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PhD thesis

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Contents

CONTENTS	1
INTRODUCTION	2
CHAPTER 1 PRELIMINARY ASPECTS	6
CHAPTER 2 UNIVERSAL LOVE – CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION	26
CHAPTER 3 THE NOMINALIST-REALIST CONTROVERSY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION	61
CHAPTER 4 COURTLY LOVE – TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN CHAUCER'S APPROACH	80
CHAPTER 5 INDIVIDUAL VOICE – A REALISTIC APPROACH TO CHARACTERS	101
CHAPTER 6 THE LYRIC WITH NARRATIVE – AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO LYRICS.....	121
CHAPTER 7 THE NARRATIVE WITH LYRIC – A TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO NARRATIVE.....	150
CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION	183
BIBLIOGRAPHY	187

Introduction

It is certainly a difficult task to write about Geoffrey Chaucer and his literary legacy. For over five hundred years scholars have dedicated innumerable pages to the life and work of the "father of English literature". Who might ever pretend to have read all that has been written about this singular genius? That is why any bibliography regarding Chaucer is always incomplete.

Whenever a researcher narrows the field of research, he needs to establish what has not been sufficiently studied. As I said in the previous paragraph, in the case of such an important writer as Chaucer is, it is hard to find such a subject that has eluded the insatiable thirst of knowledge of about ten generations of scholars. A difficult task indeed, however it is not impossible. Judging according to the books to which I have had access in the last years in Romania and abroad, it is possible to see the following:

Most books deal with such subjects as, life of Geoffrey Chaucer and description of his work; classification of the different stories of Canterbury Tales; innovations in Chaucer's writings, intertextuality and other problems regarding style; historic correspondences; parallelisms with other European literatures; certain European Medieval traditions and social phenomena, especially courtly love, as reflected in Chaucer's works; problems of language.

As I can see most books focus on very concrete aspects, e.g. a certain particular innovation (such as those regarding narrative technique), a classification of Chaucer's works, etc. In the case of medieval tradition research, most scholars are concerned with a certain particular tradition as reflected in Chaucer's works, as well with its parallelisms in other European literatures (such as courtly love).

Surprisingly, I do not find many works intended to cover all the aspects, such as style, tradition, innovation, etc. This is why I decided to dedicate this study to the systematisation of a field of research: Medieval Tradition in Geoffrey Chaucer's Writings. Inevitably, as I went deeper in the research I was compelled to narrow the field and, in this case, of systematisation as well. In order to keep the synthetic character of the research I could not narrow the field by choosing some particular tradition, but by limiting ourselves to a specific type of medieval tradition. I had to choose between social traditions and

literary traditions. Social traditions have already been extensively treated by other authors (though not in a systematic way) in researches linked to historical correspondences and Chaucer's biography. That is why I decided to concentrate my research on the more complex field of literary tradition. Of course, a writer such as Chaucer cannot be defined only from the standpoint of tradition as the importance of any genius is in his innovations rather than in his faithful continuation of tradition. Therefore I shall always present tradition in Chaucer's works in contrast with the innovations that ensured him the title of "father of English literature". My research is the first one in Romanian Chaucerian studies dedicated to the study of literary tradition in Chaucer's works.

Once I defined the field of study, I had to decide whether to investigate the whole work of Chaucer in the same measure and depth or to focus on certain works though not neglecting the remaining books. Both the considerable size of his literary production and the nature of our research, determined me to focus on a part of Chaucer's works, and namely on the minor poems. Why? Minor poems have enjoyed less attention from scholars though they are extremely helpful for the study of literary technique and style.

Chaucer's lyric poems are often criticized for being too conventionalized. Certainly the lyrics are quite conventional, but Chaucer does not blindly follow tradition; rather he is traditional in Eliot's sense of the term: he uses the conventions of late medieval poetry to serve his own ends and alters forever the traditions themselves.

One convention in particular which Chaucer makes to transcend in his lyrics is the late medieval theme of courtly love, which Chaucer gradually comes to depict ironically, suggesting the discrepancy between universal love and human love. A second convention Chaucer alters in his lyrics is the portrayal of a lyrical speaker as an abstract *everyman*. As he develops as a poet, Chaucer's lyrical speaker becomes increasingly more individualized. This is accomplished either by the poet's adopting a unique speaking voice, or by the combination of narrative with the lyric proper. Chaucer seems also to have been aware of a philosophical tradition, from his early poetry in which, influenced by Italian love poets, he assumes the position of a *realist* (who believes that the *universal* is real), to his later poems, in which he seems instead a nominalist (who thinks that only individuals can truly be known).

These three trends combine in Chaucer's lyrics, so that as he begins to accept philosophical nominalism, he also begins to individualize his speakers and characters,

since only individuals can be known. And when the lyrical speaker and his beloved are described as individuals, then the inability of the individual to live up to the fixed ideal of the courtly love becomes evident. Thus the theme of universal love as the proper alternative to courtly love underlines much of Chaucer's lyric poetry. These points are discussed in detail in my first chapter.

Chapter two concerns those poems, *Truth*, *Gentillessem Lak of Stedfastnesse*, *The Foermer Age*, and *An ABC*, in which Chaucer's everyman narrator presents in a straightforward manner universal love and its relationship with natural law. Chapter three discusses *Envoy to Scogan*, the *Envoy to Bukton*, the *Words unto Adam*, and the *Complaint to his Purse* – four later poems in which Chaucer adds a new dimension to the lyric by abandoning the abstract everyman for a individualized persona.

Chapter four investigates *A Complaint to His Lady*, *Womanly Noblesse*, and the *Complaint D' Amours*, all of which are quite early poems in the courtly love tradition, and which generalize 'everyman' courtly lover as speaker. Chapter five, however, considers those poems – *The Complaint of Venus*, *Against Women Unconstant*, *Merciles Beaute*, and *To Rosemounde* – which, while in the courtly love tradition, display more specifically characterized speakers.

Chapter six is concerned with structural changes which have the effect of characterizing the lyrical speaker and of making more concrete the situation to which he is responding. *Fortune* creates characters in a dramatic form. *The Complaint unto Pity*, *The Complaint of Mars*, and *Anelida and Arcite* are narrative-lyric hybrids which allow the audience, by combining the objective and subjective lyric, to reflect more upon the lyrical speaker's words.

Finally, chapter seven explores the lyrics which could be isolated from the narrative contained in some Chaucer's longer narratives, particularly *Troilus and Criseyde*, and considers the uses of the lyric within the narrative, as well as the reader's perception of the lyric.

For the sake of comparison I have made parallelisms with Romanian literature. Such comparison may be helpful to propose common European literary influences and even possible Chaucerian influences on Romanian literature.

It is the hope of the author that the next pages will be both helpful and pleasant to the reader.

CHAPTER 1

Preliminary Aspects

When we think of Chaucer, we think immediately of the great narrative poet. His most memorable and characteristic skills are those manifested in the great narrative works, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*: psychological realism in the characterisation of Pandarus and Criseyde, the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner; the richness and suggestiveness of the sensory details included in his descriptions of people, places and events; the exploitation and manipulation of point of view in the *Canterbury Tales*; all of these are the virtues of a great narrative poet.

But the critic who wants to study them for themselves must first work through a bulk of critical prejudice, concerning the conventionality of the lyrics, or Chaucer's lack of skill as a lyric poet, or even the failure of Chaucer's short poems to meet the criteria of a good lyric. For example, Arthur K. Moore, trying to establish the superiority of the native lyric tradition in England, thought Chaucer unfortunate in following the inferior French lyric of the fourteenth century as practiced by the master Guillaume Machaut and his disciples Jean Froissart and Eustache Deschamps. The "synthetic emotion" and the "habit of allegory" inherited from Guillaume de Lorris created a tradition in which, according to Moore, "the lyric could not thrive." In his ultimate condemnation, Moore declares "in his short poems Chaucer's genius shines feebly. Less Blame attaches to him for failing with a style which was fundamentally inefficacious than for attempting it at all."¹

Moore's comments seem representative of critical opinion in general. R.K. Root says that "after considering the range of Chaucer's power in narrative and dramatic art, it is surprising to find how limited is his power as a lyricist... The love poems, though charming in their way, are too conventional and artificial to touch us deeply.... The fact must merely be recorded as one of the limitations of Chaucer's genius."² Root, then, attributes the state of Chaucer's lyrics to a flaw in the poet's genius, while Moore had made it a defect in the tradition.

The French critic Emile Legouis, in contrast, finds something lacking in the poet's emotional expression: Chaucer, says Legouis, uses lyric poetry "less to express his

¹ Arthur K. Moore, *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1951, p. 125.

² Robert K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 2nd ed. New York: P. Smith, 1922, p. 38.

feelings than to train his style and versification.... The natural conclusion of what has been said is that he lacked almost wholly that passion and fire, that airy fancy, which are characteristic of truly lyric poets.”³

Moore attacked the tradition Chaucer inherited from Machaut as decadent, but in fact the “synthetic emotion” is a product of the use of empty clichés, and those clichés had been a conventional part of the courtly love tradition from its beginning. It had always been the greater poets who, while working within the tradition, were able to rise above the banalities of the conventions and show a note of sincerity or of originality. Chaucer worked within tradition in the manner of a great poet, one who follows tradition, as T. S. Eliot remarks in his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, not “in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes,” but rather in working with a *historical sense* – that is:

*... a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.... The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it.*⁴

The poet Chaucer, then, is “traditional” in this important sense. He is not an imitator, but is rather a poet working in the tradition of European literature and performing what may indeed be one of art's most important functions – to get us to look at the familiar in a new way, so that we really see it.

Thus, when Chaucer works with tradition, it is with the clear sense of his place within the context of western literature as he knew it, and within the tradition, he expresses the response of a late fourteenth-century English civil servant to the conventions

³ Emile Legouis, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, trans. L. Lailavoix. New York: Russell and Russell, 1961, p. 61.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, orig. pub. 1919; rpt. in *Selected Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1950, p. 4.

perpetuated by Machaut and Guillaume de Lorris, and the mainstream of continental European literature. Moreover, as tradition shaped Chaucer's individual talent, so his individual talent transformed the tradition itself.

As each of these poets inherited a decadent tradition, filled with banalities as practiced by minor poets, and brought new elements into those conventions by finding a personal voice through which to express them, so Chaucer, inheriting the artificial tradition of Machaut and his followers, made it something new and personal. A careful look at poems like *To Rosemounde* and *Merciles Beaute* will reveal just how much Chaucer was able to revitalize the courtly tradition he inherited from the continent.

A close study of the poems will reveal, as well, that Chaucer's genius was in no way limited in his lyrics. In the better lyrics just as in the better narratives, one sees Chaucer at the peak of his creative genius. As will be seen, the *Envoy to Scogan* is a masterpiece of subtlety both in structure and in theme, while the tone and speaker of that poem and poems like *To Rosemounde* or *The Complaint to His Empty Purse* create a comic mood similar to that of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Certainly, the affirmation that Chaucer's lyric poems display a lack of genius would not have been brought about by his own contemporaries, for with them the lyrics were quite popular. We hear from Chaucer himself that he wrote "many a song and many a lecherous lay" that he composed "many an ympne for [the God of Love's] halydayes, / That frighten balades, roundels, virelayes" (Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, 422 – 23; 410 – 411). John Gower alludes to these songs when he speaks of Chaucer as Love's "poet and disciple," of whom Venus can say "Of Ditees and of songes glade, / The which he for mi sake made, / The land fulfild is overal."⁵ In addition, the numerous manuscripts of poems like *Truth*, *Complaint to His Empty Purse*, and *An ABC* and others attest to the popularity of Chaucer's lyrics. To the people of the fourteenth century, then, Chaucer's lyrics did not appear as displaying lack of genius but rather were an important part of his literary output. The lyrics are primarily love poems, and as the quotation from Gower attests, Chaucer was the *premier love poet*. As C. S. Lewis explains, it was not the Chaucer of the *Tales* whom the Middle Ages chiefly admired, but the Chaucer of the love poems – that is, the Chaucer who wrote the Dream Visions, and, the love lyrics as well:

Their Chaucer was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love – romance

and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine.... And while his successors thus show their admiration for his love poetry, they explicitly praise him as a great model of style....⁶

One of the things that the following pages seek to prove is that this view of Chaucer is a legitimate one – which Chaucer’s genius appears as clearly in his lyrics as in anything else.

However, the term *lyric* is one that cannot be correctly applied to Chaucer’s shorter poetry, lacking as it does the “passion” and the “fire” of the true lyric. Legouis’ criticism, however, seems based on a narrow Romantic notion of the lyric – Wordsworth’s “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” but without ‘the recollection in tranquillity’ – a definition which would include Shelley and Byron, but which would exclude Donne, whose lyrics may be more wit than fire. The lyric so defined is far too exclusive, and would leave out the bulk of medieval “lyrics,” which may be too conventional to exhibit much “fire.”

What is needed at the beginning, perhaps, is a more accurate definition of the lyric that would apply to medieval times. One should keep in mind, first, that the term *lyric* was not used in England in the Middle Ages. It was the Elizabethans who first used the term.⁷ Therefore, it is important to remember that, as Stephen Manning declares, “these poems were not written in anticipation of modern preconceptions about the lyric.”⁸ Peter Dronke, perhaps the most important of all scholars on the medieval lyric, avoids the issue entirely, preferring to consider anything a lyric that is contained in the *chansonnières* of medieval times. The implication seems to be that virtually any short poem is a lyric.⁹ This is obviously not satisfactory as a definition but when one attempts to find a more satisfactory definition of “lyric,” the exclusiveness becomes clear again, and Chaucer’s poems seem less and less “lyrical.” Barbara Hardy, in a book on the lyric, claims, “Lyric poetry isolates feeling in small compass and so renders it at its most intense... The advantage of lyric

⁵ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Bk. VIII, 11. 2945-47; in G.C. Macauley, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 4 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901, III, 466.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp 162-163.

⁷ Rosemary Moolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 1.

⁸ Stephen Manning, *Wisdom and Number*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962, p. vii.

⁹ Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969, p. 10.

poetry comes from its undiluted attention to feeling and feeling alone, and its articulateness in clarifying that feeling, in attesting conviction or what may somewhat misleadingly be called sincerity, and transferring this from privacy to publicity."¹⁰ Here we are not far from Legouis' "fire and passion" – certainly the "sincerity" of many of Chaucer's love poems is doubtful (one can see no real woman as an object of love in the *Complaint to his Lady, or Womanly Noblesse*), and his philosophical poems have something other than feeling as their subject – they are about abstract concepts like Truth, Fortune, Gentillesse, and Lack of Steadfastness.

This dogmatic insistence upon personal emotion as the only domain of lyric poetry seems to be wrong – belonging rather to the Romantic era, Poe, whatever his other limitations as a literary theorist, was closer to the truth when he described poetry as the "Rhythmical Creation of Beauty," whose task was not to express passion, but rather to excite the *soul*; the poetic sentiment, then, was to be distinguished from both "Truth, which is the satisfaction of the Reason, or from Passion, which is the excitement of the heart." Not that truth or passion cannot be inculcated into the poem, but *beauty* or the "elevation of the soul" is the poem's main goal.¹¹ What is important for the moment is Poe's broader conception of the subject matter for a short poem – the lyric was not exclusively an expression of feeling, but a creation of beauty into which truth or passion might be introduced.

T. S. Eliot, too, questions the idea of personal emotion as the driving force of lyric poetry. His criterion, like Poe's, is aesthetic: "it is not the greatness, the intensity of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place that counts."¹²

The definition of the lyric, then, is not based upon personal emotion. But that definition is still difficult to reject, C. Day Lewis is quite helpful in distinguishing 'the lyric' from 'lyrical poetry,' and in tracing the development of the lyrical poem from simple to complex. The lyric, Lewis says, is "the purest and simplest form of poetry. It is a poem that expresses a single state of mind, a single mood, or sets two simple moods one

¹⁰ Barbara Hardy, *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, pp. 1-2.

¹¹ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Poetic Principle' in *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert C. Hough. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965, pp. 40-41.

¹² Eliot, p. 8.

against the other. It does not argue or preach. If it moralizes, the moral has an unsophisticated, proverbial ring.... It speaks with no irony or complexity of syntax."¹³ This definition, if taken, would eliminate several of Chaucer's lyrics: there is no doubt that *Gentillesse* argues, that *Lak of Stedfastnesse* preaches, that *The Former Age* moralizes, or that the *Envoy to Bukton* is full of irony. Nevertheless, Lewis sees a development in what we think of as lyrical poetry: with the divorce of the lyric from music, and the development of poetry independent of that musical source, "there is a horizontal enlarging – the power to treat a much greater variety of subjects in a greater variety of ways."¹⁴

With this definition, though, the lyric becomes all-inclusive again, and is not much advanced from the simple idea of "shortness." But in addition, the lyric seems to have a limited subject – a single mood, impression, feeling or state of mind, or two combined. The subject matter and treatment are flexible, apparently. Ann S. Haskell, addressing the problem of a definition, declares that "there is no quality of the medieval lyric that can be isolated as peculiar to the genre," though she provides some tentative generalizations about the genre: the lyrics are shorter, more usually stanzaic and have a tighter metrical pattern and more complex rhyme scheme than other types of poetry, and are "frequently celebratory or plaintive, though they can be didactic or practical,"¹⁵

It seems that any definition of the medieval lyric may be vague at best, but surely, something definite might be said of it. Northrop Frye's conception of the lyric may be particularly useful here. Frye, concentrating upon two of Aristotle's six aspects of poetry – *mythos* or *plot*, and *dianoia* or 'thought' – conceives *mythos* as the 'shaping principle' of narrative, and *dianoia* of lyric:

*In such genres as novels and plays the internal fiction is usually of primary interest; in essays and in lyrics the primary interest is In dianoia, the idea or poetic thought (something quite different, of course, from other kinds of thought) that the reader gets from the writer. The best translation of dianoia is, perhaps, "theme," and literature with this ideal or conceptual interest may be called thematic.*¹⁶

¹³ C. Day Lewis, *The Lyric Impulse*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁵ Ann S. Haskell, 'Lyric and Lyrical in the Works of Chaucer: The Poet in His Literary Context', in Douglas Shepard ed., *English Symposium Papers*, 3. Fredonia: State University of New York at Fredonia, 1972 – 1973, p. 4.

¹⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p. 52.

In drama or fiction – that is, in narrative literature – there is a pattern of movement based on action. In the lyric, in thematic literature, the structure is also based on “changing relationships within a work,” but that structure is now what Foulke and Smith call a “sequence of ideas or attitudes toward human experience rather than imitations of experience itself.”¹⁷ It presents not events, but a direct reflection upon or interpretation of events. Thus, a lyric is basically a short poem with a theme – its structure is based on a progression of thought rather than action. Certainly, such a definition fits a poem like Chaucer's *Envoy to Scogan*, structured as it is according to the poet's conception of the relationship between human love and universal love, better than any restrictive claim that the lyric is a personal expression of powerful emotion.

Legouis' criticism of Chaucer as lacking the *lyrical touch*, then, is not legitimate, as were the criticisms of Root and Moore. Nevertheless, it is not enough to simply defend the lyrics from attack. It remains to be seen what value the lyrics have, which might induce critics to see them in a positive light. A close look at the lyrics will show that Chaucer's lyric poems are excellent poetry in their own right. Accordingly, my first task will be to show the unique value and quality of each lyric in particular. Nevertheless, there will always be those who insist that the main focus of attention to Chaucer must be on the more impressive longer narratives. In this regard, Chaucer's short poems are valuable in that they provide one key to understanding the whole corpus of the poet's work. There are two major aspects of the lyrics that are particularly useful for the study of Chaucer's work as a whole: the first is the way in which Chaucer uses traditional forms. His alteration of those forms seems to have been the direct result of Chaucer's conception of the distinction between narrative and thematic literature previously mentioned, and adds something to our understanding of the Chaucerian persona as well as the structure of some of Chaucer's longer works; the second is the major *theme* of the lyrics – love – and its connection with Chaucer's conception of the universe as presented in the majority of his shorter poems. Therefore, the lyrics add something to our thematic understanding of Chaucer's work as a whole.

Anyone who reads Chaucer's shorter poems will become aware of a small group of what may be called “hybrid” forms. The early *Complaint unto Pity* begins with a brief narrative, then ends with a lyric Complaint. The same is true, on a rather more complex level, in the *Anelida and Arcite*. Further, anyone at all familiar with Chaucer's works

¹⁷ Robert Foulke and Paul Smith, *An Anatomy of Literature*. New York: Harcourt, 1972, p. 23.

outside of the *Canterbury Tales* will have noticed, imbedded in the narratives themselves, brief lyric passages presented as having been sung by some of the characters in such works as *The Book of the Duchess*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and most notably in *Troilus and Criseyde*. What was Chaucer trying to do in these poems, and why was he doing it? In order to answer these questions, it will be necessary to examine one more aspect of the lyric in general.

Because the lyric is thematic rather than narrative, its main concern is thought (*dianoia*) rather than plot (*mythos*) or character and setting (Aristotle's *ethos*). An inherent characteristic of the lyric, then, is its presentation of the thought, or emotion, or mood, out of context. Barbara Hardy notices: "This advantage is negatively definable: the lyric does not provide explanation, judgement, or narrative; what it does provide is feeling, alone and without histories or characters."¹⁸

Anyone knows that one important aspect to consider when writing a formal analysis of a poem is the context of the work, which would include, among other things, the nature and personality of the poem's speaker and the situation to which that speaker is responding with this lyric utterance. Typically, the context is quite general. It usually can be inferred from the tone and diction of the poem. It may be established by the title or subtitle of a poem: in Chaucer's *Truth*, for example, the subtitle "Balade de Bon Conseyl" establishes a kind of context – it indicates that the speaker will be giving wise advice to someone else. The poem itself does not establish a much more specific context except, perhaps, in portraying the speaker as a rather wise and pious "everyman" addressing a friend who has come upon hard times.

One other device in Chaucer's lyrics that helped to establish context was his use of the Envoy, in *Truth*, the Envoy establishes a definite audience, a certain "Vache." However, this does not change the context – what is important about Vache is that he is in troubled times. In the *Complaint to his Purse*, though, the Envoy establishes a context in which the speaker's complaining to his empty purse gains meaning from the fact that he is addressing the one who can make his purse full again.

Chaucer also used tradition to help establish a context. If he was writing a courtly love poem, like the *Complaynt D'Amours*, for example, he could be certain that his audience was aware of the entire milieu of the courtly love situation, and would

¹⁸ Hardy, B., *The Advantage of Lyric: Essays on Feeling in Poetry*. London: Indiana University Press, 1977 p. 1.

understand the poem as a reaction to that courtly love situation.

Nevertheless, the view that the lyric utterance consists of 'feeling, alone and without histories or characters,' is somewhat distorted. But it does point toward a truth: in general, all we know about the context of a lyric is the general situation to which a typically undeveloped character, the speaker, responds.

Frye is implying something similar to this when he calls the lyric "the utterance that is overheard." The speaker in a lyric poem is characteristically unaware of the presence of the audience, and is presented as talking to himself or to someone else – more often, in Frye's words, it is "the individual communing with himself."¹⁹ What the audience or reader perceives, then, is either one side of conversation between people about whom he knows nothing, or, worse, disembodied consciousness itself.

The typical voice of a lyric, then, tends not to be unique and individual, but rather *impersonal*, and with general or even universal applicability. The popular idea of a personal, intimate poem inspired by private experience comes with the Romantics. C. Day Lewis insists that impersonality is one of the chief characteristics of the great age of the English lyric, the Renaissance:

*We are not aware of a particular man writing out of his own individual personality and experience, as we are with a lyrical poem by Wordsworth or Hardy.... With the bulk of Elizabethan and Jacobean lyrics, what we hear is not this unique human being but Everyman singing through him.*²⁰

Raymond Oliver commented upon a similar tendency in the medieval English lyric for the speaker to be impersonal: the voice was not that of a single, isolated human being, but rather a typical member of the entire community. These poems performed aloud and publicly are, says Oliver, public in nature, "mediated by publicly accessible points of view."²¹ The everyman speaker noted by Lewis insures that the thought expressed in the poem will have general, even universal, application. This may account for the conventional nature of much of medieval love poetry: the thought expressed was almost never the thought of an individual speaker in a specific situation, but rather the universally applicable sentiment – an Aristotelian would say, "abstracted" – isolated from whatever

¹⁹ Frye, pp. 249 – 250.

²⁰ C. Day Lewis, p. 5.

²¹ Raymond Oliver, *Posms Without Names*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, p. 17.

concrete situation may have prompted it, and placed in the mouth of a representative everyman figure.

For Chaucer, it seems, this sort of lyric voice was not completely satisfactory, and became less and less satisfactory to him as he grew as a poet. In the *Complaint of Mars*, the character of Mars begins his Complaint proper with the following declaration:

*The ordre of compleynt requireth skylfully
That yf a wight shai pleyne pitously,
Ther mot be cause wherfore that men pleyne;
Or men may deme he pleyneith folily
And causeles; alas! that am not I! (ll. 155 – 159)*

The narrative frame establishes a situation and it establishes the character of the lyric's speaker. The lyric itself, then, records the speaker's response to the situation. The lines from *Mars* seem to imply that Chaucer considered this establishment of a more specific context vital for the communication of the lyrical "thought" to the audience: unless the audience can understand what it is the speaker is responding to, they cannot understand the response – they will "deme he pleyneith folily / And causeles." Thus, Chaucer creates specific, individual personae for his lyrics, as, for example, in *To Rosemounde*, or he alters the lyric form, as in *Mars*, to give it a narrative context.

I think, however, that Chaucer's concern in attempting to provide a specific context for the lyric is not only literary but also philosophical. The concept of the lyric as the general expression of a universally applicable response as opposed to the lyric as the response of an individual speaker to a given specific situation seems to correspond to the epistemological controversy in medieval philosophy concerning the reality of *universals*. Moreover, since Chaucer's lyrics, as thematic patterns, are structured chiefly according to *dianoia* – thought – and the movement of consciousness, it would seem quite possible that the poet may have been acquainted with, and even thought about, that very controversy. Surely it would be unusual if Chaucer – as intelligent and cultured as he was, so interested in philosophy as to have translated the Boece, so acquainted with most philosophical of Italian poets, such as, Dante – was not aware of the philosophical currents of his own time.

If he was, then Chaucer seems to have accepted, early in his career, the realist position of the scholastic philosophers of the high Middle Ages. The influence of Neo-Platonism led those thinkers to accept the reality of the "universal." Their epistemology, however, was Aristotelian. As expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas, that most influential of

the Christian Aristotelians, that position meant something like this: the *senses* of a human being perceive a material object, and via their perception the *imagination* creates what Aquinas calls a *phantasm* – that is, a “likeness” of the particular object perceived. It is upon this phantasm, or likeness, that the human intellect acts, and not on the particular object itself. The *active* intellect “abstracts” from that phantasm what the medievals called the universal form – intended in a Platonic sense to imply, for example, genera and species. The active intellect then produces this abstracted form, depositing it as it were, in the *passive* intellect, which understands it as an “intelligible species.” Aquinas’ notion, and that of most other Aristotelians, is that we have no direct knowledge of particulars: the human intellect can know only universals.²²

This is obviously oversimplified, but Chaucer, not being a professional philosopher, would probably have been concerned chiefly with the main idea of the theory. The fact is that if one accepts Aquinas' position, then a lyric poem, which expresses thematically an act of the intellect, must be concerned primarily with universals. So it is that the majority of Chaucer's earlier lyrics – whether they are the philosophical, “Boethian” poems (*Gentillesse*, *The Former Age*), or the conventional courtly love songs (*Complaint to his Lady*, *Womanly Noblesse*) – display “everyman” type of speakers, expressing universal emotions and responding to an unknown situation.

It appears, though, that as Chaucer developed as a poet and as a thinker, he grew more and more to accept the doctrine of philosophical nominalism which was current in fourteenth-century England and which viewed realism as the prevailing scholastic doctrine. The English Franciscan William of Ockham, who is considered to be the founder of the nominalist school, had died in 1349, and it allows us to assume that his ideas would have been current and gaining ground, in the England of Chaucer's day. Ockham's position concerning epistemology is as follows: the universal, according to Ockham, does not exist in reality. There exists only the individual, the “intelligible species” – universals are merely philosophers' own mental creations. If this is true, then the whole notion of knowledge through the abstraction of universals falls apart. For Ockham, the *intuitive cognition* of an existing object is the intellect's primary means of gaining knowledge. This intuitive cognition is achieved through the sensory faculties, and is that by which one is able to know whether or not a thing exists. This knowledge is *direct*; it does not come

²² See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 84 – 86. New York: McGraw Hill, translation, see the Fathers of the Dominican Province, ed., 3 vols. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947, I, 421 – 443.

through phantasms, Ockham does mention what he calls an “apprehensive intellect,” by which we form propositions from concepts (or mental terms) which we have established in our intellects and which exist, as he says, “in supposition” as signs of, or standing for, the particular individual which exists in the material world. Thus, for Ockham, only intuitive knowledge is direct, while abstractive cognition is indirect, through the mediation of these concepts that “stand for” particulars. This notion seems diametrically opposed to that of Aquinas.²³

If Chaucer accepted the nominalist position as he progressed as a poet, it would certainly explain the sentiments expressed in the *Complaint of Mars*. The lyric poem, as an imitation of the movement of thought, cannot express only universals out of context. Universals are mental inventions. They exist as concepts only, created by the mind in response to particular objects *intuitively perceived*. For the audience to understand fully the response, given in a lyric in an abstract and general way, the audience must also become acquainted with the particular situation and the concrete personality of the speaker – we can *know* only through the individual.

Chaucer's basic technique for particularizing the lyric comes in his emphasis of situation and character. In some poems, Chaucer, concentrating upon *mythos*, actually provides a narrative frame for the lyric, indicating the situation being responded to as well as the character making the response. This is what happens in those strange hybrid poems, *The Complaint unto Pity*, *The Complaint of Mars*, and the *Anelida and Arcite*. It also occurs when Chaucer inserts lyrical passages into longer narratives. In other poems, Chaucer concentrates instead upon *ethos*, the character and setting of the lyrics' speakers. Thus in poems like the *Envoy to Scogan* or the *Envoy to Bukton* (which is nominalist in spirit). Chaucer presents the audience with remarks made by a specific individual, Geoffrey Chaucer, or a caricature of him, to another specific individual – either Henry Scogan or Peter Bukton – in response to a particular situation (Scogan's unfaithfulness in love or Bukton's imminent marriage). Whatever universal theme appears here Chaucer presents only the mental response to the specific situation. Similarly, in some of Chaucer's later love poems, as *To Rosemounde* or *Merciles Beaute*, for example, the indistinguishable “everyman” figure of the conventional courtly lyric becomes an individualized character: a persona whose lyrical response to his situation (usually the

²³ See William of Ockham; text and translation of the relevant passages are in *Ockham: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, London: Thomas Nelson, 1957, pp. 17 – 74.

conventional courtly love situation) is not the universal response of the more conventional lyric, but the individual response of this particular speaker.

It should be added that the way of presentation of Chaucer's lyrics also contributed to the development of the Chaucerian persona. The medieval lyric, as already mentioned earlier, was public in nature, and that meant among other things that it was intended to be performed in public. That Chaucer's poems were written to be performed aloud before the court is almost a certainty, presented by the famous fifteenth-century manuscript Illumination depicting Chaucer reading *Troilus and Criseyde* to Richard and his court. John Stevens claims that the courtly lyrics of England were actually part of a complex "game of love" being played by the poet and his listeners. Thus, the lyrics' effect depended in a large part upon the interaction between poet and audience.²⁴

The game-like atmosphere, the poet placed in the position of a performer, chief "player" in the game of love, and the necessity of creating a situation in which the poet seemed unaware of the presence of the audience, made the performance of a lyric poem a very dramatic event. Chaucer seems to have been more histrionic than most and enjoyed adopting unusual roles to play: a bird in the *Complaint of Mars*, a woman in the *Complaint of Venus* and *Anelida and Arcite*, an unlikely lover in *To Rosemounde and Merciles Beaute*, and even a comic caricature of himself in the *Envoy to Scogan*. And it must be noted that the famous Chaucer persona of the dream visions of the end of the *Canterbury Tales* developed from precisely the same impulse; the speakers of the narratives are, in fact, not very different from the personae of some of the lyrics.

To return to the problem of Chaucer's strange narrative-lyric mixtures, it would seem that an epistemological explanation of the phenomenon could be the most useful. However, there may also be an aesthetic explanation. Chaucer's more unusual narrative-lyric combinations may be considered typically Gothic in form. Charles Muscatine asserts that in Gothic art the basic form is *juxtaposition* – that is, there is a "sequential procession rather than a unified subordination of parts."²⁵ Robert Jordan elaborates on juxtaposition as the Gothic principle of unity: "Characteristically," he says, "the total form is

²⁴ John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961, p. 158.

²⁵ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981, p. 167.

determined by the accumulation of individually complete elements."²⁶ Thus the juxtaposition of apparently incompatible components complete in themselves – the narrative and lyric of the *Complaint of Mars*, for example – creates a Gothic unity of discordant elements. The unity of Gothic art is intended, as will be seen, to reflect the unity of creation, the “fullness” of creation in an Augustinian sense, in which evil angels and sinners, for instance, are not beautiful in themselves, but “the beauty of the whole is greater than that of any of its parts.”²⁷ This concept of the *Gothic*, and its elements of harmony and juxtaposition, applies to Chaucer’s lyrics in terms of both *form* and *theme*. Chaucer’s conception of the universe was a Gothic conception, that of a divinely ordered cosmos and the purpose of *art* in such a cosmos was *to reflect that order*.

D. W. Robertson talks about this formal aspect of Gothic art. It was, according to Robertson, a dominant medieval tendency to think in terms “of symmetrical patterns, characteristically arranged with reference to an abstract hierarchy.” The universe itself was ordered as a hierarchy; the Church, the feudal state, and the moral hierarchy in man himself reflected that same order, and in fact, “once the idea became established,” says Robertson, “any single hierarchy inevitably suggested all of the others,” The function of the artist in such a society was not personal, but rather public – “to reflect a reality outside of himself.” Nevertheless, that “reality” was, Robertson says, not “nature” as we know it, but “an abstract 'nature' structured by God.”²⁸

Robertson notes that, while this hierarchical pattern was most present in the Gothic age, it had its roots far back in Patristic times.²⁹ St. Augustine is the most influential proponent of this hierarchical conception of the universe and of art as a reflection of that hierarchy. Augustine defines beauty as arising from “the rational perception of an ordered and proportionate whole, and... the master pattern of such a whole is the created world itself, no matter what its imperfections may seem to the carnal eye.”³⁰ For Augustine, then, the purpose of beauty (that is, order, proportion, harmony) in creation is allegorical – “beauty in art, like the beauty of nature itself, should lead us to a contemplation of the

²⁶ Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 130.

²⁷ D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 6 – 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

immutable beauty which is its source."³¹

This fixed, still order is reflected in the traditional *forms* of Chaucer's poetry. The ballade, the roundel, the Complaint, the Envoy, all followed established conventions of structure and style, and the conventions which ordered such literary types reflected the harmony of the universe, and so suggested it. Therefore, Chaucer follows the conventions, and even introduces, in poems like *Noblesse*, the traditional courtly idiom into English poetry, simply because it is appropriate.

However, the other aspect of Gothic art, the juxtaposition of discordant elements, is also present in Chaucer's lyrics, as he takes the established lyric forms and juxtaposes them with apparently unconnected narrative elements. That juxtaposition is also present in Chaucer's experiments with language, seen in poems like *A Complaint to His Lady*. For Chaucer, then, the medieval aesthetic did not exclude experimentation, for even though the order of God's universe was reflected in following traditional forms, the variety, the fullness of God's universe were reflected in the creation of the new or the different within those forms.

Perhaps even more important than the reflection of the Gothic view of the universe in the form of Chaucer's lyrics, however, is Chaucer's thematic use of the Gothic idea of order and harmony. To understand fully the importance of this point, it is necessary to recognize the relationship, for Chaucer, of this idea of *harmony* and *proportion* with the idea of *divine law*, of *natural law*, and of *universal love*. For people in the Middle Ages, these four concepts were closely interrelated and mutually dependent. For example, in one of Chaucer's favourite books, the *Dream of Scipio*, which he knew as it survived in Macrobius' popular fourth or early fifth century *Commentary*. In chapter V of the *Dream*, Scipio, having been whisked into space by his grandfather Africanus and having just received a lecture upon the order of the heavens, asks "hic inquam, quis est, qui complet aures meas tantus et tam dulcis sonus?" ("What is this great and pleasing sound that fills my ears?") To which Africanus replies "ille, qui intervallis disiunctus inparibus, sed taræen pro rata parte ratione distinctis impulsu et motu ipsorum orbium efficitur.... quod docti homines mervis imitati atque cantibus aperuerunt sibi redituni in hunc locum," ("a concord of tones separated by unequal but nevertheless carefully proportioned intervals, caused by the rapid motion of the spheres themselves.... Gifted men, imitating this harmony on

³¹ Ibid., pp. 75 – 76.

stringed instruments and in singing, have gained for themselves a return to this region").³² Music, then, is the ideal earthly representation of this cosmic harmony, and so is the ideal art form, though certainly that harmony can be represented by other art forms as well, as, for example, a Gothic cathedral or even a poem.³³

In his commentary on this section, Macrobius says that "in caelo autem constat nihil fortuitum, nihil tumultuarium provenire, sed universa illic divinis legibus et stata ratione procedere," ("it is well known that in the heavens nothing happens by chance or at random, and that all things above proceed in orderly fashion according to divine law").³⁴ The order, the harmony of the universe is, then, the main tenet of divine law, whose statutes are written in the mind of God. *Natural law*, or what Chaucer called the "law of kynde," is, according to Thomas Aquinas, the participation in that eternal law by rational creatures.³⁵ This is what Boethius means when he refers, in Chaucer's translation, to the human soul as having, "by naturel principles kyndeliche yhyd withynne itself, al the trouthe the which he ymagineth to ben in thinges without" (*Boece*, Bk, III, 11, 21 – 24). However, Chaucer seems to have extended the idea of the "law of kynde."³⁶ Chaucer seems to have equated natural law with the harmony of all creation because it reflects the eternal order established by God. The allegorically represented goddess Nature in the *Parliament of Fowls* is described as "the vicaire of the almyghty Lord, / That hot, cold, hevvy, lyght, moyst, and dreye / Hath knyght by evene noumbres of acord" (11. 379 – 81) – Nature's law, then, reflects divine law in binding all apparently discordant elements together in proportionate harmony, "by evene nounbres of acord." If natural law is ordered harmony, then all things in creation have a specific place if that creation and all objects in their naturally ordained spaces contribute to the harmony of the universe and obey "natural law." One is, in fact, naturally inclined toward one's divinely ordained place in the cosmos. As the Eagle of the *House of Fame*, illustrates

... every kyndely thyng that is

³² Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, pp. 73 – 74.

³³ See Jordan

³⁴ Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. Jacobus Willis, 2 vols., 1963, II, 96; trans. Stahl, p. 186.

³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Text Blackfriars, XXVIII, 20 – 25; trans. Fathers, I, pp. 996 – 997.

³⁶ For a discussion of Chaucer's acquaintance with the idea of the "law of kynde," particularly as emphasized in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. See Gareth W. Dunleavy, 'Natural Law as Chaucer's Ethical Absolute', in *Arts and Letters*, no. 52, 1963, pp. 177 – 187.

*Hath a kyndely stede ther he
Hay best in hyt conserved be;
Unto which place every thyng,
Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng,
Fioveth for to come to,
Whan that hyt is away therfro; (II. 729 – 736)*

What was this mysterious force that bound all things to their divinely ordained places in a harmonious cosmos? For the medievals, that force was *love*. Robertson, citing Lucretius and Ovid in particular, asserts that “a very ancient tradition associates love with harmony, especially with ‘*mundana musica*,’ the concord which governs the elements, the seasons, and the stars.”³⁷ For Chaucer, the most important expression of that association would have been that which occurred in his favourite book, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In Book II, metre 8, Boethius describes *Love* as the binding force of the universe:

“That the world with stable feyth varieth accordable chaungynges; that the contrarious qualites of element hoi den among hemself allyaunce perdurable; that Phebus, the sonne, with his goldene chariet bryngeth forth the rosene day; that the moone hath commaundement over the nyghtes, which nyghtes Esperus, the eve – sterre, hath brought; that the see, gredy to flowen, constreyneth with a certain eende his floodes, so that it is nat lewful to strecche his hrode termes or bowndes uppon the erthes al this accordaunce of thynges is bounde with love, that governeth erthe and see, and hath also comandement to the hevene. And yif this love slakede the bridelis, alie thynges that now loven hem togidres wolden make batayle contynuely, and stryven to fordo the fassoun of this world, the which they now leden in accordable feith by fayre moevynges. This “love halt togidres pepies joyned with an holy boond, and kjiytteth sacrement of manages of chaste loves; and love enditeth lawes to trewe felawes. O weleful were mankyride, yif thilke love that governeth hevene governede yowr corages.”

In this significant passage, Boethius identifies *love* as that force which binds the universe in perfect harmony according to divine law, or the “law of kynde.” In men,

³⁷ Robertson, p. 124.

natural law was regarded by both Aquinas and Boethius as the recognition of divine precepts. Man's natural inclination is toward the Highest Good, toward God, who is true love.

Dante, another of Chaucer's favourite authors, expands upon this idea in a famous passage from the *Purgatorio*. Virgil tells Dante

*“Né creator né creatura mai,”
comincio el, “figliuol, fu senza amore,
o naturale o d'animo; e tu 'l sai.
to naturale e sempre senza errore,
ma l'altro puote errar per malo obietto
o per troppo o per poco di vigore.
Mentre ch' elli e nel primo ben diretto,
e ne' secondi se stesso misura,
esser non pub cagion di mal diletto;
ma quando al mal si torce, o con piu cura
o con men che non dee corre nel bene,
contra 'l fattore adovra sua fattura.
Quinci comprender puoi ch'esser convene
amor sementa in voi d'ogne virtute
e d'ogne operazion che merta pene.”*

(He began: “Neither Creator nor creature, my son, was ever without love, either natural or of the mind, and this you know. The natural is always without error; but the other may err either through an evil object, or through too much or too little vigour. While it is directed on the Primal Good, and on secondary goods observes right measure, it cannot be the cause of sinful pleasure. But when it is turned awry to evil or speeds to good with more real, or with less, than it ought, against the Creator works His creature. Hence you can comprehend that love must needs be the seed in you of every virtue and of every action deserving punishment.”)³⁸

This natural desire for the good – which is for the harmony of the universe, and consequently for divine law, the will of God – is in all things. Man, however, because he

is created with free will, may turn his love toward something other than the will of God, the natural harmony, and in this way, man commits sins.

There are, thus, two kinds of love implied: *caritas*, the Divine Love which orders the universe and binds all things in harmony, and from which natural law, the “law of kynde,” gets its force – that is the natural inclination of things toward the *good*, which is to say the desire for their right place in the universal hierarchy, the desire for the will of God; and *cupiditas*, the mistaken desire of the human will for the transient goods of this world. The things of the created universe are not valuable in themselves, however. Their value, like that of art for someone like Augustine, lies, as mentioned previously, in their reflection of the eternal harmony, or the Highest Good.

The relationship of these two loves was fundamental to Chaucer. In addition, it was in the sense that the editors of the book *Chaucer the Love Poet* were able to say, “We believe that love, in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the word, was Chaucer's deepest and most passionate interest and his all but invariable topic.” Certainly, love in this broad sense is the basic theme of his lyrics taken as a whole: man must love – that is the *law of kynde*. He may turn his love toward the Good, toward which by nature he is inclined, or he may choose instead the goods of this world, most notably that offered by the tradition of *fin amors*. In his earlier lyrics, Chaucer seems to separate the two kinds of love, so that he writes about either one or, the other. Thus in some poems the speaker's will is set upon eternal precepts like Truth or Stedfastnesse or Gentillesse, while in others his love is directed toward earthly felicity, as in the *Complaint to his Lady*, the *Complaynt D'Amours*, or *Womanly Noblesse*. However, in the later lyrics the poet is more concerned with presenting the problems caused by man's confusing earthly love with universal love. In *Scogan*, in *Mars*, in *Anelida arid Arcite*, the opposition of the two loves is clear. In addition, in some of the lyrics, *To Rosemounde*, for example, or *Merciles Beaute*, Chaucer parodies the idea of courtly love or, presents the courtly love situation as a parody in the sense explained by Edmund Reiss in his essay “Chaucer's Parodies of Love”:

In parody... although the given exists... as something inadequate, we go from it and call up an ideal that exists, as it were, behind it. This ideal is not contained or fully reflected in the given, as in satire. Rather, when we call up the ideal, we are aware of the gap between it and the given. We see just how inadequate the given is, and in this

³⁸ Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XVII, 11. 91 – 105; text and trans. Charles S. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy*, 3

awareness lies the creation of humour. However, parody does not, like satire, make just fun of the given: it insists that we see it in terms of something that is adequate³⁹.

For Chaucer, that “something that is adequate” is Divine Love, and the participation of man in the *divinely ordained* order of things. Courtly love is inadequate because it substitutes a partial good, the Beloved, for the Highest Good. In the mutual love of natural partners, what Boethius called “peples joyned with an holy boond,” men could participate in the universal harmony and still partake of the partial good of earthly love, but that earthly love was love in the proper sense.

One could add that, if Chaucer did tend to accept nominalism more as he developed as a poet, then he came to doubt the *reality* of the ideal, and came to believe more in the power of the individual. *Real* love, then, exists between individuals, not ideals.

Chaucer's lyrics are many and varied, but this theme of love is one aspect that unites them. Another is Chaucer's experiments with establishing a more specific context for the lyrical utterance. Accordingly, the main body of my discussion will be structured in a manner that reflects these two aspects, and which reflects Chaucer's development as a poet from more conventional to more experimental forms, and from the relatively straightforward treatment of either Divine Love or courtly love to the ironic treatment of courtly love as a parody of Divine Love.

