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TRADITION AND INDIVIDUALITY IN CHAUCER'S LYRICS

*The University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee*

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By

Jay W. Ruud

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in English

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 1981

*F. Xavier Barron* 5/5/81

Major Professor

Date

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Graduate School Approval

Date

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## Abstract

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Jay W. Ruud

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1981

Under the Supervision of Professor F. Xavier Baron

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 his own ends, and thereby alters forever the traditions themselves.

One convention in particular which Chaucer works 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 mundane love. A second convention Chaucer alters in his lyrics is the customary portrayal of a lyric's speaker as 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 material 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 poetry, 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 depicted as individuals, living in a transient world, then the inability of the individual to live up to the fixed ideal of courtly love becomes manifest. Thus the theme of universal love as the proper alternative to courtly love underlies much of Chaucer's lyric poetry. These points are discussed in detail in my first chapter.

Chapter two concerns those poems, Truth, Gentilesse, Lak of Stedfastnesse, The Former Age, and An ABC, in which Chaucer's everyman narrator expounds in a straightforward manner upon universal love and its relationship with natural law. But chapter three discusses the 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 highly individualized persona.

Chapter four investigates A Complaint to his Lady, Womanly Noblesse, and the Complaynt D'Amours, all of which are fairly early poems in the courtly love tradition, and each of which has a generalized "everymen" courtly lover as speaker. Chapter five, however, considers those poems--The Complaint of Venus, Against Women Unconstant,

Merciles Beaute, and To Rosemounde--which while still in the courtly love tradition display more specifically characterized speakers, who manifest a clear disparity between the ideal and the real.

Chapter six is concerned with structural changes which have the effect, again, of characterizing the lyric's 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 juxtaposing the objective narrative to the subjective lyric, to reflect more intelligently upon the lyrical speaker's words.

Finally, chapter seven explores the isolable lyrics contained in some of Chaucer's longer narratives, particularly Troilus and Criseyde, and considers the uses of the lyric within the narrative, as well as ways in which the narrative colors the reader's perception of the lyric.

Throughout, my purpose is always, first, to show Chaucer's artistic skill as a lyric poet, and second to show the important position of the lyrics in Chaucer's work as a whole, for they are much more valuable than critics have ever acknowledged.

F. Xavier Baum 5/5/81

Major Professor

Date

### Prefatory Note

All citations of Chaucer in my text are to F. N. Robinson, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). Citations of Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy are to Chaucer's translation, also in Robinson. Biblical quotations are all taken from the Revised Standard Version. When a language other than English is cited, my practice is to give an English translation following the quotation in the original language. In the footnotes and bibliography, abbreviations of oft-cited journals are adopted from the 1979 MLA Bibliography.



## Acknowledgements

My task would be incomplete if I did not express my appreciation of those who helped this work along. My heartfelt gratitude goes to "my maister," Professor F. Xavier Baron, without whose guidance and encouragement this dissertation would still be stalled somewhere between dream and act. My thanks also to the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, most notably Professors Bruce Stark, Robert Stone, Robert K. Turner, Jr., and Gareth Dunleavy, all of whom helped immeasurably to shape my critical and scholarly awareness.

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Finally, and perhaps most notably, I must express my appreciation to my wife, Cindy, "my owene lady deere," without whose saint-like patience I would never have found the time to write this book, and without whose unflagging help I never would have been able to finish it.

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## CHAPTER I

## Introduction

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 characterization 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 Troilus and the Canterbury Tales; all of these are the virtues of a great narrative poet. Small wonder that Chaucer's shorter poems are much neglected--a good number even of Chaucerian scholars have probably never read them all, much less studied them. The lyrics have gone unnoticed, like the stars at midday, as students have been overpowered by the dazzling brilliance of the Canterbury collection. But it should be remembered that the stars, too, when viewed by themselves in the quiet night, have virtues of their own, less brilliant but no less beautiful than that of the sun.