The following pages will stress not only the structural experimentation and thematic relationships that make the lyrics a key to Chaucer's poetry as a whole, but will also stress, in poem after poem, Chaucer's skill as a lyric poet.

vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 184 – 85,

³⁹ Edmund Reiss, ‘Chaucer's Parodies of Love’ in Mitchell, J. and Provost, W., eds. *Chaucer the Love Poet*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973, p. 27.

CHAPTER 2

Universal Love – Classical and Christian Tradition

The first group of poems to be examined – *Truth*, *Gentilesse*, *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, *The Former Age*, and *An ABC* – form a group because thematically and formally they are universal rather than personal poetic statements. All are concerned specifically with Divine Love (and not with human love), and the importance of man's following the precepts of natural law, particularly as expressed by Boethius and in Christian tradition. None of the poems has speakers whose characters are brought into the foreground. The speakers are all “everyman” types, exhibiting traditional Christian and philosophical wisdom. Two of the poems, *Truth* and *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, do contain Envoys, which make specific applications of the universal sentiments expressed in the main bodies of the lyrics – the Envoy of *Truth* to Sir Philip de la Vache, and the Envoy of *Lak of Stedfastnesse* to King Richard – and this may have been Chaucer's early manner of placing the universal lyric sentiments into a more specific context; still, even in these two poems, the overall effect is of universal rather than personal significance. These formal and thematic similarities reflect the fact that these poems were composed early or midway in Chaucer's career: as time went on, he seems to have become more experimental with his speakers, and more concerned with the ironic possibilities in the contrast between earthly love and Divine Love. Even in these earlier poems, though, Chaucer can be seen working within traditional types of poetry only to alter or expand them to meet his own aesthetic needs.

The most important of this group of poems is *Truth*, or the *Balade de Bon Conseyl*. It serves as a good introduction to the rest of the poems here because it is the clearest expression of that moral principle – truth – which Chaucer seems to have regarded as the expression of Divine Love and the “law of Kynde” in human living.

Strangely, perhaps, critical appraisal of the poem virtually ignored this aspect, and concentrated largely upon the *Envoy*. The majority of the studies share the assumption that the *Envoy* and its enigmatic reference to “thou Vache” (1. 22) – probably the courtier Sir Philip de la Vache – are somehow central to the poem's meaning. Manuscript evidence (along with careful reading) would suggest that this is not the case. The fact that the poem

exists in 24 manuscript copies suggests that *Truth*, as Robinson says, “would seem to have been the best known or most admired of Chaucer's short poems,”⁴⁰ but the Envoy survives in only one manuscript.

It seems more worthwhile to me to approach this poem from a thematic point of view, to examine the meaning and significance attached to the concept of *Truth* in Chaucer's time. It can also be seen how Chaucer's emphasis upon *truth* as “Christian living” differentiates this poem from others in the popular *contemptu mundi* tradition, to which it seems to belong.

It seems, then, that a clear understanding of the term “trouthe” is required for the understanding of this poem. Now Chaucer uses truth in several ways, as E. Talbot Donaldson points out in his notes to the poem.⁴¹ Most commonly, Chaucer uses the word in the sense of a moral or ethical principle – “the character of being true... true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy, steadfast allegiance”. Alternatively, further, truth in this sense is a “disposition to speak or act truly or without deceit; truthfulness, veracity, sincerity; formerly sometimes in wider sense: Honesty, uprightness, righteousness, virtue, integrity”. Unquestionably, Chaucer considered this one of the most important, if not the most important, of all moral virtues. His Knight, paragon of nobility, values especially “Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie” (1. 46). If one had *truth*, one was an honourable human being. One's word was his bond. Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*, who despite his other failings is a real noble, challenges Palamon to single combat for love of Emilye with the words “Have heer my trouthe, tomorwe I wol nat faille” (1. 1610). And the Franklin, aspiring to true nobility in his own right, has Arveragus, the husband in his tale, pronounce “Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe” (1. 1479). It is certainly probable that Chaucer himself would agree with these words of Arveragus, particularly considering the fact that those who break their *trouthe* in Chaucer must be considered quite reprehensible. Similarly, in *Anelida and Arcite*, Arcite plights Anelida his “trouthe,” only to be false, and Anelida laments “Wher is the trouthe of man? Who hath hit slain?” (1. 312). But Chaucer's supreme example of one who breaks her *trouthe* is, of course, Criseyde. When she departs from on the eve of her delivery to the Greeks, Criseyde vows to return to him in ten days, saying that has no need to fear,

⁴⁰ Robinson, p. 522.

⁴¹ E. Talbot Donaldson, ed., *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*. N.Y.: Ronald Press, 1958, p. 963.

Syn to be trewe I have yow plight my trouthe.

(Bk. IV, l. 1610)

And it is on this hope that goes on, and on, believing in her return:

Biseechyng hire, syn that he was trewe,

That she wol come a – yeyn and holde hire trouthe.

(Bk. V, ll. 1585 – 86)

Chaucer often uses *trouthe* in this sense. In the *Second Nun's Tale*, for example, Valerian, nominal husband of that virgin, Saint Cecilie, tries to convert his brother, Tiburce, to the Faith. Tiburce smells the miraculous lily and rose which crown Cecilie and Valerian, but he cannot see them, and Valerian tells him that he shall see them, “If it be so thou wolt, withouten slouthe, / Bileve aright and knowen verray trouthe” (ll. 258 – 9). All their previous life has been as a dream, Valerian continues, “But now at erst in trouthe oure dwellyng is” (l. 264).

In addition to the moral virtue of truth and truth in the religious sense, there was a third meaning for the term *truth* current in Chaucer's time: “that which is true, real, or actual. Thus, philosophically *truth* is ultimate reality, or the *Highest Good*, identified with Goodness, Beauty, and Justice in a Platonic sense – identified, that is, with Divine Love and the “law of Kynde.” It is generally considered that the basic philosophy of *Truth* “shows the influence of Boethius, though it does not closely follow particular passages.”⁴² But for Boethius, *truth* was identical with the *Highest Good*. That only was *true*, in the real sense of the word, which was also permanent – anything else was subject to the change. Man instinctively desires happiness and, in order to be happy, seeks goodness. However, he cannot find true goodness and true happiness, in seeking the things of this world, because these things are impermanent. Wealth, power, honour, and earthly love all vanish. Only the Highest Good is permanent, and it is there that man should seek true happiness. Celestial love is permanent: celestial love is the *truth*. In Chaucer's translation, Philosophy says

Certes thise ben thise thinges that men wolen and desiren to geten, and for this cause desiren they rychesses, dignytes, reignes, glorie, and delices; for therby wenen they to han suffysaunce, honour, power, renoun, and gladnesse. Thanne is it good that men seken thus, by so manye diverse

⁴²Robinson, p. 522.

studies. In which desir it mai lightly be schewyd how greet is the strengthe of nature. For how so that men han diverse sentences and discordynge, algates men accorden alie in lovyng the eend of good.

(Bk. III, 114 – 125)

False goodness is characteristic of the things of this world, while true goodness characterizes the Highest Good, available to man only upon contemplation of a plane of existence beyond this world.

The three types of truth are interrelated, and the reader of this poem must keep all three in mind in order to clearly understand the sense of the lines. Boethius identifies the philosophical Highest Good with God; thus, it becomes for Chaucer identical with the Christian God. Again, Boethius' Lady Philosophy says

The comune accordaunce and conceyt of the corages of men proveth and graunteth that God, prince of alle thinges, is good.... Certes resoun scheweth that God is so good that it proeveth by verray force that parfyt good is in hym.... and forthy, for as moche as that my resoun or my proces ne go nat away withouten an ende, we owe to graunte that the sovereyn God is ryght ful of sovereyn parfit good. And we han establissched that the sovereyne good is verray blisfulnesse is set in soveryn God.

(Bk. III, 11. 39 – 62)

Since God is identified with the Highest Good, then Christ the Son (and “verray God”) must also be identified with that Highest Good, and thus the Truth (“I am the way, and the truth”).

All three connotations of truth, then, are implied and are interrelated in Chaucer's poem. In the beginning, the audience is told to “Flee fro the prees, and dweile with sothfastnesse” (1. 1), or truth. One should leave the world and dwell with truth, in the sense that many follow the way of the world (seeking earthly love), but only a few follow the way of truth (seeking eternal love).

Nevertheless, the same sentiment may be found in Boethius, in the sense that one should leave the crowd, or this world, and seek the Highest Good, the Truth. However, the Boethian influence is more obvious in the following lines:

Suffyce unto thy good, though it be smal;

For hord hath hate, and climbing tikelnesse,

Prees hath envye, and wele blent overal; (11. 2 – 4)

These things mentioned by Chaucer – “thy good” (property), “hord” (hoardings presumably of precious things), “climbing” (aspiration), “Prees” (here meaning perhaps the crowd, perhaps “prys” – value, worth), and “wele” (prosperity, wealth) – all are partial goods in the Boethian sense, and none is the road to true happiness, as Philosophy makes clear:

Forwhy yif thou enforcest the to assemble moneye, thow

must byreven hym his moneye that hath it; and yif thow

wolt schynen with dignytees, thow must bysechen and

supplyen hem that yyven tho dignytees; and yif thow

coveytest be honour to gon byfore othere folk, thow

shalt defoule thiself thurw humblesse of axynge.

(Bk. III, pr. 8, 11. 6 – 14)

The first stanza of *Truth* concludes with the admonition to the reader to desire no more than is good for him, and to “Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede” (1. 6). Now this may mean at least two different things: the reader is told to govern himself well, so that other people may *rede* him in the sense of “read,” or look to him as an *example*. This, however, would not be completely consistent with the rest of the poem. The advice to the reader is to turn his eyes *upward*, not to worry about setting a good example for the “prees” of this world. A more likely reading of these lines would be “govern yourself well, before you try to rede or *counsel* others”.

After a stanza of philosophical and religious commonplaces, the first occurrence of the refrain “And trouthe thee shal delivere...” refers undoubtedly to the philosophical Highest Good, since this is the *essence* of these partial earthly goods the reader is told not to seek; the line refers as well to the way of religious truth, since it is implied that the listener should be less concerned with physical things and more concerned with his spiritual condition; and finally, *trouthe* here refers to ethical right conduct, particularly in the instruction to “Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede” (1. 6).

Stanza two of this important lyric seems at first the most obviously Boethian of the poem. The reader is advised not to strive against Fortune, for great peace lies in not constantly striving.

Tempest thee noght al coked to redresse,

In trust of hir that turneth as a bal:

Gret reste stant in lite! businessse;

Be war also to sporne ayeyns an al;

Stryve not as doth the cokke with the wal. (11. 8 – 12)

The association with Boethius is obvious here in the reference to Fortune as “hir that turneth as a bal,” and the transition from the first stanza is clear in that riches, power, honour, and all other partial goods are, in Boethius, under the governance of Fortune, whose wheel constantly spins. This is why these goods are only partial – they are transient, always subject to the will of Fortune. “Swich is my strengthe,” says Boethius Fortune:

and this pley I pleye continually. I torne the whirlynge wheel with the turnynge sercle; I am glad to chaungen the loweste to the heyest, and the heyeste to the loweste. Worth up yif thou wolt, so it be by this lawe, that thou ne nolden adown whan the resoun of my pley axeth it. (Bk. II, pr. 2, 11. 50 – 57)

Those who play Fortune's game and strive for the things of *this* world are thus subject to disappointment, failure, and constant motion. However, those who decline to chase Fortune's gifts and who, metaphorically, stay at the hub of the wheel in Boethian terms, are not subject to the fickleness of Fortune, but seek the good, the truth elsewhere.

The sense of Chaucer's lines – that one should not strive fruitlessly, trying to change everything in this world, for that is like smashing yourself against the wall like a piece of crockery (1. 12) – seems to follow both Christian and philosophical teachings. And the final line before the refrain stresses, again, the necessity of gaining power over oneself before one attempts to exert any authority over other.

Daunte thyself, that dauntest otheres dede (1. 13)

With the opening of the third stanza of *Truth* Chaucer begins what amounts to a

summary of what has been said in the first two stanzas. Receive in obedience whatever is sent you in this life, says the poet. Do not strive to obtain the partial goods of this world. If one struggles to achieve these goods, he is merely asking to be cast down by Fortune's wheel:

That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse;

The wrastling for this world axeth a fal. (11. 15 – 16)

The remainder of the stanza moves to a commonplace image based upon these two assumptions: the world is not our permanent home; we are, then, pilgrims passing through, *en route* to our home in our own country, with our God:

Her is non hoom, her nis but wilderness:

Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forthe, beste, out of thy stall

Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;

Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede; (11. 17 – 20)

This image of life as a pilgrimage is traditional. Boethius included a similar image at the beginning of the Consolation; as the speaker is lamenting his misfortunes, Philosophy comes to him:

“Whan I saugh the,” quod sche, “sorwful and wepynge, I wist anoon that thou were a wrecche and exiled; but I wyste nevere how fer thyn exil was yif thy tale ne hadde schewid it me. But certes, al be thou fer fro thy cuntre, thou n'art nat put out of it, but thou hast fayled of thi weye and gon amys.... For yif thou remembre of what cuntre thou art barn... o lord and o kyng, and that is God, is lord of thi cuntre, which that rejoisseth hym of the dueliynge of his citezeens, and nat for to putten hem in exil; of the whiche lord it is a sovereyn fredom to ben governed by the brydel of hym and obeye to his justice.” (Bk. I, pr. 5, 11. 4 – 25)

Chaucer may have had this very passage in mind here, since later, in the Envoy, he implies the idea of God's governance as true freedom, by asserting that relying upon the gifts of this world is a kind of slavery – “Unto the world leve now to be thral” (1. 23). Further, when Boethius speaks metaphorically of obedience to God's will as being in the “brydel of hym,” it depicts the obedient worshiper as a beast, and Chaucer may suggest

this in his powerful “Forth, beste, out of thy stall”.

This “pilgrimage” figure occurs not only in the Bible and in Boethius, but it also seems to have been a stock image appearing in various Middle English lyrics in the *contemptu mundi* tradition. Now in some ways, *Truth* belongs in that tradition, as the Chaucerian speaker advises his readers to hold this world as an earthly good, and to seek instead the true and eternal love of God. However, a comparison between Chaucer's poem and any typical *contemptu mundi* lyric would reveal, as well, a fundamental difference. Chaucer is characteristically fresh, bright, and optimistic in his poem; he never succumbs to the darkness, pessimism, of the typical *contemptu mundi* poet.

Like the reader of *Truth*, the child in this poem is advised not to trust Fortune:

Ne tristou to this world: it is thy ful fo.

The rich he maketh pouer, the pore rich also.

It turneth woe to wel, and ek wel to wo.

Ne trust no man to this world whil it turneth so. (11. 19 – 22)

Chaucer never advises his listener to despise the world, never reminds him of impending death. Instead, Chaucer exhorts the audience to think of God, hold the “heye way”.

Surely, an examination of the philosophical dimensions of *Truth* affords the most fruitful interpretation of the poem. Curiously, earlier critics have focused on, almost been obsessed with, two aspects of the poem: the Envoy and the tradition of the poem's late date. Tradition long held that the poet at the end of his life composed *Truth*. The apparent contempt for this world and desire for the next seemed appropriate for one's deathbed. However, I think a close reading of the poem will not support this notion. *Truth* is not the pronouncement of one leaving this vale of tears for a better existence, but rather an exhortation about how to live a Christian life in *this* world. Though it may not have been the poem's original intent, it may well have been sent to ease the pain of one whom, having lost favour at court needed to be reminded of those things that are truly valuable. Whatever biographical details may have prompted the poem's composition, it is a piece of value and an early example of the Chaucerian philosophical lyric.

Gentilesse is a poem closely related to *Truth* in idea, spirit, and tone, primarily because both deal with the theme of living the Christian life, and of appreciating those things that are truly valuable. Robert K. Root, commenting on this poem as well as the

famous speech on the same topic that virtually closes the “Wife of Bath's Tale,” deduces that the poet had “a noticeable tinge of radicalism,” and that these passages “betray a strong leaven of democracy.”⁴³ But to read political interpretations into this poem is to misread it. The subtitle attached to the poem, “Moral Balade of Chaucier,” indicates at least what Chaucer's contemporaries saw in the lyric: the overt message of the poem was certainly moral. As *truth* was the ideal moral precept of adhering to natural law and Divine Love, *gentillesse* was nobility attained by following the ideal moral virtue of living the *truth*.

In any case, the lines should be taken in a Christian, rather than a political, light. Chaucer is certainly not advocating equality among classes as regards the substance of this world, but is talking about virtue: all are equal in the sight of God, and their heritage of grace depends upon their virtue. In addition, what Chaucer is really doing is delivering to his noble audience the ideal of what they should be. Just why Chaucer was doing this we may never know completely, but his specific treatment of the theme can be appreciated only in a detailed examination of the poem itself.

It drives the idea that no matter what his earthly position is, one can be considered noble unless he is also virtuous. Note Chaucer's irony here in putting down the Church hierarchy for a lack of moral virtue: one's official position in the Church does not ultimately matter. What matters rather is how one conducts himself, and the implication here is that there are those in the Church hierarchy who do not conduct themselves in a “gentil” manner. As for the *crown* and *diadem*, both are ceremonial headpieces worn by reigning monarchs. Whether Chaucer actually saw any difference in the two words is difficult to say. Certainly, the crown is associated with a king. Since the term apparently originated with Alexander the Great, Chaucer may have seen the *diadem* as representative of imperial, rather than merely royal, power, and therefore put it in the climactic position of his series, which progresses in power and apparent nobility, bishop to king to emperor.

The poem's first stanza opens with a remarkable sentence:

The firste stok, fader of gentil esse –

What man that claimeth gentil for to be

Must foil owe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse

⁴³ Robert K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 2nd. ed. New York: Peter Smith, 1922, p. 25

Vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee. (11. 1 – 4)

The initial line is crucial to the poem. First, it introduces the theme of *gentillesse*, that is, of true nobility. It also implies the idea of *heredity* that pervades the lyric, by speaking of the first *stock*, that is, the original ancestor from whom the rest of the lineage derives. The poet speaks of the line of all who are truly noble.

The first stanza concludes with the assertion that “unto vertu longeth dignitee, / And noht the revers, sauflly dar I deme” (11. 5 – 6). Stanza 2 describes the exemplary life lived by that “first stok,” and concludes with the idea that *only* those who follow his example are truly his heirs, that is, those who inherit his *gentillesse*.

The first stok was ful of rightwisnesse,

Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free,

Clene of his gost, and loved besinesse,

Ayeinst the vyce of slouthe, in honestee;

And, but his heir love vertu, as dide he,

He is noht gentil, thogh he riche seme,

Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe. (11. 8 – 14)

The poem seems to work as follows: there are two sets of contrasting pairs – the *first stok* or *Fader* (11. 1, 8, and 19) contrasts with “richesse” (1. 15) and with the “mytre, croune, or diademe” (11. 7, 14, 21). These correspond roughly to the other pair of contrasting concepts: “vertu” (11. 4, 5, 12) and its associated qualities “rightwisnesse” (1, 8), “trewe,” “sobre,” “pitous,” “free” (1. 9), “clene,” full of “business” (1. 10) and “honestee” (1. 11), as opposed to “vyces” (11. 4, 11, 15). The relationship between the two pairs is expressed by Chaucer's repetition of the idea of *heredity*. He is interested in the *heir* (11. 12, 13, 17, and 20): the heir of the “first stok” is virtue – “This first stok was ful of rightwisnesse” (1. 3), but the heir of the world could conceivably be vice – “Vyce may wei be heir to old richesse” (1. 15).

Who, then, *is* this “first stock,” this father of true nobility? Brusendorff attempted to show that the first stock referred, in fact, to the first generation of mankind, citing Lydgate as an example of a similar use of the term.⁴⁴ However, there seems to be no real basis for this assumption. Certainly the “first stok” here cannot refer to Adam since the

poet says that to be like him one must strive “vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee,” and this would ignore the notion of original sin. Another possibility for the “first generation of mankind” which may fit the context of the poem better is the classical notion of the “Golden Age”; when all people did right naturally, there was no greed or perfidy, no laws and no wars. Certainly, these people could be called truly noble. Moreover, Chaucer was quite familiar with the notion as it appeared in Ovid, Boethius, and the *Roman de la Rose*. For he used it extensively in his poem *The Former Age*, discussed below. However, I think it unlikely that Chaucer means here the Golden Age when he here refers to the “firste stok,” because in that case the last stanza would be nearly impossible to explain:

But ther may no man, as men may wel see,

Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse

(that is appropred unto no degree

But to the first fader in magestee,

that maketh hem his heyres that him queme),

Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe. (11. 16 – 21)

Here it is explained that no man can bequeath virtue to his heirs: that ability is appropriate only to the “first fader in magestee” (1. 19), who must be identified with the “firste stok, fader of gentillesse” (1. 1), since both are presented as that one source from whom one should claim his heredity of true nobility. It is said that the first father “maketh hem his heyres that him queme,” that is, he may make all those who please him the heirs of his virtue – an action which seems appropriate only to God or Christ. The first stock then is the New Adam, not the old.

It is clear that in order to be truly noble, one must please God and thereby become His heir. The only way of achieving this is through virtuous actions. He who is the heir to “old riches,” on the other hand, is not also bequeathed gentility along with his “mytre, croune, or diademe.” That heir may, in fact, be consumed by vice. Chaucer does not reject the possibility of riches and virtue being united, but there is certainly no necessary connection.

I should emphasize that this view of *gentillesse* is not radical, as Root implied. Chaucer's major sources for his ideas were many and were orthodox. One major source was Boethius. Jefferson sums up the notion of “gentility” in Boethius (chiefly in Book III,

⁴⁴ Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925, p. 258

pr. 6) in three points:

(1) *Virtue constitutes true gentility.* (2) *Gentility cannot be transmitted by inheritance from father to son, for virtue depends on the individual.* (3) *Gentility proceeds from God alone, the common father of all.*⁴⁵

It is easy to see how Chaucer uses all three of these points in his poem. In addition, John Livingston Lowes noted Chaucer's debt to Dante, who discusses the nature of *gentilezza* in *Convivio*. Lowes also noted Chaucer's debt to Jean de Meun.⁴⁶

As was the case in *Truth*, then, Chaucer's conception in this "moral balade" is based on both philosophical sources and Christian scripture, as has been demonstrated.

It is not based on any political considerations, as Root suggested, and it remains for me to show the inadequacy of this interpretation. Not only are the sentiments of Chaucer's poem far from "novel" or "radical," but they are also not even "democratic" in the sense Root seems to imply. For one thing, it has been demonstrated long ago how widespread these "radical" ideas were in the literature of Western Europe from Seneca and Juvenal to Langland and Gower.⁴⁷ Why would so many writers, most of whom owed their social position to the good will of the aristocratic audience for whom they performed their works, deliberately antagonize that audience by praising the virtues of democracy?

If Chaucer was talking about political or social equality, he may have been on dangerous ground. But he was not. He was talking about Christian virtue – "gentility" in the eyes of God. And this was an altogether different – and unthreatening – matter. One could be an equal in the eyes of God but an inferior socially, and in fact the stratified social order was deemed necessary by the Church as well as the aristocracy: in the words of Albert B. Friedman, "From Aristotle's *Politics* to Caxton's *Chessbook*, the learned agreed that differences in rank among men no less than the division of labour was necessary for the public good and the survival of the body politic."⁴⁸

George M. Vogt evaluates the evidence in this way:

⁴⁵ Bernard L. Jefferson, *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1917, p. 95.

⁴⁶ John Livingston Lowes, 'Chaucer and Dante's *Convivio*', *MP*, 13, 1915, 19-33.

⁴⁷ George M. Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: *Generositas Virtus, Non Sanguis*', *JEGP*, 24, 1925, pp. 102-24.

⁴⁸ Albert B. Friedman, 'Contexts of an Historic Proverb', in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974, p. 225.

... the truth seems to be merely that the sentiment is one of those which, gratifying, as they do, in a large open – handed fashion, the self – compensatory propensity of the average man (always, necessarily, less powerful than virtuous), lend themselves peculiarly to poetic treatment in all ages and have little to do with the actualities either of the poet's criticism of life or of his practice.⁴⁹

The aristocratic audience might be inclined to nod in agreement to the general proposition that all men are equal in the eyes of God – just as they might to generalized platitudes in Church, but still make no transfer to everyday realities. Those who consider Chaucerian gentillesse to be democratic are looking at the concept from the bottom up – from the point of view of the aspiring middle classes who, like the Franklin of Chaucer's pilgrimage, want to prove themselves capable of as much gentility as their aristocratic “betters.” As the clerk of the “Franklin's Tale” exclaims

*“God forbide, for his blisful myght,
But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede
As wel as any of yow, it is no dredei” (11. 1610 – 12)*

I suggest, however, that one look at the idea from the top down, as one of Chaucer's noble audiences would do.

To the medieval aristocracy, the concept of *chivalry* was one very important ideal. Chivalry was itself based not only upon feudal obligations but also upon Christian virtues. The ideal knight should be the ideal secular Christian. Neville Coghill, in a monograph entitled *Chaucer's Idea of What is Noble*, uses the example of the thirteenth – century Catalan Ramon Lull, who wrote the book that Caxton later translated as *The Order of Chivalry*. According to Lull, “Knighthood... is an office of dedication, if need be to the death, in the service of God, and only less sacred than priesthood.”⁵⁰ The characteristics of a true knight are as follows:

He is at all times and in all places to maintain justice; he must keep himself exercised in arms by attending battles and tournaments, and inspirit by practicing wisdom, charity, loyalty, and humility.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Vogt, p. 102,

⁵⁰ Neville Coghill, *Chaucer's Idea of What is Noble*. London: The English Association, Presidential Address of 1971, p. 8.

⁵¹ Ibid.

According to what we know, Lull expresses the prevailing sentiments about the ideal of knighthood current in the Middle Ages. Chaucer's closest depiction of this ideal in one of his characters is, again, the Knight of the "General Prologue":

A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,

That fro the tyme that he first bigan

To riden out, he loved chivalrie,

Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.

.....

And though that he was worthy, he was wys,

And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.

He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde

In al his lyf unto no maner wight.

He was a verray, parfit, gentii knyght. (11. 43 – 46; 68 – 72)

Coghill believes that this picture of the Knight is not the presentation of a "romantic illusion," but rather "a picture of one attempting to live up to the moral demands of Christianity, which tells us to be *perfect*."⁵²

Chaucer's lines about true nobility may be aimed at those with aspirations similar to the Knight's. Chaucer's normal audience would be an *aristocratic one*; in the mind of one of Chaucer's normal listeners, the lines on *Gentilesse* may have provoked the following argument: as a result of my birth, I am a member of the noble class, but this does not make me truly "noble" ("Vyce may we! be heir to old riches" 1. 15). Reason tells me, moreover, that I do not *deserve* to be called "noble" unless I earn the title by deeds ("What man that claymeth gentii for to be / Must folow his [i.e. "the first stok's"] trace, and alle his wittes dresse / Vertu to sew, and vyces for to flee" 11. 2 – 4). Therefore, I should act according to my role in life: love, virtue and not vice.

Gentilesse, then, is a poem discussing the nature of true nobility, which is inherited from Christ, not from one's aristocratic ancestors. That heritage is virtue – ultimately, the acting in accordance with the precepts of Divine Love and natural law, the acting out of

truth. Those who held positions of power in the worlds whether they wore “mytre, crowne, or diadem” (that is, the noble audience to whom the poem is addressed), should display their true nobility by acting in accordance with the *truth*. Only in such actions does true *gentilesse* lie.

A poem similar in its philosophical and impersonal nature is *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, but it complements the poems already discussed in that it presents a negative view, a “Lak,” a world without *gentilesse*, a world where true nobility has ceased to exist. *Truth* is a major attribute of the Christian virtue implied by the term *gentilesse*, but the second stanza of the poem stresses how that very truth, as well as other qualities associated with *gentilesse*, is noticeably lacking in these times:

Trouthe is put down, resoun is hoiden fable;

Vertu hath now no dominacioun;

Pitee exyled, no man is merciablen;

Through covetyse is blent discrecioun.

The world hath mad a permutacioun

Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikeinesse,

That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (11. 15–21)

The relationship with Chaucer's other poems based on Boethius is clear. *Truth* is the supreme virtue, equated with Christian virtue in Chaucer's poem. *Gentilesse*, or nobility, is a human quality that stems from that same Christian virtue, and Chaucer's poem on *gentilesse* stresses that point. *The Former Age* another Chaucerian poem drawn largely from the *Consolation* of Boethius looks nostalgically back at a golden age when truth still governed men's lives, and people were truly *gentil*. The theme of *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, then, is that golden age is gone, and truth and *gentilesse* are lost with it.

The main *reason* for this decline is a lack of *stedfastnesse*. The earlier discussion of *Truth* and *Gentilesse* points fairly clearly to what Chaucer meant by “stedfastnesse.” *Stedfastnesse* is stability, perfect harmony, the orderly adherence to natural law.

The speaker of this poem is, once again, a universal “everyman,” at least through the first three stanzas. And the complaint about the times is not unlike a hundred others. Perhaps this encouraged Robbins to regard the entire poem as conventional, since it “approximates the evils of the age tradition; one could almost rewrite Chaucer from single

⁵² Ibid., p. 10.

lines. The Envoy is similarly traditional."⁵³ Most critics speak of the sentiments of this poem as characteristic of the age in general. So Geoffrey Shepherd says that one of Chaucer's "common themes is a moral weariness with his times, and a longing for a lost stability.... Once there had been a better age, of faith and honour, peace and harmony. As the war with France dragged on in uneasy truces, there were many attempts to dignify old values with the memories of past achievements."⁵⁴

But Chaucer, as we have seen and will see repeatedly, uses traditions and goes beyond them. In this particular poem, Chaucer could well have written another *contemptu mundi* poem, presenting the evils of the world and advising the audience to withdraw from it, looking forward to heaven. He does not do that. Instead, as in *Truth*, Chaucer characteristically infuses into his poem a note of *hope*, a conviction that there was still a chance that men could live a life governed by natural law here and now.

This note of hope can be heard as Chaucer moves from the body of the ballade into the Envoy – that is, when he moves from the general and universal into the specific. The Envoy particularizes the theme of degeneration; it places the universal mood into the specific context of the political situation of Chaucer's own day. One problem with this poem, however, is in deciding precisely which political situation the final stanza refers to. The Envoy is traditionally believed to have been addressed to Richard II; one manuscript calls it *Lenvoy to King Richard*.

In the Envoy, Chaucer tells King Richard

O prince, desyre to be honourable,

Cherish thy folk and hate extorcion!

Suffre nothing that may be reprevable

To thyn estate don in thy regioun.

Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun,

Dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesses

And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse. (11. 22 – 28)

The alliteration of "stedfast and stable" – the two qualities describing divinely ordained order – with "sometime" make it clear that those qualities are attributes of a time in the past, now gone. Associated with this "stedfastnesse" was the quality of keeping

⁵³ Rossell Hope Robbins, 'The Lyrics', in Beryl Rowland, ed., *Companion to Chaucer Studies*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 313-32.

one's word – that is, personal integrity that is a large part of truth. But Chaucer immediately contrasts the present with that golden past:

And now it is so fals and deceivable

That word and deed, as in conclusion,

Ben nothing lyk, for turned up – so – down

Is al this world for mede and wilfulnesse,

That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (11. 3 – 7)

The poet laments the loss of that better age, for he lives in a world where there is no truth or stedfastnesse – where values have been altered.”

For Chaucer, certainly one important feature of an ordered, steadfast society would be a rightful king governing subjects loyal to their sovereign. It was the sovereign's duty to govern reasonably and to exercise authority honourably. But even if that authority became corrupt, revolt was not, for Chaucer, a possible alternative, since the order of the state was a reflection of the divine order of the universe.

The lines (11. 15 – 21) about the absence of *Trouthe*, *Pitee*, and *Vertu* quoted, which Gardner saw as “subtly striking out” at the King, may in fact subtly suggest political activity. King's. “*Trouthe is put down*,” as Richard's attempts to rally opposition to Gloucester in 1387 were put down. “*Resoun is holden fable*,” as, perhaps, Richard himself was held too “feeble” to rule and so was forced to answer to the eleven – man commission created to guide him. “*Vertu hath now no dominacioun*,” since Richard himself does not in fact rule his own country. Discretion, that virtue by which men make responsible decisions, is now blinded by covetousness. Is Chaucer here alluding to members of parliament, whose discretion may have been blinded by covetousness? Who can say. Here, again, the exact correspondences seem quite strained, but I mean to imply only that it is just as easy to see how these lines apply to the period 1386 – 89 as it was with the later period suggested by Gardner. The fact is that no historical *facts* can be found in this stanza. Stanza 3 speaks only of *general* ills. It ends with the repetition of the idea of the world's values being turned around – a *permutation*, Chaucer calls it, from right to wrong.

But after these three stanzas of despair is struck a note of hope. The Envoy to King

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Shepherd, ‘Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer’, in Derek Brewer, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975, p. 267.

Richard calls up the possibility of that former Golden Age coming again. Chaucer exhorts the king to bring back all of those values now out of fashion: “desyre to be honourable,” he tells the King (1. 22), “Cherish thy folk and hate extortion” (1. 23); let nothing reprehensible be done in your land. “Shew forth thy swerd of castigation” (1. 26), Chaucer says, perhaps hinting here at some severe and just punishment for the treason of rebels like Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick. The King is further advised to “dred God, do law, love trouthe and worthinesse” (1. 27). All of this sounds like advice that is given at the moment of a new beginning. Chaucer is portraying Richard as the one person who can give the moribund world new life – who can change the world. And there is a note of hope and desperation – if he cannot set things right, who can? The last line, in this spirit of hope and rebirth, alters the refrain to fit the mood.

This hopeful spirit is what most of all distinguishes Chaucer's poem from that which some critics have tried to make it. Chaucer's tone is not *angry* here.

In Chaucer, it is in the spirit of hope for a new start and a return to the Golden Age that the King is addressed. That hope for a new beginning is not so evident in *The Former Age*. *The Former Age* is a poem similar to *Lak of Stedfastnesse* in its nostalgic look back at a past time, which Chaucer presents as of necessity having been better than his present. But where *Lak of Stedfastnesse* ends with an exhortation to Richard to improve things, and hence a note of hope, *The Former Age* ends in these lines of total despair:

Alias, alias! now may men wepe and cryel
For in oure dayes nis but covetyse,
Doublenesse, and tresoun, and envye,
Poyson, manslauhtre, and mordre in sondry wyse. (11. 60 – 64)

This streak of pessimism seems uncharacteristic of Chaucer. Certainly not all of his poems end on a happy note, but virtually all of them, even when they end unhappily, offer some sort of possibility for living in the face of trouble. At the end of the “Knight's Tale,” for example, Arcite dies in a freak accident. His betrothed, Emilye, and his kinsman and rival Palamon go into a long period of mourning. But after some years. Theseus calls the two survivors together, and in a long speech advises them to “maken virtue of necessity” (1. 3042), offering the possibility of new life by proposing the politically expedient marriage of Emilye to Palamon.

Similarly, in the end of *and Criseyde*, , forsaken by his beloved Criseyde, throws

himself into the wars. Here he hopes to meet Diomedes, but is instead killed by Achilles. But to ensure that the reader's ultimate impression of the poem is not the despair and frustration of his last days, Chaucer concludes his fifth book with a "palinode." Here, as he ascended to the eighth sphere hears the music of the spheres which denotes natural law. From that height, and that new perspective, he looks down upon the earth and laughs. The laughter points the way to new life for the audience, and the palinode goes on to offer a sound plan for Christian living for those who do not wish to follow in the bloodstained footsteps – "Repeyresth horn fro worldly vanyte, /... / And of youre herte up casteth the visage / To thilke God that after his ymage / You made" (ll. 1837 – 1840).

Why then this poem, *The Former Age*, which praises the lives of people in the Golden Age but ends with those utterly damning lines of contemporary times? Was Chaucer simply feeling more pessimistic when he wrote this poem? That is a possibility. It becomes more of a probability if one assumes that the poem was written in the years 1387 – 88, when things seemed bleakest for Chaucer and that bleakness is captured effectively in the final lines of *The Former Age*.

But unlike *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, this poem's interpretation does not depend upon its date. For all the pessimism of the final stanza, the nostalgia of the rest of the poem is not particularly unpleasant, and perhaps it is in these lines that one may find a suggestion for right living. If the suggestion is there, though, it would scarcely seem to be Chaucer's own, since the earlier stanzas in *The Former Age* are, almost to the word, a translation of Book II, metre 5 of Boethius' *Consolation*, with additional passages based on similar descriptions of the "Golden Age" drawn from Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Roman de la Rose*. But a careful study of the parallels between Chaucer and these sources reveals slight alterations and variations on Chaucer's part intended to direct the poem in the particular direction he desired: he wanted to make a direct contrast between the past and present, and he wanted to show *covetousness* to be the cause of the decadence of his own day. *The Former Age*, then, serves as a good example of Chaucer's method of "translation," which involved, in effect, rewriting the original until it said what Chaucer wanted to say.

Chaucer's first lines, "A blisful life, a paisible and a swete, / Ledden the peples in the former age" (ll. 1 – 2), are an expansion of the first words of Boethius' poem, "Blisful was the first age of men" (Bk. III, mtr. 5, l. 1). The adjectives "paisible and swete" serve to further idealize the age, but the change from *first* to *former* is perhaps more significant.

First is indefinite: it implies the first of an unspecified number, here the first of several ages – gold, silver, bronze, iron, and present. *Former*, however, implies *duality*: *former* as opposed to *current*; then versus *now*. What is suggested, then, is a direct contrast between the past and the present, rather than a gradual decline. The indictment of the present age thus seems stronger. Chaucer's next lines are quite similar to those of Boethius, to the point of using many of the same words: "They helde hem payed of the fruits that they ete / Which that the felde yeve hem by usage" (11. 3 – 4) says Chaucer, as compared with Boethius' "they helden hem apayed with the metes that the trewe feeldes broughten forth" (11. 1 – 3). Also quite similar are the next lines of both poems, except for one difference. Boethius says "They ne destroyeden ne desseyvede nat hemself with outrage" (11. 3 – 5). Chaucer eliminates the alliteration along with the sense of people deceiving themselves and so destroying themselves with excess. Instead, Chaucer speaks of being, that is, extravagantly pampered with excessive and wasteful luxury – an idea which he continues to stress throughout the poem. The following line, "Unknowen was the quern and eek the melle" (1. 6) corresponds to nothing in Boethius. Chaucer may have added it as an indication of the technical "luxuries" of his age – handmills and mills which altered the natural state of the food as it was in the former age.

Chaucer's second stanza again takes the bulk of its inspiration from Boethius, but this time there is the additional influence of Ovid and Jean de Meun, and a larger number of lines original with Chaucer. In Book I of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how "ipsa quoque immunis rastroque intacta nee ullis / saucia votneribus per se dabat omnia tellus" (Bk. I, 11. 101 – 102), ("The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful."). In a similar passage, Jean de Meun says "La teere n'ert point Tors aree, / Mes, si cum Diex Vavoit paree, / Par soi meimes aportoit / Ce dont chascuns se confortoit" (11. 8381 – 8384), ("No plowing was then needed by the soil, / But by God's care it foised by itself, / Providing all the comforts that men wished". 169).

It is in these original lines that Chaucer's purpose reveals itself most clearly: he seems in the poem particularly concerned with advances in technology – here especially in agriculture the chief industry of his time. These advances he views in a negative light: they are a part of the excessive luxury of the present age.

Along with the *clarre* – a drink made by mixing wine with honey – further

emphasizes Chaucer's theme of modern luxury caused by men meddling with and changing the natural state of things.

The repetition of the word "yet" in this stanza should also be noted as a Chaucerian addition. A. V. C. Schmidt, in what is undoubtedly the best study of *The Former Age*, notes that this rhetorical device "establishes an ominous sense that the happy time had to end."

This alteration of the natural condition of things by human intervention continues in the first lines of the third stanza, "No mader, welde, or wool no litestere / Ne knew; the flees was of his former hewe" (11. 17 – 18). Norton – Smith notes how Chaucer's use of "former" here recalls his use of the word in line two: former "signifies 'first' in a succession of two states. The phrase implies opposition between natural and unnatural." But Chaucer does not seem to have been as intent upon stressing the procedure of dying clothing as he was upon emphasizing the luxuries of eating.

Money had not yet been invented at that time as a means of exchange or of accumulating capital; therefore, no one knew how to distinguish false from true coins (1. 20). But as soon as the motive of profit became one of man's greatest desires, he built ships to cross the ocean for the sake of commerce, and merchants began to bring in foreign ("outlandish") goods (11. 21 – 22). "No Marchaunt yit ne fette outlandish ware" says Chaucer, and then suddenly shifts topics from commerce to warfare: "No trompes for the werres folk ne knewe" (1. 23). The juxtaposition and the parallelism suggest a close relationship. The implication is that it was a similar desire for capital gain which led to the wars and fortifications of lines. This implication is even stronger when one considers that the ship "karf," or cut, the waves, like a sword. But warfare apparently suggested to Chaucer the siege of fortified cities, probably because of his experience with that sort of warfare in France, and so he took the last line of the stanza apparently from Ovid.

In stanzas two and three Chaucer had depicted the degeneracy of his times. In stanza four, Chaucer begins to make clear the cause of that degeneracy. The root of all man's evils, he says here in no uncertain terms, is covetousness – "Alas! than sprong up al the cursednesse / Of covейtise, that first our sorwe broghte!"¹¹ (11. 31 – 32). The stanza opens with lines again suggested by those of Boethius. Chaucer's lines read "What shold it han avayled to werreye? / Ther lay no profit, ther was no richesse" (11. 25 – 26). Boethius' verse is "For wherto or which woodnesse of enemys wolde first moeven armes, whan thei seyen cruele wowndes, ne none medes be of bloodishad?" (11. 25 – 28). Chaucer's

emphasis is far more upon the idea of war for *riches*, as suggested in the previous stanza, while Boethius stresses the details of *wounds* and *bloodshed*. The lines express a desire to return to the Golden Age, and describe men nowadays as burning with a “love of havynge” as hot as the fires of Etna. These words may in part have been the source for Chaucer though the similarities are not at all obvious. Chaucer passes instead to the last lines of Boethius' poem:

Alias! What was he that first dalf up the gobbettes or the weyghtes of gold covered undir erthe and the precyous stones that wolden nan be hydd? He dalf up precious periles. (11. 33 – 37)

Chaucer's lines are as follows:

*But cursed was the tyme, I dare wel seye,
That men first did hir swety bysinesse
To grobbe up metal, lurkinge in derknesse,
And in the riveres first gemrnes soghte. (11. 27 – 30)*

And the stanza ends lamenting the advent of covetousness, the cause and the result of this “grubbing up” of metal – for it is covetousness, the desire to have more, that characterized man's desire for more than Nature provided, and consequently led to the luxuries and the disasters Chaucer describes in the first three stanzas.

He is speaking again about warfare, but again, as before, his interest is not in the war or bloodshed *per se*, but rather the greed that prompts it.

*Thise tyraunts putte hem gladly nat in pres
No wildnesse ne no busshes for to winne;
Ther proverte is, as seith Diogenes,
Ther as vitaile is eek so scars and thinne
That noght but mast or apples in therinne.
But ther as bagges been and fat vitaile,
Ther wol they gon, and spare for no sinne
With al hir ost the cite for *fassaile*. (11. 32 – 40)*

The irony of marching into battle to win only a wilderness or a few bushes where dwells nothing but poverty appealed to Chaucer. The point is obviously that hope for gain (“ther as bagges been and fat vitaile”) is the sole reason for war, and thus the stanza

continues the idea of covetousness as the root of all man's woes – a theme Chaucer would treat again with incomparable skill in the *Pardoner's Tale* and its repeated theme: *radix malorum est cupiditas*.

Chaucer keeps the same notion of the first men sleeping in simplicity in caves or on the grass – in *natural* surroundings. But he adds the contrast with modern luxuries – the palace chambers and halls, the feather beds and bleached sheets that typically luxurious modern man sleeps upon were unknown to this simple folk. And those people were much better off without these things, because they were able to sleep “without walle” and “in seurtee.” There was no danger from other men because there were no riches, hence no covetousness. Men could sleep in perfect security because no one wanted more than nature provided. In the final lines of the stanza, Chaucer emphasizes that as a result of this situation,

Everich of hem his feith to other kepte, (ll. 47 – 48).

Covetousness, then, destroys *Truth*, and in the former age, when there was no covetousness, men were true.

Stanzas seven and eight are almost wholly Chaucer's invention. Their purpose, however, is chiefly to summarize points which the poet has already made, and so they do not add a great deal to the poem. Stanza seven is a general picture of human good will in the Golden Age. The people were peaceful; they had no armor and engaged in no quarrels. Each loved the other, and there was no pride, envy, avarice, or tyranny. Rather good faith reigned as empress, with humility and peace. The stanza is a general summary to be contrasted sharply with the final stanza.

Stanza eight depicts the horrors of contemporary society. Jupiter and Nimrod (“Nembrot”) are presented as types of the two chief evils condemned by Chaucer throughout the poem:

Yit was not Jupiter the likerous,

That first was fader of delicacye,

Come in this world; ne Nembrot, desirous

To regne, had nat maad his toures hye. (ll. 56 – 59)

Jupiter is depicted as the father of “delicacy,” which the OED (1.) defines as “The quality of being addicted to pleasure or sensuous delights; voluptuousness, luxuriousness, daintiness.” This is the love of luxury which Chaucer has condemned throughout the poem, and Jupiter the emblem of those “forpampred with outrage.” Perhaps Chaucer had

in mind Jupiter's rather unusual love affairs with mortal women. It is, in Ovid, with the ascension of Jove that the Golden Age passes to silver, when men begin to plow the earth and to build walls. "Nembrot," on the other hand is "desirous to regne" – and is covetous of power and the riches associated with it. In medieval tradition he is also the builder of the tower of Babel. Most critics have interpreted line 59 in this light, seeing the tower as a symbol of pride in its climbing toward heaven. But Norton -Smith notes that *toures*, a plural, cannot (in line 59) refer to the *tower* of Babel, of which there was only one, but refers rather to Babylon. And Nimrod's importance is that he was the first monarch. "Voluptuous, full of pride, he established the rule of Monarchy, enclosing and subjugating the people, inaugurating war and envy." Thus the real importance of these *toures* is the way they recall the "toures hey" and the "walles"; in all three places, the suggestion is that *towers* are needed for protection when covetous men, like Nimrod, desire more than they need.

Norton-Smith goes on to comment upon the influential critical interpretation of these lines on Nimrod as political allegory of Gloucester. But Norton-Smith believes that as a king, Nimrod would more likely represent Richard II. There is, however, no reason at all to consider this poem a political allegory. Norton – Smith apparently believes that this poem belongs to Chaucer's and Richard's, last years. The point of these lines is not really the *kingship* of Nimrod, but rather his lust for power, his "tyrannical ambition" and "political oppression," that Chaucer condemns, and that point is made whether the allusion is to the building of the tower of Babel or the walls of Babylon; Nimrod is no more an allegorical figure here than Jupiter is. Both tendencies – the love of luxury and the love of riches and power, result from *covetousness* – the desire for more than nature provides. Hence Chaucer's final lines, quoted here, describe a world dominated by covetousness:

Alias, alias! now may men wepe and cryel

For in oure dayes nis but covetyse,

Doublenesse, and tresoun, and envye,

Poyson, manslauhtr, and mordre in sondry wyse. (11. 60 – 63)

In the end, then, *The Former Age* seems not such a pessimistic poem after all. Through the pessimism of the final lines presents a recommendation for right living even in the face of a world thus characterized. And though his lines were drawn heavily from three sources, Chaucer's own purpose is always constant, and he does not hesitate to alter what he borrows to fit his own frame. His purpose is not to show the actual physical decay

of the world since the first age, so he ignores the description in Ovid of the perpetual springtime of the Golden Age; his purpose has nothing to do with showing a paradise for lovers, so he ignores much of the *Roman de la Rose*. Boethius' theme had been the fact that the first men had lived without covetousness because they lived without riches. It was an appropriate thesis at this point in the *Consolation*, since it comes directly after Philosophy's lecture on the vanity of earthly riches. Chaucer plays upon Boethius' suggestion: he eliminates what seems irrelevant to him, rearranges details, and stresses a connection between love of luxury and love of power, describing as a chain of events the simple desire for more and different foods than those supplied by Nature, leading to fierce desire for riches and power that ignites warfare. Thus I must disagree with Schmidt's contention that "The question, how did man *lose* his innocence? is barely raised, let alone answered."⁵⁵ The cause is covetousness. Chaucer is certainly not advising that all men go off to sleep in caves and eat wild nuts and berries – that is no longer possible, the world being what it is. But one can live as simply as he can, desiring no more that God sends: this is living according to natural law, in harmony with the earth. It is also the message of *Truth*. And it is, in the end, pure Chaucer.

This "pure Chaucer" of the Boethian lyrics is not so recognizable, however, in *An ABC*. The poem, in fact, may appear to be out of place in this chapter. *An ABC* is sentimental, simplistic, even pious – what does it have to do with the self – conscious, philosophically reflective Boethian lyrics?

ABC does fit into this group, since all are chiefly concerned with the concept of Divine Love. The Boethian lyrics are "philosophical" in that they deal with their major theme, the necessity of following the dictates of Divine Love in our lives, in a rather abstract, philosophical manner. Divine Love is perceived in terms of abstract conceptions like natural law, universal harmony, truth, gentillesse, and stedfastnesse. But for the average person in medieval Europe, Divine Love was embodied not in abstract concepts but in one specific person – the Virgin Mary. Christ, or the Almighty Father Himself, were often depicted as transcendent rulers, interested chiefly in Justice and Righteousness. God's Love and Mercy, therefore, were manifested largely in the Virgin. Thus even in the very early and conventional Here, Chaucer can be observed doing what he does so often in later lyrics: personalizing and particularizing the abstract concept of universal love, here

⁵⁵ Schmidt, p. 114.

presenting it in the person of Mary.

What is important about this lyric is, first, what it reveals about Chaucer's speaker as one conditioned by the cultural currents of his time. The age of the great upsurge of the Cult of the Virgin which sprang into prominence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had left its mark upon popular imagination, and there was no abating of that current in the fourteenth century. Indeed, in a century wracked by plague, war, and political and ecclesiastical turmoil, the Virgin was the one constant people could always turn to for comfort. Mary, perhaps more than any other figure, was the popular manifestation of that Divine Love that was Chaucer's major theme.

Secondly, and of chief interest here, is what this early lyric reveals about Chaucer's craftsmanship – or perhaps his lack of craftsmanship. For the unavoidable impression one receives after a first reading of the poem is its apparent lack of unity. P. M. Kean complains that

*The ABC is a poem –and there are many like it in the Middle Ages –which substitutes a formal device for any thematic development. Its form is provided for by the simple decision to compose twenty six stanzas, each beginning with a successive letter of the alphabet. Beyond the fact that each is addressed to the Blessed Virgin, there is no consecutive thread running through the poem.*⁵⁶

It hardly seems necessary to point out that the poem has only twenty-three stanzas. More importantly, Kean's flaw is in expecting the *ABC* to follow modern tenets of poetry of which Chaucer was not aware and to which he would not have ascribed. The assumption seems to be that a poem must have a “thematic development” and a single “consecutive thread” in order to be a poem. Certainly the poem has a thematic unity, and several threads which run through it and give it that unity. But thematic “development” per se depends upon some conflict or tension which is set up in the poem, and then resolved. It can only occur when there is change or progression. Now in the *ABC*, as Reiss noted,⁵⁷ there is a tension between the speaker's impassioned state in lines like

⁵⁶ P. M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p.193.

⁵⁷ Edmund Reiss, ‘Dusting off the Cobwebs: A Look at Chaucer's Lyrics’, *Chaucer Review*, 1, 1976, 55-65.

Loo, how that theeves seven chasen meel

Help, lady bright, er that my ship tobreste! (11. 15 – 16)

and the calm assuredness of the Virgin, a calmness which engulfs the speaker in the end when he asks her to

Bring us to that palais that is bilt

To penitentes that ben to merci able. (11. 183 – 184)

In these final lines a resolution of the tension occurs, and perhaps, a “thematic development.” But the same tension and resolution could easily have been portrayed in a sonnet. Are they enough to sustain a poem of 184 lines? Probably not in Kean's view. The point is that Chaucer simply had a different concept of the unity of a poem; the depiction of a static situation in which little or no change occurred, but the speaker's thoughts ranged among various aspects of and approaches to his situation, was quite common in the Middle Ages – courtly love poetry abounds in such lyrics. The criterion that a lyric poem display development, or tension and resolution, does not necessarily hold in medieval poetry.

My central point here is that Chaucer, following this more “medieval” notion of unity, uses two specific devices to unify the poem. First, Chaucer develops the character of the Virgin Mary, presenting both her personal perfections and her special privileges and powers as popular medieval piety conceived them, by the device of repetition of words and concepts associated with Mary's character: her mercy, pity, and generosity are repeatedly stressed, as are her roles as mediatrix, Queen of the Universe. Secondly, Chaucer unifies the poem through certain image patterns which tie the stanzas together.

The character of the Virgin is established first by depiction of her personal perfections. Of all Mary's personal virtues, the most important to the speaker of this poem is obviously her mercy. The poem virtually begins and ends with references to Mary's remarkable capacity for mercy: she is the “a! merci able queene” in line one, and she is “merci able /... To penitentes that ben to merci able” in lines 182 – 184. Mercy seems her chief attribute as she is called the “cause of grace and merci” (1. 26), “ful of swetnesse and merci evere” (1. 51), “Mooder, of whom oure merci gan to springe” (1. 133), and “ladi ful of merci” (1. 173); Chaucer, for variety's sake, occasionally uses the Latinate synonym: Mary is “queen of misericorde” (1. 25).

But mercy is not the only quality attributed to the Virgin in Chaucer's poem. Mary is able to offer mercy, or divine clemency, because she feels such pity, such sympathetic

compassion, for the suffering sinner. She watches sinners with “pitous eyen cleere” (1. 88), she is “of pitee well” (1. 126), and she shows abounding pity to those who ask for it (11. 135 – 136).

As a direct consequence of her unlimited pity and mercy, Mary is figuratively represented as a heaven of refuge for sinners. This is one of the metaphorical threads which run through *An ABC* and help to unify it: the speaker is pictured as one troubled and fleeing from the dangers of the world, from the wiles of the Devil, from his own sins, and from the wrath of God. And the Virgin is the archetypal mother figure, who provides comfort and protection for her troubled child.

A third quality stressed in *An ABC* is Mary's generosity. And in this as in all other virtues, the Virgin is unsurpassed. “Bountee” has pitched his tent in her heart (1. 9), says the speaker, so that “thin herte is ay so free” (1. 11). Further, Mary is “largesse of pleyn felicitee” (1. 12), and is “ful of bountee” (1. 66). She is, in Chaucer's apostrophe of line 107, the “tresoreere of bountee to mankynde.” These lines refer specifically to Mary's role in dispensing mercy to the human race, a role in which her generosity surpasses all imaginable bounds.

But it must be noted that “bounty” or “freedom” is unmistakably an attribute of the noble class. It is one of the premier virtues inherent in the chivalric ideal – the Knight in the *General Prologue* is described as loving “Chvalrie, / Trouthe and honour, fredom and curtesie” (11. 45 – 6). In this, of course, the chivalric ideal reflected economic reality, for a good lord was one who would provide generously for his retainers.

But more specifically and more importantly, the virtue of *bounty* was also characteristic of the ideal ladies of the courtly love tradition. Now it is well known that the cult of the Virgin flowered at approximately the same time as the emergence of the courtly love tradition in the twelfth century. Both show a trend toward a new and more positive, if idealized, view of femininity in a culture in which women were predominantly pawns in political marriages on the secular level, and the cause of mankind's loss of Eden at a spiritual level. There must have been some mutual influence between the two trends, though a definite cause – effect relationship, one way or the other, is unlikely. It has long been recognized that poems in praise of the Virgin use language which is often identical with that of poems in praise of the ideal Beloved of the courtly poetry. Bounty is certainly one of the chief characteristics of the Beloved: it appears in several of Chaucer's more courtly lyrics as a desirable trait for his lady. In *The Complaint unto Pity*, for example,

“womanly Beaute” is said to be allied with “Bounte, Gentiessie, and Curtesye” (11. 66 – 68). In *A Complaint to his Lady*, the speaker says of his Beloved that “Hir name is Bountee” (1. 24), and in a reversal of roles, Venus, speaker in *The Complaint of Venus*, says of *her* lover that “In him is bountee, wysdom, governaunce” (1. 9).

Certainly pity and mercy, the two other prevalent virtues attributed to the Virgin in *An ABC*, are also important traits which the courtly lover desires to find in his Beloved. Chaucer's *Complaint unto Pity* is the most obvious example, for here the speaker complains that his Beloved is devoid of pity, and finds the personified Pity “ded, and buried in an herte” (1. 14), The hard-hearted woman of *A Complaint to his Lady* is surnamed “Fair Rewtheles” (1. 26), while the speaker of *Womanly Noblesse* actually prays to his Beloved “with your pite me som wise avaunce” (1., 22). Similarly in *Merciles Beaute*, the speaker addresses his Lady, saying that personified Beauty has “fro your herte chaced / Pitee, that me availeth not to pleyne” (1. 15), and that her beauty is so great “no man may atteyne / To mercy” (1. 23). The Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* says that, when his Beloved finally acknowledged his love, “My lady yaf me al hooly / The noble yifte of Mr mercy,” (11. 1269 – 1270). And finally, Chaucer's most complex portrait of the courtly heroine, Criseyde, ponders to herself in Book II of the *Troilus*, when she sees Trolilus ride below her window,

... “Lo, this is he

Which that myn uncle swerith he moot be deed,

But I on hym have mercy and pitee.” (11. 653 – 655)

But it is not only in her qualities or mercy, pity, and bounty that the Virgin of *An ABC* resembles the courtly Beloved. “Lady bright,” which Chaucer calls Mary three times in *An ABC* (11. 16, 62, and 181), is a typical epithet for the courtly Lady. Compare “Emelye the bright” in “The Knight's Tale” (1. H27), “my lady bright / Which I have loved with al my myght” in *The Book of the Duchess* (1. 477), O lady bright.

In this same light must be considered the imagery describing Mary as the speaker's healer – another of those recurring image patterns which serve to unify the poem. Now it was quite conventional to portray the courtly Beloved as the lover's “physician” or “leech”: love so wounds the lover, or lovesickness so disables him, that only through the beneficent actions of the Beloved can the lover be healed. The speaker of *To Rosemounde*, for example, tells his Beloved that “at a revel whan that I see you daunce, / It is an oynement unto my wounde” (11. 6 – 7), The Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess*

calls his lost lady “that swete, my lyves leche” (l. 919). And Criseyde, taking pity on the seeming anguish of Diomedes, grants him mercy: “And for to helen hym of his sorwes smerte, / Men seyn – I not – that she yaf hym hire herte” (Bk. V, 1049 – 50).

Similarly, the Virgin is described as a healer, but the wounds are not those of love. Rather they are wounds inflicted by the thorns which afflict the earth after Paradise, emblematic of the speaker's sins: “With thornes venymous, O hevne queen.”

And again, Chaucer calls Mary “my soules leche” (l. 134). In imagery borrowed from the courtly love tradition, then, the poet here makes Mary the idealized Lady. The major difference in the two presentations – that of the Virgin and that of the Courtly Beloved – is that Mary possesses all the ideal qualities in abundance, and her mercy is always attainable, while the lady of the courtly lyric tends, more often than not, to lack those qualities of mercy, pity and bounty which the lover so desires to see in her. And when the poet prays to Mary to heal his wounds, the prayer is always answered.

John Gardner has called *An ABC* “in effect a courtly-love poem to the Virgin.... The poet strongly emphasizes the spiritually up-lifting effect of the lady.”⁵⁸ But Gardner further states that Chaucer's devotion in the poem is not purely conventional, citing lines 36 – 40 in particular:

But merci, ladi, at the grete assyse,

Whan we shule come bifore the hie justyse!

So litel fruit shal thanne in me be founde

That, but thou er that day me wel chastyse,

Of verrey right me werk wol me confounde.

Now one of the conventions of the courtly love tradition was the ennobling nature of love. Love of the lady brought out in her lover all of the courtly virtues – courtesy, valor, honour, truth, humility, and bounty – since, in order to be worthy of her, the lover would work hard to attain these virtues. A similar situation is taking place in these lines, though on a spiritual rather than a mundane level. Gardner interprets these lines as the speaker's asking that “the Virgin scold and correct Mm and thus help him resist sin and error.” Gardner's reading, based on the “chastyse, seems to place Mary into the same type as those cold and distant courtly mistresses who *chastyse* their lovers for any minor

offense against the strict code of love. Such a view, though, would be inconsistent with the merciful Mary, always the sinner's friend.

Turning from Mary's personal virtues to her special privileges and powers, Chaucer's speaker seems most interested in Mary as mediatrix, and certainly this was her chief role in medieval society. The idea of intercession of the saints had, for a long time, been a part of the Church's heritage. By the end of the second century, Giovanni Miegge notes, "By virtue of the spiritual unity between the Church militant and the Church triumphant, the idea that martyrs could help the living with their prayers entered the heritage of common beliefs scarcely noticed."⁵⁹

The Virgin, though she did not die a martyr, became associated with the martyrs because of her psychological suffering, particularly on Calvary; and naturally as the Mother of God, Mary could be no less than chief of the martyrs. It is "a short way," says Miegge, "from prayers in communion with the Virgin and the saints to an invocation addressed to the Virgin and the saints."⁶⁰ Certainly the Virgin, as God's Mother, would be more effective than any other saint as a sinner's advocate, and her abounding mercy, already noted as one of her characteristic perfections, would not allow her to ignore any sinner's prayer.

Two image patterns run through the poem reinforcing this picture of Mary as mediatrix. The first is that which underlines her role as Mother – for she is not only portrayed as the Mother of God in the poem, but as the universal Mother as well – if God is Our Father, Mary is Our Mother. And as a mother, she is more approachable a figure, displaying the stereotypical motherly qualities of compassion and protection, than God the Father, with whom one associated authority, sternness, strength, and punishment. This idea occurs first where Mary as Mother is called upon to confront the Father's wrath and so save the speaker from hell:

Glorious mayde and mooder, which that nevere

Were bitter, neither in erthe nor in see,

But ful of swetnesse and of merci evere,

⁵⁸ Gardner, *Life and Times of Chaucer*. New York: Random House, 1978, p. 117.

⁵⁹ Miegge, p. 130.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142

Help that my Fader be not wroth with me.

Spek thou, for I ne dar not him ysee,

So have I doon in erthe, alias the while!

That certes, but if thou my socour bee,

To stink eterne he wole my gost exile.

The same image is repeated, and the juxtaposition of mother/father made even for explicit, later in the poem:

Redresse me, mooder, and me chastyse,

For certaynly my Faderes chastisinge,

That dar I nouht abiden in no wise,

So hidous is his rightful rekenynge.

Mooder, of whom oure merci gan to springe,

Bith ye my juge and eek my soules leche;

For evere in you is pity haboundinge

To eche that wole of pitee you biseeche. (11. 129 – 136)

Mary's role as advocate – she who will speak before the high Judge for the sinner, and through her infinite mercy win Him, too, to pity - is stressed throughout the poem in a recurring set of images. But there is a sudden and climactic shift as the end of the poem approaches. Now Mary is no longer looked upon as mediatrix, but rather the poet wishes her to become his *judge*, thereby usurping the power of the Father:

Mooder, of whom oure merci gan to springe,

Beth my juge and eek my soules leche. (11. 133 – 134)

And again:

Ladi, unto that court thou me ajourne

That cleped is thi bench, O freshe flourel

Ther as that merci evere shal sojourne. (11. 158 – 160)

Why this sudden change? Has the reader been prepared for it? Certainly the tremendous power of the Virgin is suggested by all of the regal names which the Speaker calls Mary. She is “hevene queene” (1. 24 and 149), and “queen of misericorde” (1. 25),

the “queen of comfort” (1. 77, 121), “Noble princesse” (1. 97), and ultimately “maistresse / Of hevne and erthe” (11. 109 – 110). Indeed, Chaucer goes so far as to say to Mary that God:

... hath thee maked vicaire and maistresse

Of al this world, and eek governouresse

Of hevne, and be represseth his justise

After thi will; and therfore in witnesse

He hath thee crowned in so rial wise, (11. 140 – 144)

The depiction of the coronation of the Virgin was a popular theme in medieval art, and Chaucer may well have had this sort of picture in mind in these later lines. All of these lines depict Mary in the traditional medieval guise of Empress of the Universe, powerful yet, of course, always merciful. In part, the enthronement of Mary was a superimposition of Christian colours upon all the cults of Virgins and Mothers among the ancient pagan peoples – Mary becomes the Christian transformation of Isis, of Athena, of Diana.⁶¹ Though this sort of thing certainly served the purpose of assimilating strong elements of paganism which the Church could not otherwise control, this apparently universal psychological need for an archetypal Mother.

This placing of Mary on an apparently equal footing with the risen Christ Himself may seem to go too far, but it is a direct consequence of the view, popular in the Middle Ages and not unknown even today, of Mary as *co-redemptress* of the world.

The tradition of the “seven sorrows of the Virgin,” one which began at the end of the eleventh century and reached “full flowering in the fourteenth,” concentrated upon Mary's suffering, particularly her tears over the crucified Christ. In poems like the famous and popular “Stabat Mater,” the tradition portrayed Mary, the “Mater dolorosa,” as a fellow sufferer with Christ, and hence one who took an active role in man's redemption. Chaucer certainly has this tradition in mind in his lines:

Ladi, thi sorwe kan I not portreye

Under the cros, ne his greevous penaunce.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 68-82

But for youre bothes peynes I yow preye,

Lat not oure alder foo make his bobaunce

That he hath in his lystes of mischaunce

Convict that ye both have bought so deere. (11. 81 – 86)

It is in this light that Chaucer's depiction of Mary as Empress of the Universe, dispensing mercy in her own right, must be understood. As co – redemptress of mankind, she has earned the power which her Son has given her in dividing the universe with her. The apotheosis of Mary can go no further, and Chaucer himself is not, at this point, hesitant to go as far as he can with it. Perhaps this explains why Chaucer can address Mary in the first line by the surprising epithet “Almighty” – a title reserved only for God Himself, and the unorthodox implications of which only Wolfgang Clemen seems to have noticed.⁶²

Thus for Chaucer, as for most medieval men and women, the Virgin is the manifest embodiment of what may otherwise have been a mere abstraction: the overflowing *love* of God, represented here in what must certainly have seemed the most natural and compelling symbol, a Mother. The importance of this Divine Love in its function of binding the universe in perfect harmony, and human beings' participation in that universal harmony through harmonious love of each other and true love of God, are the chief themes of Chaucer's lyric poetry. Poems like *Truth* and *Gentiiesse* deal clearly and unequivocally with Divine Love and its role in human ethics. But they do so in a general way. It remains to be seen how, where Chaucer dealt with *human* love, he always held the notion of natural law up to it as a yardstick. And, as Chaucer began to individualize the speakers of his lyrics, he began to deal with specific cases of the manifestation of universal love and its related natural law.

As for Universal or Divine Love in Romanian literature we should say that it has few writers with a real mystical vocation. Among the Moldavian chroniclers of the XVII-th and XVIII-th centuries, Grigore Ureche, Miron Costin and Ion Neculce, the theme of Divine Love is exploited from the standpoint of reflections on human destiny. The only salvation of mankind is in faith and Divine Love. This world fatally lives under the horrific sign of evil and death. Therefore people should live thinking about the coming joy of the future life. In the book that Dimitrie Cantemir wrote during his youth, *The Divan or the Squabble of the Wise with the World*, the author explores through dialogues, in good

⁶² Clemen, p. 177.

platonian and Christian tradition, the relations between the Wise and the World. The life on earth should be lived according to the *carpe diem* principle. However, people must not remain prisoners of the world, but they should look for the supreme goodness in *ataraxia* or detachment from the world.

Generally speaking, the tragic feeling of existence is not characteristic of Romanian literature. Just such writers as Miron Costin, Eminescu, Blaga or Vasile Voiculescu frequently display the tragic tension, a gloomy vision on human condition. The tragic character comes from the failure of the human being to know and decipher the mysteries of the universe and the undiscernible mystery of existence.

Also in the vision of several Romanian writers, if people cannot understand the mysteries of the world, due to the fact that they are mere toys of destiny, the only solution is that one of following the natural law, of living according to the own nature. The praise to both, human nature and the joy of living, can be found at Romanian writers such as Anton Panu, Ion Creangă and Mihail Sadoveanu, who has many affinities with Chaucer. A well known essayist, Alexandru Paleologu, in his book *Common Sense as a Paradox* (Cartea Românească Publishers, Bucharest, 1972), underlines the representative character of these writers as for Romanian literature. G. Călinescu wrote in the chapter *National Specific* of his book *A History of Romanian Literature from the Origins up Today* (Minerva Publishers, Bucharest, 1982) about the "healthy skepticism" of Romanians.

The acceptance of the own condition and the natural law remain the only solution when facing death. Constantin Ciopraga, in his book *The Personality of Romanian Literature* (Institutul European Publishers, Iași, 1997), characterized the Romanian Literature through its inclinations to balance and prevention of tragic tensions. The conflict with the world and the Divinity is peacefully solved. The indignant man, about whom Camus wrote, cannot be found in Romanian literature, except by Eminescu (cf. such poems as *Mureșanu*, *Anthropomorfism* etc.) and L. Blaga (*Psalm*, *In the Great Transition* etc). These cases are, however, exceptions that confirm the rule.

CHAPTER 3

The Nominalist-Realist Controversy and the Philosophical Tradition

Chaucer's maturity as a poet is reflected in his later lyric poems in at least three ways: first, the basic theme changed from universal love in itself (or, as will be seen in the next chapter, courtly love in itself) to the exploration of the ironic discrepancies between universal love and the things which men place their love in – particularly courtly love. Secondly, Chaucer seems to have become more fascinated with nominalism as he grew older. He was especially interested in the nominalist argument that the mind can know only particulars rather than universals, and he sought in several ways to particularize the subject matter of his poetry. But in addition, his natural curiosity about words and his inclination to experiment with language led Chaucer to explore the nominalist distrust of terms: since words were several steps removed from the direct experience of the particular, the ability of words to communicate the truth accurately in a manner which the human mind could understand was highly questionable.

A final development concerned the speakers of the lyrics. In the later poems, these speakers change from “everyman” personae with all distinctive characteristics related to the background, to real characters whose particular personalities help to place the universal lyric concerns into a defined and specific context. What Chaucer began in the Envoys to *Truth* and *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, he expands to pervade entire poems like *Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan*, *Envoy de Chaucer a Bukton*, the brief *Chaucers Wordes unto Adam*, *His Owne Scriveyn*, and the well-known *Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse*. In each of these poems, the speaker is no longer a faceless everyman, but rather Geoffrey Chaucer, or at least the public side of him, and the situations described are events in the definite and personal relationships of Chaucer, the speaker of the poems, with persons in his public life: with fellow poet Henry Scogan, with Peter Bukton, a Knight of Yorkshire, with Adam, his copyist, and with the newly coronated King Henry IV.

Here Chaucer achieved the illustration of the universally applicable lyric thought through an incident providing a specific narrative or dramatic context. An excellent and eloquent example of this achievement is evident in one of Chaucer's best short poems, the

Scogan. Although Kittredge considered the poem entitled *Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan* to be the best of all Chaucer's personal epistles, he still called it "a trifle, thrown off by the poet in a moment of comic exasperation."⁶³ The fact is that *Scogan* is more than Kittredge thought it was. Even if a great deal has been written about *Scogan*, more than most of the other lyrics, and the implication therefore must be that readers on the whole regard the poem as one which must be considered. Early criticism dealt largely with subjects external to the poem itself – that is, the date of the composition and the identity of the man Scogan. It seems most prudent to go along with the generally accepted notion that the poem was written in the autumn of 1393 to a man named Henry Scogan – a man who, like Chaucer, was a public servant and, also like Chaucer, a poet. But having established that, one has said very little about the poem. More recent critics have focused their attention, and largely disagreed, on problems more explicitly connected with the poem itself: what was Chaucer's purpose in writing this? What do the three subjects have to do with one another? And finally, what is the enigmatic reference to "Tullius" meant to suggest, and what, if anything, does it have to do with the rest of the poem?

The controversy usually centers upon the last question. If that one can be answered, then the answers to the other questions should follow. The enigmatic last stanza of the poem reads thus:

*Scogan, that knelest at the stremes hed
Of grace, of alle honour and worthynesse,
In th'ende of which strem I am dul as ded,
Forgete in solytarie wilderness, –
Yet Scogan, thenke on Tullius kyndeness;
Mynne thy frend, there it may fructifye!
Far – wel, and loke thow never eft Love dyffye. (11. 43 – 49)*

The poem is essentially a begging one, of the same mood as the *Complaint to his Purse*, and Chaucer's purpose is to remind Scogan to put in a good word for him where it will do some good. R. T. Lenaghan, says that the *Envoy to Scogan* "may fairly be taken as a begging poem," and notes that Chaucer's annuity was renewed in 1394, shortly after the apparent date of this poem⁶⁴.

⁶³ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1915, p. 36.

⁶⁴ R. T. Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's Envoy to Scogan: The Uses of Literary Conventions', *Chaucer Review*, 10, 1975, p. 48.

Others, however, have called this view into question. Walter H. French sees the poem as essentially a refusal on Chaucer's part to do Scogan some service – probably to write a poem helping Scogan to smooth things over with his lady.⁶⁵ French's interpretation does not seem to have convinced critics, but his assertion that the Envoy is not a plea for financial assistance has been picked up. One critic, Marion L. Polzella, stresses the importance in the poem of the speaker who, like the personae of the longer poems, is a detached observer of the world of love. Chaucer is developing an analogy between *poet* and *lover*, and is seeking in the Envoy not material profit but rather poetic inspiration.

While there is much to be said for the parallel between the poet and lover, that analogy really does not satisfactorily explain the last stanza and so produces an incomplete reading of the poem. The closest thing to a satisfactory reading of this poem is Alfred David's article *Chaucer's Good Counsel to Scogan*. David notes that Scogan is a humorous “Balade of good counsel,” in the same vein as the more serious *Truth* or *Gentillesse*.⁶⁶ Further, Chaucer is probably reacting to a real occasion, as French had suggested, but that occasion was probably a *poem* in which the younger poet, following convention, claimed to have forsaken his love⁶⁷. David states the implicit moral of the *Envoy to Scogan* thus:

*in this world nothing lasts forever, not youth, not love, not fortune, and especially not words, whether they be lover's vows, poems, or the decrees that have established stars in their courses.*⁶⁸

The first lines of the poem stress mutability, as if Scogan's breaking of love's law causes a similar break in the order of the heavens “that was made, like the promises of the courtly lover, 'eternally to dure.”⁶⁹ The “streme's head” of the final lines, in David's interpretation, must be taken figuratively to refer to the top of Fortune's wheel, where Scogan is now. Chaucer, at the bottom, is asking Scogan to learn from the example of the elder poet; so that “mynne thy frend” would mean to keep Chaucer's example in mind, to “contrast their present fortunes as a remedy against excessive pride and recklessness.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Walter H. French., ‘The Meaning of Chaucer's *Envoy to Scogan*’, *PMLA*, 48 1933, p. 289.

⁶⁶ Alfred David, ‘Chaucer's Good Counsel to Scogan’ *Chaucer Review*, 3, 1969, p. 266

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

None of these readings, not even David's, is completely satisfactory. French assumes too much – he builds a whole narrative situation around the poem which the text of the poem itself cannot support. And though Polzeila's insight is beneficial in examining the speaker of the poem, the Envoy seems just as confusing as ever. What has Tullius to do with this relationship? How can Scogan the lover be at the “stremes hed / Of grace” when he has blasphemed against the god of love? As for David, his emphasis upon the mutability of all things is, as he says himself, an “implicit” moral, and he seems to be stressing as the main point of the poem something which is of only secondary importance. The emphasis of this poem is upon love and the law of love, and a convincing explanation of the Envoy would do well to show its place in relation to that particular theme – especially since the last line of the poem is “loke thou never eft Love dyffye” (l. 49).

Whenever Chaucer speaks of the “law of kynde,” he is referring to the divinely ordained order that binds the universe in harmony. And Cicero was a major source of Chaucer's concept of natural law. Cicero's most popular work in the Middle Ages was, of course, the *Dream of Scipio*, which survived into medieval times chiefly through the vehicle of Macrobius' commentary. For the fact that Chaucer was familiar with “Tuliyus of the Drem of Scipioun” we have his own testimony in the *Parliament of Fowls*, where he describes the narrator as reading that book before falling asleep and having his own dream.

In the *Somnium Scipionis*, Cicero portrays Scipio ascending in a dream with his grandfather, Africanus, into the heavens high above Carthage. From this vantage point Scipio first realizes the smallness and insignificance of the earth. As Chaucer summarizes in the *Parliament of Fowls*:

*Then bad he hym, syn erthe was so lyte,
And ful of torment and of harde grace,
That he ne schulde hym in the world delyte.* (ll. 64 – 66)

Further, Africanus teaches Scipio the structure of the universe; again Chaucer summarizes:

*And after shewede he hym the nyne speres,
And after that the melodye herde he
That cometh of thiike speres thryes thre,
That welle is of musik and melodye
In this world here, and cause of armonye.* (ll. 59 – 63)

This harmony of the spheres is important. It is a reflection of *divine order*, which was to be equated with the “law of kynde” – love as the binding force. And that love extended not only through the spheres, but also into the hearts of men and beasts. Thus human love, when properly placed on the Highest Good, was also a reflection of the binding force, the law of kind. This is what Boethius says when he cries out, in Chaucer's translation, “O weleful were mankynde, yif thiike love that governeth hevene governede yowr corages.” (Bk. II, mtr. 8, ll. 24 – 26).

All things participate in this natural harmony by maintaining their proper places in the divine order of things. As Chaucer's Eagle says in the *House of Fame*, “every kyndely thyng that is / Hath a kyndely stede” (ll. 730 – 31). It follows that when the heart of man pursues its natural inclination, it will lead the man to a mate who is his natural companion in the universal harmony. Therefore, lovers should choose mates according to their natural “likeness,” as Cicero argued.

The *Parliament of Fowls* may again serve as an illustration. In this poem, the Goddess Nature is described in this way, in lines recalling Boethius' description of love as the binding force:

... *the vicaire of the almighty Lord,*
That hot, cold, hevy, lyght, moyst, and dreye
Hath knyght by even noumbres of acord (ll. 379 – 381)

She is, in other words, the love that orders all things. Her command to the birds is this:

“... *by ordre shul ye chese,*
After youre kynde, everich as you liketh” (ll. 400 – 401)

Aside from recalling Genesis, the quotation implies a certain natural fitness. And dissension is caused in the *Parliament* when, after the noblest Tercel Eagle has chosen the Formel on Nature's hand, two more eagles “of lower kynde” (ll. 450) also claim her. Discord arises in part because the eagles, in defiance of Nature's command, the “Law of Kynde,” fail to choose mates after their own “kynde.” This then is what Chaucer accuses Scogan of in the Envoy: Scogan should place his love where it would be more fruitful, and thus he should obey Nature's law – “Tulius kyndeness.”

Natural law is the law which governs the stars and planets, and that law has been broken. Therefore the gods themselves, equated here with the seven planets, are weeping. Weeping most pitiously of all is Venus in the fifth sphere:

By word eterne whilom was yshape

That fro the fyfte sercle, in no manere,

Ne myghte a drop of teeres doun escape. (11. 8 – 10)

This eternal law, which Chaucer would equate with the “law of kynde”, commanded that no tears should escape from Venus’ sphere, but she is weeping so much that her tears threaten to drown the earth with rains.

In lines 15 – 21, Chaucer blames Scogan for causing this overflow. By forsaking his lady, Scogan has broken the law of love – and Chaucer extends this sort of love to also include the law of love which rules the spheres, the “statutz hye in hevene” which comprise the law of kynde. In stanzas four and five, Chaucer engages in some good – natured kidding about the likelihood of love for those who, like Chaucer and Scogan himself, are “rounde of snap.” But this kidding does look forward to the serious, if good natured, exhortation in the final stanza, so Chaucer, anticipating Scogan's rejoinder after these stanzas about Cupid's revenge – the “Lo, olde Grisel lyst to ryme and playel” (1, 35) – tries to eliminate any misunderstanding. Here I would accept David's interpretation that the younger poet may believe Chaucer is jealous of his reputation, but that Chaucer excuses himself, suggesting that his “muse” is quite inactive these days, and that, anyway, “the fortunes of poets, like those of courtiers and lovers, come to naught in the end.”⁷¹ Chaucer's lines

But al shal passe that men prose or ryme;

Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme. (11. 41 – 42)

may be a way of preparation for the return to the idea of the “law of kynde” in the last stanza. Scipio, it will be recalled, was ashamed of the littleness of the earth and the futility of achieving fame in such a minute sphere. Africanus tells Scipio “infra autem iam nihil est nisi mortale et caducum praeter animos munere deorum hominum generi datos, supra lunam sunt aeterna omnia.” (“Below the moon all is mortal and transitory [including poetry, as Chaucer says here], with the exception of the souls bestowed upon the human race by the benevolence of the gods. Above the moon all things are eternal.”)⁷²

The point may be, then, that Scogan, like Scipio, should turn his eyes from transient sublunar things and contemplate the eternal order, “thenke on Tuilius

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 273.

⁷² Clinton Walker Keyes, ed. and trans., *De Re Publiica and De Legibus* CUP; Cambridge, 1968), p. 270. The translation is from Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 73.

kyndenesse."

Thus as David points out, the "stremes hed" of the final stanza is the metaphorical stream of grace, honour, and worthiness. Scogan, in his prime, is at the stream's head while Chaucer, humbly depicting himself in decline, is "in solytaire wildenesse." But the point is that these things – grace, honour, and Fortune's other gifts – are transient because sublunary. The older poet, whom age has offered the time for philosophical reflection, has determined that these *very* real "statutz hye in hevene" presented ironically in the beginning are what is really important in life. The "law of kynde" is what matters, not poetry or even, Cupid's love. It is the love which binds the universe which is important. That love implies loving one whom nature would see as worthy of love, but even beyond that, it implies placing one's love where it cannot fail – in the Highest Good itself, which is the source of all love. *Scogan*, then, is a poem about different kinds of love and about the law of kynde, and the final line – "Far – wel, and loke thow never eft Love dyffye" (l. 49) – takes on many meanings: "do not defy Cupid" is the obvious surface meaning, but ultimately the line means "do not go against the law of kynde"; love where it will prove fruitful. Love one who is your natural "match" here in this world, but above all know that the most fruitful love possible is the love of the Highest Good toward which man's will is directed "kyndely": that is, the love of God.

This natural law and the love of God are not so constantly present in Chaucer's other personal Envoy poem, the *Envoy to Bukton*. Here, the subject is a different kind of love: that associated with marriage. One would expect Chaucer to have had a high opinion of marriage. That favourite Boethian passage in Book II, metre 8 of the *Consolation* describes universal love as that which "halt togidres peples joynd with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrament of manages of chaste loves" (ll. 21 – 23); and certainly the "natural mate" in whom Chaucer advises Scogan to place his love is conceived of as one whom Scogan would marry. It may be surprising, therefore, to read *Bukton* and discover that it is a humorous *condemnation* of marriage.

But a close study of the poem reveals that its real purpose is something quite different. Once again, Chaucer was using a specific occasion to provide him with a context in which to place a more generally applicable lyrical theme – one concerned not only with marriage but also with poetry itself.

The occasion was apparently the impending marriage of a certain knight named

Peter Bukton⁷³, in the year 1396. The importance of this date lies in the fact that it establishes the *Envoy to Bukton* as one of Chaucer's very late compositions. This placement of the poem in context may help us to understand more fully just what Chaucer had in mind when he wrote this poem. For it seems to me that *Bukton* has much in common with other late pieces like the *Physician's Tale*, the *Manciple's Tale*, and even the *Second Nun's Tale*, in being what John Gardner calls "purposely bad art": "The idea, grounded in nominalism, that art is futile – either wrong or incapable of communicating – will become increasingly important in the *Canterbury* Unreliable narrators one after another force us to face the question squarely, ultimately casting such doubt on art's validity as to bring on Chaucer's Retraction."⁷⁴ Placed in this context, the *Envoy to Bukton* becomes a poem ostensibly about marriage but on another level about poetry itself – and about the unreliability of poetry as a means of communication.

Critics have often puzzled over the apparently poor artistic quality of such demonstrably late tales as the *Physician's* or the *Manciple's*. Do they represent the sort of loss of creative vitality that people like Wordsworth and Coleridge bewailed? That hardly seems likely, if Chaucer was writing things like the *Pardoner's Tale* at about the same time. Gardner's suggestion, that Chaucer was experimenting with deliberately unreliable art, seems to make some sense out of it. The *Second Nun's Tale*, for example, is actually a poem *about* the saint's life genre, "an expressionist imitation designed to be more like the original than the original"⁷⁵; the *Manciple's Tale* "turns the simple legend into something ludicrously overblown"⁷⁶; the *Physician's Tale* "reveals the proud and empty character of the narrator and pleases only by its awfulness."⁷⁷ We are confronted, then, with a skillful artist deliberately using his skills to create something artistically inconsistent. Why? "In their artistic undercutting of art's very foundations [these tales] show... that Chaucer finally carried the nominalist argument, that nothing can be known, to its conclusion.... Art, like everything else, is an illusion."⁷⁸

Gardner's explanation presents a Chaucer influenced by the philosophical ideas of the nominalists. Such an assumption is not unlikely, as we have seen. Chaucer's well-established

⁷³ Ernest P. Kuhl, 'Chaucer's My Maistre Bukton', *PMLA*, 38, 1923, pp. 115-32.

⁷⁴ John Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer*. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977, p. 298.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

debt to the philosophy of Boethius, Augustine does not exclude the influence of philosophical thinkers closer to him in time. Chaucer lived in close proximity to Oxford all of his life. It would be difficult to conceive of a well-informed person like Chaucer being unaware of the philosophical trends largely initiated a half-century earlier by the Oxford scholar William of Ockham. It is not necessary for Chaucer to have read Ockham in detail – probably he hadn't. He must have been aware in a general way of a popularized version of Ockham's ideas and their implications. Ockham's most important contribution was the reemphasis of philosophical nominalism – the idea that the mind cannot directly know universals, that only individuals can be known directly. It was a position which led ultimately to the conviction, directly opposed to Aquinas, that we can know nothing about God, that, as C. Warren Hollister sums up, “Christian doctrine, utterly undemonstrable, must be accepted on faith alone, and that human reason must be limited to the realm of observable phenomena.”⁷⁹

Ockham reached this position largely from a discussion of *terms*, of words themselves:

*“The real sciences are about mental contents, since they are about contents which stand for things; for even though they are mental contents, they still stand for things. Logic, on the other hand, is about mental contents that stand for mental contents.”*⁸⁰

So Gardner can say that Chaucer's familiarity with the nominalist position led him to speculate “that quite possibly all truth is relative... that quite possibly, there can be, in the end, no real communication between human beings.”⁸¹ The end result is a poem like the *Second Nun's Tale* – in effect a parody of an ancient tradition, a poem which is about poetry, and a demonstration of the unreliability of art as a communicative device.

Chaucer, of course, was never one to despair. His chief reaction in his lyric poems was to rely more heavily upon the specific situation rather than upon the abstract concept. Thus Scogan, Adam, and an empty purse become poetic subjects, rather than *truth*, *gentillesse*, or *lak of stedfastnesse*. At least occasionally Chaucer, in a characteristically ironic voice, questions the validity of any kind of knowledge gained through language, or through any means other than divine revelation.

⁷⁹ C. Warren Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 4th ed. New York: Hiley, 1978, p. 310.

⁸⁰ William of Ockham, Prologue to the *Expositio super viii libros Physicorum*, in *Ockham: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, London: Thomas Nelson, 1957, p. 12.

⁸¹ Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, p. ix.

And this is a major theme of the *Envoy to Bukton*. Thus the influence of late medieval philosophy on the poem goes even further than already discussed. William of Ockham's views were lent support by the work of the earlier Oxford scholars, Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170 – 1253) and Roger Bacon (c. 1214 – 1292). Grosseteste is famous for formulating a scientific methodology combining mathematics as a key to understanding the universe (a notion borrowed from Plato) and the importance of direct experimentation (a notion borrowed from Aristotle)⁸². Bacon followed Grosseteste in criticizing “the deductive logic and metaphysical speculations that so fascinated his scholastic contemporaries.”⁸³

Gardner explains what this means for Ockham and others: “except for the authority of divine revelation, at which, Bacon says, we can only wonder, if proofs are unattainable, *authority* (that of Plato and Aristotle, for instance) can only be trusted when confirmed by experience; but *experience lies*.... In other words, for imperfect, fallen man, *nothing outside revelation can be certain*.”⁸⁴

All of this has a direct bearing on the meaning of the *Envoy to Bukton*. The poem is, apparently at least, a poem advising a young friend against marriage. The words the speaker uses make it clear what he thinks of marriage: it is folly – “dotage” he calls it in line eight, something only for one who is “unwys” (l. 27) or, worse, a “doted fool” (l. 13); and marriage is, for a man at least, the equivalent of bondage – it is the “cheyne / Of Sathanas, on which he gnaweth ever” (ll. 9 – 10), and “were he out of his peyne, / As by his wille he wolde be bounde nevere” (ll. 11 – 12). None but a fool would rather “Ycheyned be than out of prison crepe” (l. 14). One who marries is his “wives thral” (l. 20), and would be better off “to be take is Frise” than be caught “in the trappe” of marriage (ll. 22 – 23). Finally, Chaucer prays that Bukton may lead his life “frelly... / In fredam; for ful hard is to be bonde” (ll. 31 – 32). Marriage, then, is bondage, slavery, prison, a chain, which only someone not quite right in the head would undertake. This is what most readings of the poem say.

But a closer reading reveals that the poem is concerned with the philosophical questions raised by Ockham and Bacon – with the nature of truth and of language itself, poetry, as the vehicle for the expression of truth. Note how the poem opens not with a statement concerning marriage but with an anecdote about *truth*:

⁸² Hollister, p. 274.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 275.

⁸⁴ Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 156.

*My maister Bukton, whan of Crist our Kyng
Was axed what is trouthe or sothfastnesse,
He nat a word answerde to that axing,
As who saith, "Woman is al trewe," I gesse. (11. 1 – 4)*

These lines introduce several themes and motifs. The immediate suggestion, recalling Bacon, is that the *only* source of reliable knowledge, or truth, is *divine illumination*, something which would come only "of Crist our Kyng." This is important because the poem later provides examples of Bacon's other two paths of knowledge: *authority* and *experience*. Further, these lines suggest the unreliability of *knowledge* that is *not* based on revelation.

The idea that "no man is al trewe" leads into the second half of the first stanza:

*And therefore, though I highte to expresse
The sorwe and wo that is in mariage,
I dar not writen of is no wikkednesse,
Lest I myself falle eft in swich dotage. (11. 5 – 8)*

No man is completely true, Chaucer says; therefore even though he has promised, or undertaken, to write about the sorrow and woe of marriage, he does not dare to write any wickedness about it. Chaucer mentions that marriage is full of sorrow and woe, but then says he dares not speak ill of it (even though he already has), and in the next breath calls it "dotage," thus renegating on what he had just said in the previous line. Furthermore, though the "no man is al trewe" applies to the fact that Chaucer said he was going to write about one thing but now says he dare not do so, the implication exists as well that the reader can't believe *anything* the writer says.