And so with Chaucer's lyrics. But the critic who ventures to study them for themselves must first wade through a morass 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."<sup>1</sup>

Moore's comments seem representative of critical opinion in general. R. K. Root muses 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."<sup>2</sup> Root, then, attributes the sad state of Chaucer's lyrics to a defect 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 makeup: Chaucer, says Legouis, uses lyric poetry "less to express his 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."<sup>3</sup>

How can one answer these charges from important critics like Moore, Root, and Legouis, who find nothing in the lyrics but the

dregs of Chaucer's poetry? 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 inception. It had always been the greater poets who, while working within the tradition, were able to rise above the banalities of the conventions and strike 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 pronounced 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 which preceded it.<sup>4</sup>

The poet Chaucer, then, is "traditional" in this important sense. He is no slavish 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 perpetuated by Machaut, and Guillaume de Lorris, and the mainstream of continental European literature. And as tradition shaped Chaucer's individual talent, so his individual talent transformed forever the tradition itself. The greater poets had always done so. William IX of Aquitaine had done so, apparently early in the tradition, in poems like this in which he parodies love's conventions--

Si·m breu non ai ajutori,  
cum ma bona dompna m'am,  
morrai, pel cap sanh Gregori,  
si no·m bayz' en cambr' o sutz ram.

(If I do not get help soon  
and my lady does not give me love  
by Saint Gregory's holy head I'll die  
if she doesn't kiss me in a chamber or under a tree.)<sup>5</sup>

and this, in which his sincerity cuts through the clichés--

que tal se van d'amor gaban,  
nos n'avem la pessa e·l coutel.

(Such others go around talking and talking big of love,  
but we have a morsel of its bread, and a knife.)<sup>6</sup>

Walther von der Vogelweide had done so, in poem after poem searching for the true meaning of love, of "minne," in natural reactions rather than conventions. In one poem he expresses his doubts about the traditional picture of love as painful:

minne ist minne, tuot si wol:  
tuot se wê, so enheizet si niht rehte minne.  
sus enweiz ich wie sê danne heizen sol.

(Minne is minne if it gives pleasure:  
if it causes misery, it isn't right to call it minne--  
then I don't know what it should be called.)<sup>7</sup>

True love is expressed by a simple country girl in Walther's famous "Under der Linden":

Ich kam gegangen  
 zuo der ouwe:  
 do was min friedel komen e.  
 da wart ich enpfangen,  
 here frouwe,  
 daz ich bin saelic iemer me.

(I came walking  
 to the meadow,  
 my love was already there.  
 And he received me,  
 Blessed Lady,  
 the joy of that will last.)<sup>8</sup>

As each of these poets inherited a decadent tradition, riddled with banalities as practiced by lesser writers, and breathed new life 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 when it came through his lips. A careful look at poems like To Rosemounde and Merciles Beaute will reveal just how much Chaucer was able to revitalize the moribund 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 not unlike that of the Canterbury Tales. And the philosophical, Boethian poems contain

some of the strongest, most memorable lines Chaucer ever wrote.

Certainly the charge that Chaucer's lyric poems display a lack of genius would not have been borne out 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" ("Retraction," l. 1086), that he composed "many an ympe for [the God of Love's] halydayes, / That highten balades, roundels, virelayes" (Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, F 422-23; G 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 Nitees and of songes glade, / The which he for mi sake made, / The land fulfiid is overal."<sup>9</sup> And 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 evinced no 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 Troilus, the Dream Visions, and, yes, 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. . . . If they all took Chaucer's love poetry au grand serieux, it is overwhelmingly probably that Chaucer himself did the same.<sup>10</sup>

One of the things that the following pages seek to prove is that



this view of Chaucer is a legitimate one--that Chaucer's "genius" shines as brightly in his lyrics as in anything else.

But the term "lyric" is one which, if that third criticism raised by Legouis is true, 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 narrowly Romantic notion of the lyric--Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" but without the recollection in tranquility--a definition which would include Shelley and Byron, but which would exclude much of Donne and Herbert, 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 conventionalized to exhibit much "fire."

What is needed at the outset, perhaps, is a more accurate definition of the lyric which would apply to medieval times. But the task may not be easy. 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.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is important to remember that, as Stephen Manning declares, "these poems were not written in anticipation of modern preconceptions about the lyric."<sup>12</sup> Peter Dronke, perhaps the most authoritative of all scholars on the medieval lyric, sidesteps the issue entirely, preferring to consider anything a lyric which is contained in the chansonniers or Liederhandschriften of medieval times. The implication seems to be that virtually any short poem is a lyric.<sup>13</sup> This is obviously not satisfactory as a definition--a shopping list is short--but when one

attempts to find a more satisfactory definition of "lyric," the exclusiveness becomes apparent again, and Chaucer's poems seem less and less "lyrical." Barbara Hardy, in a book on the lyric, claims that "Lyric poetry isolates feeling in small compass and so renders it at its most intense. . . . The advantage of lyric 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."<sup>14</sup> 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 sole province of lyric poetry seems to be a wrong-headed legacy of 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.<sup>15</sup> What is important in this for the moment is Poe's broader conception

of the subject matter for a short poem (and for him, a poem was of necessity short)--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, denounces 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."<sup>16</sup>