The second stanza opens with a familiar rhetorical device, an *occupatio* or refusal to describe or narrate – here used as a sort of ironic device in which the writer denies that he will say something yet says it anyway. "I wol nat seyn..." says Chaucer, and follows by saying a lot of things which he says he intends not to say. He won't say that marriage is the chain of Satan, on which he insists:

*But I dar seyn, were he out of his peyne,
As by his wille he wolde be bounds nevere.
But thilke doted fool that eft hath levere
Ycheyned be than out of prison crepe,*

God lete him never fro his wo dissevere,

Ne no man him bewayle, though he wepel (11. 11 – 16)

The implication is, of course, that Chaucer is speaking of one who would willingly be married. But notice that the poet never directly condemns marriage – there is no specific reference in these lines to who “thilke doted fool” – although the implication is obvious. Technically, Chaucer is holding to his promise that he “wol nat seyn” any evil of marriage, but he also demonstrates that “no man is al trewe,” since he, in fact, is speaking evil of it. It should be further noted that the comparison with Satan is quite ambiguous, and suggests even the implied condemnation of marriage. Satan is the principal sinner of the universe. If marriage is *really* the “chain of Satan,” then it too, is a kind of bondage, here the sin of *lust*. If that is true, then it is virtue, not folly, for man to accept God's will, and the speaker undercuts his own argument.

And this leads to the third stanza, where the poet alludes to St. Paul's well – known lines in I Corinthians 7, particularly verse nine, but the context of verses one through nine is important:

It is well for a man not to touch a woman. But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.... If they cannot exercise self – control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be a flame with passion.

Later in the same chapter Paul writes of marriage in terms of bondage, and mentions the difficulties inherent in marriage:

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek marriage. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries she does not sin. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. (I Cor. 7:27 – 28)

Chaucer sums these statements up in the first four lines of stanza three:

But yet, lest thow do worse^a take a wyf:

Bet ys to wedde than brenne in worse wise.

But thow shal have sorwe on thy flessch, thy lyf.

And ben thy wives thral, as seyn these wise; (11. 17 – 20)

The concession of these first two lines is that marriage is God's will, a fact which suggests the "chain on Satan" comparison of the previous stanza. In the next two lines, Chaucer takes what Paul said about the mutual bondage of marriage and twists it to his own purpose, by making only the husband a thrall.

In the final stanza, the Envoy of the lyric, the poet sends Bukton the poem, which he calls "This lytel writ, proverbes, or figure" (1. 25). He advises Bukton to consider the poem's advice, though Chaucer has not really given the reader any unqualified advice at all on the matter. The stanza continues the tone of the whole poem, this time by listing several proverbial expressions and by alluding to one of Chaucer's own compositions:

Unwys is he that kan no wele endure.

If thow be siker, put the nat in drede.

The Wyf of Bathe I pray yow that ye rede

Of this matere that we have on honde.

God graunte you your lyf frely to lede

In fredam; for ful hard is to be bonde. (11. 27 – 32)

Again Chaucer, true (but not "al trewe") to his promise to speak no ill of marriage, makes no direct application of the proverbs he quotes to Bukton's impending marriage. But the applications are obvious and could be easily inferred by the reader. However, if one continues to apply Bacon's ideas to the poem, it should be noted that one of the four obstacles to true knowledge, in Bacon's opinion, was "popular prejudice" – the sort of thing which would be embodied in such proverbs. Further ambiguity is added with the reference to the Wife of Bath. It seems at first perfectly appropriate to refer to her prologue, which is also concerned with marriage and with the two ways of achieving knowledge; her first words allude to Bacon's very distinction:

"Experience, though noon auctoritice

Were in this world, is right ynogh for me

To speke of wo that is in mariage." (11. 1 – 3)

On the surface, then, what Chaucer is telling Bukton is to read the Wife of Bath as an exemplum of one who, through experience and authority, has gained true knowledge about the evils of marriage. Further, the Wife of Bath's Prologue is an assimilation of the vast anti-feminist literature of the age, and part of what Chaucer intends to say by the allusion must be this: here is what women are like – they try to dominate their husbands;

therefore, you don't want one'. However, what Bukton *really* would have found, had he read the Wife's Prologue carefully, is a set of experiences demonstrating the evils of a marriage in which one partner exercised "mastery" over the other, and also the bliss that could be obtained in a marriage wherein love and dependency were mutual – as, ultimately, in the Wife's fifth marriage:

*"God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
And also trewe, and so was he to me."* (11 823 – 25)

Furthermore, the first part of the Wife's Prologue is a spirited defense of sexuality and marriage, based on the *authority* of the likes of St. Paul and even St. Jerome. She does, in fact, allude to the same chapter in I Corinthians that Chaucer does in lines 17 – 20 of Bukton, but her interpretation is somewhat different and, in fact, more accurate:

*"In wyfhod I wol use myn instrument
As frely as my Makere hath it sent.
If I be daungerous, God yeve me sorwel
Myn housbounde I wol have, I wol nat lette,
Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral,
And have his tribulacioun withal
Upon his flessch, whil that I am his wyf.
I have the power durynge al my lyf
Upon his propre body, and noght he.
Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me;
And bad our housbondes for to love us weel.
Al this sentence me liketh every dee!"* (11. 149 – 162)

Here, both husband and wife are both "dettour and thral." Mastery and submission are *mutual*. The knowledge gained through both the *authority* and *experience* of the Wife of Bath's Prologue, then, is that marriage should be based on the mutual and equal love of natural mates: it is the same point Chaucer made in *Scogan*, in the *Parliament of Fowls*, and in other poems. The fact that the Wife does not seem to realize the truth that her experience and authority reveal suggests that, perhaps, she lacks the divine illumination which Bacon says must be present.

So the allusion to the Wife of Bath is ambiguous and completely contradicts the thesis of *Bukton's* speaker. The entire poem, then, is full of ambiguities, misdirections,

half-truths. Chaucer says he is going to do something, decides not to, says he won't do it, and then does it. He presents two paths to knowledge – that of authority and that of experience – and arrives to no conclusion from either of them. Truth can be found only, as the introductory allusion to Christ implies, in divine inspiration. But no such divine inspiration is forthcoming in this matter, and we must see through the half-truths of *Bukton* looking for meaning. The initial overall impression is, of course, what it always has been thought to be; the poem is a statement against matrimony. But what the poem probably really is, if I read the allusions to the Wife of Bath and to St. Paul accurately, is the opposite – a recommendation of matrimony, when it is a “marriage of true minds.” Chaucer does the opposite of what he seems to be doing: “no man is al trewe.”

But beyond this, a close reading of the lines creates a different effect: *nothing* in the poem is unambiguous. Poetry and language, associated with abstractions, are not reliable mediators of truth – the entire *Envoy to Bukton* is a lie. But Chaucer did not stop with this belief in the unreliability of words. He does seem to have arrived at the belief, in other poems, that when language became more concrete, when the abstraction had a specific context, then the language was at least more reliable.

Still, this unreliability of language was something that Chaucer seems always to have stated. The fact that his words may not always be understood seems to have haunted him in *and Criseyde*. Not only did Chaucer the linguist know how language changed over the years –

Ve knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge

Withinne a thousand yzer, and wordes tho

That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge

Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,

And spedde as wel in love as men now do; (Bk. II, 11 22 – 26)

but Chaucer, the poet, knew how even the words he wrote down could be twisted and misread in transmission. His worries at the end of –

So pray I God that non myswrite the,

Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge. (Bk. V, 11 1795 – 96)

are apparently founded upon fact and experience. The brief lyric *Chaucers Worries unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn* shows, in the poet's words to his copyist, the sometimes sorry state of publication a century before the advent of printing. The fate of a poem was largely in the hands of the scribe or copyist to whom the author entrusted his manuscript for

preparation. And scribes were not famous for their accuracy. Although Adam's "myswrytynge" is through "negligence and rape" (1.7) rather than "defaute of tonge," there is no question that an author had to deal with incompetence and indifference if he wanted copies of his manuscript made, and that any serious writer concerned, as Chaucer obviously was, with the integrity of his own written word, was doomed to frustration. For even though Chaucer may have had some control over the sheets turned out by Adam, it is clear that once a copy produced by Adam reached its intended owner – whether a patron or friend of the author – that owner had every right to have further copies made for his friends, and so on, and over these further copies a writer had no control. Clearly Chaucer's lines to Adam reveal the sort of frustration a creative artist must feel given the situation.

Certainly the *Words unto Adam* will never be considered one of Chaucer's great poems. In a very special way, Chaucer is here merging form and content. His general concern about the reliability of language as a means of communication, seen in *Bukton* and in earlier quoted passages from the , is here is here present in the scribe's miswriting of the poet's words. But in the very words of the poem, Chaucer is pushing the language beyond the bounds of simple denotative communication.

I have tried to show that Chaucer's concern about the reliability of words was one aspect of his interest in nominalism. Chaucer's apparently "nominalist" interests in parody and in the unreliability of language shown in *Bukton* and in *Adam* appeared in one of his best lyrics, *The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse*. This complaint has always been one of his most popular lyrics. *Purse* represents the playful, parodying and thoroughly "medieval" character. *Purse* owes its popularity to Chaucer's humorous parody of the courtly love conventions in speaking to his empty purse as if it were his courtly mistress. It is a parody that works largely through Chaucer's use of words with double or even triple meanings – words, like those in the *Envoy to Bukton*, which "lie" in the sense that they communicate no single meaning. *The Complaint to his Purse* is not a difficult poem and is relatively brief. Another of the poem's attractions is its glimpse of the relationship between poet and patron in the fourteenth century, and the uses of poetry to attain practical ends – a practice still possible in 1399.

As a begging poem, *Purse* also belongs to a traditional genre, practiced in poems by Froissart, Deschamps, Machaut, and others⁸⁵, a genre which Chaucer is also exploring by his parody. Surely the poem must be taken as a poem written to King Henry during a

time when the poet was genuinely in difficult financial condition.

Chaucer's method of begging was peculiar. Even in his tight financial situation, Chaucer had not lost his sense of humour, and he must have known that wit would be appreciated far more by the new monarch than tears. Anyway, tears were not his style. So the poet addressed his purse as if it were a lady.

The complaint genre which Chaucer chose to parody was one of long and distinguished literary tradition. Chaucer plays with the familiar tradition, borrowing phrases and postures from the popular genre and ironically applying them to his purse, rather than his lady: "To you, my purse, and to noon other wight Complayne I, for ye be my lady deerel (11. 1 – 2)

There is a pun on "deere" as meaning "sweetheart" but also as "precious" or "costly." The poet follows this with double meaning and with irony, and with the clichés of courtly love:

I am so sory, now that ye been lyght,

For certes, but ye make me hevychere,

Me were as leef by layd upon my bere; (11. 3 – 5)

The poet is sad because the purse is light – that is, it weighs little – just as a lover would be sad if his lady were light – that is, "wanton, unchaste". This lightness obviously contrasts with the desired *heaviness* of the next line. The poet wants the purse to "make me hevychere" – that is, to become full, heavy, once more. This is ironic since a lover would want anything but his Beloved's "hevychere," or sorrow – he would want her "with lossunchere". But just as the courtly lover would die for his Beloved's "lossunchere," so Chaucer would just as soon be "layd upon my bere," unless his purse makes him this "hevychere." The stanza ends with Chaucer crying mercy unto his purse, and reiterating his threat to die unless the purse again becomes heavy:

For which unto your mercy thus I crye;

Beth hevychere ageyn, or eies mot I dyl (11. 6 – 7)

The second stanza of *Purse* continues in much the same tone. Like a true lover, the poet begins to explore the effect of the Beloved upon his senses. Chaucer says

Now voucheth sauf this day, or yt be nyght,

That I of yow the blisful soun may here, (11. 8 – 9)

⁸⁵ see Robinson, p. 865.

The third stanza plays with courtly love allusions:

Now purse, that ben to me my lyves lyght

And saveour, as down in this world here, (11. 15 – 16)

The chief comparison in this poem is between the purse and the lady; the religious imagery is typical of the hyperbole addressed to the Beloved in the courtly love lyric. The purse, like the lady, will light the poet's life when it is heavy again, and will certainly be his savior, at least “in this world here,” if it will help to pay his debts.

Finally, Chaucer begs his purse's “courtesye” – again as if it were a courtly *lady*, or as if it were Mary, “Queen of Courtesye” (as she is in the *ABC*) – to “beth hevye agen, or elles moot I dye” (11. 20 – 21).

These lines end the poem proper, and are followed by the Envoy, addressed specifically to Henry IV. It should be noted that the form of the poem – a typical ballade of three stanzas, each stanza ending in an identical refrain, followed by an Envoy – is one that developed, in association specifically with courtly love lyrics, among the French versifiers of the fourteenth century. Chaucer uses a similar form in such courtly love poems as *Womanly Noblesse*, the ballade *Complaint of Venus, To Rosemounde* (without an Envoy).

Chaucer drops all parody, and drops his ludic mask, speaking straightforwardly of his need to the new king:

O conquerour of Brutes Albyon,

Which that by lyne and free eleccioun

Been verray king, this song to yow I sende;

And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,

Have mynde upon my supplicacioun! (11. 22 – 26)

In the *Complaint to his Purse*, then, we have one of the most characteristic of Chaucer's later poems. Perhaps that is why it is so popular. A comparison of *Purse* with Chaucer's other most popular lyric, *Truth*, reveals some clear contrasts between Chaucer's earlier and later lyric poetry: one can see first that while *Truth* was concerned only with universal love and with man's participation in that love, *Purse* is concerned more, like *Scogan*, with the ironic contrast between different *types* of love – love of money, courtly love, and even Divine Love. And where *Truth* implies that there is but one *truth*, the

connotations of the language in *Purse* demonstrate a concern here, as in *Bukton* and *Adam*, about man's ability to find or to express that truth. Finally, where *Truth* has a speaker whose individual personality is subordinated to the universal theme, the wit of the speaker of *Purse* regarding the specific situation of a particular person – Geoffrey Chaucer – is actually the important aspect of this poem. Thus two nominalist arguments serve as the basis for two major aesthetic aspects of Chaucer's later lyrics. One is the assumption that the human mind can have direct knowledge only of *particulars*, and that the mind can know *universals* only indirectly and by its own action – the universal is not “real” in the sense of having an independent existence outside of the mind. Therefore, of the two means of acquiring knowledge – *argument* and *experience* – the experience of the *particular* has more validity. Secondly, since language is concerned with *mental concepts* and is removed from direct experience of the particular, the ability of language to communicate *truth* in a manner comprehensible to the human mind is highly doubtful. As the language comes to represent the *object itself* rather than *an abstract mental concept*, there is a clear possibility that real communication can take place. Thus the particularizing of the subject matter and the exploration of the possibilities of language lie behind not only the *Complaint to his Purse*, but the *Envoy to Scogan*, the *Envoy to Bukton*, and the *Words unto Adam* as well.

In Romanian literature, the relativist scepticism of the nominalists can be found mainly in authors such as Ion Luca Caragiale and Ion Creangă. For them the supreme ideal is the human love and not the divine one. The relativist approach to the world, characterized by the disbelief in apparent reality, can be found at writers such as M. Eminescu and L. Blaga. For them the supreme ideal is the Divine Love.

CHAPTER 4

Courtly Love – Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer's Approach

The literary tradition of courtly love was a pervasive and attractive one in Chaucer's world. The influence of the French love poets (of Machaut and his followers), and of the long line of poets going back through Guillaume de Lorris to Chretien de Troyes and to the Provencal troubadours⁸⁶, was immense and inescapable for a young poet trying out a rather revolutionary idea: the writing of serious poetry in English. Nor could Chaucer, after his first Italian journey in 1372, ignore the significant contribution to the courtly tradition made by Dante and the *stilnovisti*. After absorbing the conventions of French and Italian love literature he began to modify them and to question the ideal. It would be tempting to digress into a long exploration of the ideal of courtly love and all its intricacies. But C. S. Lewis, Charles Muscatine, Maurice Valency, Frederick Goldin and others have already provided valuable studies⁸⁷ on the subject. It is more relevant to consider Chaucer's reaction to two particular courtly love conventions which the poet inherited from the French: the idea of love as ennobling, and the idealization of the lady.

In a courtly love affair, the lover was his lady's humble servant, and she his superior socially as well as morally, since convention demanded that she embody the perfect achievement of every imaginable virtue. But, paradoxically, love was also ennobling for the lover: in reality, the perfections of the lady were those qualities which the lover strove to see in himself. As Goldin explains, "In every love relation in the courtly lyric, the living lady, universally esteemed, reflects the idealized image of the man who consecrates himself to serving her."⁸⁸ The courtly love lyric was above all a poem about the aspirations of the aristocratic class: "The early courtly lyric explores the possibility that in his love for a woman, a man might search for an ideal which could refine his

⁸⁶ On this courtly style in general see Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 11-57.

⁸⁷ See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969; Maurice Valency, *In Praise of Love: An Introduction to the Love-Poetry of the Renaissance*. New York: MacMillan, rpt. 1961; Frederick Goldin, *The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1967; and Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economou, eds., *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature*. London: Kennikat Press, 1975

⁸⁸ Goldin, pp. 40-41.

being.”⁸⁹ The problem with this idea must be its completely secular basis. Chaucer stressed the notion that true nobility, *gentillesse*, comes from God: man attains it only by emulating Christ and his perfections.

But from a philosophical point of view, the idealization of the lady does exactly that: it replaces God or Christ with the lady as the personification of the Highest Good. I have repeatedly stressed the medieval belief that man's will is by nature directed toward the Highest Good, that is, toward God. When man does right, then, he follows natural law and the precepts of Divine Love. Since man has free will and is corrupted by original sin, however, he may turn from desire of the Highest Good to a desire for some partial earthly good. Courtly love seems to describe, and even celebrate, this phenomenon. The lover's lady becomes the only object of his will and love. As a result, *she* becomes for him the Highest Good. She is idealized, transformed into a goddess; the object of his love becomes the idol he worships. Chaucer, however, was more interested in loving women than in worshipping goddesses. According to Chaucer's philosophical ideas, it was a serious error to turn from the Highest Good and put one's faith in worldly things. That was *lak of stedfastnesse*; that was Scogan's error. Love between man and woman should not be of the idealized, but should be of the type “ther it may fructifye,” as Chaucer told Scogan, and implied behind the ironies of *Bukton*. For Chaucer the real love was in marriage – the fruitful participation in the harmony of natural law by equals, by natural mates – rather than courtly love – the idealizing of adulterous passion as the Highest Good.

But the *stilnovisti* had given a completely different philosophical interpretation of the psychology of love. The most philosophical of love poets, Dante, was able to reconcile courtly love with Christian love through a combination of Neoplatonic idealism and Aristotelian epistemology. The intellect separated the *form* of beauty from the lady herself, and that beautiful *form* or ideal was in fact a reflection of the ultimate beauty, identified with the Highest Good. This turned the Beloved into a means by which the lover was led from worldly love to the love of ideal beauty to the love of God. Thus Beatrice could become for Dante the symbol of Divine Love, leading the poet into heaven.

Undoubtedly Chaucer was aware of Dante's literary treatment of Beatrice, but he seems to have rejected Dante's conception as an answer to the problems brought about by courtly love. Chaucer was more practical, and seems to have had a good deal of trouble actually separating the ideal from the particular woman. For Chaucer, therefore, instead of the

⁸⁹ Ferrante and Economou, p. 7.

Beloved leading the lover to God, the opposite seems to have been true: when the lover made the lady the ideal, then he began to *mistake* her for the Highest Good.

This can even be observed in Chaucer's earliest lyrics, which seem most clearly influenced by the courtly love poetry of the French and of the Italians. In at least three of his early poems, *A Complaint to his Lady*, *Womanly Noblesse*, and the *Complaynt D'Amours*. Chaucer adopts the persona of a courtly lover in the conventionally hopeless love situation. *A Complaint to his lady* is the most thoroughly conventional of the three, and is interesting chiefly for its introduction into English of the French courtly style and the influence of rhetoricians like Geoffrey of Vinsauf. Thus the poem shows the same interest in verbal experimentation displayed in later poems like *Bukton* and *Adam*. In *Womanly Noblesse*, Chaucer borrows from Italy the description of love in terms of Aristotelian psychology, and subtly implies his criticism of intellectual, Dantean love by depicting a speaker who has confused his Beloved with the Highest Good. But Chaucer's most characteristic answer to courtly love was his insistence upon regarding people as *individuals* rather than *idealized abstractions*, and this criticism occurs chiefly in the later poems with highly individualized speakers. Even in the *very* early *Complaynt D'Amours*, however, some attempt at individualizing the persona is taking place. Indeed, in the latter two poems, it may be said that Chaucer condemns the system of courtly love.

In *A Complaint to his Lady*, though, such a condemnation is not even covertly present. In fact, when critics condemn Chaucer's shorter poems because of the purely conventional nature of their language and style, their concern with form at the expense of original content, their *very* artificial character, those critics are thinking not so much of poems like *Scogan* or *Bukton* as of Chaucer's courtly love poems, and perhaps most specifically of *A Complaint to his Lady*.

A Complaint to His Lady is not a great poem. It is not even, by most criteria, a very good poem. Tyrwhitt called it a "heap of rubbish," and few have really contested that opinion. But it is undeniably an extremely important poem in the development of Chaucer's idea of the lyric, and thus, in the development of English literature as a whole.

Chaucer realized quite early that one of the problems with lyric expression was the creation of a specific context for the lyric utterance. When a "lyric utterance" was a single voice speaking a deep emotion, it was crucial that, if any communication was to take place at all, the audience must be aware of the context of that utterance in order to empathize, or at least sympathize, with the poem's speaker. Total objectivity, total detachment, on the

part of the audience could lead to a breakdown in the communication of the emotion. *Truth, Gentiiesse, Lak of Stedfastnesse, The Former Age*, all are but expressions of strong emotion. The *Envoy* poems of the 1390's had their context established for them, since they were written to a particular person for a particular purpose. The *ABC* does indeed express a strong emotion, fear of damnation and a fervent desire that the Virgin calm that fear. But the context of the *ABC* was not a particular problem in medieval England, since the subject was one with which everyone was familiar and the speaker was an "everyman" with whom all Christians could identify.

The problem with switching to a secular subject was in finding a context which might be equally universal for human emotions, and thus in one sense the most "lyrical" of topics, human love. Now, the system of courtly love which dominated western literature during the late Middle Ages gave Chaucer this context. It created an immediately recognizable situation and impressed the audience. Unfortunately, it also burdened the poet with so many conventions that generally his only chance to demonstrate his ability was in the formal aspects of the poem, rather than in its content.

In adopting the conventional "complaint" form for this early poem, Chaucer also adopted the conventional persona of the courtly lover, and therefore brought into play all of the courtly conventions. The fictional speaker of the suffering lover *does* give the sentiments expressed in the poem a rather universal character, but also makes the poet's job, in terms of subject matter, that of merely fulfilling a set of predetermined expectations. And that is what the *Complaint to His Lady* becomes. The thesis of the poem is typical in courtly love poetry. The speaker loves a beautiful lady but she doesn't love him, and he suffers, even to the point of death. Thus he shows cause for his complaint.

The poem has been criticized for its lack of unity, so much that Brusendorff thought it should be printed as three separate poems. Certainly there is no continuity of thought, but that is not so rare for medieval lyric poems in general, especially courtly love poems. Wolfgang Clemen, calling "continuity of thought" a modern concept, noted that in French formal poetry, there are "a large number of poems composed as variations on a theme, with no attempt at continuous development or logical connections."⁹⁰ As one of these kinds of poems, *A Complaint to his Lady* is similar in construction to the earlier *ABC*, in which the stanzas were connected by the repetition of certain terms and image

⁹⁰ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C. A. M. Sym, London: Methuen and Co., 1968, p. 186.

patterns. Here, the most repeated terms are, first, the speaker's impending death. He suffers so in his mind, he says in stanza one, "that, sauf the deeth, ther may nothyng me lisse" (l. 6) and the pain he feels "now doth me spelle" (l. 14). It is his lady, "Faire Rewtheless," who does this to him, yet he protests "she sleeth me giltelees" (l. 29). The theme comes in the the following proposition:

*... there ever ye fynde, whyl ye lyve,
A trewer servant to yow than am I,
Leveth thanne, and sleeth me hardely,
And I my deeth to you wol al foryive.
And if ye fynde no trewer verrayly,
Wil ye suffre than that I thus spilie,
And for no maner gilt but my good wille? (ll. 110 – 116)*

The speaker finally simply places himself completely in her power:

*But I, my lyf and deeth, to yow obeye,
And with right buxom herte hooly I preye,
As is your moste plesure, so doth by me; (ll. 118 – 120)*

As is typical of the courtly lover, his death may be prevented only by the Beloved's pity. And as is typical of the Beloved, she has none. "Neither pitee, mercy, neither grace, / Can I not fynde" (ll. 17 – 18), says the speaker. His lady, "Fair Rewthelees," does not care:

*She that mighte me out of this brynge
Me reccheth nought whether I wepe or synge
So lite! rewthe hath she upon my peyne. (ll. 47 – 49)*

Still, hoping against hope, the speaker begs his lady in the end to spare him just one drop of her saving grace. The words recall those of the *ABC* but the Beloved's indifference to the speaker's suffering contrasts sharply with Mary's mercy:

*And therfor, swete, rewe on my peynes snterte,
And of your grace graunteth me som drope;
For elles may me laste no blis ne hope,
Ne dwelie within my trouble careful herte (ll. 124 – 127)*

Now like a good lover, the speaker will continue to love his lady forever, even though he knows she will never pity him:

... thogh ye never wil upon me rewe,

I moste you love, and been ever as trewe

As any man can, or may, on – lyve here. (11. 95 – 97)

When Hoccleve called Chaucer the “firsts fyndere of our fair language,” he was referring specifically to Chaucer as the first to use poetic techniques and rhetorical principles which had previously been used particularly for composition in Latin, but more recently in the French and Italian vernaculars, and to utilize these techniques in the English tongue. So Chaucer was to Hoccleve the “Flour of eloquence,” and to Lydgate the man who was able: Out of our tounge / Tauoyden al Rudnesse, And to Reffourme it / with Colours of Swetnesse.⁹¹

And it is particularly in poems like the *Complaint to his Lady* that Chaucer was able to experiment with verse forms and with rhetorical techniques, to see just what was – and was not – possible in English. Clemen noted how the fact that the three sections of the poem were each written in a different metre served to emphasize the “theme and variation” technique⁹². Unquestionably, then, the *Complaint to his Lady* is an experiment in verse forms. But it is also, in its way, an experiment in rhetoric and diction.

All of this may well be true. It is widely recognized that Chaucer's most characteristic style is rather colloquial. This is what Charles Muscatine calls the “bourgeois style,” characteristic of many of the most admired *Canterbury Tales*. But this does not exclude poetic diction, in the *Complaint to his Lady* where Chaucer is experimenting with literary forms which he is trying to adapt to English idiom, that colloquial style is pervaded by innumerable formal poetic devices from the medieval rhetoricians.

The entire poem, it could be argued, is an example of what Geoffrey of Vinsauf and the rhetoricians call *expolito*, which is the repetition of the same idea in different words. The “theme and variation” technique is certainly a reflection of this device, which is one of Vinsauf's methods of amplification. Chaucer uses *personification*, another of Vinsauf's methods of amplification, in lines 13 – 22 of the poem, where Love is, as was customary, personified and made a god who compels the speaker. That personification is

⁹¹ John Lydgate, ‘Fall of Princes’, in Spurgeon, Caroline, ed. *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357 – 1900*. 3 Vols. New York: Russell and Russell, 1960, vol. I, p. 37.

⁹² Clemen, p. 186.

repeated, but is then abandoned.

Chaucer also uses some of the *tropes* listed in the rhetorical handbooks. One of these is *pronominatio*, or the substitution of a descriptive term or epithet for a proper name – the Lady's “name is Bountee, set in womanhede, / Sadnesse in youthe, and Beautee prydelees / And Piesauce, under governaunce and drede; / Hir surname is eek Faire Rewthelees.” Another trope, *translatio*, or what we commonly know as metaphor, is used in lines 56 – 57, where the heart of the lady is compared with a sword:

Me semeth that your swete herte of stele

Is whetted now ageynes me to kene.

Further, Chaucer begins the poem by a use of *transgressio*, or the transposition of words out of their customary order. Most commonly, Chaucer uses *exclamatio*, in outbursts like “Alias!” (l. 35, l. 50, l. 86, l. 100), or rhetorical questions, as in “What have I doon that greveth yow, or sayd, / But for I serve and love yow and no mo?” (ll. 60 – 61), or “Wil ye suffre than that I thus spille, / And for no maner gilt but my good wille?” (ll. 115 – 116), or the prime example,

Alias! Whan shall that harde wit amende?

Where is now al your wommanly pitee,

Your gentillesse and your debonairtee?

Wil ye nothyng therof upon me spende? (ll. 100 – 103)

Again, since the exclamations and the questions add to the colloquial character of the poem, which Clemen pointed to, this is another example of Chaucer's combining poetic devices with English idiom.

And finally, there are also figures of *thought* used throughout the poem. There is *diminutio*, or self-disparagement, in lines like “And leest worthy of alle hem, I am he” (l. 67); there is *divisio*, or the presentation of a dilemma, in the speaker's description of his condition:

For I am set on yow in swich manere,

That, thogh ye never will upon me rewe,

I moste yow love, and been ever as trewe

As any man can, or may, on – lyve here. (ll. 94 – 97)

But the most common of these figures of thought in the poem is *contention antithesis*. The whole of *A Complaint to his Lady* does, in fact, go around this particular

device. Both Clemen and Clogan have already noted the antithesis in the poem. But for them, the style put forth both points of view at the same time, so that the poem took on the character of a dialogue⁹³. Now even though it is my belief that Chaucer worked hard in his lyric pieces to create contexts which would provide some rationale for the lyric utterance, and while an implicit dialogue would create a situation for the lyric, I cannot see in this poem any dialogue emerging, the way it does, for example, in the *Complaynt D' Amours* discussed later. What I do see is the repeated emphasis on antithetical elements in the love relationship, such as the fact that love both gives pleasure and causes pain. Certainly such a situation is perplexing. The antithesis creates a tension in the speaker's emotions: it presents him with a dilemma which he tries to resolve in various ways, but which in the end is unsolvable, so that he yields to the lady's superior wisdom and puts his life and death in her hands. The *contentio*, then, serves not only as a rhetorical ornamentation but also as a unifying device in the poem, just as the theme and variation (*expolitio*) do.

This juxtaposition of antithetical elements appears throughout the poem, from the lament "The more I love, the more she doth me smerte" of line 20 to the contrast between the speaker and his Beloved presented and repeated (*expolitio*): "I am so litel worthy, and ye so good. / For ye be oon the worthiest on – lyve / antithetical emotions: "For bothe I love and eek drede yow so sore" (1. 78). It sounds again in the contrast between the speaker's desire and his reality: in his heart is "so muche wo, and [eek] so litel blis" because "al that thyng which I desyre I mis, / And al that ever I wolde not, ywis, / That finde I redy to me evermore" (11. 41 – 45). *Contentio* serves as a structural device throughout the poem.

The point is that, though Chaucer is admired for his "natural idiom," he was almost always using rhetorical devices. Geoffrey of Vinsauf had said that "lightness" of style, or *literal* use of words, did not necessarily exclude the use of rhetorical devices,

*If your language is intended to be light and yet beautifully colored also, do away with all devices of dignity and use instead the plain – the plainness of which, however, should not alarm the ears by ugliness.*⁹⁴

The *Complaint of his Lady* is not a great poem. But it is as unified as most medieval poems on the same subject. And it is notable in Chaucer's development as an early

⁹³ See Clemen, p. 187; and Clogan, p. 137.

⁹⁴ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, 'The New Poetics', trans. Jane Baitzell Kopp, in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 72-73.

example of his determining a context for the lyrical expression of emotion, and for its example of the poet's adaptation of rhetorical devices to the English language.

In contrast to a rather colloquial poem like *A Complaint to his Lady* is one of the most "courtly" of all Chaucer's lyrics, the ballade *Womanly Noblesse*, a poem first discovered and printed by Skeat in 1894. Though Skeat praised the poem at the time, no one else seems to have been very impressed by it. Arthur K. Moore saw *Womanly Noblesse* as illustrating a "defective technique" and "Chaucer's

reluctance to engage his own sympathies."⁹⁵ Root, less drastically, said "If not deserving of the high praise bestowed upon it by Professor Skeat in the first flush of discovery, it is yet a charming and grace – ful bit of conventional love poetry."⁹⁶

It is apparent that Chaucer was, in *Womanly Noblesse*, trying to write in the "courtliest" possible style. Another aspect of this poem which is immediately noticeable and is characteristic of *courtly literature* in general is the fact that the lady with whom the speaker is in love is never described in any individualizing manner. *Womanly Noblesse* seems at first to be merely a compilation of the clichés enumerated at the beginning of this chapter. The lady is the ideal of womanhood. She is mistress of the speaker's heart, and his love will never change. He serves her through his love and hopes she will ease his pain. He prays that the lady will have pity upon him. Accordingly, Robinson's only comment on *Womanly Noblesse* is that "in thought and sentiment the poem is conventional."⁹⁷ This kind of conventionality in the courtly love lyric is precisely what Charles Muscatine considers the prime characteristic of the "courtly" (as opposed to the "bourgeois") style.

Designed to evoke ideal and invisible worlds, it reflects an unconcern for naturalism or representationalism that is hard, at first, for the modern reader to appreciate... Medieval culture as a whole is much more receptive to the production of nonrepresentational art than ours is. The medieval audience is ready and able to see effortlessly beyond the surface representation of form and image to a higher reality, and to see the concrete itself as metaphor and symbol... Under these conditions it is

⁹⁵ Arthur K. Moore, *The Secular Lyric in Middle English*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1951, p. 131.

⁹⁶ Robert K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 2nd ed. New York: Peter Smith, 1972, p. 79.

*economical and logical that courtly idealism, attempting to transcend the limitations of everyday, outward appearances, should employ a literary style which can directly represent an ideal worlds and can convert even outward appearance to ulterior, poetic – symbolic purposes*⁹⁸.

This explains the idealism of courtly love poetry in general, though it may not completely explain the totally abstract nature of this particular poem. For the characteristic idealization and conventionality of the courtly style does not necessarily exclude the use of concrete nouns. Take, for example, the description of Blanche in the *Book of the Duchess*. The Black Knight describes her thus:

*Ryght faire shuldres and body long
She had, and armes, every lyth
Fattyssh, fleshy, not gret therwith,
Ryght white handes, and nayles rede,
Rounde brestes; and of good brede
Hyr hippes were, a streight flat bak. (11. 952 – 957)*

Certainly the description of the woman is an idealized one. But at least one gets the impression there is a woman, with shoulders, arms, hands, nails, breasts, hips, and back. These are specific nouns, though the description is conventional. Contrast this with the words of *Womanly Noblesse*. The only description of the lady contains nothing at all of a concrete nature:

*So we! me liketh your womanly countenaunce,
Your fresshe fetures and your comynesse (11. 5 – 7)*

The entire poem follows this pattern. The most concrete of these are the ones which describe the lady's position with relation to the speaker: she is his *maystresse* (1. 7), his *lady* (1. 27), his *sovereigne* (1. 28).

Other nouns describe the lover's mental state: his *distresse* (1. 9), *duresse* (1. 14), his *peynes* (1. 17), his *wo* (1. 21) and his *hevynssse* (1. 23). There is, in fact, only one word in the entire poem which denotes something which could be directly experienced by the senses, and that is the word *flour* in the epithet “flour of wommanhede” (1. 28) – but that is used metaphorically, and is not a description. Most of the nouns are generalized

⁹⁷Robinson, p. 859.

⁹⁸Muscatine, pp. 14-15.

abstractions, like *governaunce* (1. 2), *noblesse* (1. 3), *plesure* (1. 4), *allegiaunce* (1. 21), *wommanhede* (1. 28), and *goodlihede* (1. 30).

Chaucer speaks of *remembraunce* in the first stanza (1. 1), *wyl* in the second stanza (1. 16), and *resoun* in stanza three (1. 24), corresponding to the three parts of the soul – memory, understanding, and will – that St. Augustine enumerated in his treatise *On the Trinity*. It is as if Chaucer were deliberately trying to draw attention to the mental process involved in a love situation. The poem is not chiefly a simple love compliment, but is in large part a poem about the *psychology* of love.

In this endeavor Chaucer had a precedent in the *dolce stil novo* school of Florence. Dante's influence was already apparent in Chaucer's *Complaint to his Lady*, but the influence of Dante and his school can be seen even more strongly in *Womanly Noblesse*, and can help to explain as well, the totally abstract style of the poem. Perhaps the best place to go to demonstrate the psychology of love as presented in the *stilnovisti* is Guido Cavalcanti's famous poem *Donna me prega*. Cavalcanti describes love's psychology in this way:

In quella parte dove sta memora prende suo stato...

Elli e creato e da sensato nome,

d'alma costome e di cor volontate.

Ven da veduta forma che s'intende,

che prende nel possibile intelletto,

come in subietto, loco e dimoranza. (11. 15 – 23)

In that part where the memory is it comes into being...

It is created out of something seen,

the soul's disposition, and the heart's desire.

It comes forth from a form perceived and understood,

which takes its dwelling

in the possible intellect, as in its subject.)

His presents an *elitist* view of love; only a few can really understand its workings, and the lady is one of those. The important points of Aristotelian epistemology as advanced specifically by the *stilnovisti* are as follows: the human intellect can directly know only universals. The images perceived by the senses are stored in the imagination, and it is only through an act of the intellect that these images or “phantasms,” become intelligible; it was the function of the active intellect to “abstract” the universal “form”

from this individualized *image* of the material thing. That universal form is then perceived and understood by the passive or possible intellect. These forms are ultimately stored in the *memory* which Aquinas considered a power of the intellect:

From its nature the memory is the treasury or storehouse of species... Wherefore it is clear that memory is not a distinct power from the intellect; for it belongs to the nature of a passive power to retain as well as to receive⁹⁹.

this belongs to the intellect... such inclination is termed will”). Human love, then, was the sort associated with the appetitive powers of the sensitive soul.

The higher form of love is, of course, intellectual love, and that must be the love that the *stiinovisti* experienced since, as Guinizelli had proclaimed, true love seeks its dwelling always in *Al cor gentil*¹⁰⁰. Now in this elevated love, the man, lover and singer, has in mind first the universal – the ideal image of the beautiful woman. When the image of the Beloved, the real woman of the love lyric, is perceived by the poet's senses, the intellect, according to the Aristotelians, abstracts the intelligible form from that image of the Beloved, and thus understands her to be beautiful because of her affinity with the universal form of beauty with which he compares her in his memory. The implication of this for Dante became increasingly important in the *Vita Nuova* and especially in the *Divine Comedy*. Maurice Valency describes the situation in a passage which I quote because of the concept's importance to *Womanly Noblesse* and to Chaucer's understanding of epistemology in his early poems:

In those of the gentil heart, love was an intuition of the good. It was through the desire of what was beautiful that one arrived at what was good: at the summit of the intellectual scale the suorum puichrum and the summum bonum were seen to be the same. But the lover received the ray of the third heaven through the eyes of the beloved lady first of all in his heart –it was there that he was chiefly susceptible. It was only secondarily that the influence of the lady was exerted in his mind. So long as the angelic lady remained in the flesh, therefore the quality of the desire she evoked remained complex and equivocal, for these earthbound stars had bodies

⁹⁹ Th. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, art. 7. In Blackfriars, 11, 1970, 170-72, trans. Fathers

¹⁰⁰ See Guido Guinizelli, 'Al cor gentil', in Goldin, *German and Italian Lyrics*

*which, unlike the heavenly bodies, aroused concupiscence. It was only when the angel was distant or, better still, dead, that stilnovist love could be purified of its carnal component.*¹⁰¹

All of this begins to make sense in the first lines of Chaucer's poem.

*So hath myn herte caught in remembraunce
Your beaute hoole and stidefast governaunce,
Your vertues alle and your hie noblesse,
That you to serve is set al my plesaunce. (ll. 1 – 4)*

Nothing of the material woman is glimpsed in these lines, because the “herte” – apparently used loosely for the “soul” as it contains the “remembraunce” –intellectualized love. From the material woman have been abstracted all of the universal qualities which she possesses: her beauty, her perfect demeanor, her virtues, and her high nobility, now exist as universals in that part of the intellect called *memory*, so that the poet now finds his happiness only in serving her, the embodiment of all ideal perfection which is the *good* toward which the will is directed by nature.

Stanza two of *Womanly Noblesse* is concerned with the *will*, as the first stanza was with *memory*. Declaring the eternal nature of his love and service, and emphasizing the pain he feels in his heart for love of the lady, the poet “humbly” tells his mistress “My wyl I conforme to your ordynaunce” (l. 16). This is consistent with the nature of love; since the will seeks always after the good, and since the lover finds good to be embodied in the object of love, he therefore bends his will toward that good manifested in his Beloved.

The problem – with seeking to love an earthly woman intellectually is that the woman is too alive. That is why, as Valency said, it is only when the woman is absent or dead that this sort of love can exist in a pure state: it was not until Beatrice died that Dante could make her the heroine of the *Comedy*.

Though the speaker of *Womanly Noblesse* has sought to intellectualize his love by abstracting the universal form of beauty from the material woman, and catching that form in his memory, and though the totally abstract nature of the poem reflects that intellectualization, the speaker has not totally abandoned the woman, the physical being, since it is apparent in stanza three that he mistakes the woman herself for the Highest Good. Perhaps his senses get in the way – the beauty of the physical woman, when she

¹⁰¹ Valency, p. 250

does appear before the lover's eyes, may cause him to choose what he can see rather than what he can't. He tells the lady how "I hange in balaunce" – she keeps him in limbo, neither accepting nor rejecting him. What is it he expects from her? Chiefly he wants her to alleviate his pain – "Of my grete wo listeth don alleggeaunce" (1. 21). Now the pain is caused by the inability of the loved one; as Cavalcanti said, love "vol ch'om miri in un fermato loco" ("makes one yearn for what he cannot reach") (1. 51). Since the will seeks the good, and since the lady is only a partial good and not the Highest Good, the lover must of necessity be frustrated because he will never attain what he desires. Only God can grant what the lover wants from the lady, and that explains the religious imagery found in the third stanza. In language of the *ABC*, the lover asks for abiding grace, and for the pity which will decrease all of his suffering. And finally, having already demonstrated how his *memory* and *will* participate in his love, the speaker brings *reason* into the picture, recommending the following solution:

And thynketh by resoun that wommanly noblesse

Shuldenat desire for to do the outrance

Ther as she fyndeth non unbuxomnesse. (11. 24 – 26)

Where the courtly lady, emblem of "womanly noblesse," finds her lover totally devoted in service, she should want to "do the outrance," the utmost in her power, to make him happy. But happiness must be found in the Highest Good, not in the lady herself. The speaker deliberately invokes *reason* when he is being the most unreasonable.

The Envoy to the poem emphasizes just how far gone the lover's reason is. He calls the lady "Auctour of nurture" (1. 27), that is, the source from whom he receives all sustaining nourishment – an epithet which can be appropriate only for God. She is "lady of pleasaunce/ or happiness, is the "sovereigne of beautee" as well as the "flour of wommanhede" recalling the "of al floures flour" which denoted the Blessed Virgin (*An ABC*, 1. 4). These epithets are followed by an example of the poet's mock humility:

Take ye non hede unto myn ignoraunce,

But this receyveth of your goodlihede, (11. 29 – 30)

This is in contrast with the air of superiority adopted by people like Dante, Cavalcanti, or Guinizelli, but it is not intended to be anything like the sort of self-mocking which appears in some of the later lyrics like *To Rosemounde* and *Merciies Beaute*. And although he has not explored love with the depth of the *stilnovisiti*, he has for apparently

the first time in English discussed the psychology of love as a medieval philosopher would have seen it. Chaucer, of course, saw this psychology from a different angle than Dante, for where Dante is able to use the Beloved to lead him to the Highest Good, Chaucer sees devotion to the Beloved as turning *from* the Highest Good, and develops that idea in later lyrics and in the . Further, in this poem, Chaucer has used the three stanzas to reflect the three-part division of the soul which, in turn, implies the Trinity according to Augustine. The verse form thus suggests the real source of the Highest Good, of which the poem's speaker seems to have lost track. All of this must be kept in mind when the poet speaks of "myn ignoraunce."

James I. Wimsatt writes that "all of Chaucer's independent love lyrics (except the *Complaint of Venus*) are based on poems of Guillaume de Machaut."¹⁰² Certainly it is true that the influence of Machaut is obvious. But I think that *Womanly Noblesse* points to Dante and the *stilnovisti* as another important source for the love lyrics. In a poem less philosophically complex than those of Dante or Cavalcanti, but still dependent upon the overall precepts of Aristotelian epistemology, Chaucer brings a vision of that style to English poetry.

But for the most part, Chaucer's treatment of courtly love did not involve the ideal abstraction as presented in *Womanly Noblesse*. More and more it was the *individual* situation that made its way into the lyric.

Perhaps the best way to understand a poem like the *Compiaynt D'Amours*, then, is to interpret it in the light of its presentation before that courtly audience. That such poems as the *Compiaynt D'Amours* were performed orally is generally accepted. The speaker of the poem does make a reference to the complaint as a *written* poem, as something the Beloved could read, saying

... I now dorste my sharpe sorwes smerte
Shewe by word, that ye wolde ones rede
The compleynte of me, which ful sore I drede
That I have seid here... (11. 66 – 69)

Robbins describes such poems as being read at "an assembly where... lords and ladies danced, played courtly games... heard music, enjoyed a picnic, and indulged in a

¹⁰² James I. Wimsatt, 'Guillaume de Machaut and Chaucer's Love Lyrics', *Medium Aevum*, 47, 1978, pp. 66-87.

little flirtation."¹⁰³ Such an assembly must have been the scene for the first reading of the *Complaynt D'Amours*, made "on Seint Valentynes day, / Whan every foughel chesen shall his make" (ll. 85 – 86). Kean, describing Chaucer's love lyrics in general, claims "their justification lies in the occasion for which they were written; they exist as part of an agreeable exchange between poet and audience, which forms their context."¹⁰⁴ Just what this exchange consisted of must have been, for Chaucer, similar to the situation which Frederick Goldin in describing the early troubadour lyric calls the "array of perspectives" in the courtly love lyric. The performer assumes the role of the courtly lover, and plays upon the opinions and responses of the different elements of his audience. Some of these elements may be hostile to the lover, but in incorporating these views into his song and playing off of them, the singer shows how a truly noble man loves.¹⁰⁵

The structure of the poem is dialectic. The poet vacillates between condemnation of the lady – the representation of the viewpoint of the "enemies" in the audience – and vindication of her – the viewpoint of the true courtly lover. The structure is also facilitated by the Proem and Envoy, stanzas one and thirteen, which link with each other and frame the rest of the poem.

Stanza one not only introduces the poem and its speaker, but suggests five important themes which are developed in the body of the poem. These themes are also repeated in the epilogue, linking beginning and end with each other and with the rest of the poem: the poet is making a complaint to his lady – "I Beginne right thus my deedly complaininge/ on hir (ll. 1 – 5) he says in stanza one, and in the end says "To hir... This woful song and this compleynt I make" (ll. 87 – 88); the speaker emphasizes his great love – he speaks of "me... that love hir best" (ll. 6 – 7) in the beginnings and ends with "yit wol I evermore... love her best" (ll. 90 – 91); his love causes his suffering, since he is "the sorwefulleste man / That in this world was every yet living" (ll. 1 – 2) and later sings "this woful song" (l. 88); only the lady has the power to save or kill him, for it is she that "may to lyf and death me bringe" (l. 5), although in the end, "she do me sterve" (l. 91); the fact that she chooses to destroy him in the end is a result of her having no mercy or

¹⁰³ Russell Hope Robbins, 'The Vintner's Son: French Wine in English Bottles', in *Eleanor of Aquitaine: Patron and Politician*, ed. William W. Kibler, London: University of Texas Press, 1976, p. 162,

¹⁰⁴ P. H. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, I, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Goldin, 'The Array of Perspectives in the Courtly Love Lyric' in Ferrante, J. and Economou, G. D., eds. *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature*. New York: Kennikat Press, 1975, p. 94.

pity –the lady “hath on me no mercy ne mo rewthe” says the speaker in stanza one (l. 6), and reiterates that she “never yit wolde me to mercy take” in the final stanza (l. 89). Green, who pointed out some of these relationships, generalizes that “Chaucer's architectonic superiority often creates an interlacing between beginning and end.”¹⁰⁶ Certainly that was also true in *Womanly Noblesse*, where the last lines repeated the opening lines of the poem. Here, that “interlacing” provides a frame which helps, by its emphasizing those five repeated themes, to structure the poem.

The dialectic begins in the second stanza. This is a stanza of *accusation*, where the speaker delineates his sorrows – he is like an exile on an island, from which he can never escape alive:

... thus ye me from al my blisse exyle.

Ye han me cast in thilke spitous yle

Ther never man on lyve mighte asterte: (ll. 11 – 13)

All of this sorrow comes about because the lady will not grant him her favours. She seems to enjoy the speaker's pain – “Your plesaunce is to laughen whan I syke” (l. 10).

These are serious charges, but in stanza two comes the antithesis, the vindication of the lady. She is perfection itself: it is impossible even to speak of her “beautee and goodnesse” (l. 17), while the speaker himself, by contrast, is “th'unworthiest that may ryde or go” (l. 19). As a result, the speaker excuses his lady, saying “I have no wonder thogh ye do me wo” (l. 18).

Stanza four brings another accusation: the lady's lack of pity not only causes the speaker sorrow, but it will actually kill him.

Alias! Thus is my lyf brought to an ende;

My deeth, I see, is my conclusion (ll. 22 – 23)

But this accusation, that the lady will cause the poet's death, is answered, again, in the following stanza. The speaker once more excuses the lady:

But shal I thus yow my deeth foryive,

That causeles doth me this sorwe drye?

Ye, certes, I! (ll. 31 – 32)

He can forgive her his death for a very simple reason: she did not ask him to love her, and never wanted him to serve her. That is his *own* folly:

¹⁰⁶ Green, p. 21.

... For she of my folye

Hath nought to done, although she do me sterve;

Hit is nat with hir wil that I hir serve! (11. 33 – 35)

Stanza six continues the lover's apology for the lady. Since he loves her "without hir reed" (1. 37), his death brings "no blame unto hir womanheed" (1. 39). But he begins to change toward the end of this stanza – his death is not really his *own* fault either since it comes upon him as the result of forces over which he has no control. Two things are killing him: "hir beautee and myn ye" (1. 42), that is to say, her beauty because that makes him love her, and his eyes because it is through them that he perceives her beauty.

And so with stanza seven the poet makes another accusation. It is as if the lady, since her beauty causes his love even though she did not will it, has some moral obligation to prevent the poet's death by some small show of pity:

... she is verray rote

Of my disese, and of my deth also;

For with oon word she mighte be my bote (11. 43 – 45)

But she will not even do that, and in this she seems most guilty, as the poet has mentioned before, the lady actually takes pleasure in his agony:

It is hir wone plesaunce for to take

To seen hir servaunts dyen for hir sake! (11. 48 – 49)

This causes the poet to wonder, in stanza eight, how Nature could have made his lady, this "fayreste creature ... that ever was livinge, / The benignest and beste eek that Nature / Hath wrought or shal" (11. 51 – 54), but for some reason forgot to include pity among her virtues. The answer comes in stanza nine, where the speaker again excuses the lady, saying it was not her fault for being created without pity, but the fault lies in the Creator:

Yit is a! this no lak to hir, pardee,

But God or Nature sore wolde I blame (11. 57 – 59)

Once again, as in *Womanly Noblesse*, Chaucer has presented a speaker whose reason has been damaged by his "love. Though not as philosophical a poem as *Womanly Noblesse*, the *Complaynt D'Amours* here depicts its speaker as attempting to move from his personal experience to a philosophical truth, attempting to abstract from his individual situation. But his reasoning process is blurred: he blames God for his problems. The problem with it

is, of course, that God created human will to desire, according to natural law, the Highest Good; but the will, being free, may desire worldly pleasures. That is the speaker's problem here, and the courtly audience would undoubtedly recognize his faulty reasoning.

But that audience would also recognize in the speaker a truly courtly man – and that certainly was one of the purposes of the courtly lyric, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter: the lady was the embodiment of the aspirations of the courtly class and the lover presented himself as truly noble by serving her. In the last part of stanza nine, the lover's virtue of *humility* reaches unbelievable proportions. There are those in the audience, the “enemies,” who would say that the lover is a fool to continue loving when the lady enjoys to see him suffer. But this stanza, spoken as the answer of the truly courtly man to his enemies' accusations, ends in self-sacrifice

I ne oughte to despyse my ladyes game;

It is hir pley to laughen whan men syketh,

And I assente, al that hir list and lyketh! (11. 61 – 63)

In stanza ten the speaker gives the “enemies” their last chance. Turning to address the lady directly once more, he says he will write a poem telling of his sorrows, revealing to the world his lady's unkindness, “complaining” of her lack of pity. And in this, the “enemies” may say, the lover fails to keep his perfect devotion to his Beloved.

... I now dorste my sharpe sorwes smerte

She by word, that ye wolde ones rede

The compleynte of me... (11. 66 – 68)

That is what a “complaint” is supposed to do; that is what the speaker of *A Complaint to his Lady* does – he reveals the cruelty of “Faire Rewtheles” for not having pity. But the speaker of the *Compiaynt D'Amours* does not even do this. His true love will not even allow him to complain about his lady, so he begs her to forgive him:

A trewer servaunt shulle ye never have;

And, though that I have pleynd unto you here,

Foryiveth it me, myn own lady dere! (11. 75 – 77)

The real cleverness of the *Compiaynt D'Amours* can be seen in these lines. Chaucer has not written a complaint – he has written a non-complaint. He has answered all of the possible opposing viewpoints in a dialectic revealing why he really has no right to complain against his lady, and ultimately asks her forgiveness even for doing that.

The speaker will love his lady forever, and humbly serve her:

Ever have I been, and shal, how – so I wende,

Outher to live or dye, your humble trewe;

Ye been to me my ginning and myn ende (11. 78 – 80)

Furthermore, she is his sun: “Sonne of the sterre bright and clere of newe” (1. 81).

This is an astrological image; the Beloved is like the sun while the lover is like one of the planets, a “star bright and clere of hewe.” She is the source and inspiration of this poem, as well as of the lover's *gentillesse*, his true nobility shown in the poem.¹⁰⁷

And finally the lover, pledging his love to be always “freshly new,” recommits himself to his Beloved, swearing never to “repente” – never, in fact, to have reason to write a *real* complaint:

Alwey in oon to love yow freshly newe,

By God and by me trouthe, is myn entente;

To live or dye, I wol it never repente! (11. 82 – 84)

The speaker of the *Complaynt D'Amours*, then, is the perfect courtly lover, as were the speakers of *A Complaint to his Lady* and *Womanly Noblesse*, but Chaucer points out that even the *perfect* courtly lover is inadequate; truth resides only in the Highest Good. Thus here are hints of irony in the presentation of the speakers of the early *Womanly Noblesse* and the *Complaynt D'Amours*. As the following chapters will show, as Chaucer develops his art of the lyric, the speakers become less and less the universal courtly lovers, and more and more individualized, following the role – playing posture suggested in the dramatic form of the debate, initiated in the *Complaynt D'Amours*. In addition, the Beloved eventually becomes less of the abstract universal of *Womanly Noblesse*, and more of an individual, who can be measured against the always influential ideal – a process which culminates in the characterization of Criseyde.

Unlike Western tradition, the Romanian literature has not created books that illustrate the myth of absolute love, such as *Tristan and Isolda* or *Romeo and Juliet* etc. The woman is by no means the object of mystical adoration, but is usually treated with contempt. As for eros, the Romanian writers suffer from “virile sufficiency” and display a superiority complex in relation to women. In his study *The Poetry of “Realia”* (volume *The Universe of Poetry*, Minerva Publishers, Bucharest, 1971, G. Călinescu asserts that “ the real Romanian erotic poet, in the highest sense of the word, is and remains Conachi, except

by Eminescu, who is such a great poet that, even keeping a distance from women, he always aspires to them" (cf. p. 285). According to Călinescu only Conachi and the Văcărești poets from the beginning of the XIX century had metaphysical imagination and put love under the sign of fatality and the implacable destiny. They adore the woman as an idea and not as a concrete palpable reality. The influence of Petrarca is evident for both Costache Conachi and Iancu Văcărescu. An influence from Chaucer, however, is more difficult to prove though we cannot exclude it.

Romanian literature, in general, regards the woman as an object of lust. Romanian writers, such as Creangă, appreciate the Woman of Bath and others, but not Laura or Beatrice.

¹⁰⁷ Derek Brewer, ed., *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975, p. 260.

CHAPTER 5

Individual Voice – a Realistic Approach to Characters

The process of individualizing the speaker of the lyric and of exploring the ironic contrasts between courtly love and Divine Love that could be seen in the movement from poems like *Truth* to poems like the *Envoy to Scogan* can also be observed in Chaucer's love poems. Those generally considered earlier lyrics (*The Complaint to his Lady*, *Womanly Noblesse*, and the *Complaynt D'Amours*) are conventional courtly love lyrics. Any irony in these poems is only vaguely present if at all. And the speaker in each of these poems is the conventional courtly lover, praising his lady, complaining about her cruelty, swearing to serve her faithfully and eternally. The poems show the early Chaucer writing conservatively within the courtly love tradition. To return to the realist – nominalist controversy I have been stressing, these early poems manifest a realist outlook. Since both the lover and lady of these poems are treated abstractly, the poems display a belief that the ideal, the universal, is real and can be known, and if known, then communicated through a lyric poem.

But as time passed, Chaucer began to explore new directions to take within the tradition of courtly love. And he began to view things more from the nominalist perspective: the universal cannot be directly known by the mind. If the ideal exists at all, it seems to exist as a mental construct. Only individuals exist in a way that enables them to be known. Thus in poems like the *Complaint of Venus*, *Against Women Unconstant*, *Merciles Beaute*, and *To Rosemounde*, Chaucer creates individual speakers. These are real people instead of abstractions, and as real people they carry the whole idea of courtly love. For if the Beloved is a real woman and not a universal, then the love of her cannot possibly be mistaken for the Highest Good. Chaucer implies that true love, *the law of Kynde*, should recognize the individual, and not worship idols. And this seems to be one of the themes of *Venus*.

The Complaint of Venus is a free translation of three ballades written in French by the Savoyard knight, Oton de Granson, to which Chaucer added an original Envoy. Its title was invented by scholars because of its manuscript association with the *Complaint of Mars*. Many have assumed that both poems were written regarding the affair between John Holland and Isabelle, Duchess of York, the *Venus* having been written specifically for that

lady. If that were true, then that fact would provide us with a different sort of a context for this lyric. But the fact that Chaucer makes no overt reference to such a situation causes two problems: it makes it impossible to prove the theory, and our lack of knowledge makes it impossible to catch the significance that the poem may have had for its original audience. Further, any connection of this poem with real people does not provide the same sort of personal context that one finds in the *Envoys to Scogan* or *Bukton*, for example, because this poem is not about specific historical events, but rather more universal ones.

What matters in this poem is not which specific individual it was written for, but rather that it was written for a woman (as the Envoy's reference to "Prynmesse" indicates). Who that woman was is not particularly important for our understanding of the poem. What is important is the role-playing of the speaker. Chaucer, presumably performing the lyric before an audience among whom was the woman at whose request he had written the lyric, creates a dramatic monologue in which he adopts the role of a woman in love, debating, in a manner similar to that of the speaker of the *Complaynt D'Amours*, with the elements in the audience – particularly the "Jealous Ones" – who are the enemies of the lovers. In the end, the mask drops and the lyric voice comes from Chaucer the poet, still on stage and now addressing the audience, and the patroness, directly.

Chaucer makes no reference to any significance that his writing for a woman may have had for the poem. In the *Envoy*, he apparently regards the poem chiefly as a translation and as a metrical exercise. He speaks of the difficulty of his task:

And eke to me it ys gret penaunce,

Syth rym in Englissh hath such skarsete,

To folowe word by word the curiosite

Of Graunson, flour of hem that make in Fraunce. (11. 79 – 82)

The irony of these lines is obvious; for Chaucer not only translated Granson's three ballades, but he also added an original ten-line Envoy. Galway points out in particular the "in Fraunce" at the end of the compliment to Granson – the implication being that Granson may be the flower of poets in France, but that is only because Chaucer himself is in England.¹⁰⁸

Skeat sees the poem as largely a paraphrase, rather than an accurate translation¹⁰⁹. Robinson, too, mentions that, while the second and third ballades follow the originals

¹⁰⁸ Galway, p. 277.

¹⁰⁹ Skeat, *Works*, I, 87.

fairly closely, "Chaucer's version of the first is hardly a translation at all. Only five or six lines are adapted and those very freely."¹¹⁰

What all of these critics ignore is that fact that, as was the case in *The Former Age* and in *An ABC*, it is in his changes from, and not his fidelity to, the original that Chaucer most clearly distinguishes himself as a poet, and that, therefore, Chaucer's deviations from Granson are what make the *Complaint of Venus* a worthwhile poem. Those deviations are chiefly the result of his writing the poem for a woman, apparently at her request. The *penance* Chaucer did in writing this had to do not merely with solving a complex metrical problem as he implies in the Envoy – and which, as the Envoy shows, he solved rather easily, without any real "penance" at all. It was rather a difficulty of a structural as well as a psychological nature. For the poet's task was, first, to unite three independent ballades into a single coherent lyric poem; and second, since he was fulfilling the request of a woman, to translate a courtly love poem from the point of view of a man into one from the view of a woman.

Once again Chaucer approached the problem of placing the lyrical utterance in an appropriate context by creating a speaking *persona* for the poem – this time not the conventional courtly lover but a woman. It was not new for a woman to be the speaker of a courtly love lyric, but it was certainly unusual. Chaucer puts another lover's complaint in the mouth of a woman in *Anelida and Arcite* a poem to which *Venus* shows some similarities. Chaucer also treated the woman as a lover in the person of Criseyde, and she, as will be seen, provides some parallels to the speaker of *Venus*.

The main problem in writing a poem in the courtly love tradition from the point of view of a woman is that most of the clichés no longer apply. It is not the lady's role to be in love but rather to be the object of love; her heart is to be won by noble deeds and service; she is not a suitor but rather grants favours to or from those who serve *her*. This being the case, how could a poet express the usual woe that a love lyric must conventionally portray, if his speaker was the lady herself, she whose lack of pity caused this anguish, but who did not suffer herself?

Although there are courtly love poems written from the woman's point of view – written, even, by women – which speak of love service in the same manner as those with male personae, Chaucer rejected that approach as unnatural.

He has *Anelida*, for example, say

¹¹⁰Robinson, pp. 862-63.

And shal I preye, and weyve womanhede?

Nay! Rather deth then do so foul a dede! (ll. 299 – 300)

She would be putting aside her femininity by becoming the suitor, and that would be dishonourable. The speaker of the *Complaint of Venus*, then, could not be pictured as suffering in the service of her beloved. Also, she could not be a hard-hearted “Faire Rewthelees,” for then she would lose any sympathy from the audience, and besides, she would have nothing over which to suffer. Instead, Chaucer chose a sympathetic sort of “everywoman” who has granted her love to the worthiest possible servant. Chaucer apparently concluded that one thing that *could* cause the woman pain in a courtly love situation would be her lover's absence once she has accepted him. Accordingly, the first ballade mentions the lovers' separation, but in it the speaker reveals how the memory of her loved one torments her. Then, however, the lady begins to complain to Love because of the pain it causes – and the most important agent of this pain is *jealousy*, for jealousy is apparently what is keeping the lovers apart. She and her lover must stay apart for fear of what others will say. Ultimately, though, in the third ballade, the speaker refuses to suffer, and vows to continue loving her knight in spite of anything jealousy can do, for he is the worthiest and the best, as she had asserted in the first ballade.

Chaucer solves the problem of structure, then, by giving the three poems a logical continuity of thought in the mind of the speaker (whom we may as well call “Venus” for lack of a better name): the first ballade is related to the second in that the jealousy condemned in the second is the cause of the separation lamented in the first; the third ballade *defeats* jealousy and returns to the joy in the lover's good qualities enumerated in the first one. And Chaucer solves the problem of the woman as speaker by having her lament something which would have been considered appropriate to her womanhood; her lover's absence and her fear of “the jealous ones.”

John Norton-Smith, in the study on *Complaint of Venus*, sums up the poem thus: “In the *Complaint of Venus* the lovers are presented as supremely happy in themselves, their mutual affection and moral admiration threatened externally by the figure of Jealousy.”¹¹¹ This explains the changes made from Granson.

A closer look at the text of the poem will illustrate the generalizations. The poem's opening lines, as mentioned earlier, reveal the separation of the lovers, but indicate that the lady can still find consolation in the memory of her beloved:

*Ther nys so high comfort to me pleasaunce,
When that I am in any hevynesse,
As for to have leyser of remembraunce
Upon the manhod and the worthynesse,
Upon the trouthe and on the stidfastnesse
of him whos I am al, while I may dure. (11. 1 – 6)*

The fact that she is in “hevynesse” because of the separation foreshadows the outburst in the second ballade. One could note a parallel in Anelida's Complaint:

So thirleth with the poynt of remembraunce

The swerd of sorowe, ywhet with fals plesaunce (11. 211 – 212)

In Anelida, the memory of past joys causes *pain*, because the lover has been false.

In *Venus*, the memory is comforting, because the lover though absent, is still true.

The list of her beloved's admirable qualities includes his *manhood* and *worthiness*, *truth* and *steadfastness*. The list goes on in the second stanza to include his “bounte, wysdom, governaunce” (1. 9), the fact that he is “of knyghthod... parfit richesse” (1. 12), his “noblesse” (1. 13), and the fact that Nature “so wel hath formed him” (1. 14). All of these are things which would make up a worthy lover, but the third stanza depicts the lover as the true ideal, because of his service:

His gentil herte is of so gret humblesse

To me in word, in werk, in contenaunce,

And me to serve is al his besynesse,

That I am set in verrey sikernesse. (11. 18 – 21)

The fact that he is the ideal lover in his sincere service is proof to the speaker that she has placed her love in the right place. “Venus” only hopes it is enough to convince others. There is a foreshadowing of her approaching complaint against jealousy when she says

Ther oghte blame me no creature,

For every wight preiseth his gentilesse. (11. 7 – 8)

The *man* was to be praised if he put his love in a worthy lady. The nobler his Beloved, the nobler he was for loving her. A woman, once she has granted her love, must always be careful that the love remain a secret, in order to protect her honour and her

¹¹¹ Norton-Smith, p. 18.

reputation. One might compare “Venus,” here, to another of Chaucer's women in love, Criseyde. The loss of reputation is one of the things that Criseyde dreads; one excuse that she gives for not loving is that she will have to “'coye hem, that they seye noon harm of me! / For though ther be no cause, yet hem semen / Al be for harm that folk hire frendes quemen; / And who may stoppen every wikked tonge, / Or sown of belles whil that thei ben ronge?¹” (Bk. II, 11. 801 – 805). And as “Venus,” in the midst of her affair and despite the “jealous ones,” believes that no blame should attach to her because her lover is so noble, so Criseyde, about to enter her affair and in fear of the “jealous ones,” *hopes* that her good name will be kept, because the *object* of her love is so worthy:

"And though that I myn herte sette at reste

Upon this knyght, that is the worthieste,

And kepe alway myn honour and my name.

By alle right, it may do me no shame.” (Bk. II, 11. 760 – 764)

But ideally, the love must be kept secret in order to bloom and grow. The jealousy, then, is the jealousy of others which seeks to destroy the precious thing she and her lover have. It is against malicious tongues like these that “Venus” here proclaims that no one “oghte blame me.”

The speaker concludes the first ballade with the summarizing sentiment that she should consider herself quite fortunate in having such a lover to serve her.

There is, as the second ballade begins, a sudden change of mood. “Venus” has said that she *should* be happy, but she cannot restrain her unhappiness. She has said that no one *ought* to blame her, but the problem seems to be that her absence from her lover is *caused* by those who *do* “blame her” – those who speak ill. She addresses Love directly, and enumerates some of the conventional discomforts which love is supposed to cause: lovers wake when they should sleep, complain rather than sing, cast down their eyes and change colour, complain when they sleep and dream when they should be dancing.

The speaker tells us, “al the revers of any glad felyng” (1. 32). The pain in the speaker's case is all caused by one thing: separation from her lover due to the jealousy of others:

Jelosie be hanged be a cable!

She wolde al knowe thurgh her espyng,

Ther doth no wyght nothing so resonable

That al nys harm in her ymagenyng. (11. 33 – 36)

Chaucer speaks of jealousy as deceitful and the cause of much “desturbyng,” All of this Chaucer uses with the metaphor of Love's *gift*. Love's joy is a gift, love gives much sorrow and much pain. The gift is pleasant for a time, but becomes a burden after a while, because of the confusion brought by jealousy: jealousy causes us to be constantly “in drede and sufferyng” (1. 45), to “languishe in penaunce” (1. 46).

The third ballade resolves the threat to the speaker's love which jealousy raised. The speaker, still addressing Love, excuses herself for anything she may have said wrong claiming that she has no desire “t'escape out of youre las” (1. 50), love.

She has served so long that she would choose to remain in love forever. In spite of the torments which Jealousy may put her through, she will remain faithful: “no fors though Jelosye me turmentel” (1. 53).

Chaucer's speaker makes Jealousy into an evil torturer, trying to get her to abandon her love by putting her through agonizing torment. Let “the jelous” put her to the test, says “Venus,” for she will never deny or repent loving her knight:

And let the jelous putte it in assay

That for no peyne, wol I not sey nay;

To love him best ne shal I never repente. (11. 62 – 64)

The torture which Jealousy puts her through must be her separation from her lover. She emphasizes several times that she is to find happiness in seeing him when it is possible – “sufficeth me to sen hym when I may” (1. 54) – and satisfaction in the knowledge that her love is the worthiest in the world – exactly the defense she had used in the first ballade, as proof against “blame”:

Herte, to the hit oughthe ynogh suffise

That Love so high a grace to the sente,

To chese the worthieste in alle wise

And most agreable unto myn entente.

Seche no ferther, neythir wey ne wente,

Sith I have suffisaunce unto my pay. (11. 65 – 70)

Chaucer's poem, then, is extremely well structured and perfectly unified, and he has admirably achieved his goal of writing a lover's complaint from a woman's point of view. As A. Wigfall Green summarizes, Chaucer in *Venus* “demonstrated his art as a translator, arranger, and original poet capable not only of following the complex structure

of French verse but of creating a new form even more intricate."¹¹²

It is clear that, whatever reservations Chaucer may have had concerning the ideal of courtly love, he was able to empathize with those who held to the ideal, and he demonstrates this in playing the role of the courtly lady. And that role in itself is, in fact, the point that pervades the tradition: by making the woman the speaker, Chaucer removes her from the ideal abstraction and makes her a speaking human being – not a highly individualized one, but certainly a flesh-and-blood woman with emotions and desires. Unlike the abstraction, she can hardly be confused with the Highest Good. Thus Chaucer, again very subtly, indicates that love should be an equal partnership (the woman has a voice, as here – she is no “ideal”) between two human beings, two natural mates following the “law of Kynde”.

This “role-playing” is what links *Venus* to the other poems discussed here. In *Against Women Unconstant* and *Merciles Beaute*, Chaucer adopts another role, that of the “rebellious lover”. Like the woman speaking in *Venus*, the “rebellious lover” persona was not new. *Against Women Unconstant* and *Merciles Beaute* belong to a courtly tradition in which the lover abandons his lady because of her cruelty (exactly what Chaucer condemned Scogan for in the *Envoy to Scogan*). The appeal of the poems, then, does not lie in their originality – Chaucer did not invent the rebellious lover. Robbins comments that “Chaucer's obverted love lyrics ... were just as conventional (and as influenced by the French) as the direct complaints.”¹¹³

But the difference in Chaucer's is in intent. The lover's nobility is revealed through his suffering, as with the speaker of the *Complaynt D'Amours*. But in *Against Women Unconstant*, for example, the lover's condemnation of his lady is so strong, and the sarcasm of the line (“In stede of blew, thus may ye were a! grene”) so harsh, that the speaker shows a lack of *courtesy*. His own nobility is questionable. But even more importantly, the speaker's charges against his ex – Beloved ironically reveal the speaker's own significant error: he condemns her for being what she cannot help being – a creature of the sublunary world. The irony lies in the speaker's having placed his faith in her, rather than in the Highest Good.

This theme begins to develop in the first lines of *Against Women Unconstant*.

¹¹² A. Wigfail Green, ‘Chaucer's Complaints: Stanzaic Arrangement, Meter, and Rhyme’, *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 3, 1962, 26-27.

¹¹³ Rossell Hope Robbins, ‘The Lyrics’, in Beryl Rowland, ed., *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 325.

Here, the speaker addresses his lady directly, and she is portrayed in these lines as the direct opposite of *truth*. She is characterized by *newfangelnesse*, or fondness for novelty, and *unstedfastnesse*, and is accused of constantly having a lust for new things.

Madame, for your newfangelnesse,

Many a servaunt have ye put out of grace

I take my leve of your unstedfastnesse

For wei I wot, why! ye have lyves space,

Ye can not love ful half yeer in a place,

To newe thing your lust is ay so kene;

In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene. (II. I 7)

First, the speaker says that the lady has put many servants out of *grace*. Grace here means, most immediately, *favour*, or “the condition or fact of being favoured” The lady has, in other words, dropped many of her lovers, or denied them her favour or good will. On the other hand, *grace* has an unmistakable Christian connotation. The *OED* defines this *grace* as “the divine influence which operates in men to regenerate and sanctify, to inspire virtuous impulses, and to impart strength to endure trial and resist temptation”, and a *state of grace* as “the condition of one who is under such divine influence”

As we have seen before, religious imagery has a tendency to work its way into courtly love poetry. So this image is not unconventional – the lady's praise appears often in religious terms in order to make her a quasi-divine being, worthy almost of worship. What is remarkable here is that the lady is the one who puts people *out* of grace. A direct contrast is implied, then, of the lady, and her treatment of those who love her, and God, whose grace abounds to those who love Him. And further, in another sense, the lady is not only a kind of perverse God, but she may actually, by leading men to sin, put them out of God's *own* grace.

What Chaucer is implying, then, when he compares the lady's mental *faculties* to a “mirour nothing may empresse,” is that the woman is a slave of her passions, of her sensitive soul, and is unable or unwilling to think rationally about the images her mind receives. That is why she is incapable of the more permanent love praised by Dante and Cavalcanti, for instance. Their love was a function of *rational* soul, which abstracted the *universal* form from the phantasm caught by the *sensitive* soul. This higher love, then,

involved an intellectual activity. The lady's love in this poem, however, involves only the bestial following of her appetites.

Love abides – it is permanent – but this is Christian love, *caritas*, of which St. Paul speaks. It is in direct conflict with the fleeting love exemplified in the lady. Paul in this passage is *also* talking about understanding: the mirror, once again, is the facet of the mind which aids in understanding. But understanding is indirect – we see through the mirror. In this world, we can know, according to medieval thought, only through *abstracting* from the *images* we perceive. Our way of knowing is *indirect*, and that is why we know only partial truths. In the case of the lady, she knows only the partial truth of the phantasm.

We can get the Truth is through *Love*, that is, Divine Love, which we can achieve by following natural law, and by loving the Highest Good rather than partial goods.

What is important here is not Lady's goodness but her sin her *lak of stedfastnesse*.

This adds to the ironic portrayal of the lady as a perversion of divinity which began in stanza one and now continues in the second image of stanza two – that of the weathercock:

Ther is no feith that may your herte embrace;

But as a wedercok, that turneth his face

With every wind, ye fare, and that is sene;

In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene. (11. 11 14)

This image may be proverbial, but even so, it is quite appropriate. The *cock*, it should be noted, is a traditional symbol of Christ, since he heralds the dawn, the coming of light into the world. It is also a symbol of the *conscience*, because of its role in Peter's denial.¹¹⁴

But unlike Christ, the embodiment of *truth* and so of constancy, the lady is like a *weathercock*: she turns with *every* wind. Any change in her immediate situation brings about a corresponding change in her personal loyalties. The woman is simply without any "faith," any permanent moral center, that can keep her true in anything. In this constant spinning, like a weathercock, she is like another symbol in medieval thought: Fortune and her wheel. But this similarity becomes even more clear in the third and final stanza.

Stanza three opens with a continuation of the religious imagery apparent in the first

two stanzas, and here, too, the lady is seen as a perversion of the holy, for she is a kind of saint in the religion of love:

Ye might be shryned, for your brotelnesse,

Bet than Dalyda, Creseyde or Candace; (11. 15 – 16)

The lady is here placed in the company of woman famous for their lack of *trouthe*: Delilah who betrayed Samson; Candace, the Indian princess who beguiles Alexander in medieval romance; and Criseyde, the prototype of all those who forsake their lovers and their lover's vows.

Why make the lady of the poem suggest the Goddess Fortuna? Certainly because she and the love of her are meant to embody those things of this world which are subject to Fortune. When one puts one's faith in the joys of this sublunary realm, both Boethius and Chaucer say, then one is riding Fortune's wheel. Those things in Fortune's realm – riches, power, fame, and sexual love – are merely loaned to us, and fade from our grasp as the goddess spins her wheel.

The poem ends with a pair of statements which were, again, apparently proverbial, and then the repetition of the refrain once again, all stressing the lady's inconstancy;

If ye lese oon, ye can we! tweyn purchace;

AT light for somer, ye woot we! what I mene

In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene. (11. 19 – 21)

She is unconcerned about losing servants, because she can easily get more – the implication being that she does not take seriously her ties with any of them. And when the lady dresses in green, she will dress “al light for somer” – an idiomatic expression used again in the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* (l. 568), where it merely refers to the wearing of light clothes in warm weather. Here, the speaker's “ye woot we! what I mene” draws attention to the play on words intended in “light” – here, as in the refrain of the *Complaint to his Purse*, Chaucer puns on “light” as meaning “fickle” or even “lacking moral substance.”

To sum up, the speaker of *Against Women Unconstant* writes the poem as a declaration of his forsaking his lady, who is fickle and devoted to “newefangelnesse.” The speaker himself never seems to go beyond this simple malediction against his faithless Beloved. But in his language – in his picturing her as a perverted deity, in his depiction of

¹¹⁴ Arthur T. Hatto, *EOS: An Inquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry*.

her love as the mirror in which we see dimly, or of her as a weathercock turning like a wheel, as one who, like Fortune, is constant only in her “unstedfastnesse” – the poet is trying to convey the real weakness in courtly love: the lady is an ideal, but an earthly ideal, a transient and mutable thing. She is one representative of a whole world characterized by its *lak of stedfastnesse*¹¹⁵

The two lovers, the lady and the speaker, are individuals, like those images in the mirror. They are not the Highest Good. Only in God is there *truth* – and that is something we have heard from Chaucer before.

The “rebellious lover” convention also influences one of the most delightful of Chaucer's courtly love lyrics, the triple roundel appropriately entitled, in the single manuscript in which it survives, *Merciles Beaute*. Here again, Chaucer begins with the convention but gives it even more emphasis by individualizing the speaker, creating for himself a more rounded “role” to play as performer of the lyric. The final “rejection” stanzas of *Merciles Beaute*, which play upon the poet's own physical shortcomings – his fatness – are what make Chaucer's poem memorable.

Merciles Beaute is made up of three roundels. *Merciles Beaute* can be shown to possess a unity. Now the roundel was a French form, used extensively by Chaucer's models Machaut and Deschamps. It was by definition a short poem with only two rhymes throughout, in which the first line or lines would be repeated as a refrain in the middle and at the end, and the length of the poem could vary from fourteen lines to seven, depending on how many lines are repeated and how many times the repetition occurs. Chaucer apparently introduced the roundel into English, and it remained a very unusual verse form, occurring almost solely in the work of major court poets like Chaucer, Hoccleve, and later Wyatt. The only other instance of Chaucer's using the roundel is in the song welcoming spring at the end of the *Parliament of Fowls* (ll. 680 – 692), but he may have written others which have been lost, since he testifies himself in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* that he wrote “many an ympne for your halydayes, / That highten Balades, roundels, verelayes” (LGW, F 422 – 423; G 410 – 411). The nature of these other roundels is unknown, so it is not possible to say whether or not Chaucer wrote other triple or perhaps double roundels. There is no need to conclude that *Merciles Beaute*, because it is three separate roundels, is intended to be three separate poems. Chaucer may simply have

The Hague: Mouton, 1965, pp. 91

¹¹⁵ Skeat, *Works*, I, 88.

been experimenting with constructing a longer poem using the roundel form to combine separate stanza-like components into the form of three terns.

It is the sense of the poem which should determine its unity – and here the second argument must be dealt with. I think the poem expresses, in its three roundels, what Skeat calls three “movements,” and that there is a definite progression, even a cause – effect relationship, between the three parts of the poem: the speaker has been wounded by love; he therefore begs for mercy from his Beloved, who shows none; and finally he rejects her¹¹⁶. The three parts are also linked, as will be seen, by imagery as well as by progression.

From the beginning, it is obvious that this poem is full of very typical metaphors of the courtly lyric. The first stanza opens with the *very* conventional image of the wound of love. In this case, it is the overwhelming beauty of his Beloved's *eyes* which wounds the lover's heart sharply:

*Your yen two wol slee me sodenly;
I may the beautee of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit thourhout my herte kene. (11. 1 – 3)*

Chaucer goes from the conventional “wound of love” imagery to the equally conventional “lady as healer” image - unless the Beloved heals him, with a kind word, he will die of the love inflicted by her eyes:

*And but your word wol helen hastily
My hertes wounde, while that hit is grene,
Your yen two... (11. 4 – 6)*

In the final stanza of this first roundel, the concept which links the three stanzas is introduced: the lover's *trouthe*. It is his steadfastness and constancy that recommend him as a lover, he argues:

*Upon my trouthe I sey you feithfully
That ye ben of my lyf and deeth the quene
For with my deeth the trouthe shal be sene. (11, 8 – 10)*

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

This stanza plays upon the contrast between true and false lovers which had always been a part of the courtly love tradition. It was a problem that came down to Chaucer's age from the troubadours: in such a conventionalized system of love, how can one determine who is a true lover, and who is false? An unfaithful lover can say the words as well as a faithful one, as Chaucer's Anelida found of Arcite:

For so ferforth he gan her trouthe assure

That she him trusted over any creature.

But he was fals; hit nas but feyned chere. (11. 90 – 91)

How then can the Beloved of *Merciles Beauty* be sure of the speaker's sincerity? He swears faithfully that she has total control of his life and death (just as the speaker asserts at the end of the *Complaint to his Lady*), and declares that the proof of his love, his *trouthe*, as well as of the lady's complete control, will be seen when he actually dies of his love. At that point, of course, it will be too late for the lady to save him with a word of pity. The dilemma has no real solution to it: the lady will not grant the speaker mercy, and so save his life, unless he can prove his *trouthe* to her; the only way the speaker can prove his *trouthe* is to die for love.

This being the case, there is little chance that the lady will be moved while the poet still sings. Then Chaucer moves from the traditional lovers' wound / beloved as physician image to the equally conventional personified abstractions. In stanza one, the lover's friends, Pity and Mercy, are shown to be overpowered by his enemies, Beauty and Danger, Beauty, which had wounded the speaker in line two through the lady's eyes, here has chased Pity from her heart (11. 14 – 15), while Danger, the lady's typical courtly disdain, has chained up mercy (l. 6). There is no hope for the lover and the image of his suffering and imminent death is repeated, as the speaker begins to realize the futility of his predicament: "me ne availeth not to pleyne" (l. 15) he says (though that is exactly what he is doing), and "Giltles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced" (l. 17). The speaker protests his innocence, but for some reason has been sentenced to death. Of what crime was he falsely accused? The following line implies more specifically the exact crime of which he is innocent: "I sey you sooth, me nedeth not to feyne" (l. 18). If the poet's love was "feyned chere," like Arcite's, then he would no longer be "giltles," and the lady's disdain of him would be justified. But as it is, the poet is not guilty: "I sey you sooth," cries the speaker, reemphasizing the *trouthe* of lines 8 – 10.

In the last stanza, the poet has reached a definite conclusion. His courtship is

completely futile, even if he were to die for his lady is totally devoid of mercy:

Alias! that Nature hath in you compassed

So greet beautee, that no man may atteyne

To mercy, though he sterve for the peyne. (11. 21 – 23)

Nature here is the goddess personifying the creative force in the world. The lines can be compared with the portrayal of Nature in the *Parliament of Fowls*:

... Nature held on hire hond

A forme! egle, of shap the gentilleste

That evere she among hire werkes fond,

The most benygne and the goodlieste.

In hire was even vertu at his reste,

So ferforth that Nature hireself hadde blysse

To loke on hire, and ofte her bek to kysse. (PF, 11. 372 – 378)

In the case of the poet's Beloved, however, it seems impossible for “everi vertu” to be in her “at his reste”. For beauty and mercy seem to be presented as mutually exclusive entities: the more one has of one, the less room she has for the other, and in the case of the Beloved in this poem, the over-abundance of beauty means a complete lack of mercy.

The final part is the one which causes difficulty if the poem is to be seen as a unified structure, for the style, imagery, and tone of this roundel contrast sharply with those of the first two. The contrast signals the complete shift in the speaker's attitude. In the first two, he has been the conventional courtly lover, pleading for his lover's mercy and offering his *truth*. But the lady will not yield. Thus, in the last part, the speaker has decided to abandon his love. Accordingly, he also abandons his style and tone of courtly convention. Particularly ironic is his emphasis upon his *truth* in the first two sections, and his demonstration of his *lack of truth*: he really *is* one of the false lovers he swears *not* to be.

Certainly the third part is the most characteristically Chaucerian of the poem. It is largely on the strength of these lines that Neville Coghill called this poem “incomparable... the most graceful bombshell Chaucer ever addressed to a lady in the courts of love. It explodes in the last stanza”¹¹⁷:

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,

I never think to ben in his prison lene;

Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene. (11. 27 – 29)

The image of the *prison of love*, another familiar metaphor in literature, is expanded here to be something the rebellious lover has escaped from in abandoning his love.

The importance of these lines and those that follow is the creation of an individual *persona*. And this is where *Merciles Beaute* really differs from poems like the *Complaint to his Lady* and the *Complaint D'Amours*. In these earlier poems, Chaucer attempts to solve the problem of placing the lyrical Complaint into a context by placing it in the conventional milieu of the courtly love situation. In *Merciles Beaute*, however, he is doing something somewhat different. Chaucer is concerned here, as in most of his later lyrics, with creating a *persona* to create a lyric poem. The poem no longer is uttered by a generalized “courtly lover”; it is, instead, placed within the context of the courtly game, but into the mouth of a highly individualized speaker – a role which Chaucer, in delivering his poems orally in the court, could play to perfection, since it was in some ways a caricature of himself.

This individualization of the lover is continued in the idiomatic and uncourtly expression “I counte him not a bene” (1. 29). This and the similarly idiomatic “I do no fors” (1. 31) and “[ther] is non other mene” (1. 36) contrast sharply with the very courtly language of the first two parts – “I may the beautee of hem not sustene” (1. 2), of “For Daunger halt yourmercy in his cheyne” (1. 16). The contrast in tone is therefore accompanied by a corresponding contrast in language: again, Chaucer is experimenting with words and contrasting connotations.

And the imagery of the third part also contrasts with that of the first two, in that it is no longer so totally conventional. The “fat – lene” antithesis is new and the “lover's prison” motif receives a new twist in it. Love speaks to the poet, but he pays no attention:

He may answer, and seye this and that;

I do no fors, I speke right as I mene. (11. 30 – 31)

The *persona* created here then is individualized by his unlikeliness as a lover, due to his fatness, his lack of courtly speech (the point may be that, having given up love, he now has no need for courtly language), his somewhat young attitude toward love, but also, and this is emphasized by the poem, his *untrouthe*. Obviously the ideal courtly lover is one whose *trouthe* governs his relationship with his lady. The speaker here protests his *trouthe*

¹¹⁷ Neville Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* 2nd ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 81.

strongly in lines 8 – 10 in the first roundel, in line 18 of the second, but proves, here in the third, that despite his protests he was pretending all along – his *trouthe* was just words.

The poem's unity, then, is demonstrated in its logical continuity as well as its playing upon the idea of the lover's *trouthe*, which is present in the final roundel. That closing part does, it is true, initiate a rather sudden shift, but it is a shift intended to accompany the lover's change of attitude, the dropping of the mask. And that change is intended by Chaucer to put this conventional lyric complaint into the mouth of an individual speaker – to give the lyric a context.

As a general rule it seems that, as Chaucer's speakers become more individualized, the possibility of courtly love as a viable relationship becomes more and more remote. This is because courtly love venerates the *universal* and Chaucer insists that people are *individuals*. Such is even the implication in the *Complaint of Venus*, where the love is praised. Such is more obviously the message of *Against Women Unconstant*, where the lady is condemned for not being the ideal, and *Merciles Beaute*, where in rejecting the lover, the speaker demonstrates that he is not the ideal.

A more complex situation occurs in *To Rosemounde*, where the individual speaker not only shows *himself* to be less than the ideal courtly lover, but also, by the flaws in his character, suggests one flaw in the whole courtly love system.

Just what Chaucer was trying to do in the ballade *To Rosemounde* has never been completely clear. Some critics have accepted the poem as a conventional courtly love ballade. The most notable of these was Robinson, who included it, with *Womanly Noblesse* and *Against Women Unconstant*, as among the earliest ballades. Like these poems, then, “the *Rosemounde*, addressed to an unknown lady, is a typical complimentary poem in the spirit of courtly love.” Significantly, however, Robinson adds that “in its grace and humour it is distinctively Chaucerian.”¹¹⁸ Moreover, Robinson affirms that “the language of the entire ballade is conventional and the lady is addressed with the expected formulas of any *salut d'amour*.”¹¹⁹

In attempting to create a context for the lyrical utterance, Chaucer decided, as one solution, to create a definite persona for the speaker, so that the audience, in observing the

¹¹⁸ Robinson, p. 521.

¹¹⁹ Rossell Hope Robbins, ‘Chaucer's *To Rosemounde*’ *Studies in the literary Imagination*, 4, 1971, p. 74.

character of the speaker, would also understand the purpose and context of the lyric. In *To Rosemounde*, Chaucer does not portray himself as the “fat” suitor of *Merciles Beaute*, nor as the poet “hoar and rounde of snap” of the *Envoy to Scogan* – he is an incompetent lover with delusions in love's service. It may be useful here to remember the two-sided cliché of courtly love poetry: love was ennobling for the lover, and, on the other hand, only the truly noble could feel love. This Chaucer knew from many sources, most notably the Italians, like Guinizelli who spoke of love dwelling only in “al cor gentil,” the gentle heart. Now another measure of the lover's nobility was his skill at composing the love song, so that the three attributes became interrelated: the truer the love, the nobler the lover; the nobler the lover, the better his song; the better the song, the truer the love. So it is that Dante takes great pride in boasting of the exclusive nature of his poetry – it is only for the “noble hearts”:

*Canzone, io credo che saranno radi
color che tua ragione intendan bene,
tanto la parli faticosa e forte. (No. 41, 11. 53 – 55)*
(*Song, I believe they will be few
who truly understand your meaning,
so subtle and hard are your words.*)

It is in this tradition that Chaucer's speaker wishes to place himself by his depiction of himself as the ideal lover in *To Rosemounde*.