The definition of the lyric, then, need not insist upon personal emotion. But that definition is still difficult to pin down. 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 which expresses a single state of mind, a single mood, or sets two simple moods one 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."<sup>17</sup> This definition, if allowed to stand, would eliminate several of Chaucer's lyrics: there is no doubt that Gentilesse argues, that Lak of Stedfastnesse preaches, that The Former Age moralizes, or that the Envoy to Bukton speaks with both irony and complexity of syntax. But 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."<sup>18</sup>

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 juxtaposed. 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."<sup>19</sup>

It seems that any definition of the medieval lyric must be fuzzy at best, but surely something definite might be said of it. Northrop Frye's conception of the lyric may be particularly useful here--one need not accept Frye's entire critical apparatus to agree with his sound distinction between lyric and narrative. Frye, concentrating upon two of Aristotle's six aspects of poetry--mythos or plot, and dianoia or "thought"--conceives of 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.<sup>20</sup>

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."<sup>21</sup> It presents not events, but a direct reflection upon or interpretation of events. Thus a lyric is basically a short poem patterned thematically--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 more restrictive claim that the lyric is a personal expression of powerful emotion.

Clearly Chaucer's shorter poems are lyrics in Frye's more reasonable definition of the term. Legouis' criticism of Chaucer as lacking the lyrical touch, then, is unwarranted, as were the criticisms of Root and Moore. But it is not enough to simply defend the lyrics from attack. It remains to be seen what value the lyrics have, which might induce scholars 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. But 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 which

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. So 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 Complaint of Mars and in Anelida and Arcite. Further, anyone at all familiar with Chaucer's works 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 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, and disembodied, as it were. Barbara Hardy considers this part of the advantage of lyric: "This advantage is negatively définable: the lyric does not provide explanation, judgement, or narrative; what it does provide is feeling, alone and without histories or characters."<sup>22</sup>

These observations, however, must be qualified. Any student of literature 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 which helped to establish context was his use of the Envoy. In Truth, the Envoy establishes a definite audience, a certain "Vache." But this does not change the context any--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 understand the poem as a reaction to that courtly love situation.

Hence, 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."<sup>23</sup> What the audience or reader perceives, then, is either one side of a snatch 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.<sup>24</sup>

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."<sup>25</sup> 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 distilled--an Aristotelian would say "abstracted"--from whatever 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 shal 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)

This is not to imply that Mars is to be considered a spokesman for

Chaucer, but Chaucer's practice in the Mars and the other poems mentioned above (Pity, Anelida, and the others), suggests that he was in sympathy with Mars' remarks here. Chaucer frequently puts lyrics in narrative frames in order to show cause for the lyric expression. 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 pleyneþ 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 begin to suspect more and more strongly, 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 human response as opposed to the lyric as the response of an individual speaker to a given specific situation seems to parallel the epistemological controversy in medieval philosophy concerning the reality of universals. And 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 conversant with that most philosophical of Italian poets, 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 Neoplatonism 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 went 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, or "agent," intellect then produces this abstracted form, depositing it as it were, in the passive, or "possible," 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.<sup>26</sup>

This is admittedly oversimplified, but Chaucer, not being a professional philosopher, would probably have been concerned chiefly with the main outline 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 of necessity 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 speakers, expressing universal emotions and responding to no known situation. Perhaps the epitome of the lyric as an expression of realist Aristotelian epistemology occurs in Womanly Noblesse, and the philosophical implications of that poem will be discussed at length in the third chapter.

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 ultimately all but displaced realism as the prevailing scholastic doctrine. The English Franciscan William of Ockham, credited with virtually founding the nominalist school, had died in 1349, and it is reasonable to assume that his ideas would have been current, and gaining momentum, 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 collapses. 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 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 supposito," 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 which "stand for" particulars. This notion seems diametrically opposed to that of Aquinas.<sup>27</sup>

If Chaucer grew to accept the nominalist position as he progressed as a poet, it would certainly explain the sentiments expressed in Mars' Complaint. 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 comprehend 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 mythos and ethos, or situation and character, along with the usual diagnosis, the response that is the province of the lyric proper. 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 (the latter of which, as shall be seen, is most explicitly 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 impending marriage). Whatever universal theme appears in these poems is purely 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 rotund, rather slow-witted, and not particularly trustworthy persona whose lyrical response to his situation (usually the 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 mode of presentation of Chaucer's lyrics also doubtlessly contributed in no small measure to the development of the Chaucerian persona. The medieval lyric, as already noted, was public in nature, and that meant among other

things that it was intended to be performed publicly. That Chaucer's poems were written to be performed aloud before the court is a virtual certainty, evinced 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.<sup>28</sup> The gamelike 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, must have combined to make 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 Rosemunde and Merciles Beaute, and even a comic caricature of himself in the Envoy to Scogan. And it must be inferred that the famous Chaucer persona of the dream visions, of the Troilus and of the Canterbury Tales grew from precisely the same impulse: the speakers of the narratives are, in fact, not much different from the personae of some of the lyrics, as shall be seen.

To return to the problem of Chaucer's strange narrative-lyric mixtures, it would seem that an epistemological explanation of the phenomenon could prove the most fruitful. But 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."<sup>29</sup> Robert Jordan elaborates on juxtaposition as the Gothic principle of unity: "Characteristically," he says, "the total form is determined by the accumulation of individually complete elements."<sup>30</sup> 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 "fulness" 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."<sup>31</sup> Hence the gargoyles on medieval cathedrals, or the juxtaposition of apparently discordant elements in Gothic manuscript illumination. 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 has much to say 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 (as has been said before) not personal, but rather public--"to reflect a reality outside of himself." But that "reality" was, Robertson is quick to point out, not "nature" as we know it, but "an abstract 'nature' structured by God."<sup>32</sup>

Robertson notes that, while this hierarchical pattern was most manifest in the Gothic age, it had its roots far back in Patristic times.<sup>33</sup> 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."<sup>34</sup> 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 immutable beauty which is its source."<sup>35</sup>

This fixed, immutable 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 Womanly

Noblesse, the traditional courtly idiom into English poetry, simply because it is appropriate--it is decorous to do so; it is harmonious with the subject matter.

But the other aspect of Gothic art, the juxtaposition of discordant elements, is also apparent in Chaucer's lyrics, as he takes the established lyric forms and juxtaposes them with apparently unconnected narrative elements, and in the Complaint of Mars and Anelida and Arcite. That juxtaposition is also present in Chaucer's experimentation with language, seen in poems like A Complaint to his Lady. For Chaucer, then, the medieval aesthetic did not preclude experimentation, for though the order of God's universe was reflected in following traditional forms, the variety, the fullness, of God's universe was 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 the medievals, these four concepts were closely interwoven and mutually dependent. Look, for example, at one of Chaucer's favorite 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 tamen pro rata parte ratione distinctis impulsu et motu ipsorum orbium efficitur. . . . quod docti homines mervis imitati atque cantibus aperuerunt sibi reditum 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 stringed instruments and in singing, have gained for themselves a return to this region").<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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").<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> 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, mt. 11, ll. 21-24). But Chaucer seems to have extended the idea of the "law of kynde."<sup>40</sup> For Chaucer seems to have equated natural law with the harmony of all creation as 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, hevye, lyght, moyst, and dreye / Hath knyght by evene nombres of acord" (ll. 379-81)-- Nature's law, then, reflects divine law in binding all apparently discordant elements together in proportionate harmony, "by evene nombres of acord." If natural law is ordered harmony, then all things in creation have a specific place in 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 verbose Eagle of the House of Fame espouses,

. . . every kyndely thyng that is  
 Hath a kyndely stede ther he  
 May best in hyt conserved be;  
 Unto which place every thyng,  
 Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng,  
 Moveth for to come to,  
 Whan that hyt is away therfro; (ll. 729-736)