Perhaps what Chaucer is doing here is presenting the whole motivation for courtly love. Chaucer realized that courtly love, as I discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter, was a myth perpetuated by the aristocratic class, in part for the purpose of defining what true nobility was. The perfections of the Beloved were the perfections the lover wanted to achieve, and in his love for her, he was supposed to achieve them. Thus a courtly lyric is not only about the man's love for the woman, but rather about the man's love for himself, or rather for what he becomes in loving her. Chaucer, knowing well that true nobility, *gentillesse* (gentilezza), comes from the love of God and not of the self or any worldly thing, presents in *To Rosemounde* the “ideal lover,” who really only loves himself, and whose boasts about his own nobility reveal all too well his real lack of that quality.

Its rhetorical devices have already been noted. The lady is the shrine of beauty; she shines like a crystal. Her rounde cheeks are like rubies, Robbins notes that this description of the cheeks is unusual: cheeks are generally not a part of the catalogue of the lady's

features included in the typical courtly description, and, further, roundness is usually reserved for the breasts, not the cheeks.¹²⁰ This, of course, could be more evidence of the poet's lack of skill – he simply does not realize that it is not appropriate in a love poem to describe the lady's cheeks. He finishes the first stanza with the conventional imagery of the lady's being the cure for his “wound” – but significantly his love is chaste. Like the speaker of the *Complaynt D'Amours*, whose high love moved him to choose to suffer without reward in order to give his lady pleasure, the speaker of *To Rosemounde* wishes to emphasize his own love's noble nature

Suffyseth me to love you, Rosemounde,

Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce. (ll. 15–16)

But that nobility of love is an attitude, and *this* is the point of the poem. This chaste love has nothing to do with the lady, but is rather a result of the speaker's character: he is really not interested in her, but rather in the image he creates of himself, through loving her. The first line of the second stanza presents the courtly pretensions with an impact. The speaker exaggerates his sorrow to the point of depicting himself weeping a vat full of tears – a poetic device make the speaker's pretensions of love ridiculous.

The implication, in the system of courtly love, is that he is also a bad lover. The poem, then, like the *Envoy to Bukton*, is another example of Chaucer's skillful use of the lack of skill. But more than this, it is an accusation of the whole genre of courtly poetry in which the lover attempted to prove his own nobility. By extension, it is a condemnation of the whole system of courtly love because of its elaborate but ultimately misdirected search for true nobility in the wrong places.

Thus individualizing the speaker in the love poem seems to have led, for Chaucer at least, to a balanced, wise, and understanding rejection of the concept of *courtly love*. Whether it be the subtle suggestion of the humanity of the Beloved seen in *Venus*, or the breaking down of the ideal mistress in *Against Women Unconstant* or of the ideal lover in *Merciles. Beaute*, or the satirizing of the lover's true motive in *To Rosemounde*, when the speaker becomes a person, the ideal evaporates. Thus what may have begun as a problem in *form* for Chaucer – the search for a specific context in which to place the lyric utterance, since according to nominalist belief the mind must begin with particulars – makes in the end a *thematic* difference: courtly love, based on the belief that the universal

¹²⁰ Robbins, 'Chaucer's *To Rosemounde*', pp. 77-78. See also Galway, p. 278, and Edith Rickert, 'A Leaf

can be known and loved, is ridiculous in a world where only the *individual* can be truly known.

CHAPTER 6

The Lyric with Narrative – An Innovative approach to Lyrics

Chaucer's individualizing the speakers of poems like *To Rosemounde* and *Merciles Beaute* was his means of presenting specific cases in his love poems, rather than general, conventional sentiments. He could thereby examine the worth of the abstract concept of courtly love, for instance, when it was put into the mouth of a specific, "real-life" human being. Chaucer's interest in the individual rather than in the abstraction – an interest which paralleled the nominalist emphasis upon the knowledge of the particular as opposed to the universal – was what led to the poet's creation of concrete characters, rather than abstract "everyman" figures, who would speak his lyric verses. But his creation of character is not normally the realm of a lyric poet. Northrop Frye's suggestion, cited earlier, that the lyric poem is chiefly concerned with the realm of *dianoia* or thought (in Aristotelian terms) seems to hold true for most lyrics: the lyric is a form of *thematic* literature, structured according to a pattern of thought rather than a pattern of action. The creation of individualized characters is more properly the area of narrative literature: the drama or novel or, in medieval times, narrative poetry. Perhaps a natural extension, then, of experimenting with the speaker of the lyric poem was Chaucer's experimenting with the overall structure of the lyric genre, either by changing it into dramatic verse in his short Boethian poem *Fortune*, or more commonly by placing the lyric within a short narrative framework, and creating the strange narrative – lyric hybrid of such poems as *The Complaint unto Pity*, the *Complaint of Mars*, and the *Anelida and Arcite*.

As a precedent for his use of a dramatic lyric, Chaucer could refer to the traditional *debat* – a poem in which two speakers engaged in an argument over some central issue. In *Fortune*, Chaucer utilizes that dramatic form to create a situation in which both speakers are reacting to each other and interacting with an audience. This interaction creates a situation to which the individual speakers are making specific responses; thus the poem avoids being simply a philosophical treatise in the abstract. This dramatic poem was one logical development of Chaucer's tendency toward individualizing his personae, but it seems to have led to a dead end in *Fortune*, since Chaucer wrote no more in the *debat* genre. However, another logical development of that same individualizing tendency was the creation of a *narrative* context into which the speaker – character could be placed. So the narrative – lyric hybrid appeared, in which the audience is introduced to a character through

events in a story, and the character responds to those events through a lyric poem. In this way the audience is given an objective view of an actual situation before being given the character's subjective response to the situation. As a result, the reader is able to evaluate that lyric statement.

This experimentation with form affected Chaucer's lyrics beyond the purely structural level. Particularly in the two later narrative-lyric poems, the *Complaint of Mars* and the *Anelida and Arcite*, Chaucer uses the new form to supplement his major theme of the two contrasting kinds of love. In these two poems, the lovers and *ladles* are both sharply individualized as characters in the narrative parts of the poems. The juxtaposition of the specific individuals depicted in the narratives with their highly conventional spoken Complaints seems to sustain the courtly love ideal, first by demonstrating the gap between the real human being and the ideal, and second by implying the ironic discrepancy between courtly love and Divine Love.

Nowhere in Chaucer is that discrepancy so clear present as in *Mars* and *Anelida*. But it is in the two earlier poems, the *Complaint unto Pity* and *Fortune*, that Chaucer begins his use of structure to individualize the speakers and to underline his theme of the two kinds of love. It would seem appropriate, therefore, to begin with *Fortune* and *Pity* to observe the trend which culminates in *Mars* and *Anelida*.

One of Chaucer's more unusual lyrics is the short poem usually entitled *Fortune*. Indeed, in one sense the poem is not a lyric at all, if the lyric is defined as a poem with a single speaker. For *Fortune* falls into the category of the *debat* poem, or the *tenso* – it is a poem in which two speakers engage in a debate over a certain topic, a genre familiar to readers of such Middle English poems as *The Owl and the Nightingale* or *Winner and Waster*. As a debate poem it is unique in Chaucer, and Brusendorff thought that Chaucer must have been influenced by some of Deschamps' ballades, though if the widely accepted date of 1390 for this poem is accurate, it would be another three years before Chaucer would receive any of Deschamps lyrics.¹²¹

The debate poem is a form perhaps more dramatic than lyric, but as such it is the logical end result of the tendency seen in many of Chaucer's other lyrics – that of putting the lyric utterance into a specific context by creating an individualized *persona* to speak the lines. The assumption of an individual speaking voice in poems like *To Rosemounde*, *Merciles Beaute*, or the *Complaint of Venus* is certainly a step toward dramatization, and

there is in a poem like the *Complaynt D'Amours* a dialectic structure where the speaker engages in a debate, adopting and then rejecting the points of view of different elements of the audience. What *Fortune* does is go one step further: both sides in the debate are represented by speaking characters.

One problem which this creates is the complicating of the issue. In other poems with single personae, the audience is compelled to sympathize with the speaker. In a debate poem, the audience has two speakers and may not know with whom to sympathize. This, in fact, forces the audience to become active, to actually become involved in the lyric performance, by weighing the evidence and making a decision between the two parties. In *Fortune*, this is even more important since the audience is addressed directly in the end and asked to respond. The response of the audience would probably, as will be seen, indicate whether they understood the poem. This interplay with the audience in *Fortune* is what really provides the poem with a specific context: though the characters in the debate speak in fairly general terms, the audience is asked to make a specific decision regarding the particular incident of *this performance* of the poem.

Of course, the natural reaction may well be to simply agree, as the poem goes along, with whichever speaker happens to be holding forth at the time. This may be particularly true in the case of *Fortune*, since it abounds in Boethian ideas. The situation is based, it is well known, on Book II of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where Philosophy depicts the manner in which the Goddess Fortuna might answer her accusers.

The poem, a triple ballade like the *Complaint of Venus*, begins with a ballade spoken by the Plaintiff, who complains that the world is without order, and is governed only by the hazard Fortune, Yet the Speaker refuses to sorrow for lack of Fortune's favour. There are other things, he suggests, which are more important than the favours of Fortune. He finds consolation in the fact that he is guided by reason and has mastery over himself. What this means according to Boethian thought is that the Plaintiff, guided by his reason, has directed his will toward the Highest Good, God, rather than to any worldly goods. In this way he is able to say he has true mastery over himself; those who turn from the Highest Good to pursue worldly goods are weak and lack control because they are doing something which they really do not want to do.

A further consolation for the Plaintiff is that through the workings of Fortune he can know his true friends – he can “knowen frend fro fo in thy mirour” (l. 10) – since

¹²¹ Aage Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948, pp. 242-45.

false friends will desert him in times of bad fortune. This point becomes more and more important as the poem progresses. Finally, the Plaintiff cites Socrates as his example of one who did not court the favour of Fortune, but rather who knew her character as one who continually lies. The speaker takes Socrates' example to heart, and in the repeated refrain declares "For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye" (11. 8, 16, 24).

Fortune begins to make her case in the second ballade. The philosophy she says, however, is not much different from the Plaintiff's. She begins, for instance, by telling the plaintiff

*No man is wrecced, but himself it wene
And he that hath himself hath suffisaunce. (11. 25 – 26)*

Which echoes that the Plaintiff said in lines 13 – 15:

*But trewely, no force of the reddour
To him that over himself hath the maystre!
My suffisaunce shal be my socour;*

What kind of an argument is that? It is confusing at first, until one reads the next lines of Fortune's defense, and realizes that there is more going on here than the surface meaning of the words. Fortune says to the Plaintiff

*Why seystow thanne I am to thee so kene,
That hast thyself out of my governaunce? (11. 27 – 28)*

Fortune makes a good point here. If the Plaintiff really is outside of her governaunce, as he claims to be, then he has nothing at all to complain about. At this point the speakers of the poem begin to interact with each other as individuals in a real argument, rather than as personified abstractions. As a result, the context of the debate becomes more lively. The Plaintiff, it seems, is assuming an attitude, which Fortune is able to see through. The Plaintiff, affected by his loss of good Fortune, complains against her by saying he is his own governor. If that were true, says Fortune, the man would not be complaining. He would simply, she continues, be thankful for the goods she has gave him up to this time. And besides, he doesn't know yet what she may do for him in the future. Further, says Fortune in the refrain of her speech, "thou hast thy beste frend alyve."

The idea of friendship is central to the poem. It should be recalled that the title of this piece in several manuscripts is "Balades de Visage sanz Peinture," which is to say, the "unpainted" visage – a metaphor denoting, no doubt, the true friend – him whose face is not masked by false appearance. The reader has already seen how the Plaintiff declared in

line ten that one of the beneficial side effects of Fortune's instability is the fact that one is able to discover first who one's friends really are. For the false friends who crowd around when one is at the top of Fortune's wheel are the first to flee when the wheel turns. But the friend who stays through adversity is truly a friend. This Fortune herself makes clear in the second stanza of her speech:

I have thee taught division bitwene

Friend of effect, and frend of countenance. (11. 33 – 34)

In addition, Fortune continues, paraphrasing Boethius (Bk. II, pr. 4, 11. 51 – 57, as Robinson notes), the Plaintiff's anchor of comfort still holds fast – he has not been completely sunk by the storm, and may in fact arrive in better circumstances eventually. Besides, Fortune repeats finally, “thou hast thy best frend alyve.”

Fortune ends her speech by asserting her authority over the Plaintiff. She has already seen through his attitude, and reminds him that she has for some time “fostred... you in thy plesaunce” (1. 42). He was born in her “regne of variaunce” (1. 45). She is to rule, and it is not his place to tell her what to do. Her “lore,” which is to say her *instruction* or *doctrine*, is more beneficial for the Plaintiff than his grievance, or his curse, is detrimental. In other words. Fortune claims that her good effects outweigh her bad, and ends again by reminding the Plaintiff that his best friend is still alive. The Plaintiff counters with his final arguments. He damns Fortune's “lore.” Call it what she will, he says, it is still “adversite” and nothing else. Regarding his best friend, the Plaintiff seems to have caught something in Fortune's speech that the reader may have missed. Fortune, in defending herself, has held the Plaintiff's best friend up to him as something which he should thank *her* for. He thanks Fortune for revealing *her* friends to him – those “painted visages” who follow prosperity. These he is not sorry to lose, but his true friend, says the Plaintiff, is totally out of her power:

My frend maystow nat reven, blind goddesse.

That I thy frendes knowe, I thanke hit thee.

Take hem agayn, Tat hem go lye on pressel (11. 50 – 52)

For a full understanding of the poem, it is important to contrast the actions of the “false friends” with those of the “beste frend” to whom both Fortune and the Plaintiff have already alluded. For the description of the “beste friend,” we must turn from Boethius to another of Chaucer's favourite sources, the *Roman de la Rose*. In that work, Jean de Meun describes the “Best Friend” as one who, when a person has fallen from Fortune's favour,

will spare none of his *own* riches in soothing his friend's misfortune:

Mes quant le sot il acorust

Et quanqu'it pot me securut

Et tout m'offri quanqu'il avoit

For ce que mon besoing savoit.

"Amis, dist il, faiz vous savoir,

Veze ci le cors, veze ci l'avoir

Ou vouz aves autant cum gie.

Prenes en sanz prendre congie'.

Mes cum bien? Se vous ne saves,

Tout, se de tout mestier aye's;

Car amis ne prise une prune

Contre ami le bienz de Fortune." (ll. 8061 – 8072)

(Soon as he knew my state, he running came;

As far as possible he gave me aid,

Offering me what he had to end my care.

"My friend," said he, "assure yourself you own

My body and my goods as much as I.

Take without asking leave. How much? Take all

If all you need. Of Fortune's many gifts

No friend from friend a single plum witholds.) (pp. 163 – 64)

Though Chaucer nowhere refers explicitly to the *Roman* in this poem, the repeated reference to the "beste frend," including the appeal to that friend's generosity which we will see at the end of the poem, and the contrast of this with false friends, implies that Chaucer may have had this passage in the *Roman* in mind, and perhaps expected his audience to be just as familiar with it, or at least with the sentiments therein described.

Now the Plaintiff has made his case, and it is up to Fortune to conclude hers. This she does in the final two stanzas of this third ballade. Here Fortune ceases the discussion of friends – she switches the direction of her defense. It is as if she is yielding the "frend" argument to the Plaintiff: his best friend is not in her power, and he really should not thank her for that friend. But Fortune here really begins to defend her mutability, rather than avoiding the question by seeking some benefit which may be gained from that mutability. She makes two important points. First, Fortune affirms, she is doing that which for her is

natural, in other words, she is obeying the law of Him who created her, she is following her natural inclination, thus “Why sholdestow my realtee oppress?” (1. 60) she asks the Plaintiff. If all other forces are able to perform their natural functions, if the heavens may shine, rain, or hail, why then should she alone of God's creatures be deprived for performing her natural function?

Right so mot I kythen by broteinesse: –

In general, this reule may nat fayie. (11. 63 – 64)

Her displaying her fickleness is placed in the category of a “rule which may not fail” – a divinely ordained rule which will last as long as the universe itself. Her changeability belongs, in fact, natural law, an “eternal statute” like those broken by Scogan. The point is that if one follows natural law, and pursues the Highest Good rather than wordly goods, then one will be happy. Fortune herself follows the Law: it is when man breaks that Law that Fortune causes him problems.

And this leads into Fortune's second, and even more important, concluding argument. In this case she is, at last, answering the Plaintiff's very first accusation, that the changing world is governed by Fortune's error (11. 1 – 4). Following the fourth book of Boethius, Fortune declares that she is in reality working out God's will in the world. The heavens, she claims, “hath propertee of sikernesse” (1. 69), but the earth “hath ever resteles travayle” (1. 71). There can be no permanence on earth – permanence is the property of the heavens, and those who seek to maintain those transient earthly possessions are doomed to lose them, simply because of the changeableness of this sphere. So it is that what men, “blind bestes, ful of lewdnesse” (1, 68), call *Fortune* is in reality divine providence, the “execucion of the majestee / That al purveyeth of his rightwysnesse” (11. 65 – 66): the implied conclusion is that those who fight against the mutability of Fortune are in reality fighting the preordained nature of the universe as ordered by the Almighty. “In general, this reule may nat fayle” (1. 72).

Now it should be noted that medieval dialectic does not present a thesis and antithesis which are resolved into a synthesis, but rather it is a debate in which one scholar maintains a position against any and all challenges. The point of this particular debate seems to be that Fortune is the winner.

The central theme of *Fortune* thus places it in the same category as poems like *Truth* or *Gentiiesse*, which discuss Universal Love in a Boethian manner. In technique,

however, *Fortune* is quite different. Through the dramatic structure Chaucer creates speaking characters, and in their interaction with the audience Chaucer goes beyond abstract philosophical precepts and creates a specific situation to which the audience can respond.

Though the *debate* genre was a conventional type of poetry, Chaucer seems to have wanted to use it especially to provide a situational context for the thematic patterns of his lyrics. The form, in which the characters interact and also interact with an audience, seems to have been one logical development from Chaucer's individualizing his speakers and reading or "acting" their parts before the audience. But *another* logical development of that tendency was the creation of a *narrative* context for those speakers, so that they become in fact characters in a story, speaking the lyric in response to specific events of which the audience has been made aware through the narrative.

In Chaucer's experimental attempts to provide a context for the lyric utterance, none is as curious as this lyrical-narrative hybrid which he came up with, first, in the *Complaint unto Pity*, and experimented with again in the *Complaint of Mars* and *Anelida and Arcite*. The form resembles, in some ways, the *dit* utilized by Guillaume Machaut,¹²² except that in each of these poems of Chaucer's the narrative element is radically reduced just to give the lyric a background, or a frame, in which to exist. But the story does provide what Chaucer wants it to provide: a situation which the lyric's speaker can react to, or reflect upon, or interpret.

The *Complaint unto Pity* would seem to be the least successful of the three in achieving this goal. As here, rather than putting a *very* general courtly love lyric into a more specific narrative context, thus providing a clear motive for the speaker's emotion as expressed in the lyric, Chaucer instead puts a lyric into a narrative context peopled by personified abstractions. The narrative, thus, is just as abstract as the lyric, and if the purpose were to provide a more specific environment for the lyric, then one might conclude that the poem is something of a failure – a mere mixture of narrative and lyric elements which do not work together in a purposeful relationship.

A closer look at the relationship between the two parts of the poem reveals that, while there are no specific details given in the opening stanzas which lift the poem out of the realm of a very abstract courtly love allegory in the manner of Guillaume de Lorris,

¹²² See James I. Wimsatt, 'Anelida arid Arcite: A Narrative of Complaint and Comfort', *Chaucer Review*, 5, 1970, pp. 1-8.

still three specific things are determined by the narrative part which establish the rhetorical situation for the lyric: these are the speaker, the audience, and the purpose. Now the speaker of the poem, as shall be seen, far from being the stereotyped “courtly lover,” is actually someone quite recognizable to readers of Chaucer. He is, as John Gardner describes him, “Chaucer’ old gimmick, the myopic, dim-witted narrator, caricature of himself.”¹²³ Thus even in this very early poem, Chaucer works on individualizing the persona. The specific audience intended for the Complaint to be given later is here established to be Pity, the personification of the abstract moral quality. As will be seen later, the fact that the poet is addressing Pity is not at all clear through much of the lyric itself. Third, the narrative establishes the purpose of the Complaint – the speaker seeks Pity’s protection against her adversary, *Cruelty*. The narrative part of the poem, then, serves to put the lyric into a rhetorical, if not a specifically concrete context, as a closer examination will show more clearly.

The poem begins, as many a courtly love poem, with the speaker lamenting about his unrequited love. He has sought Pity – here the personification of his lady’s showing mercy upon him by responding to him sexually – for a long, long time, and, “with herte soore, and ful of besy peyne” (l. 2), he suffers more than anyone in the world has ever suffered without dying. The first stanza closes with a clear statement of the rhetorical situation which will provide the context of the later lyric:

My purpose was to Pite to cotnpleyn
Upon the cruel tee and tirannye
Of Love, that for my trouthe doth me dye. (ll. 5 – 8)

Allegorically Pity, as Pittock has suggested, is seen as a great Lady from whom the speaker seeks protection against a cruel Lord who unjustly oppresses him. Literally, the speaker is presented as suffering for his trouthe – that is, his devotion to his lady – because she will have no pity on him.

Any hopes that the speaker may have had about the lady’s having pity on him are vanished by what he discovers in stanza two. Pity, the personification of human compassion and sympathy, is dead. The proper place for pity, for compassion, is the human heart; thus Chaucer, using the word “buried” (l. 14), speaks of the allegorical Pity as being buried in her grave, which happens to be in the lady’s heart. At the same time he implies that Pity, compassion, is metaphorically “buried” in the lady’s heart: that is, all

¹²³ John Gardner, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, p. 81.

human hearts possess the potential to feel sympathy and compassion, but that potential is deeply buried in his lady's heart – so deeply that it would be a hopeless task to find that emotion in her. In effect, the narrator is discussing the character of his lady: she has no pity.

With the third stanza, the speaker begins to present his reaction to the situation he has found, and in his reactions to provide the reader with a characterization of himself, first, in stanza three, by his actions, and second, by his words.

In stanzas four and five, the speaker presents his own words uttered upon his finding the corpse of Pity. The speaker first bewails the universal lack of pity, and talks about Cruelty:

Now Cruelte hath cast to slee us alle,

In ydel hope, folk redeless of peyne,

Syth she is ded, to whom shal we compleyne? (11. 26 – 28)

According to Pittock, “the Pity of which he is speaking is identifiable with that compassion which must be exercised in human affairs if society is to function properly.”¹²⁴ But it seems to me that this reading does not take into account the following stanza, for in these lines the speaker, having implied that Pity is dead to everyone, suddenly expresses his surprise in discovering that nobody else is aware of Pity's death:

But yet encreaseth me this wonder newe,

That no wight woot that she is ded, but I –

So many men as in her tyme hir knewe

And yet she dyed not so sodeynly; (11. 29 – 32)

The fact that only the speaker knows of Pity's death suggests the following as the most likely interpretation of the allegory: the speaker's lady utterly refuses to grant him pity, which causes the speaker to overreact in the belief that *all* pity is lost. The lady, however, may continue to hold out pity, or the hope, to any and all of her other admirers – “so many men as in her tyme hir knewe” – and as a result, nobody else seems to know or care about the speaker's discovery that pity has died. To them, she still lives. The speaker exaggerates his own importance in believing that what happens to him happens to all; and he does not realize that it is only to him that the lady refuses to grant her pity.

¹²⁴ Pittock, ‘Chaucer: *The Complaint Unto Pity*’, in *Criticism*, 1, 1959, p. 164.

With stanza six, the poem stops its concentration upon the narrator's response, and returns to the allegory, through which he is again describing his lady only now in more detail – Bounty, Beauty, Lust, Jolyte, Youthe, Honeste, Wisdom. But the lady reveals no pity toward the lover, and when he, having served her for years ("be length of certeyne yeres" in line eight), finally has the opportunity to tell her how he feels, he cannot do it for fear of being rejected. The speaker's indecision are, again, what one would expect from the depiction of the speaker in the previous stanzas.

Like the narrators of many of Chaucer's other poems, like *To Rosemunde* or *Merciles Beaute*, the speaker of *Pity* is an unlikely lover. He is not *very* bright, , and, in fact, he doesn't even talk like a courtly lover. The *Complaint unto Pity* is almost totally void of the kind of poetic diction that occurs in *Womanly Noblesse*, for example, or even the *Complaint to his Lady*, or, *Anelida and Arcite*.

Now it should come as no surprise that these figures gathered about the bier of *Pity* do not seem to be mourning – they stand "lustely, / Withouten any woo, as thoughte me" (11. 36 – 37). Mourning would be an act prompted by *Pity*, and since *Pity* is dead and not among these abstractions, they cannot show any pity through mourning. The speaker, in stanza seven, reveals that he has written a "Bill of Complaint" – presented here as a kind of petition which he had planned to give to this great lady *Pity*, presumably to protect him against Cruelty as noted in stanza one. But the presence of all of these *other* qualities puts the speaker off, since they are, as stanza eight reveals, "Confedered alle by bond of Cruelte" (l. 52). As a result, the speaker decides that there is no use in reading his bill at all, since *Pity* is dead and the other qualities are his enemies – indeed, they "ben assented when I shal be sleyn" (l. 53). Again, it is not until the allegory is interpreted that the real character of the speaker comes through: his lady possesses all the best qualities of the ideal man, one whose poem sounds like an everyday conversation rather than a courtly speech. He is not one whose "cor gentil" raises him above the crowd and urges him to love.

Now Pittock, in a *very* clever insight, stated that part of the confusion in the *Complaint unto Pity* resulted from the fact that there are two separate meanings of *Pity* in the poem: *pity* can mean first the emotion, which may mean either sexual responsiveness on the part of the lady, or, more generally, *compassion* which she seems to lack. Secondly, "Pity" may actually denote the woman herself, the Beloved. I would say that Pittock is absolutely correct in his assessment. It would seem to me that the allegorical figure of *Pity*

in the narrative section of the poem represents the emotion, which the speaker portrays as dead in the lady. The lyric section of the poem, however, is actually addressed to the physical lady, and not to the emotion *Pity*.

Structurally, as Skeat first observed, the *Complaint* seems to divide itself into three parts, or groups of three stanzas, each ending with a rhyme word: “seyne” (1. 77), “peyne” (1. 98), and again “peyne”¹²⁵ (1. 119). This would be better observation if one could see some shift, as well, in sense from one part to the other, or something which unites the stanzas within each part. Besides, the word “peyne” is one which could be expected, several times, in a courtly love poem: it occurs five times in the *Complaint* alone (11. 98, 99, 106, 116, and 119), not to mention three more times in the narrative part of the poem. The word's occurrence in the two places Skeat notes may simply be coincidence. A more fruitful structural division for the *Complaint* is that suggested by Pittock, who sees in the first five stanzas a direct address to *Pity*, and the last four as a renewal of the poet's suit.¹²⁶

The point is that the lady for whom the poem was intended has all the best courtly virtues, except for *Pity*. But *Pity*, or compassion, or sympathy, is the queen of all virtues (1. 58). Without it, all these others are worth nothing. Pittock may be pushing his interpretation a bit when he speaks of Chaucer as “primarily concerned with the relation of compassion to the other virtues,” and sees the poet's theme as “real spiritual beauty” which is “possible only if compassion is given its proper place in the character.”¹²⁷

The real purpose of these Christian elements in the poem – the suggestion of the Virgin Mary and the implication that *real* pity, in the sense of *compassion*, is the equivalent of Christian charity – is to point up the speaker's error. He persists in pursuing the earthly good of the lady while ironically suggesting the Highest Good. But in this early poem, that theme is in the background, and has not the primary importance Pittock seems to suggest.

This becomes more clear as the poem continues. In the fifth stanza of the *Complaint*, the end of the first section of the poem, the speaker appeals to the lady's pride, saying that her own reputation will be harmed if she grants him no pity – certainly if Chaucer's chief aim was to suggest Christian charity. The verse can have meaning only if addressed to a

¹²⁵ Skeat, *Works*, p. 460.

¹²⁶ Pittock, p. 165. See also Charles J. Nolan, Jr., ‘Structural Sophistication and *The Complaint unto Pity*’, *Chaucer Review*, 13, 1979, 363-72. Nolan gives the fascinating suggestion that the *Complaint* follows the tripartite division of a legal bill (address, statement of grievance, and prayer for remedy)

¹²⁷ Pittock, p. 165.

courtly mistress: grant me your favours, says the lover, and you will be famed as the perfect courtly lady; deny me, and your reputation will suffer because you will be known as cruel and heartless.

There is a definite change in mood in the sixth stanza of the Complaint, and, further, the speaker stops addressing the lady as if she were the personification of that which should be her chief quality. Instead, he here begins to address her more openly. He begs her to have mercy on his pain, for he has sought her, served her for years, and he loves and *dreads* her. Certainly if the speaker were addressing the abstract emotion pity, he would not have to dread her.

If the speaker is seen as addressing his lady here, rather than an abstraction of Pity, then the difficulty disappears, since the lady herself, being void of Pity, has every right to be called a queen of furies, for like a fury she cruelly inflicts pain upon the speaker.

The pain is described in quite conventional terms in the next two stanzas. In a typical paradox, what the speaker desires fervently he cannot have no matter how desperately he seeks it, while he has plenty of pain and sorrow. All he lacks is death. He suffers every woe imaginable, yet he does not dare complain to the lady, not, here, because she is dead. Certainly Pity, the embodiment of compassion, would care about the speaker. The lady, however, does not, because she has no pity. But the speaker, like a true courtly lover, vows to be faithful even to his death, even if that death is caused by the lady's cruelty:

Algate my spirit shal never dissevere

Fro youre servise, for any peyne or woo. (11. 115 – 116)

It is curious that the speaker of the lyric comes across somewhat differently than the lover presented in the narrative. It may be because Chaucer is trying to show, in the Complaint, the opinion which the courtly lover has of himself, while he shows, in the narrative part of the poem, the impression which this particular lover makes on others. The poet is here doing something similar to what he does in poems like *To Rosemounde* – that is, create a character of an unlikely lover writing a love poem. The difference is that in *Rosemounde*, the lover's shortcomings are made clear in the lover's lyric itself, while in *Pity*, those shortcomings are brought out in the narrative frame of the lyric, so that the noble sentiments expressed in the Complaint are juxtaposed to the narrative's characterization of the speaker as the not a noble lover. What the narrative does is individualize the conventional, very general sentiments of the lyric, and emphasizes the

courtly ideal by demonstrating the inability of real human beings to meet that ideal.

The poem ends very much as it began – the poet returns to the beginning. The lady is again addressed as if she were the abstraction *Pity*, and the speaker says that, since she is dead, “Thus for your deth I may wel wepe and pleyne / With herte sore, and ful of busy peyne” (ll. 118 – 119). What these lines do, in effect, is illustrate allegorically what the speaker has literally stated just a few lines earlier: he will continue to serve the lady no matter what. Just as in the beginning of the narrative the speaker had served the lady, hoping for pity, for many years, “with herte sore, and full of besy peyne” (ll. 1–2), so now, even though he has found no pity in her, he will continue to serve the lady, mourning for her lack of pity, but in precisely the same manner as he served her before – the manner of the courtly man.

What *The Complaint unto Pity* illustrates is that the interaction between narrative and lyric can enrich the lyric by adding new dimensions to its meaning, even when, as is the case in *Pity*, the narrative part provides no concrete physical situation which would create a specific context for the lyrical utterance. The characterization of the lady as an ideal woman without pity, and of the speaker as an unlikely lover, enrich the lyric.

Characterization becomes even more important in another of Chaucer's narrative-lyric hybrids, *The Complaint of Mars*. Here, the speaker of the lyric, the lover's lady, and even the narrator of the story portion of the poem are all individualized, and though the *Complaint* itself is rather conventionalized, the characterization provided in the narrative allows the audience, to an even greater extent than in the *Complaint unto Pity*, to compare the idealized sentiments of the *Complaint* with the real characters established in the narrative.

The Complaint of Mars is really one of the most remarkable of Chaucer's shorter poems. It is remarkable not only for its clever narration of a very human love story in terms of mythological characters and the movements of the heavenly spheres, but also though its manipulation of different speaking voices. The former aspect has been the basis of some disagreement, for where Manly claimed “the poem is so packed with astrological allusions and conforms so closely to astronomical relations and movements that it can hardly be regarded as anything else than a mere exercise of ingenuity in describing a supposed astronomical event in terms of human action and emotion,”¹²⁸ Gardiner Still argued that the astrological framework is there to provide a serious comment on real

¹²⁸ John Matthews Manly, ‘On the Date and Interpretation of Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*’, *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 5 1986, p. 124.

human love and its relation to free will.¹²⁹ The main focus, though, will be on the various speaking voices in the poem.

Once again, Chaucer in the *Complaint of Mars* is addressing the problem of placing the abstract lyric into some concrete context. *Mars* may well be the best example of all Chaucer's poems of this phenomenon. For the speaker of the Complaint proper actually begins with the assertion that

*The ordre of compleynt requireth skylfully
That yf a wight shai pleyne pitously,
Ther mot be cause wherfore that men pleyne;
Or men may deme he pieyneth folily
And causeles; alas! that am not I! (ll. 155 – 159)*

Nancy Dean sees these lines as an indication of the difficulty which Chaucer found in the love complaint as a genre. "If a man complain pitifully there must be cause for which one does complain or men may think that he complains foolishly, and without cause. For Chaucer the 'complaint' needed to include a convincing cause for lament, a cause all men would grasp as 'real,' hence the biographical or settings of the majority of his complaints."¹³⁰ Chaucer achieves this kind of "realism" in *Mars* by placing the Complaint proper into a narrative context, as he did with the *Complaint unto Pity*.

Taken in isolation, Mars' Complaint is actually a fairly typical lover's complaint: the Beloved is the paragon of ideal womanhood; the speaker is and will eternally remain her most humble servant; his love causes him great pain and anxiety because he is unable to share it with the lady. The only somewhat atypical aspect of this Complaint is that the suffering is caused by the lovers' separation, as in *Venus*, rather than the lady's cruelty. But basically, there is no indication, at least until the final part, that the speaker is anything but a kind of everyman figure of the distressed lover. There is little to distinguish this poem from some of Chaucer's other more traditional complaints, as the *Complaint to his Lady*, *Womanly Noblesse*, or the *Compiaynt D'Amours*. Mars' *Complaint* consists of sixteen nine-line stanzas. They are divided into five sections of three stanzas each, preceded by a Proem. With each new part, the speaker undergoes a corresponding shift in

¹²⁹ Gardiner Stillwell, 'Convention and Individuality in Chaucer's *Complieint of Mars*', *PQ*, 35, 1956, pp. 69-89.

¹³⁰ Nancy Dean, 'Chaucer's *Complaint*, a Genre Descended from the *Heroides*', *Comparative Literature*, 19, 1967, 24.

tone or subject matter. The Proem begins with the lines already quoted, and ends with the speaker's resolve. This sort of beginning is not unlike the opening lines of the *Complaynt D'Amours*, where the speaker declares himself to be "ful of wo," implies that he has good reason to be, and resolves to relate those reasons:

*I, which that am the sorwefulleste man
That in this world was ever yit livinge,
And leest recoverer of himselven can,
Begin right thus my deedly compleininge
On hir, that my to lyf and deeth me bringe (11. 1 – 5)*

A similar opening introduces *A Complaint to his Lady*:

*Ther nedeth me no cure for to borwe,
For bothe I have good leyser and good leve;
Ther is no wyght that wol me wo bereve
To wepe ynogh, and wailen al my fille; (11, 1013)*

The first part of *Mars' Complaint* is also remarkably typical. The lover has from the beginning given his service to his lady, and in that service would die: "Ne truly, for my deth, I shal not lette / To ben her truest servaunt and her knyght" (11. 186 – 187). He does this because the lady is worthy – she is the paragon of all perfections:

*My lady is the verrey sours and welle
Of beaute, lust, fredom, and gentillesse,
And therto so wel fortunad and thewed
That thorough the world her goodnesse is yshewed. (11. 174 – 181)*

As Mars' lady is the "sours and welie" of all virtues, so the Beloved in *Womanly Noblesse* is the "auctour" of all "norture". The lady *Rosemounde* is the shrine of beauty "as fer as cerclad is the mapemounde" (1. 2), just as Mars' lady is recognized "thorough the world" for her goodness. And the catalogue of the lady's virtues, "beaute, lust [i.e. pleasure or delight], fredom, and gentillesse," is similar to the catalogue appearing in *A Complaint to his Lady*: "Hir name is Bountee, set in womanhede, / Sadnesse [i.e. stability or steadfastness] in youthe, and Beautee prydeiees and Pleasaunce" (11. 24 – 26), as both stress beauty, pleasure, generosity, and true nobility.

Having established the fact of his love and of his lady's superiority, the speaker moves on to address, in the second part, three interrelated problems. In the first stanza, the speaker asks "To whom shal I then pleyne of my distresse?" (1. 191). He does not have an

answer, but he knows that he cannot complain about his lady, because she is also in distress. This is not unique: the speaker of the *Complaynt D'Amours* also resolves not to complain to his lady, not because she is in distress and can't help, but rather because she is simply not to blame for his suffering: "For she of my folye / Hath nought to done" (11. 33 – 34). This fact of his lady's distress leads the speaker of *Mars* to comment upon the difficulties of lovers – the lady may not have pity, or, if she does, the lovers are in danger through the actions of the jealous or the envious. In the third stanza here the speaker reveals his own distress: his lady is frightened and in difficult circumstances – he does not say precisely what – and he is not able to assist her – he does not say why. This causes Mars his anguish; it is the separation from his lover and the fear for her safety that causes Mars to complain.

For your disese we! oughte I swowne and swelte,

Though I non other harm ne drede feite. (11. 216 – 17)

Having established the cause of his sorrow, Mars is still searching for someone to blame, for someone to whom he can complain. In the third part he finds that someone: it is God Himself. Clemen claimed that at this point the Complaint ceases to follow the conventional pattern,¹³¹ but I do not think that this is completely true. The speaker of the *Complaint to his Lady* blames the god of Love:

Now hath not Love me bestowed weel

To love ther I never shal have part? (11. 33 – 34)

It is also possible to find the lover blaming God the Creator, as the speaker of the *Compiaynt D'Amours*:

Yit is al this no lak to hir, pardee,

But God or Nature sore wolde I blame, (11. 57 – 58)

The conclusion is that God "hath to lovers enmyte" (1. 236). The speaker supports his claim by a fascinating simile of God as a fisherman: God, like a fisher, bates his hook "with som plesaunce"¹¹ (1. 238), and catches therewith "many a fisch," who "at first hath / Al his desir, and therewith al myschance" (11. 240 – 241), where in the juxtaposition of *desir* and *myschance* Chaucer provides a comment upon the value of Mars' kind of *desir*. Here, even if the fish escape, the hook has "wounded" him "so sore / That he his wages hath for evermore" (11. 243 – 245).

¹³¹ Clemen, p. 195.

The implications of these lines have been discussed at great length by several critics. As Chauncey Wood pointed out, the speaker here resembles , as well as Palamon and Arcite, in that he is attempting irrationally to “question [his] dilemma with some quasi-philosophical logic, usually depending upon Boethian arguments that are followed with some care all the way to a sudden, erroneous conclusion.”¹³² The error in the speaker's reasoning is most obvious in his assumption that God forces us to love the things of this world. It is certainly true that God created the beauty and all good things of this world, and that God is also responsible for the inclination of our will to love beauty and the good. But as Rodney Merrill rightly points out, Mars' “*freedom* lies not in choosing whether to love, but in deciding what to do, how to respond to his desires with his will.”¹³³ It is precisely because lovers place their desires upon the things in the worldly realm, the realm of Fortune, where all is transient and fleeting, that they have no lasting joy. God placed within men the desire for *eternal* joy, consequently the true object of that desire should be the eternal, supreme good – God Himself. As Boethius writes, “Forwhy the covetise of verray good is naturely iplauntyd in the hertes of men, but the myswandrynge error mysledeth hem into false goodes” (Bk. III, pr. 2, ll. 22 – 25).

It becomes clear in the second stanza of the final part that Mars' lady is Venus, the “emprise” of “my ladyes, that been true and stable” (l. 281). Because Venus is “desolat,” the ladies should, “Be wey of kynde,” pity her, as well as Mars, and all “folk that be in peyne” (l. 283). The ladies, then should also complain. These last three stanzas serve the function of an Envoy; they directly address the audience and establish a clear rhetorical situation. Just as the Envoy to *Lak of Stedfastnesse* clearly established that the “everyman” speaker was addressing the King, just as the Envoy to *Fortune* made clear that the speakers of that poem were performing exclusively for the “princes,” so this final part establishes that the audience of the Complaint is intended to be all noble knights and ladies, and, in particular, all lovers. The audience is invited to participate in the sorrow and “complaining” of the speaker and his lady, who are established by this Envoy as *Venus* and *Mars*.

Now the story of the love affair of Mars and Venus was certainly well known to the medieval audience, but to establish further the lyric context for the complaint, Chaucer

¹³² Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 154

¹³³ Merrill, p. 37.

chooses to retell the story himself, and it is now time to determine how this elaborate narrative frame serves to particularize some of the general sentiments of the *Complaint*, and to colour the reader's response to some of the speaker's comments.

But the matter becomes more complicated, since the *Proem* establishes for the readers still *another* context: the context in which the narrative itself is being uttered. For we learn in the Proem that the poem, like the *Complaynt D'Amours* or the *Parliament of Fowls*, is being sung on Valentine's Day – the day when every bird chooses his mate, and when all the courtly folk in the audience are advised “ye that han not chosen in humble wyse, / Without repentyng cheseth yow your make; / And ye that han ful chosen as I devise, / Yet at the lest renoveleth your servyse” (11. 16 – 19). It is an appropriate and conventional day to sing a song about love.

Skeat was unimpressed by the bird narrator, saying “such a contrivance shews a certain lack of skill, and is an indication of a comparatively early date.”¹³⁴ But birds were conventional singers of love. Many troubadour lyrics begin with a comparison between the song of the bird and the lover's song. The point is that the bird was a conventional representation of one who sang a song of love. But there are two other likely reasons for the bird-narrator. First, as a natural creature, the bird underlines quite heavily the distinction between natural love and courtly love. The very first stanza of the Proem makes that contrast manifest:

Gladeth, ye fouies, of the morowe gray`.
Lol Venus, rysen among yon rowes rede!
And floures fressh, honoureth ye this day;
For when the sunne uprist, then wol ye sprede.
But ye lovers, that lye in any drede,
Fleeth, lest wikked tonges yow espyel!
Lo! Yond the sunne, the candel of jelosyel (11. 1 – 7)

The joy of the birds and flowers in the morning light contrasts sharply with the sorrow of the human lovers, who fear the light and flee the sun, who is called the “candel of jelosye.” These lines obviously foreshadow the discovery of Mars and Venus by Phoebus later in the narrative section of the poem. They also link this poem to the *aube* tradition – the dawn song spoken by the lovers as morning approaches. As Hultin notes,

¹³⁴ Skeat, pp. 64-65.

the *bird* here takes the traditional role of the watchman, who warns the lovers of the coming light, and, here, attempts to give some consolation to the parting lovers that, in spite of whatever occurs, love is worthwhile¹³⁵ :

*With teres blewe, and with a wounded herte,
Taketh your leve; and with seint John to borrowe,
Apeseth sumwhat of your sorowes smerte.
Tyme cometh eft that cese shal your sorowe:
The glade nyght ys worth an hevy morowe! (11. 8 – 12)*

The allusion to Saint John and the traditional religious imagery of light and darkness have been noted by both Hultin and Merrill.

That narration concerns the adultery of Mars and Venus, a story which would have been quite familiar to Chaucer's courtly audience through Ovid and later versions. But what is again ironic is that the story is totally inappropriate for the celebration of love customary on St. Valentine's day – something Stillwell sees as part of Chaucer's "anti-courtly" theme in the poem.¹³⁶ Dale Wood, reviewing the different versions of the Venus-Mars legend, concludes that the audience, from its knowledge of the traditional story, would expect the narrative itself to be comic, as it is in Ovid; further, from the astrological nature of the story as Chaucer tells it, depicting as it does the conjunction of Mars and Venus in Taurus, the audience would expect the story to concern very unfortunate events, as such a conjunction would portend.¹³⁷ The bird-narrator declares his intent to sing a song in honor of the occasion:

*And for the worship of this highe feste,
Yet wol I, in my briddes wise, syng
The sentence of the compleynt, at the leste,
That woful Mars made atte departyng
From fresshe Venus in a morwenyng. (11. 22 – 26)*

And as he ends the narrative part of the poem, the bird, apparently careless to the sense of what he has just uttered, prepares to rehearse Mars' *Complaint*, but first prays "God yeve every wyght joy of his make!" (1. 154). The irony of this line becomes clear as the story unfolds, for it is a story of *illicit adultery*, *sham*, *unfaithfulness*, and almost

¹³⁵ Hultin, p. 60.

¹³⁶ Stillwell, p. 72.

¹³⁷ Wood, p. 120.

complete *lack* of any “joy” of one’s “make.” It seems that the bird is another of Chaucer’s foolish narrators – one whose statements are uttered in complete, and simple-minded, innocence, but which the audience must not trust as accurate judgements of the story. The bird is aware of neither the significance of the dawn imagery, nor of the inappropriateness of the tale for the occasion, nor of the importance of the story itself. Similarly Mars, speaker of the Complaint, is unaware of the significance of much of what he says. The audience, lacking a guiding voice, must make the connections themselves.

That narrative which the bird introduces, and with which Mars’ Complaint must be compared, begins here and, Mars, the fierce God of War, is tamed by his courtly mistress, Venus, who “brydeleth him in her manere, / With nothing but with scourging of her chere” (11. 41 – 42). It is decided between them that they will come together in Venus’ “nexte paleys” – that is, in astrological terms, her next “mansion,” which is Taurus. Now Mars makes an important speech in the following lines – one which colours much of the interpretation of the rest of the narrative and of the *Complaint*:

*Then seyde he thus: “myn hertes lady swete,
Ye knowe wel my myschef in that place;
For sikerly, til that I with yow mete,
My lyf stant ther in aventure and grace;
But when I se the beaute of your face,
Ther ys no drade of dethmaydo me smerte,
For al your lust is ese to myn herte.”* (11. 57 – 63)

These lines raise the most important question in the poem – the relationship between free will and destiny. Up until this point, it had seemed that the lovers, caught as they are in the movements of the heavens, and doomed eternally to repeat the same moves, through the will of the God who controls all – whom Mars calls “him that lordeth ech intelligence” (1. 166). Dean apparently thought it Chaucer’s intent to present a deterministic view of love: “What better example could there be of the ultimate destiny of love to change than the projection of Mars and Venus as planets, turning by necessity in destined paths at destined rates?”¹³⁸ But it is quite evident from the above lines that Mars *chooses* to take the path he takes, and so is morally responsible for the outcome of those actions; the fact that his own decisions happened to correspond to divine prior knowledge is inevitable, but also irrelevant

¹³⁸ Dean, p. 19.

as regards his own personal fault: God gives man free will, yet knows what man's choice will be, and so incorporates it into His plan. If man chooses evil, he chooses it freely, and must suffer the consequences.

Thus according to the account of the bird-narrator, unbiased in its simplicity, Mars himself is to blame for his predicament, for he freely chooses to go to Venus' chamber, even though his reason tells him it is dangerous. This adds a good deal to our understanding of Mars' own self-deception in his lines about God the Fisherman and Broche of Thebes.

The narrative continues. Mars awaits Venus, alone, in Taurus. When she arrives, they spend a blissful time together, until suddenly, in a repeat of the Proem's *aube*, Phoebus approaches with a flaming torch. Venus, in lines repeats with "Alas, I dye! / The torch is come that ai this world wol wrie."¹³⁹ (11. 90 – 91).

Mars leaps to his feet and arms himself, begging Venus to flee. He stays to face Phoebus, "in peril to be sleyn" (l. 108), but in "double penaunce" (l. 109). Again, the events of the narrative add further clarification to the Complaint proper, for Mars' unspecific worry concerning his lady's welfare is now offered concrete shape.

This curious mixture of narrative and lyric also characterizes what is probably Chaucer's least-known poem of any length, *Anelida and Arcite*. Critics have found little to say about this poem, and most of what they *have* said has not been good. One reason for this is the apparently *fragmentary* nature of the poem. Two critics, James Wimsatt and Michael Cherniss, working under the assumption that the *Anelida* is indeed a fragment, have attempted to determine what Chaucer's ultimate *intent* was for this poem: that is, how it would have ended had Chaucer not abandoned it.¹³⁹

Both critics, however, apparently ignore the basic similarity between the *Anelida* and the *Complaint of Mars*. Both poems consist of three parts, each of which serves an identical function in its respective poem. Both poems begin with an introductory section which is followed by a brief narrative. Both narratives concern a love affair, and both serve the purpose of establishing a context for the third section of the poem, the lyrical *Complaint*. *Anelida's* Complaint, like Mars', is a fairly *general lamentation*, given substance by the narrative from which it springs. This possibility is given more reliance by Brusendorff's comments on this poem Brusendorff pointed out that this "peculiar and

¹³⁹ Wimsatt, pp. 1-8.; Michael Cherniss, 'Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*: Some Conjectures', *Chaucer Review*, 5, 1978, pp. 9-21.

badly constructed stanza” was “certainly a spurious addition,” and that the “original poem would then simply have consisted of a narrative introduction and a lyrical complaint, just like *Mars*, and there is no reason to believe it not to have been finished.”¹⁴⁰ My assumption, then, will be that the *Anelida* is complete after the Complaint, and that its basic structure is similar to that of the *Mars*.

The *Anelida* recalls the *Mars* not only structurally, but in other ways as well. Once again, the poem concerns the impermanence of earthly felicity, this time suggesting above all the discrepancy between the appearances of this world – the apparent certitude of worldly goods – and the reality of those transient joys – the fact that they are inconstant. Again in this poem, this point is brought particularly by the discrepancy between the two voices (that of the narrator of the story and that of *Anelida*, speaker of the lyric), and between their interpretation of reality and the reader's inferred understanding of events. A close examination of the text of the poem, will bring these points out.

The poem's invocation seems straightforward enough – it is only after the reader has traversed some distance into the story that he realizes how misleading that invocation has been. The invocation to *Mars* in stanza one implies a tale of great deeds in battle. The invocation to “*Polymya*,” that is, *Polyhymnia*, who was the muse of heroic hymns, is also quite fitting for a tale of martial deeds.

Still, there are aspects of the invocation which seem to call into question all that. *Anelida and Arcite* opens with a dark metaphor. The narrator will tell an old story

That elde, which that at can frete and bite,

As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,

Hath nygh devoured out of our memorie, (11. 12 – 14)

Time is like a beast that devours everything. If the full implications of this image are realized, one sees a frightening picture. All will eventually pass away, perish in Time's slow jaws: *Anelida* and *Arcite*, their story, their memory, the narrator of the story, and its reader. The initial metaphor gives the reader pause to consider the transience of his worldly state. Another figure of speech which follows closely, in which the narrator compares the telling of his tale to the bringing of a ship safely into harbor (1. 20), invites the reader to participate in an allusion. The harbor is only a temporary safety. Time will eventually “frete and bite” the ship. The narrator, of course, never say this, but the imagery suggests it.

The invocation also contains the first hint that the narrator of the story is not

¹⁴⁰ Brusendorff, p. 260.

completely reliable. For he names, in the final line of the invocation, his sources: "First folowe I Stace, and after him Corynne" (l. 21). Now Statius' *Thebaid* may be a source for the poem, but unquestionably the chief source for the first part of the story is Boccaccio's *Teseide*.¹⁴¹ And as for Corynne, althou there have been several questionable attempts at identifying this source, the identity remains a mystery, and perhaps always will.

As the "Story" portion of the poem begins with a Latin quotation from Statius, which Chaucer expands into the seven-line stanza, the promised story of war begins to unfold. Theseus, one of the greatest heroes of Classical mythology, is returning home to Athens after winning honour and glory in war. The description of Theseus' triumphant return is continued in stanza seven, where, significantly, Theseus is said to be "In al the flour of Fortunes yevynge" (l. 47). Though at this point the line seems to point forward to the fall of Theseus through Fortune's instability, which never occurs in the poem, this line *does* provide a rather fragile link between the epic and lyric elements of the poem – between the *narrative* and the *Complaint* – a link which I will discuss below.

It is in this seventh stanza that a sudden shift occurs in the speaker's presentation. In the middle of the stanza the narrator shifts from his description of Theseus, and the Athenian hero never reappears:

*Let I this noble prince Theseus
Toward Athenes in his wey rydinge,
And founde I wol in shortly for to bringe
The slye way of that I gan to write,
Of quene Anelida and fals Arcite. (ll. 45 – 49)*

It leaves the reader wondering what on earth Theseus had to do with the story – a question which is never answered. Assuming, again, that the poem is incomplete in itself, this is a serious structural flaw. Furthermore, as the poem continues, the narrator's competence becomes more and more a matter questionnable. With stanzas eight and nine, the war which seems to have been suggested from the first begins to erupt, and the recurrence of the figure of Mars in line 50 recalls the *epic* invocation. But the war of the Seven against Thebes is summarily dismissed after two stanzas, and the advent of Creon and peace in stanza 10 leaves the reader frustrated. Queen Aneiida is introduced in line 71,

¹⁴¹ On Chaucer's sources, see Pratt.; Edgar F. Shannon, 'The Source of *Aneiida and Arcite*', *PMLA*, 27, 1912, pp. 461-85; Madeleine Fabin, 'On Chaucer's *Anelida and Arcite*', *MLN*, 34, 1919, pp. 266-72.; and Paul Clogan, 'Chaucer's Use of the *Thebaid*', in *English Miscellany*, 18, 1967, pp. 9-31. On *Corynne*, see Robinson, p. 789; and Douglas Bush, 'Chaucer's *Corinne*', *Speculum*, 4 (1969), pp. 106-07.

and with her the theme of *betrayed love* which will be the topic of the remainder of the poem. Nowhere does the narrator, in his “slye way,” give any indication as to what the epic elements of the poem have to do with the lyric.

This narrator has, from the first, been all too present. He is, in fact, annoying. For he knows everything in advance. He consistently tells the reader ahead of time everything that will happen. The narrator makes sure his reader knows that even Arcite’s jealousy is feigned (l. 126). Virtually nothing is left for the reader himself to discover in the narrative. What is left for the reader to do is to try to decipher those things which the narrator, somehow neglects to mention.

When Anelida is introduced in line 71, a whole new set of expectations are aroused in the reader’s mind. She is the lady of courtly romance – a fact which is apparent immediately, for she “Fairer was then is the sonne shene” (l. 73). The expectations of courtly romance are slightly altered: Anelida is the perfect Beloved, but Arcite is a false lover. He wins his lady not by years of faithful service inspired by *fin amors*, but rather through “craft” and “cunning” (ll. 88 – 89), and with “feyned chere” (l. 97). Such an affair can only end in disaster. Stanzas 15 – 20 describe the ideal courtly affair, but for one thing: Arcite’s wooing is only sham, as the reader has already been warned. In the meantime Arcite imitates typical love – sickness, swearing “he wolde dyen for distresse” (l. 101), until Anelida has pity “upon his sorowes” (l. 104) and grants him her love. And during the affair Arcite acts the part of the true lover, even to the point of feigning “jelousye” (l. 126) when Anelida is open with him about her earlier relationships with other men. Arcite’s playing contrasts with Anelida’s true lovesickness:

When she shal ete, on him is so her thought,

That we! unnethe of mete tok she kep;

And when that she was to her reste broght,

On him she thoughte alwey til that she slep; (ll. 134 – 137)

The point of Anelida’s full and open honesty is stressed, while the reader can only anticipate Arcite’s betrayal.

In the course of his description of the love affair between Anelida and Arcite, the narrator uses another figure of speech which, like those of the invocation, serves to underline the basic dichotomy of appearance – vs. – reality found in all worldly joys. That figure which gives pause is the proverbial comparison of Arcite to a horse “that can both bite and pieyne” (l. 157). Arcite appears to be in love, but will “bite” or “renne away” at

the first opportunity. Further, the runaway horse may well be an image of *passion*. Certainly the horse or steed has long been a symbol, in myth and literature, of the animal within man, of the *force of instinct*. The fact that Anelida is not able to keep her steed *bridled*, so that it runs wild, may well suggest the fact that her love of Arcite has blinded her, perhaps even to the point of mistaking his love for the Highest Good.

The idea of control also recalls the earlier image of the ship.

The story of the poem now proceeds as expected. Arcite leaves Anelida, and goes off to his disdainful new love. At this point, as the narrator describes Arcite's new lady, his seeming omniscience breaks down (perhaps indicating that he is really not interested in this shrew, but rather the faithful Anelida), and he says he does not know what her colour was (l. 146). It may have been white, red, or green, but he does not mention blue (the colour of truth) – and the audience must infer the implication of this. This lack of knowledge on the part of the narrator, coupled with his earlier mistakes may cause the audience to lose confidence in the narrator.

This being the case, it becomes difficult to accept without question the narrator's interpretation of the meaning of the tale he tells. As Clemen noted, the speaker clearly intends his story to be an exemplum.¹⁴² He first says “gret wonder was hit noon / Though he were fals, for hit is kynde of man” (ll. 148 – 149). Such a broad generalization from a single example is something of an oversimplification. The narrator advises

Ensamble of this, ye thrifty wrynmenn alle,

Take her of Aneiida and Arcite,

That for her liste him 'dere herte' caile,

And was so meke, therfor he loved her lyte.

The kynde of mannes hearte is to delyte

In thing that straunge is, also God me save!

For what he may not gete, that wolde he have. (ll. 197 – 203)

Arcite may certainly be condemned for his betrayal, but to advise all women not to be kind or to give love for fear of being treated in the same way is highly questionable, since the narrator has been presenting Anelida's tender love as the only positive point in the story. The sympathy which the narrator emphasizes towards Anelida's faithful love may be one of the things which blinds him to the true meaning of events – a meaning which becomes more clear as one reads Anelida's Complaint.

Again, the lyrical Complaint is relatively general, relatively conventional, taking concrete meaning as it does from the context of the narrative. Its structure, though, is somewhat unusual, being largely the record of several shifts of mood in the mind of an emotionally confused woman.

As the Complaint whirls from topic to topic, Chaucer skilfully creates the character of a person nearly hysterical with grief. That grief is punctuated by what Clemen called “a striking mixture of artificially conventional expressions and perfectly simple and natural turns of phrase” which may be “cries, protestations, questions thrown in... and often... a break in the syntax within the line.”¹⁴³ The Complaint is an unusual combination of natural speech rhythms and formality.

The power which shaped Anelida's affair was not destiny but Fortune: by setting her will not on the Highest Good (in Boethian terms), but on transient earthly pleasures (things which time can devour), Anelida can be said to have subjected herself to the whims of Fortune, And Fortune's wheel always turns. Anelida is deceiving herself. She has in part contributed to her own downfall by letting her passions overrule her reason, and by placing her love in someone like Arcite rather than in the Highest Good. Like the narrator, Anelida fails to interpret satisfactorily the events of this poem.

Anelida's direct statements in the Complaint, then, do not provide the real theme of the poem. The reader must look elsewhere to discover clues to that meaning. And it is largely the imagery of the Complaint which, taken in conjunction with the imagery already noted in the narrative part of the poem, reinforces the appearance/reality opposition which now can be seen to pervade the poem. Anelida's Complaint opens with the lines “So thirleth with the poynt of remembraunce / The swerd of Sorowe, ywhet with fals plesaunce” (ll. 211 – 212). The image is rather complicated: sorrow is like a sword, and its sharpest part, its point, is *remembraunce*. Basically the figure is a comparison of physical pain (caused by a sword) with mental pain (caused by loss). Significantly, the sword has been sharpened by false happiness, that is, the happiness of *this* world which fades, governed as it is by Fortune's whims. That happiness is an illusion is certainly implied, but that it makes sorrow sharper by contrast is the “point.” Nothing is more painful than, in times of sorrow, to remember past joys. Here, the illusion of happiness is overcome by the reality of suffering.

¹⁴² Clemen, p. 204.

¹⁴³ Clemen, p. 207.

Another figure of speech involving ships occurs in lines 313 – 314 of Anelida's Complaint, recalling the earlier image of the ship searching for a haven (l. 20):

Who that hem loveth, she shai hem fynde as fast

As in a tempest is a rotten mast. (ll. 313 – 314)

Finally, then, the tale of Anelida and Arcite is an exemplum. Neither speaker, though, seems completely aware of just what it exemplifies. It is not the narrator's easy “nothing thinketh the fals as doth the trewe” (l. 105), nor Anelida's pathetic “Wher is the troutne of man? Who hath hit slayn?” (l. 312). It concerns, rather, “a! the flour of Fortunes yevynge” (l. 44).

Earthly love – is dealt with in the remainder of the poem, and this, too, is a transient joy, and consequently under the governance of Fortune. The ultimate experience of the poem is the frustration of perception. What earlier commentators pointed out is to a large extent true. The poem is fragmentary and lacks unity, and the plot, characters, and diction are quite conventional. But it does not necessarily follow that *Anelida* “lacks substance,” as W. P. Ker thought.¹⁴⁴ Its *substance*, as I see it, is that very fragmentary nature which builds the poem's apparent indefiniteness. The poem forces the reader to alter his perception of the world: he can no more formulate the poem, penetrate the mystery of events, than can the narrator, no more than the ship can be brought safely to port, or the wild beast can be tamed, or man can escape the jaws of time. All earthly delights, including love, power, and wisdom, are illusory: they are eaten away by time and Fortune. True happiness lies in the love of God, the Highest Good. Significantly the *Anelida* and the *Mars*, as well as that other great poem to which both look forward so clearly, the concern pagan characters. The pagans, like Anelida, have an excuse for not knowing where the Highest Good lies. Perhaps this is the reason why the speakers of both poems seem unaware of the full significance of the events which they describe, and why the reader, from a Christian rather than a pagan perspective, must put together the true meaning of what is happening. The implication is that the reader, illumined by the revelation of Christ has no excuse. And the emphasis upon human free will in both poems becomes, for the reader, all the more significant.

In Romanian literature the ballade presents a structure that combines lyrics, epics and drama. An educated, very diverse and complex tradition evolved under the shadow of

¹⁴⁴ Ker, p. 82.

the popular ballade. A theatrical and dramatic nature characterizes the ballades of George Coșbuc, while we can find allegory and parable with lyrical inflections in the texts of some authors, such as: Alexandru Macedonski (*December Night*) and Ștefan Augustin Doinaș (*The Boar with Silver Tusks*). An exceptional synthesis of lyrics, epics and drama we find in Mihai Eminescu's "Luceafărul". Radu Staura drafted a very interesting theoretical essay, *The Resurrection of the Ballade*, in which he rejects the "pure lyrics" and underlines the necessity of mixing in poetry the three genders (epics, lyrics and drama).

As close to the ludic spirit of Chaucer we might mention *mutatis mutandis*, the his versified stories of Anton Pann and the *Levant* of Mircea Cărtărescu.

CHAPTER 7

The Narrative with Lyric – A Traditional Approach to Narrative

While it is apparent that Chaucer, in composing his lyrics, was aware that the conventional medieval lyric had certain weaknesses which he attempted to avoid through the incorporation of particularly characterized speakers and the use of narrative – a process which seems to have culminated in poems like the *Complaint of Mars* and *Anelida and Arcite* – it is also apparent that Chaucer wanted to incorporate within those works lyric passages – many of which can be isolated as structurally independent lyrics in their own right, apart from their narrative context, and many of which were undoubtedly originally composed separately, and only later included in their present larger frames. No discussion of Chaucer's lyrics can be complete without considering these “imbedded” lyrics, in terms of both how they function in themselves, and how they function within the environment of their respective narratives.

It was Arthur K. Moore, in discussing Chaucer's “lost songs,” who first suggested that some of the “many a song and many a lecherous lay” which Chaucer mentions in the *Retraction of the Canterbury Tales* were not “lost” at all, but were rather incorporated into some of the longer poems: he includes the passages in the *Book of the Duchess* beginning “I have of sorwe...” (ll. 475 – 486) and “Lord, hyt maketh. (ll. 1175 – 80), as well as the “Hyd, Absalon...” from the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women (F 249 – 269; G 203 – 223) and the “Now welcome, somer...” from the *Parliament of Fowls* (ll. 680 – 692), and at least seven passages from *and Criseyde*.¹⁴⁵ Robert O. Payne would add three additional passages from the ,¹⁴⁶ and to these one might also add the *Clerk's Envoy* in the *Canterbury Tales* (ll. 1177 – 1212) as a lyric passage. It is possible, then, to discover in the longer works fifteen lyrics besides the twenty – one I've already discussed, and there are, as Ann Haskell has shown, many additional lyrical passages which may not necessarily be isolable.¹⁴⁷

The most obvious question that comes to mind is, of course, why would Chaucer

¹⁴⁵ Arthur K. Moore, ‘Chaucer's Lost Songs’, *JEGP*, 48, 1949, pp. 198-99.

¹⁴⁶ Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973, p. 185.

¹⁴⁷ Ann S. Haskell, ‘Lyric and Lyrical in the Works of Chaucer: The Poet in His Literary Context’, in Douglas Shepard, ed., *English Symposium Papers*, Fredonia: State University of New York at Fredonia, 1978, pp. 1-45.

do this? What is the purpose of including lyrics within a narrative structure? The most immediately obvious, but least satisfactory, answer is that it was conventional to do so. Certainly since Guillaume Machaut the *dit* had been a popular form in courtly poetry, and the *dit* was, precisely, a narrative interspersed with relatively independent lyric passages. Moore noted that Machaut had included seven lyrics in *Le Remede de Fortune*, one of Chaucer's sources for the *Book of the Duchess*.¹⁴⁸

But even if convention can be used to explain the lyric passages, it remains to be explained why Chaucer, as a conscious literary artist, should choose to follow this particular convention. What possible function would it serve? Haskell suggested that the lyrics are used within narrative structures “to fulfill specific functions within the larger fabric,” and that the most “immediately obvious use to which they are put is textual contrast. A well-placed lyric stanza can signal a change in narrative direction quite effectively.”¹⁴⁹ This is certainly true. If the narrative itself is running, relating event after event, the insertion of a lyric, which does not invite the reader's anticipation of temporal events but rather the reflection in detail upon one particular point, marks a definite shift in reader response. Haskell compares it to the action of a motion picture camera: “The cinematic introduction of lyric essentially stops the roll of the narrative film, letting us look at a particular frame at leisure.”¹⁵⁰

Payne, taking a different approach, considers the lyric passages from a rhetorical point of view. Considering the lyric passages of *Antigone* in particular, Payne claims that each is a set piece, each comes at a critical point in the action, and each occurs outside of conventional conversational exchanges between the characters, and that nothing but *Antigone's* song (Bk. II, 11 827 – 875) actually contributes to the movement of the plot. “These ten important lyric amplifications are all excellent examples of a device to which all the rhetoricians devote large amounts of space in their catalogues of the means of amplification”; that device is *apostrophe*. Payne says that Geoffrey of Vinsauf, for example, indicates in his treatment of *apostrophe* that it has a “clearly lyric quality.” An *apostrophe*, in fact, “frequently constitutes a lyric form by itself; the complaint, for example, is only an *apostrophe* dislocated from its circumstances, and Geoffrey

¹⁴⁸ Moore, p. 198.

¹⁴⁹ Haskell, p. 33.

¹⁵⁰ Haskell, p. 35.

recognizes it as such by citing one as an example of the device."¹⁵¹

It is not only a matter of deciding whether the imbedded lyrics have a structural or a rhetorical function. Clearly they serve both. But the lyrics seem, as well, to serve two other functions. First, these lyric passages aid in the delineation of character. Chaucer uses the lyric for what the lyric does best: expressing the emotion or the state of mind of an individual speaker. The lyrics generally act in these narratives like a *soliloquy* in a drama: they allow the reader to overhear, as it were, the private thoughts of the individual speaker into whose mouth the lyric is placed – certainly those thoughts are quite artificially presented when expressed as a lyric poem. In these narrative poems, then, Chaucer uses the lyric to help establish character; in a sense, he reverses the process he used while writing lyrics for their own sake, when it was the lyric that was important for its own sake, and the character was created in order to provide the lyric with a context.

This reversal can be seen in another way as well. Chaucer perceived that the typical medieval lyric, as he knew it, had one obvious weakness: in its over-using conventionality it seemed to have worn itself out. Every love lyric sounded like every other love lyric, and so there was no way to determine the sincerity of the lyric utterance. All one needed to do to write a courtly poem was repeat the *cliches*. That is why establishing the character of a speaker, or establishing a narrative context for the lyric utterance, was so effective in making particular the action and showing the genuineness of the emotion expressed in that lyric. In writing his narrative poems, however, Chaucer seems to have come to the realization that the weakness of the abstract lyric was also, paradoxically, its greatest strength: by omitting concrete, particularizing detail, the lyric took on a kind of *universal significance*. These are not the feelings and thoughts of one specific man or woman, at one particular time and place, occurring in reaction to one unique chain of events. Rather they are the expressions of human emotions, universally applicable to all humanity, and in that sense are more real than any accurate narration of concrete details.

The lyrics within Chaucer's narrative structures, then, serve a thematic function as well. They occur at important points in the narratives because they serve to heighten the significance of those moments, by *universalizing* them through the individual characters' emotional responses to the situations. Philosophically, in terms of realist epistemology as Chaucer understood it, the *lyrical apostrophes* serve a rational function by *abstracting* the

¹⁵¹ Payne, pp. 84-85.

universal form from the *particular* event presented in the plot – only then could the mind truly understand the significance of the story.

But we should remember that Chaucer leaned, later in his career, toward nominalism. In the and in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the lyrics not only provide the universal, often ideal, abstraction, but when juxtaposed with the narrative context and with the true character of the speaker whose voice utters the lyric make for ironic contrast. For my purposes here, I will discuss nine “imbedded” lyrics: one from each of the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, and six passages from *and Criseyde*. I have chosen these nine lyrics because they seemed to me the most clearly *isolable* – that is, each of the lyrics I discuss can be studied in isolation from the longer narrative in which it now exists, and so quite possibly was even composed separately, and later inserted into the narrative. In any case, the poems I have chosen have the most claim to be called lyrics in their own right, rather than simply “lyrical passages.”

A brief and very simple lyric which occurs in Chaucer's earliest narrative composition, the *Book of the Duchess*, may serve as an example of the most productive way to study these imbedded lyrics: I will look first at the poem itself, and then at what the lyric *does* in the narrative.

At this particular point in the *Book of the Duchess*, the obtuse dreamer, having joined the “hert hunt” of the emperor Octavian, is making his way through the green wood when he comes upon the Black Knight, whom he describes at some length. The dreamer overhears the knight making “a compleynte to hymselfe” (l. 460), which the dreamer then repeats:

“I have of sorwe so gret won
That joye gete I never non,
Now that I see my lady bryght
Which I have loved with al my myght,
Is fro me ded and ys agoon.
Alias, deth, what ayleth the,
That thou noldest have taken me,
Whan thou toke my lady swete,
That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,
So good, that men may wel se

Of al goodnesse, she had no mete!" (ll. 475 – 486)

It is a simple and conventional expression of sorrow. The speaker, like those of all Chaucer's Complaints, begins by establishing himself as the "sorrowfulest man," saying that he has such great sorrow that he shall never have joy (ll. 475 – 6), and goes on to explain why – his lady is dead. The lady is described in terms typical of the courtly lady: she is "my lady bright" (l. 477), "my lady swete" (l. 483), and is "so fair, so fresh, so fre" (l. 484), that she has no equal in her "goodnesse." The lamenting speaker typically laments the fact that a personified "Deth" did not take him as well.

While the lyric has nothing particularly remarkable, it does universalize, in its conventions, grief over the loss of one's Beloved. If the emotion expressed strikes a responsive attitude in the reader, enabling him to feel sympathy for the bereaved knight, then the lyric has served its purpose. It should be noted that the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess*, however, does not seem to fully comprehend the lyric. He realizes that the knight is uttering "the moste pitee, the moste rowthe, / That ever I herde" (ll. 465 – 66), but he does not appear to have listened to the knight's words, or at least he seems not to have taken literally the knight's assertion that his lady "is fro me ded and ys agoon." Anyway, the Dreamer begins to question the knight, and does not stop until the knight has at last declared openly and without the trappings of allegory or conventional poetry that "She ys ded!" (l. 1309). The lyric, then, also contributes to the characterization of the Dreamer by providing an obvious clue to the knight's distress, a clue which the narrator fails to understand.

This earliest example, then, provides a rather simple illustration of the use of the lyric to aid in characterization and to universalise emotion, and also to indicate a shift in the narrative direction, as the poem, at the point at which the lyric is introduced, changes from a description of a lark through the woods to a discussion of grief. Chaucer sometimes uses lyrics in some of his later poems in a more elaborate, sometimes more sophisticated manner.

Another isolable lyric is the well-known song sung by a few chosen birds at the end of the *Parliament of Fowls*. Like "Hyd, Absalon...", this poem has been highly praised for its lyric beauty, as the poem is a delightful song in its own right; it also, as will be seen, serves two important functions within the longer narrative.

In its formal pattern the poem is a *rondeau*, or what Chaucer calls a "roundel," like

the three verses comprising *Merclies Beaute*. Chaucer borrows from the French court poets Machaut, Deschamps, and Froissart the form. Now Robert O. Payne considered it highly ironic that the birds of Nature's own garden should borrow the "artificialities of French lyric" to praise their goddess,¹⁵² but I do not think that Chaucer would have regarded his verse form as at all "artificial." On the contrary, if Peter Dronke is right as to the origins of the rondeau, nothing could be more appropriate. "I believe," says Dronke, "that the two best-known types of medieval dance-song, the carol and the rondeau, are essentially popular forms." The forms may have become more elaborate and stylized when they moved into the courts, but originally, in Dronke's opinion, they would have been the dance songs of the people, sung on still-popular holidays, like May Day, which hearkened back to the pagan nature worship of pre-Christian times.¹⁵³

The roundel, then, combines the *aristocratic* and the *folk* in a special way. As such, it is a perfect form for Chaucer, who combines the elements of the court and the people (in the idiomatic expressions captured in formal verse, for example, in something like *A Complaint to his Lady* or *Aneida and Arcite*), and for the *Parliament of Fowls* in particular, where birds from out of a folk tale hold court and speak with all *courtesy*. Further, the roundel again shows Chaucer working within the poetic traditions of his time, and bringing them to new achievements.

Chaucer uses, here, not only a traditional form, the roundel, but a traditional theme. In genre the poem is a *reverdie*, a song in praise of the coming of spring. As such it belongs to one of the most persistent literary types in the Middle Ages: virtually every love lyric, for example, begins with the invocation to the spring and usually notes the return of life to the world and the tendency of the natural world to procreation in that season. The joy of this impulse reflected in nature usually parallels the feelings of the poem's speaker – his thoughts, too, turn naturally toward love and his Beloved. The fact that such poems are so persistent in literature suggests that their mood of celebration strikes a responsive attitude in the basic structure of the human imagination – because this mood is an integral part of the rhythm of the world as we perceive it, the natural cycle of events in which spring chases away the gloom of winter, or dawn chases the shadows of night, or the birth of a child brings new life where there was none before. When Northrop Frye, constructing a table of literary genres which correspond to the natural cycle, speaks

¹⁵² Payne, p. 143.

of the kind of mood present in such reverdies as “Now welcome, somer...,” he thinks first of Shakespearean comedy, which he calls “the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land.... The green world charges the comedies with the symbolism of the victory of summer over winter.”¹⁵⁴ Foulke and Smith, analyzing Fryean “comedy” in lyric forms, note that the poem as *celebration of temporal experience* corresponds to this “green world” comedy of Shakespeare.¹⁵⁵ Surely the purest, most basic type of celebration is that which rejoices in the archetypal victory of spring over winter. This triumph is heightened when the two are seen in conflict, as they are in this poem, and in Chaucer's more famous lines about April “piercing” March in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Certainly, and doubtlessly because of the universal appeal of its archetypal celebration, “Now welcome somer...” has impressed most critics with its simple beauty and charm. Wolfgang Clemen called it an example of “pure lyricism,” which “breathes an indescribable freshness and an unstudied charm,” and provides a feeling of “relief and happy expectation.”¹⁵⁶ D. S. Brewer praised the poem for its creation of “a feeling of relief and enlargement, a feeling of new life warming old winter's bones, of the world stirring anew with perennial joy... and loving respect aroused by the contemplation of Nature.”¹⁵⁷ This roundel, as the comments indicate, has been one of the most universally admired of Chaucer's lyrics. That admiration comes in spite of, or perhaps because of, the poem's basic simplicity.

As it is a simple poem there is virtually nothing to think about in the first stanza, the three lines which also form the refrain of the roundel:

Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe,

That hast this wintres wedres overshake,

And driven away the longe nyghtes blakel

The first thing that strikes one about these lines is the personification of “somer”

¹⁵³ Peter Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969, p. 188.

¹⁵⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 182-83.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Foulke and Paul Smith, *An Anatomy of Literature*. New York: Harcourt, 1972, p. 829.

¹⁵⁶ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C. A. M. Sym, London: Methuen and Co., 1968, p.

¹⁶⁷.

¹⁵⁷ D. S. Brewer, *The Parlement of Foulys*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1960, p. 25.

(by which Chaucer means spring).¹⁵⁸ Here the “softe,” *gentle* sun contrasts with the *harshness* of winter. But “somer” is not to be seen as weak or as lazy. Summer is figured as *shaking off* the winter weather, as one rising from a sleep, and as *driving away* the darkness of the long winter's night. This equation of winter with sleep and with the darkness of night is continued in the third stanza, when the birds are said to be “Ful blissful” when they “wake” (l. 689). This metaphorical connection between spring and morning, and between winter and night, is perfectly in keeping with our perception of the rhythms of nature: the day repeats the pattern of the year in microcosm. The idea of the return to life is suggested by Chaucer's making springtime *alive* and *active*: no longer passively sleeping, “somer” engages in the rather violent activity of shaking off and driving away the winter and the darkness. In equating the spring with the morning Chaucer also evokes the whole rich symbolism associated with dawn and the coming of light as discussed in the previous chapter on the *Complaint of Mars*. Symbolically, then, the spring sun is the light of salvation, and that becomes even more significant as the poem progresses and the season inspires the birds to obey the “law of kynde” – the implication is that salvation actually comes through obedience to that law.

The birds are introduced in the second stanza, in association with Saint Valentine:

Saynt Valentyn, that art ful hy on-lofte,

Thus syngen smale foules for thy sake (ll. 683 – 684)

As in the *Complaint of Mars*, it is the birds who respond naturally to the coming of light, obeying natural law. In this stanza, as in the first, Chaucer again uses the motif of *reawakening*, but this time in a *particular* rather than a *cosmic* sense. In the first lines of the poem, Chaucer had taken the general and abstract concept of the passing of the seasons and made it particular and concrete for the reader by the metaphor of the spring waking from a sleep. Here, the individual birds are shown to participate in the regenerative process – they join together in a song praising St. Valentine, on whose day each bird chooses his mate. The process of the second stanza, then, is the reverse of the first, for here the individual, particular birds join together in the *universal* celebration of all nature at the return of spring. As the seasonal cycle is reflected in the day and vice versa, so the individual is reflected in the universal, and the general in particular.

¹⁵⁸ As Arthur Moore has shown, the English language had no specific word for the vernal season until “spring” came into use in the 16th century. Chaucer, therefore, had to use “somer” in connection with St. Valentine's Day because he lacked a specific word for springtime. See Arthur K. Moore, ‘*Somer and Lenten* as Terms for Spring’, *N&Q*, 194, 1969, pp. 82-83.

The introduction of St. Valentine must, of necessity, bring to mind thoughts of love, and so the poem follows the medieval tradition of moving from a celebration of the spring to a celebration of the regenerative process associated with natural love. In the new lines of the third stanza, that natural love is celebrated:

Wei nan they cause for to gladen ofte,

Sith ech of hem recovered hath hys make,

Ful blissful mowe they synge when they wake: (ll. 687–689)

These lines represent a further elaboration of the analogies Chaucer has been indicating between the universal and the particular. Just as the wakening of the birds parallels the wakening of the summer season in the first stanza, so the *inner* world of the birds is shown to reflect the *outer* world of the natural environment.

Interestingly enough, this theme of the inclusion of the universal within the individual, and the immersion of the individual within the universal, is reflected throughout the entire roundel – thematically and structurally. Form matches content. The first three lines are concerned thematically with the universal rebirth of nature; structurally they are also “universal” in the sense that, first since they begin the poem and also end it, they include the whole of the poem, and second, since they are repeated at the end of each stanza, they belong to each individual part of the poem. Similarly, the two stanzas are concerned thematically with the specific response of the birds paralleling the reawakening of nature, but each stanza also contains those repeated lines, thus each individual stanza contains within it the universal.

In itself, then, the roundel functions as a structurally independent unit.¹⁵⁹ However, as J. A. W. Bennett proposed, the lyric is also made to serve at least two important functions in the narrative as a whole: first, the lyric helps the movement of the plot, since it startles the narrator out of his dream; second, and more importantly, it contributes thematically to the work as a whole by illustrating the concord praised in the poem.¹⁶⁰

The first function is rather obvious. The discord that erupted among the birds as a result of the eagles' competition has finally been brought under control by Nature, who then gives to each fowl his mate “by evene acord” (l. 668). The lyric, then, appropriately

¹⁵⁹ See Aage Brusendorff, p. 288.

¹⁶⁰ J. A. W. Bennett, *The “Parlement of Foules”: An Interpretation*, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 184-85.

finishes this section on Nature and the birds by manifesting, in its carefully constructed formal pattern, the concord that has been restored: the noise, the discord of the bird parliament is ended by the music, the harmony, of the bird song.

Not only does the poem adequately end the bird's parliament, but it also provides a transition to the final stanza of the narrative as Bennett noted, for it is the shouting of the birds at the end of the song which wakes the dreamer from his sleep – and the poem ends as it began, with the narrator poring through more books, in order to find an answer to his initial question.¹⁶¹

The narrator, it will be recalled, began his reading, specifically of Macrobius' *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, in order “a certeyn thing to lerne” (1. 20), presumably about love. Scipio Africanus comes to the narrator in a dream, saying that, as a reward for his diligence, “sumdei of thy labour wolde I quyte” (1. 112). The purpose of the dream, then, is to teach the dreamer something about the nature of love. Africanus leads the Dreamer to a garden which must be entered through a wide gate. Verses are written on either half of the gate in gold and black letters. The verses astonish the Dreamer, since he cannot understand them because they seem to contradict one another. On the one side the verse reads:

*"Thorgh me men gon into that blysfyl place
Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure;
Thorgh me men gon unto the welie of grace,
There grene and lusty May shal evere endure.
This is the wey to al good aventure.
Be glad, thow redere, and thy sorwe of – caste;
Al open am I – passe in, and sped thee faste!" (11. 127 – 133)*

The other side, however, contains a thoroughly different message:

*"Thorgh me men gon," than spak that other side,
"Unto the mortal strokes of the spere
Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde,
Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.
This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful
There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;*

Th'eschewing is only the remedye!" (11. 134 – 140)

Clearly this is the *Garden of Love*, and the two inscriptions reveal two aspects of love – its joy and its pains. What may be further implied is the contrast between two types of love. The second type is obviously courtly love, with its suffering and its “Daunger.” It is here portrayed, as so often in Chaucer, as something unnatural – “Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.” Chaucer, however, prefers natural love – love “ther it may fructifye” as he tells Scogan. The first inscription is actually a description of the kind of love which follows natural law: it is healthy (all the “dedly woundes” of courtly love are cured), natural (it is associated with the “grene and lusty May”), and seems to have the support of divinity, for through it one attains “the welle of grace.” The Dreamer learns nothing from the inscriptions, however, and stands indecisively between them, until Africanus shoves him through the gate and into the garden.

The garden, too, presents the Dreamer with a contrast. He passes first through a beautiful park with magnificent trees and flowers, and in which he hears the sweetest music imaginable:

Of instruments of strenges in acord

Herde I so pi eye a ravyshyng swetness,

That God, that makere is of al and lord,

Ne herde nevere beter, as I gesse. (11. 197 – 200)

The music is reminiscent, as Robertson suggests, of the music of the spheres which token universal harmony in “Tullyus the Drem of Scipioun.”¹⁶² This natural garden contrasts with the temple of brass which the Dreamer finds in the middle of the garden. Passing through the temple, he finds it is the Temple of Venus, peopled by no natural living things but rather by sterile abstractions, and by Venus in “disport” in a “prive corner” with “hire porter Richesse” (11. 260 – 261). No sweet music pervades the Temple of Venus, but only pitious sighs, “engendered with desyr” (1. 248). Still, the Dreamer makes no comment about the contrasting pictures.

This, then, is the background to the roundel. Coming out of the temple of Venus, the narrator steps into the bird parliament, where, contrary to the law of Nature, three eagles have pledged their love in courtly style:

"Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² D. W. Robertson, Jr., p. 132.

*I chese, and chese with wil, and herte, and thought,
The formel on youre hond, so wel iwrought,
Whos I am al, and evere wol hire serve,
Do what hire lest, to do me lyve or sterve.” (ll. 414 – 420)*

This is what causes the discord among the birds, and here, for a third time, the Dreamer witnesses a contrast: the parliament's chaos is balanced in the end by the harmony of the birds' song, which recalls, as Robertson again notes, the heavenly music in the garden and the music of the spheres in Macrobius.¹⁶³ The roundel, then, comes at the very climax of the dream, the moment before the narrator's awaking, and if the Dreamer has not yet perceived anything about “love,” this climax should be expected to contain an answer. The Dreamer, however, does not see any answer, and so keeps reading; and many critics of the poem, following the narrator's direction, have failed to see in the poem anything resembling an answer to the Dreamer's initial problem. Clemen said that the roundel “has little to do with the matters that were under discussion.”¹⁶⁴ Brewer thought that the poem had more to do with joy in nature than with any “logical solution of the original problem,”¹⁶⁵ and Payne asserted that the lyric “doesn't conclude the poem at all – that it leaves all the basic questions about love and art unanswered.”¹⁶⁶

The problem that the critics have is the same problem that Chaucer's narrator has: he is looking for an answer about human love, but what he gets is an answer about *universal* love, and so he doesn't recognize it because it is not the answer he wants. But, for Chaucer, it is the only *true* answer. I would refer to David Chamberlain's brilliant article, “The Music of the Spheres and the *Parliament of Foules*,” as the best overall interpretation of this poem, and one which describes most fully the connection of this poem with universal love and harmony. Chamberlain's thesis, that the Structure of the *Parliament* reflects the proportionate harmony of the universe (much like a Gothic cathedral),¹⁶⁷ points the way to seeing the poem as a whole as a reflection of the Divine Love which, according to Macrobius and Boethius, binds the world together in harmony.

That the harmony of the universe is the ultimate cause of the harmony of the earth

¹⁶³ Robertson, p. 132.; See also Bernard Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 144

¹⁶⁴ Clemen, p. 167.

¹⁶⁵ Brewer, p. 25.

¹⁶⁶ Payne, p. 142.

¹⁶⁷ Chamberlain, pp. 32-56.

is the point of Chaucer's paraphrase of Macrobius in lines 59 – 63 of the *Parliament*:

And after shewede he hym the nyne speres,

And after that the melodye herde he

That cometh of thiike speres thryes thre,

That welle is of musik and melodye

In this world here, and cause of armony.

And that this harmony is the ultimate result of natural love, the “law of Kynde” by which everything desires its proper place in the universal order, and which should ideally move the hearts of individuals, is apparent in Chaucer's translation of Boethius.

This notion, the underlying theme, of virtually all of Chaucer's lyrics, from *The Complaint of Mars* to the *Envoy to Scogan*, that the love of the individual should be in accordance with the law of nature, is twice specifically alluded to in the *Parliament*. The fowls, we are told, have assembled before Nature,

And everich of hem dide his besy cure

Benygnely to chese or for to take,

By hire acord, his forme! or his make. (11. 369 – 371)

And later, after the debate, “To every foul Nature yaf his make / By evene acord” (11. 667 – 668). The choice of a mate, one's individual love, should therefore be by mutual agreement, and consequently appropriate, in agreement with the design of nature, in harmony with other things. So it is that the eagles' quarrel causes such discord: at least two of the suitors are unworthy of the formel eagle on Nature's hand, and so they are, by this *inharmonious* love, transgressing the law of Nature. The other eagle, the first and noblest in rank, also transgresses Nature's law by pledging his “service” to the Formel as his “soverayn lady,” rather than taking her as his natural mate. The result of this is chaos.

By now the overwhelming importance of the roundel as an important expression of the *Parliament's* basic theme should be obvious. More than simply illustrating through its careful pattern and harmony praised in the narrative, which was what Bennett saw in the lyric¹⁶⁸, it emphasizes, as has been shown, the necessary participation according to natural law of the individual in the *universal* pattern of the natural cycle. Love in the roundel is awakened in the individual birds as a response to the awakening of the natural world; and that awakening of the springtime, as a part of the rhythm of the seasons, is a reflection of

¹⁶⁸ Bennett, p. 184.

the natural harmony, the Divine Love, which binds the universe “by evne noubres of acord.” (The dreamer, in a typically Chaucerian ironic reversal, participates in the natural order as he sleeps, and, upon awakening, is plunged back into the darkness.)

The implication for *human* love must be, then, that when it accords with the “law of kynde,” when it occurs between two natural mates bound by the mutual tie of marriage, rather than as an adulterous relationship in which one party is the other’s “soverayn,” then it is in harmony with the universal love which binds the universe and creates the harmony of the seasons. When it defies the natural law, it causes discord, as the lesser eagles’ attempts to win the formel eagle cause chaos at the *Parliament*. Chaucer’s Valentine’s Day message, then, seems to be that we should choose a mate for whom we are naturally suited and with whom the attraction is mutual – rather than one with whom, for one reason or another, we are infatuated, for infatuation is not love; harmony is.

The theme of the contrast between courtly love and Divine Love is treated once again in another of Chaucer’s “imbedded” lyrics, the one beginning “Hyd, Absalon, thy gilte tresses dere” in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. Like the roundel in the *Parliament of Fowls*, this ballade has been praised for its lyric beauty. H. S. Bennett, in his *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, remarked that it was with the creation of poems like this one that Chaucer “extended the art of the lyric.”¹⁶⁹ R. T. Davies certainly considered the poem a separable entity, as he includes it in his anthology of *Medieval English Lyrics*, commenting that in this poem “the poet is superbly sure of himself and the lines are not only melodious but dignified and resonant ... The confident tone struck by the vocatives and imperatives is sustained through a succession of distinguished names and examples.”¹⁷⁰ High praise, that – higher, in fact, than any of Chaucer’s independent lyrics are apt to get from most scholars.

But it seems to me evident that this poem was indeed, originally, an independent lyric. I do not agree with Galway’s statement that “the *Balade* seems to have been added to the Dream scene as an afterthought,” but I do agree with her that the poem was probably

¹⁶⁹ H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford History of English Literature, Vol. II, London: Oxford University Press, 1947, p. 10.

¹⁷⁰ R. T. Davies, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 329.

written prior to the rest of the Prologue.¹⁷¹

Considered as a lyric, the poem is a conventional ballade without an Envoy – in the form it is identical with *Gentiiesse* and *Against Women Unconstant*. As it is, it is a conventional abstract lyric in praise of a courtly lady. Its cataloguing nature is not uncommon to medieval love poetry, particularly this love song in praise of the lady. Traditionally, this kind of poem was more likely to be something like the Black Knight's long eulogy in the *Book of the Duchess*, where the lady is described from head to foot, while each particular virtue is enumerated and discussed thoroughly. But poems with lists of proper names were also, Robinson asserts, a type of poetry common to the period.¹⁷²

The poem is structured in a *telescoping* manner: the poet begins by enumerating qualities which would be considered general human virtues; he continues with a group representing virtues specific to the feminine gender; he concludes with a whole group of figures representative of the single most important virtue to the lady who follows the God of Love: "Trouthe of love."

The three biblical figures who begin the poem, *Absalon*, *Ester*, and *Jonathas*, represent three qualities which could be either masculine or feminine. Absalon is the figure representing "gilt tresses clere" (F 250), that is, shining, golden hair –recalling Absalon's treacherous rebellion against his father King David. The fact that the first "important" quality mentioned in the poem is beautiful hair, and the fact that the "gilt" hair belongs to "guilty" Absalon, prevents any attempt to read the poem as a literal expression of Chaucer's feelings.

The second quality mentioned is *Ester's* "mekenesse." Now when one considers the story of Esther, it seems strange for the poet to call her *meek*. If one thinks of "meek" as "timid" or "mild," or, as Webster defines it, "enduring injury with patience and without resentment," then the term can be used only ironically to refer to Esther, who boldly approached her husband, the Persian King Ahasuerus, petitioning the revocation of all laws concerning the Jews, and who also persuaded the king to hang Haman, architect of those laws, as well as his sons, and to allow the Jews to slaughter 500 of their enemies in Susa, his capital city. Such a woman can hardly be called "meek". Nor can she be called "meek" in the sense of "submissive" – she is certainly not submissive to her husband's

¹⁷¹ Margaret Galway, 'Chaucer's Sovereign Lady: a Study of the Prologue to the *Legend* and Related Poems', *MLR*, 33, 1983), p. 167.

¹⁷² Robinson, p. 843

will. Rather he submits to hers in all things regarding her people, as far as the book of Esther tells us. It may be that Esther is submissive to her kinsman Mordecai, for the book of Esther says “for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him” (Esther, 2:20). But the Bible itself never calls Esther “meek.” In fact, the only two biblical persons referred to by that adjective are Moses and Jesus Christ – neither of whom can be said to have been “submissive” except to one thing: the will of God. Esther's submission to Mordecai is her acceptance of the role God prepared for her as savior of His (and her) people. “Who knows,” Mordecai says to her, “whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). The meekness, then, to which the poet here refers is one of the highest of Christian virtues, in which, here, the speaker's lady is said to outshine even Esther.

Jonathan is the figure representing another important virtue common and appropriate to both sexes: “frendly manere” (F 252). Jonathan's great friendship with David needs little explanation: as told in I Samuel, Jonathan defied his father King Saul in order to warn David of Saul's enmity. This brotherly love is a clear example of *caritas*. This, and the example of Esther, illustrate the two greatest commandments according to Christ: Esther, in submitting her own will totally to the will of God, shows that her will is directed toward the Highest Good, toward God. Jonathan's unselfish brotherly love for David is the unselfish love which human beings need to have for each other according to natural Law. Thus Chaucer illustrates the command to love, and the command to love your neighbor as yourself by Jonathan's friendship. If the poet's lady excels in these two qualities, then little more need be said. But the fact is, the poet seems to regard these qualities lightly (they are preempted by golden hair), and he moves on to virtues which may be applicable only to women.

The faithful Penelope is cited as a figure of “wifhood” – here meaning not simply “womanhood” but the more specific *wifhood* – Penelope was a faithful wife for twenty years during her husband's absence, and so has every right to be cited for her *wifhood*. Marcia is a remarkable choice: the second wife of Cato, she was released by him in order that she might marry Hortensius, his friend. Upon Hortensius' death, Cato seems to have taken Marcia back. If Chaucer had read *Il Convivio*, he would have been familiar with Dante's allegorizing the story as the return of the soul to God, and the implication for Chaucer and his audience, then, may have been not only Marcia's “wifhood” but also her *repentence* – another Christian virtue. But Penelope and Marcia are told to make “no

comparison” of their wifehood with that of the poet's lady.

As the catalogue of virtues moves on, two other favourable characteristics peculiar to women are mentioned, and, as usual, the poet's lady outshines even the greatest examples of these qualities. The beauty of Helen of Troy or of the fair Isolde of the Tristan legends was common knowledge, but the face of the poet's lady would cause these rivals to hide their faces in shame. The “faire body” of Lavinia, Aeneas' bride, or of Lucrece, whose “faire Body” inspired the wicked Tarquin to rape her, could not hold a candle to the fair body of the poet's lady.

The final quality, placed in the climactic position as, apparently, the ultimate, supreme virtue, is “trouthe of love” (1. F 261), for which the poet cites eleven examples: Polyxena, Cleopatra, Thisbe, Hero, Dido, Laodamia, Phyllis, Canace, Hypsipyle, Hypermnestra, and Ariadne. Each one of these ladies was known to the fourteenth century audience for a love affair which ended tragically. Cleopatra, Thisbe, Hero, Dido, Laodamia, Phyllis and Canace all commit suicide as a result of unhappy love affairs. Hypsipyle and Ariadne die of love. Hypermnestra ends in prison. Polyxena is killed. Each is cited as example of “trouthe” in love – they remained faithful in spite of all. One cannot help but compare the usage of the word “trouthe” here with Chaucer's use of it elsewhere – particularly in the ballade with that title. *Trouthe* for Chaucer means not only moral faithfulness, but also the truth of the Christian religion, which is also the philosophical truth of ultimate reality. Truth, in fact, implied subduing one's will to love the Highest Good more than any earthly good – to act, ultimately, as Jonathan and Esther, not as Dido and Cleopatra.

The structure of this poem, then, reveals its ironic intent. Not only does the poem open with a punning praise of Absalon's hair, which pervades the rest of the poem, but it descends from the praise of Christian virtue to the praise of physical beauty for its own sake to the praise of “trouthe of love” or, in more realistic terms, dying for the sake of the love of earthly things – a “virtue” which the speaker seems to consider more valuable than the earlier qualities, since he devotes much more space to it than to any other quality. The *caritas* of the first stanza is to be balanced against the *cupiditas* of the last, and the speaker ironically appears to choose the latter.

Taken by itself, then, the ballade seems ironic. It remains to be seen what function it serves in the context of the Prologue as a whole. There are, of course, two versions of

the Prologue, and the ballade functions differently in each. First, in both Prologues, the ballade serves to point a climactic moment in the action: the point at which the God of Love enters with his Queen, Alceste, and the poem changes from a *pastoral* about love to a dream vision about love. It is one of those points which Haskell was describing when she spoke of the stopping of the narrative roll to examine the single frame – here the frame which depicts the God of Love's own lady, Queen Alceste; the wife of Admetus in classical mythology, Alceste consented to die in his place at the hour of his death, and so is the main example of womanly devotion and of “trouthe in love.”

Aside from this structural function, and its own lyric beauty, the poem has other purposes in its context, as the speaker does not realize that his song reveals his value of earthly forms of love over heavenly – that he finds the values of Cleopatra and Dido more appealing than those of Esther and Jonathan. That irony reveals the irony of the entire poem: for it is, as Alceste calls it, “a glorious legende / Of good wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lives” (F 483 – 485). That is, it is a parody of the *Golden Legend* – a parody of saints' lives, for these are Cupid's saints. The parody invites comparison with the original.

But Chaucer's use of the lyric within the narrative really culminates in the most important of his finished works, *and Criseyde*. Chaucer here takes the traditional story, from Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, of the tragic love affair set against the background of the Trojan War, and retells it in his own memorable style. Chaucer always seems to have worked within a *tradition*, whether it was the courtly love tradition, or a traditional metric form or literary genre, a traditional story, or even a *translation* of material from a tradition, but Chaucer was *never the prisoner of tradition*. He never copied what had been given him; rather he revitalized it. The courtly love situation took new life in his hands as he individualized it and gave it a new twist. So in the , Chaucer takes what he had been given and makes it into what has been called a “*psychological novel*.” Whether or not this is the case, it is much concerned with the psychology of lovers, and much of this psychology is presented in the heightened, lyric expressions dispersed through the poem. The develops much like a motion picture, to use Haskell's analogy, with scenes of dialogue and action pointed, at key moments, by lyric utterances, spoken most often by himself, which, like stop action in a film, momentarily freeze the action to concentrate upon character.

Chaucer's presents once again the main theme of his lyric poems: the idea of love.

Most often the idea expressed concerns the limitations of earthly love in contrast with the Divine Love which orders the heavens and the earth. This is the theme of *and Criseyde*, which illustrates by long and painful *exemplum* the impermanence of worldly love, and depicts in the end a who, ascended to the top of the universe, sees like Scipio or Dante the order of a cosmos bound by God's eternal love.

The lyric passages of the , which, as Robert Payne notes, interrupt the plot at every important development, form what Payne calls “a kind of distillation of the emotional progress of the poem.”¹⁷³ As such, it develops the theme of worldly love vs. Divine Love from the point of view of characters involved in the action of a courtly romance.

While Payne found ten lyrics in the poem¹⁷⁴, and Charles Muscatine saw “some thirty – odd lyric monologues” in Troilus’ mouth alone,¹⁷⁵ I could identify six passages in *and Criseyde* which can beyond question be regarded as individual, separable lyric poems in their own right. The first of these is, of course, the *Canticus Troili* of Book I, lines 400 – 420. This poem, as is well known, is a translation into English of Petrarch's sonnet 132. Chaucer, it will be recalled, had already worked with the translation of lyric poetry in his ABC and *The Former Age*, and would work with translation again in the *Complaint of Venus*. The *Canticus Troili* is, however, a closer translation than these. Still here, as with those other poems, the first and most important question to be asked is what changes were made from the original and why those changes were made. But in the case of the *Canticus Troili*, one must also ask precisely what the translation of Petrarch's sonnet does for the narrative at this particular point. And the two questions can be answered simultaneously through an analysis of the poem.

Chaucer's alterations from Petrarch begin with the very first lines of the poem. For where Petrarch asks “S'amor non e, che dunque e quel ch'io sento?” (“If it is not “love, what then is it that I feel?”) (1. 1), Chaucer translates “If no love is, O God, what fele I so?” The difference is drastic, for where Petrarch is concentrating upon the analysis of the feelings of a particular, individual speaker, Chaucer is considering the more universal question of whether love itself exists *at all*. This seems at first a reversal of the process Chaucer had been engaging in throughout his lyric poems – it would have been more typical of Chaucer to have further particularized the theme of the sonnet, rather than

¹⁷³ Payne, p. 186.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Muscatine, p. 135

broadened its application. But remember that this lyric occurs in a narrative – the speaker is already particularized as , the former scoffer at lovers now turned lover himself.

That, then, is one reason for the change: it is quite consistent with ' character up to this point to begin the lyric “If no love is...,” for his previous taunts at others' amorous misfortunes, his opinion of lovers as “veray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye” (Bk, 1,1. 202), are indications that had previously doubted the existence of love itself. Now, struck by Criseyde's beauty, and thus having proof in his own flesh of love's existence, still is confused as to the exact nature of love: “And if love is, what thing and which is he?” (Bk. I, 1. 401).

Further, this confusion as to the nature of love itself reflects the overall theme of the poem: the confusion of wordly love with universal love. The narrator has said, after was struck with love of Criseyde, that “Love is he that alle thing may bynde, / For may no man fordoun the lawe of kynde” (Bk. I, 11. 237 – 38). This, of course, is somewhat ironic, for the narrator is thinking of Cupid, the God of Courtly Love, while the “lawe of kynde” that “alle thing may bynde” is rather that universal Divine Love. Troilus' confusion about the real nature of love here is consistent with the confusion apparent throughout the poem.

Chaucer devotes the remainder of the first of his three stanzas to a fairly close rendering of the rest of Petrarch's initial quatrain. If love is good, he says, then where does all his woe come from? If love is bad, then why are its pains so sweet? The rhetorical figure is contentio, as Payne and others have pointed out: “the balancing of these clauses against each other in paired oppositions.”¹⁷⁶ That figure is significant to the theme of the poem, according to Payne, for the effect is to “align the two sets of suggestions (i.e., the “subjection of the individual will to love” and the “order of natural harmony larger and more remote than individual will or human love”) in nearly paralyzing ironies.”¹⁷⁷

Chaucer's second stanza follows Petrarch's second quatrain fairly closely. As Thompson points out, Chaucer is here, like Petrarch, now concentrating upon the suffering individual.¹⁷⁸

The final stanza of ' song is closest of all to the original, rendering Petrarch's sestet in seven lines. Like Petrarch, begins by saying that if he consents to the love, then it is wrong to complain. This is followed by the metaphor of the lover as a *rudderless ship*,

¹⁷⁶ Payne, p. 198.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁷⁸ Thomson, p. 318.

confusedly tossed about by conflicting winds, and by the depiction of the disoriented lover shivering in summer and burning in winter. Chaucer's only changes are the already noted addition of love as a "wondre malady".

In the twelfth line of Petrarch's sonnet, the speaker depicts his metaphorical rudderless boat as being without its *wisdom*, and being, instead, laden with *error*. In Petrarch, the *wisdom* may have implied certainty, the *error* confusion, and the line may simply have reflected the speaker's attitude about the conflicting emotions within him. In , however, the *error* may have suggested awareness of his error in choosing Criseyde's love over universal love – an awareness for which would not be ready until the end of Book V. That "error" may be suggested ironically, though, by the image of the *rudderless boat*.

Chaucer's alterations of Petrarch's Italian, then, have done three things: first, Chaucer's poem is now concerned, more generally than Petrarch's, with the universal nature of love. Secondly, Chaucer sees the nature of love as a disease when directed, as in the case of , toward more partial good in place of the Highest Good. And third, that love is directed freely by the human will, and therefore Troilus is accountable for his love.

This accountability is suggested again in the second and longest important lyric passage of the , Antigone's song in Book II, lines 827 – 875. this is a woman's song, a *winileod* in Peter Dronke's terminology, thanking the God of Love for the speaker's remarkable lover. Taken by itself it is, as Donald R. Howard describes it, "a characteristic courtly lyric ... almost a compendium of courtly love conventions."¹⁷⁹

But the real importance of Antigone's song is the context in which it appears. Like the first *Canticus Troili*, Antigone's song occurs at a crucial point in the action: the moment at which Criseyde is trying to decide what to do about Troilus' love. Unlike that former poem, or any of the other lyrics in the , Antigone's song has a definite function in the plot of the narrative itself – for it is Antigone's lyric song in joyous praise of love which convinces Criseyde to accept .

Antigone's song is a courtly lyric. It begins with the speaker, in feudal imagery, declaring allegiance to the God of Love, whose "humble subgit" she is (l. 828), and to whom she gives all her "hertes lust to rente" (l. 830). She goes on to say that she does this

¹⁷⁹ Donald R. Howard, 'Experience, Language, and Consciousness: *and Criseyde*' in Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg, eds., *Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1970, p. 182.

because of the grace Love has shown her, since he “han me so wel byset / In love” (l. 834 – 5). In stanza three, the speaker describes her noble lover in the usual way, even religious, terms – her lover is the “roote” of “vertu,” for instance – and in stanza four she again thanks the God of Love, and adds how her love has ennobled her, as well:

This dooth me so to vertu for t'entende,

That day by day X in my will amende. (ll. 853 – 854)

Before Antigone declares the permanence of her love in stanza seven, and utters in her final couplet words quite similar to Criseyde's situation

Al dredde I first to love hym to bigynne,

Now woot I wel, ther is no peril inne. (ll. 874 – 875)

she devotes stanzas five and six to a defense of love against its enemies, and these stanzas are of particular importance.

Sister M. Charlotte Borthwick has pointed out most systematically how Antigone's song answers the objections to love which Criseyde has just raised prior to entering her garden and hearing her niece's performance. To Criseyde's objection that love will “thralien libertee,” Antigone answers

"And whoso seith that for to love is vice,

Or thraldom, though he feel in it destresse,

He outhur is envyous, or right nice,

Or is unmyghty, for his shrewednesse,

To loven;" (ll. 855 – 859)

May nought endure on it to see for bright?

Or love the wers, though wrecches on it crien?" (ll. 862 – 865)

Antigone, then, in the conventional dialectical attitude of the courtly lover, which we have seen before, for instance, in the *Complaynt D'Amours*, answers the charges of the “enemies of love” – here in the person of Criseyde herself. And Criseyde is, apparently, converted by Antigone's song, for she sighs “Lord is ther swych blisse among / These loveres, as they konne faire endite?” (ll. 885 – 886), and

gan every word which that she of hire herde,

She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,

And ay gan love hire lasse for t'agaste

Than it dide erst, and syken in hire herte,

That she wex somewhat able to convert. (ll. 899 – 903)

after which she goes to bed and dreams of the eagle, , tearing out her heart.

But while Criseyde seems convinced by the song, a closer look at Antigone's "arguments" reveals that the reader should not be. She never says that it *isn't*. She merely puts forth an *ad hominem* argument, avoiding the question altogether, and claiming that anyone who would believe this way must be envious, quite ignorant, or unable to love because of wickedness – the charge is never really answered. Second, Antigone's use of her own love as an example of one without jealousy is emphasized in line 866 when she seems to admit that there are hard times, but the good times make love worthwhile. And finally, her hyperbolic statement, so typical of lovers, that her love will last forever is so false that no medieval person, schooled in the transience of "this world, that passeth soone as floures faire," would accept. The contrasting love that *does* last forever – the love of God, who is *really* "he that is the welle of worthynesse, / Of trouthe grownd, mirour of goodlihed" (ll. 841 – 42) as Antigone, in conventional religious imagery, describes her lover, here perhaps with a bit of irony.

What, then, is it that convinces Criseyde? She is to be swayed by her emotions, against her reason. Howard describes Antigone's song as having "the unique quality of lyric poetry, particularly when sung," in that it "submerges the plain sense of language in song and image" and emphasizes a power, "by suspending normal syntactic and logical relations, to make outlandish notions seem compelling, to make sense out of nonsense."¹⁸⁰ While Howard's notion of the lyric is not valid for Chaucer's shorter poems on the whole, it seems to apply in this case. Criseyde is convinced, "in her feelings" as Howard says, that love is right.

Like ' first lyric, this song and Criseyde's reaction to it help to establish character. While ' song suggested his confusion and lack of self-knowledge, his tendency to remain in inactive suffering, and revealed the fallacy of his predisposition to put the blame for his actions on forces other than himself, Criseyde's reaction to Antigone's song shows her as a woman who allows her emotions to lead her – she has been described as "the ferfulleste wight / That myghte be" (Bk. II, 450 – 51), and certainly her other emotions are nearly as strong as her fear, as here they convince her to accept the love of . It is not merely the medieval commonplace of woman being governed by emotion and man by reason – of the lascivious Eve seducing the rational Adam – though that tradition probably colours some of Chaucer's characterization; it is rather that, within Criseyde herself, as, for that matter,

in , was the power of the rational faculty to discern the Highest Good and to realize the impermanence of wordly goods. As Sister Borthwick argues, the naive young Antigone may not be aware of the irony in what she says, that human love is not the Highest Good, but Criseyde, as her interior monologue has shown, is aware; she merely “allows the words of the girl to work upon her.”¹⁸¹ Criseyde is aware of the dangers of the affair and of the likely continuance of it – she goes into it with her eyes open. And the point is that she, like , must be held accountable. She is not predestined, but exercises her free will. She makes a conscious decision not so much to love but to feel the emotions: “she wex somewhat able to converte” (1, 903). It is not so much, as Howard describes it, that “Chaucer here explores the irrational element of our choices and finds that we are not free except in the most limited way.”¹⁸² It is rather Criseyde's free decision, reached through her emotions, to allow this love – a function of her “slyding of corage,” her inability, because of the strength of her conflicting emotions, to take the sort of strong stand that *truth*, the moral absolute, the proper ordering of life, including submission of emotion to reason, would enable her to take,

The next important lyric passages occur at the very climax of the poem – and Criseyde have finally been brought together through the trickeries of Pandarus, and spend a blissful night together. In the morning, a long scene occurs (Bk. III, 11, 1415 – 1526), in which the lovers are awakened by the crowing cock, they curse the coming of the day, pledge eternal faithfulness, and part in sorrow. My concern is most specifically with Criseyde's apostrophe to the night, lines 1422 – 1442, and Troilus' answering apostrophe to the dawn. Both passages are, like the previous two lyrics, Chaucerian additions to the *Filostrato*, although Troilus' speech is suggested in three brief lines of Boccaccio's text.¹⁸³ That Chaucer was familiar with the dawn song tradition is clear in the beginning of the *Complaint of Mars*, as well as in the *Reeve's Tale*, where he parodies it.¹⁸⁴ The significance of Criseyde's and apostrophes here becomes apparent upon a close examination of the poems themselves, and an examination as well of their relation to the *aube* tradition, and their place in the itself.

Criseyde's poem begins with an address to Troilus as her “hertes lyf” (1. 1422).

¹⁸⁰ Howard, p. 183.

¹⁸¹ Borthwick, p. 230.

¹⁸² Howard, p. 191.

¹⁸³ Robinson, p. 823.

She laments the fact that she was ever born, because she feels such woe “That day of us moot make disseveraunce” (l. 1424). It is she who insists that the time has come for to leave, for otherwise, her reputation ruined, she will be “lost for evere mo” (l. 1426). R. E. Kaske first noted that Criseyde's lines emphasize a reversal of roles, contrasting with the typical *aube* situation where it is the lover, not the lady, who usually is the one to initiate the leave, though it is true that Chaucer is here following Boccaccio.¹⁸⁵ Jonathan Saville provides further support for Kaske's argument, remarking that the character of the lady in the dawn song is rather invariable: she is nearly always more passive, more grieved at the separation, more antagonistic to the day, and more preoccupied by love. It is nearly always the knight, not the lady, who is first to insist on the necessity of parting.¹⁸⁶ Kaske points to other instances in this *aube* context of Book III where the conventional roles of lover and lady are reversed. ' anguish at parting is much more intense than Criseyde's, according to Kaske, as sighs “ful soore” (l. 1471), will be “ded anon” if he must, for long, “fro yow sojourn” (ll. 1483 – 41). Further, when asks Criseyde for assurance (ll. 1485 – 91) and she pledges faithfulness, it is another reversal of the prevailing pattern.¹⁸⁷

This reversal of traditional roles, which shows as the one less able to accept the reality of the dawn, seems intended on Chaucer's part for two reasons. First, it may suggest the story's end, where remains the faithful lover, refusing to accept the fact that he and Criseyde are separated forever, while Criseyde more easily accepts the situation, allowing things to happen to her again through her “slydinge corage,” and adjusts to Diomedes as her lover. Secondly, and more importantly for my purposes here, the reversal of roles may imply a reversal of the normal, natural order of things – a situation further underlined by Criseyde's arraignment of the night in the following lines. This sort of reversal is not uncommon in courtly literature, where quite often, as F. Xavier Baron points out, “What is shameful and unreasonable for society is honourable for the lovers.”¹⁸⁸ For Chaucer, however, this reversal of the normal order serves not to ennoble the lovers by separating them, but rather to emphasize the lovers' misdirected lives.

Criseyde expresses a desire that the night would last as long as the one “when

¹⁸⁴ See R. E. Kaske, ‘An Aube in the *Reeve's Tale*’, *ELM*, 20, 1959, pp. 295-310.

¹⁸⁵ R. E. Kaske, ‘The Aube in Chaucer's *Troilus*’, in Richard O. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, eds., *Chaucer Criticism: and Criseyde and the Minor Poems*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961, p. 171.

¹⁸⁶ Jonathan Saville, *The Medieval Erotic Aube: Structure as Meaning*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1972, pp. 153-54.

¹⁸⁷ Kaske, ‘The Aube in Chaucer's *Troilus*’, p. 172.

Almena lay by Jove” (1, 1428) – the night when Hercules was conceived, which lasted some three months. She addresses the “blake night” (1. 1429), with a double reference to the night’s darkness as well as its evil in passing too fast, God made the night to give beasts and men rest from their labour, but this night is to blame for speeding by so fast that there is no rest. In the third stanza Criseyde refers again to God as the creator of nature, “maker of kynde” (1. 1437), and calls the night “unkynde,” or unnatural. She expresses the desire that God, in punishment, will bind night eternally to her own hemisphere, so that day will never come.

Now the irony in Criseyde’s lines is hard to miss. For here is Criseyde, already having, in an “unnatural” manner, given her emotions priority over her reason, and reversed the traditional male-female roles with , accusing the night of being “unnatural” merely for staying only its naturally allotted time, rather than the three months she wishes for in the beginning, or the eternity at the end.

Saralyn Daly calls Criseyde’s aube “blasphemous,” saying “not only does she presume to criticize a work of creation and advise that God alter his arrangement, as sometimes occurred in the Provençal albas; but in so doing, she recalls and alters the very scriptural passage which concerns the creation of night and day,”¹⁸⁹ by which she refers to Criseyde’s line to the night “That shapen art by God this world to hide” (1. 1430). What is truly unnatural here is Criseyde’s *proposal*, not the *night*.

Another aspect of the unnaturalness of the lovers’ feelings about the coming of the dawn was discussed in my section on the *Complaint of Mars*. There I noted how the lovers seemed discontent with the natural order of things, since all natural creatures rejoiced at the coming of dawn, while the lovers cursed it. Now Saville, discussing this conventional disharmony between lovers and nature in the aube, says that

Nature is not merely a different world of feelings, a world of lower creatures who cannot understand or share the lovers’ higher feelings. It is also felt as an antagonistic force of great strength, opposed to the lovers and trying to destroy their union. Nature and the lovers are not merely contrasted in respect of their values and their kinds of reality; they are in active, bitter conflict. And the focus of this conflict is that indispensable

¹⁸⁸ F. Xavier Baron, ‘Love in Chretien’s *Charrette*: Reversed Values and Isolation’, *MLQ*, 34 (1973), p. 375

¹⁸⁹ Saralyn R. Daly, ‘Criseyde’s Blasphemous Aube’, *N&Q*, 10 - 1963, p. 443.

element of the alba, the dawn.

In Chaucer's aube, however, it is not that the lovers are superior in their emotions to the rest of nature; it is rather that they, through free will, have turned toward worldly pleasures and so are out of harmony with nature. And this aube indicates the discrepancy between Criseyde's love and the love in which the rest of the natural world participates. Criseyde wants this night to last forever, but that pleasure in which she finds joy in the night is a false pleasure.

The concluding lines, in which Criseyde makes specific reference to time and place, emphasize the transience of her kind of love:

"For now, for thow so hiest out of Troie,

Have I forgon thus hastili my joie:" (II. 1441 – 42)

The references to Troy here, and at the beginning of Troilus' answering *aube*, not only cast the shadow of doom over the lovers by recalling the doomed city, as Gardner suggests,¹⁹⁰ but also emphasize the transience of all worldly things – as the power and glory of Troy, greatest of earthly cities, vanished, so the love of and Criseyde will vanish, as it must, in this world. And Criseyde's exclamation of how "hastili" her joy has been taken away by the dawn implies the "hasty" character worldly joys, and must suggest that one joy that is eternal: the "kyndely" love of "God, maker of kynde." *aube* continues in much the same vein, but condemns the day itself. He curses the sun's coming into Troy, saying that it *discloses* what the night and love have stolen. The "envious day" – like the "candel of jealousy" in Mars – peers in at every hole with one of its bright eyes. The sun here takes the part of the envious "talebearers" of the courtly tradition. He asks that God, "for his grace," drink the sunlight.

The irony of these lines must be obvious by now. Certainly it is the daylight, rather than the destroying of it, that is traditionally associated with God's grace. The eyes of the sun, then, may also be the eyes of the all – seeing Judge. Ironic, too, in this context is Troilus' consigning the daylight, for its spiteful treatment of poor lovers who have never done it any harm, to hell: "Thyn be the peyne of helle!" he exclaims in line 1458. This, of course, is a complete reversal of the traditional associations of the darkness with evil and hell, the coming of light with Christ, the last judgement, resurrection and eternal life. The

¹⁹⁰ Gardner, p. 139.

reversal only serves to further underline Troilus' confused perceptions. He goes on to accuse the sun of having "siayn" many a lover, since its light will not let them dwell anywhere in safety; *secrecy* is, of course, the keynote of courtly love. The "slaying" may be the metaphorical "dying for love" so common in the courtly love situation, when the lover must be separated from his Beloved. On the other hand, it may refer to the literal death of one or both of the lovers if they are discovered together by the jealous husband, whose presence usually causes the need for secrecy in the first place. But that slaying may intimate another kind of death – that of the spirit. If one conceives of those spying eyes of the sun as the all seeing eyes of God, then the lovers who sought to hide from those eyes are revealed in their sin, and are consigned to the *everlasting* death of hell, their sin being their preference of worldly love over Divine.

Later, praying to the God of Love after it is decided that Criseyde is to be sent to the Greek camp in exchange for Antenor, declares that "ye Criseyde and me ban fully brought / Into youre grace, and bothe oure hertes seled" (Bk. IV, 11. 292 – 93). But Criseyde will break faith, break her vow, break the *seal*.

In his final stanza, changes from cursing the "cruel day" to despising the sun. Portraying the sun as a somewhat less than ideal lover, depicts the sun as a fool, who should be despised, since he allows his love, the dawn, to rise and leave so early only to persecute other lovers. The sun, then, is pictured as a boor, one who cannot love properly and who prevents others from doing so. It is an interesting stanza since here the lover, rather than showing himself, depicts the natural world anthropomorphically, in the form of the lovers Titan and Aurora, as being out of step with the courtly love situation.¹⁹¹ It is a clever new twist, but in the overall context must be seen as an example of ' loss of proper perspective in not realizing that he, not the sun, is misdirected.

The ultimate effect of the *aube* scene, then, is to underline the contrast between the worldly love of the two lovers with the heavenly love associated with the dawn and the light in a Christian context. The most important statement in the of that universal love, though placed ironically in the mouth of a still misdirected who does not really comprehend the significance of what he says, follows almost immediately in ' "Hymn to Love" which occurs near the end of Book III (lines 1744 – 1771).

¹⁹¹ Skeat, p. 402.

Troilus' Hymn to Love is another translation, this one also a close one, by medieval standards; it is a translation of Boethius' Book II, metre 8 – a text which has been referred to several times before as the classic expression of love as the binding force in the universe. Chaucer begins with a *repetitio* that emphasizes, by repetition, the topic of the poem. Chaucer shows the power of love in terms moving from the general to the specific, from the macrocosm to the microcosm. Love governs the earth, sea, and heavens; it binds nations of people together; and it binds smaller groups of people as well – “compaignie” and “couples”:

"Love, that of erthe and se hath governaunce,

Love, that his hestes hath in hevenes hy

Love, that with an holsom alliaunce

Halt peples joyned, as hym lest hem gye,

Love, that knetteth lawe of compaignie,

And couples doth in vertu for to dwelle,

Bynd this acord, that I have told and telle."(Bk. III, 11. 1744 – 1750)

The most significant change from Boethius that Chaucer makes here is the alteration of Boethius' reference to the holy bond of marriage – “This love halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and kyntteth sacrement of marriages of chaste loves” (11. 21 – 23) says Boethius. Chaucer changes the reference to “couples.” This according to Ida L. Gordon “betrays the inapplicability to his own love for Criseyde in the 'holy bond of love' his hymn is celebrating, for an illicit relationship cannot, by its *very* nature, belong to the divine order of harmony.”¹⁹² This may be an overstatement, since it was possible, as in Dante's love for Beatrice, for the love of “couples” to belong to the universal harmony. Stanza two, in words *very* close to Boethius' opening lines, shows love as the power that holds together by a perpetually existing bond, all the *very* conflicting elements that make up the universe. And in lines ironic considering the *aube* scene just described, , forgetting his words of some three hundred lines earlier, echoes Boethius in praising the orderly movement of the sun and moon, of night and day, as part of Love's governaunce:

That Phebus mote his rosy day forth brynge,

And that the mone hath lordshipe over the nyghtes, –

Al this doth Love, ay heried be his myghtes! (Bk. III, 11. 1755 – 57)

In his third stanza Chaucer combines the lines of Boethius immediately following these on the sun and moon, concerning Love's holding back the sea, with Boethius' later lines about what would happen if Love did *not* order all things. expands this idea into the wish that God, the "auctour" of "kynde," would bind all human hearts by love as well, compelling them to love:

"That from his bond no wight the wey out wiste;

And hertes colde, hem wolde I that he twiste

To make hem love, and that hem liste ay rewe

On hertes sore, and kepe hem that ben trewe!" (II, 1768 – 1771)

The effect of these final lines is to emphasize again the confusion in Troilus' mind concerning the two types of love. The first three stanzas of his hymn have celebrated the universal binding force of Divine Love, the harmony of the universe; the last stanza, with its reference to the ordering of "cold hertes," to the desire that all those cold hearted mistresses will be compelled to have pity upon their suffering lovers. As Gordon puts it, "it's ambiguous which love is meant, and the point is that doesn't know the difference. ' hymn shows that what his love is really seeking is the true happiness."¹⁹³ But that love is obviously misdirected, and that raises a further point about these last lines. is once again touching on the question of free will vs. predestination suggested in the first *Canticus Troili* and the context of Antigone's song. He here wishes that people were *compelled* to love. The fact is that they are, according to the medieval mind. Like all objects in the universe, man's will is directed by nature to its proper place, and his love directed toward the Highest Good. Through his free will, man can turn his love toward worldly goods, and that is what has happened in Troilus' case – he has chosen the human love of Criseyde as the force which will govern his life. The ironic point is that what is wishing for in this lyric is that all hearts be compelled to the human love in which he engages, and to which he alludes in this final stanza – a situation which would reverse the effects of the harmonious love he has been praising throughout the poem, as love of God would no longer be the single unifying force in the universe, but all would be attracted to partial transient good, and chaos would result.

The importance of this lyric, here at the beginning of the action, when events begin to reach their now – inevitable conclusion, cannot be overemphasized. In translating

¹⁹² Gordon, pp. 34-35.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 35.

Boethius' classic statement of love's power, and in depicting ' disastrous misunderstanding of the concept, Chaucer has presented here what John Hagopian calls a "microcosm of the whole poem."¹⁹⁴ Perhaps Robert Payne says it best when he remarks "however much a Neoplatonist one holds to be, the Boethian harmonic scale of creation still demands the perception that the love between man and woman is *not* the principle that controls the universe, nor is mankind constrained to the former as to the latter."¹⁹⁵

The result of this confusion of the two kinds of love is illustrated by the last of the isolable lyrics in the , the second *Canticus Troili*. This poem, appearing in Book V, lines 638 – 644, after Criseyde has left Troy is the shortest of the lyric passages in *and Criseyde*. Here Chaucer's use of ship imagery was consistent with the imagery of the rest of the poem. As will be seen, the imagery of this stanza gains special significance when compared with the imagery of the other lyric passages of the poem, particularly Troilus' first song and the Hymn to Love.

The metaphor of the lover as a sailor lost at sea without a star to guide him begins in the first line and develops through the stanza:

*"O sterre, of which I lost have al the light
With herte soor we! oughte I to biwaiile.
That evere derk in torment, nyght by nyght,
Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saiile;
For which the tenth nyght, if that I faille
The gydyng of thi bemes bright an hours,
My ship and me Caribdis wol devours."* (Bk. V, 11. 638 – 644)

Criseyde is the star which would guide the way for the speaker, , through his life. She is the *lode – star*, the polar star, the one fixed constant in the heavens against which all else can be measured. The image is quite fascinating. It is certainly fitting for a love poem – in the Middle Ages, the attraction of the compass needle toward the north star would be an example of the universal love which links all things in the universe together and which, in astrology, allowed some heavenly bodies to cast special influence on particular objects on earth. The same sort of attraction takes place between the lover and his lady.

But Criseyde is in the Greek camp, and without her has no light. He has good

¹⁹⁴ Hagopian, p. 2

¹⁹⁵ Payne, p. 205.

cause to lament.

If one compares Troilus' first song with his last, the most obvious point of comparison is the *ship* imagery. In the first *Canticus Troili*, the lover was *rudderless boat*, tossed about by contrasting winds. His love of Criseyde had left him confused, uncertain, and unhappy, and his ship had no direction. Now, in Book V, after Criseyde has left, she has taken with her the guiding light of love, and Troilus' ship is *again* without direction, confused, and heading for disaster. The two lyrics illustrate the "double sorrow" of , and underline the real cause of that double sorrow. The problem at both points – when suffers for his love of Criseyde and then for his loss – is the same: his life has no real focus to give it direction; it is void of "the *true* love which *orders* all things and causes them to find their proper places.

In the middle of the poem, in Book III, believes he has found that force which will guide his ship. Thus the three lyrics illustrate well the circular pattern announced by the narrator at the beginning: "Fro wo to wele, and after out of joye" (Bk. I, 1, 4), prays that Love will "cerden hertes alle, and faste bynde" – that love will guide, even *control*, all things, as it does in his own heart, and as it does the sea:

... *that gredy is to fiowen*

Constreyneth love to a certeyn ende so

His flodes that so fiersly they ne growen

To drenchen erthe and al for evere mo; (ll. 1758 – 1761)

It is true that love should be the force which serves to guide the ship of Troilus' life. His mistake, as has been noted, is his exclusive faith in the wrong kind of love; that is what, in the end, will break his ship.

The lyrics of the present a pattern of the emotional and thematic movement of the poem. They depict Troilus' confusion, his double sorrow as well as his joy and Criseyde's. And the lyrics emphasize the major theme of this poem, and, it seems, Chaucer's lyrics as a body: the transcendence of universal love over sexual love. The first *Canticus Troili*, the translation of Petrarch in Book I, depicts Troilus' initial sorrow in presenting love as a *desease* when directed toward anything less than the Highest Good. And the lyric emphasizes, in its changes from the Petrarchan original, that , with mankind in general, is to be held accountable for the object of his love. Antigone's Song in Book II gives an emotional argument in favour of romantic love, and helps to incline Criseyde toward accepting as her lover. The fact that Criseyde is convinced by the song is an indication of

her allowing her emotions rather than her reason to guide her. But Criseyde is to be held accountable, as well, since she *chooses* to let her emotions sway her. The magnificent *aube* scene shows and Criseyde at the high point of their love, uttering dawn songs which reveal a discrepancy between the lovers' world and the natural world governed by *universal* love. And that discrepancy is made more apparent by Troilus' "Hymn to Love" at the end of Book III. In a paraphrase of Boethius praises Love as the binding force of the universe, but reveals his confusion by attributing to his love for Criseyde the harmony of the universe. But ' problem is that the binding force of his life is transient – she is "slyding of corage" – and so his *personal* world collapses. Thus the final *Canticus Troili* of Book V depicts ' life as a *rudderless boat*, without the direction and order that Love could give it. Troilus was supposed to place his love elsewhere and direct it towards universal love.

But and Criseyde, like Mars and Venus or like Anelida in other poems, were *pagans*: one of Chaucer's points is that they could be excused for placing their loves in the wrong places, since they lived before the revelation of Christ. Christians, Chaucer's audience, have a greater responsibility, for the Christian has already been shown what sees from the eighth sphere:

*And ther he saugh, with ful avysement,
The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye
With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie.
And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
This lite! spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held ai vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.
And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
And dampned aloure werk that foioiweth so
The biynde lust, the which that may not Taste,,
And shoiden aloure herte on heven caste. (Bk. V, 11. 1811–1825)*

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

In his landmark book, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Charles Muscatine challenged the long-held tradition that Chaucer was an innovative "realist" in a time of literary dullness and didacticism. Chaucer's position in literary history makes fuller sense if we consider him as belonging to that international, Gothic tradition of which French is the central literature. The earlier French tradition shows better than the English that Chaucer's realism is medieval, not modern or "Renaissance." It shows that his mixture of styles, rather than embodying some presumably advanced revolt from convention, is an expression of the *very* ambivalence of his culture, that it is the style of the period.

Certainly Chaucer is working within the literary traditions of the late Middle Ages when he writes his lyrics. He does not break from tradition to write totally new kinds of poems. What he does do is use the tradition for his own ends, rather than tailor his ends to fit the tradition. Thus the tradition itself was forever altered for Chaucer's having written in it, which was T. S. Eliot's prescription for the proper relationship of tradition to the individual talent.

One tradition which Chaucer inherited was the tradition of courtly love, born in eleventh-century Provence and developed by Chretien de Troyes and by Guillaume de Lorris. Chaucer received the tradition through the *Roman de la Rose* and from Machaut and his followers, and saw it, in altered form, in the love poems of Dante and of Petrarch. The ideal lover, refining his soul through love service to a distant goddess-like woman, had become so familiar, though, that particularly in Machaut's disciples, Chaucer surely detected form without substance. His solution was irony. The conventional *cliches* uttered by the lover in a courtly love poem became, in Chaucer, ironic since they contrasted with what Chaucer perceived as the proper object of love, the Highest Good. The proper love of man and woman was not the ideal courtly love situation, wherein the Beloved stands high above the lover and demands service, but rather the kind of mutual caring and understanding which a good marriage of natural companions, for instance, could bring (as in the *Envoy to Scogan*). Therefore Chaucer wrote his courtly poems, quite often, as parodies, pointing beyond the inadequate courtly situation to the universal love beyond it.

Chaucer creates this kind of irony in his lyric poems usually in one of two ways: either he individualizes the speaker of the lyric, as he does, say, in *To Rosemounde*, and so implies the failure of the individual to live up to the ideal of the convention, or he actually puts the lyric itself into a narrative context, which shows in more detail the character of the individual speaker, and makes even more clear the discrepancy between the ideal words which the lover utters, and the lover's real position. Here, too, Chaucer was working with the traditional forms and genres he received from his courtly predecessors. He uses the traditional ballades (*Against Women Unconstant*) and roundels (*Merciles Beaute*), the traditional complaints (*Complaint to his Lady*) and salut d'amours (*To Rosemounde*), but he puts them into the mouths of individualized speakers rather than conventional "everyman" types, or he puts them into narrative contexts, all to show the lack of agreement between the ideal and the individual reality.

Parts of the tradition, too, were Chaucer's sources. But even when it would seem that Chaucer must stay totally faithful to his sources, that is, in his translations, one can see the poet in him reworking, embellishing, or deleting (in *Venus* or in *The Former Age*, for example), in order to make the translation say what Chaucer wants to say.

And part of any literary tradition is the language in which the author writes. With Chaucer, this is a particularly crucial area. In fact, as Muscatine pointed out, Chaucer was writing within the French tradition. He takes the English idiom of his time and reworks it in the French style, so that in a poem like *A Complaint to his Lady*, he is creating a new English poetic language (by working, again, in the French courtly tradition). But his linguistic experiments do not stop there, and he keeps working with language, trying to use sounds (in the *Words unto Adam*, or in *Merciles Beaute*) or playing upon multiple connotations (as in the *Complaint to his Purse*), to communicate beyond the literal level of words.

At the same time Chaucer was also contending with a *philosophical* tradition, one that extended from Augustine, Macrobius, and Boethius down through Thomas Aquinas to Roger Bacon and to William of Ockham. It was a tradition which stressed the necessity of man's will being set on the Highest Good. It was a tradition that conceived of a perfectly ordered universe, and of happiness as participation in that perfect order, that natural law. These precepts Chaucer accepted and presented in his poetry as the ideal behind the parodied courtly tradition.

From the philosophical tradition, too, Chaucer inherited the realist-nominalist

controversy: can the mind know particulars, or can it know oftly universals? Although his favourite philosophers (Boethius and Macrobius), influenced by Neoplatonism, were realists, Chaucer's temperament seems not to have allowed him to accept the kind of position that would allow Dante, for example, to find in the love of a woman a route to the love of God. Though early in his career Chaucer seems to work in the realist tradition, culminating in *Womanly Noblesse*, Chaucer seems later to have swung toward nominalism. Some of the alterations Chaucer makes in the lyric tradition- that is, individualizing the speaker, and showing the ironic contrast between individual situations and ideal love affairs-reflect a swing toward the tradition of philosophical nominalism, and the belief that only the individual can be known with any certainty at all (as Chaucer expresses in the *Envoy to Bukton*).

Of all Chaucer's poetry, his lyrics have been regarded as perhaps his *first* conventional work, and this has been, for some, an excuse not to read them. But in all of Chaucer's poetry, he is *traditional* in the sense that he works within certain conventions. Muscatine demonstrated that fact. In truth, the lyrics are far more exciting, as literature, than critics have ever suspected. So much is going on within and around the conventions, with linguistic and structural experimentation, manipulation of personae, thematic ironies, and philosophical speculation, that even a book this size is hard put to explore everything. Certainly, on the other hand, there are those who will see the importance of the lyrics only in so far as those lyrics can shed light on Chaucer's major narrative works. Let those people take note of the theme of earthly love vs. Divine Love which Chaucer develops in his lyrics and reemphasizes in the lyrical passages within the *Parliament of Fowls*, the *Legend of Good Women*, and particularly *and Criseyde*. For others, who appreciate good lyric poetry for its own sake, I submit that in terms of theme, of voice, of style and of structure, of variety, and even of originality, Chaucer has written, in *Truth*, in the *Envoy to Scogan*, in the *Complaint to his Purse*, in *Womanly Noblesse*, in *To Rosemounde*, and in *The Complaint of Mars*, a handful of poems that qualify him as one of the great lyric poets in the English language.

No scientific work can boast to have accomplished thoroughly all its goals with no omission or mistake. This principle can be surely applied to this work as well. However, it is my opinion that I have succeeded to localize Chaucer within the coordinates tradition-innovation and to establish that the Father of English Literature never broke away from tradition but combined different elements of tradition for his own purposes.

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