What was this mysterious force which bound all things to their divinely ordained places in a harmonious cosmos, and which, in man, apparently inclined him to follow those natural precepts implanted in his heart? 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.'<sup>41</sup> For Chaucer, the most important expression of that association would have been that which occurred in his favorite 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 elementz holden 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 leweful to strecche his brode termes or bowndes upon the erthes (that is to seyn, to coveren al the erthe)--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, alle 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 peples joyned with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrament of mariages of chaste loves; and love enditeth lawes to trewe felawes. O weleful were mankynde, 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." But the last part of Boethius' poem strikes an ominous note: man is somehow unnatural--he apparently does not participate in this natural harmony. Why is this? In men, natural law was regarded by both Aquinas and Boethius as the recognition of divine precepts. But that recognition is not always heeded--man's free will gets in the way. Man's natural inclination is toward the Highest Good, toward God, who is true love. But, Boethius explains, although "the covetise of verray good is naturely iplaunted in the

hertes of men. . . .the myswandrynge errour mysledeth hem into false goodes" (Bk. III, pr. 2, ll. 22-25).

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

"Né creator né creatura mai,"  
 cominciò el, "figliuol, fu senza amore,  
 o naturale o d'animo; e tu 'l sai.  
 Lo naturale è 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 sé stesso misura,  
 esser non può cagion di mal diletto;  
 ma quando al mal si torce, o con più 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 vigor. 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 away to evil or speeds to good with more zeal, 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.")<sup>42</sup>

This natural desire for the good, which is for the harmony of the universe, and hence 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 sins.

There are, thus, two kinds of love implied: caritas, the Divine Love which orders the universe and binds all things harmoniously,

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 rightful place in the universal hierarchy, the desire for the will of God, the desire for God Himself; and cupiditas, the mistaken desire of the human will for the lesser, 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.<sup>43</sup> And it was in this sense that the editors of the recent 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."<sup>44</sup> 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 lesser 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 Gentilesse, while in others his love is directed toward earthly felicity, as in the Complaint to his Lady, the Complaynt D'Amours, or Womanly Noblesse. But 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 add Arcite, the opposition of the two loves is clear. And in some of the lyrics, To Rosemoude, for example, or Merciles Beaute, Chaucer parodies the idea of courtly love or, more accurately, 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 awareness lies the creation of humor. But parody does not, like satire, just make fun of the given: it insists that we see it in terms of something that is adequate.<sup>45</sup>

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 degree. But in the worship of the Beloved as an ideal, man erred. 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 primacy 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 which 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 chapter, then, discusses the poems in which Chaucer is concerned chiefly with aspects of universal love--his philosophical poems with "everyman" speakers. The third chapter discusses the poems wherein the everyman speaker had disappeared and Chaucer presents a speaker now more specifically himself, or a caricature of himself, reacting to a specific situation. Chapter four discusses Chaucer's courtly love lyrics with conventional courtly speakers. The fifth chapter continues with Chaucer's courtly lyrics, but examines the less conventional courtly poems, with strongly individualized speakers whose poems display an ironic discrepancy between courtly love and Divine Love. Chapter six moves into a discussion of Chaucer's formal experiments, particularly the lyrical-narrative hybrids, which establish a specific situation to which the speaker responds. The final chapter discusses the special case of the lyrics contained within Chaucer's longer narratives, and investigates the thematic relationship between the independent lyrics and the lyrics within the narratives.

This final chapter is included as a necessity, since Chaucer includes in his narrative poems several passages which could be

isolated as independent lyrics in their own right. It is not to be inferred from this, however, that Troilus and Criseyde, for example, is in any sense the culmination of Chaucer's use of the lyric. Certainly it is the high point of Chaucer's use of the lyric for certain purposes within narrative structures, but it must be stressed again that Chaucer's lyric poetry forms a body of worthwhile verse in and of itself. The following pages will stress not only the structural experimentation and thematic relationships which make the lyrics a key to Chaucer's poetry as a whole, but will also stress, in poem after poem, Chaucer's consummate skill as a lyric poet. If nothing else, a close study of the lyrics suggests one thing: if Chaucer had written no narrative poetry at all, if the Canterbury Tales, the Troilus and Criseyde, the dream-visions, had never existed, the world would of course be much emptier, but still the craftsmanship and beauty of Chaucer's lyrics, his transformation of the traditional lyric through experimentation with speaker and structure, would have had far-reaching influence and would have established him as a major fourteenth-century poet--a major lyric poet. And it is of that major lyric poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, that I now propose to write.

## CHAPTER I: NOTES

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28 John Stevens, Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 158 et passim.

29 Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 167.

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

31 D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 120.

32 Robertson, pp. 6-15.

33 Robertson, p. 6.

34 Robertson, p. 119.

35 Robertson, pp. 75-76.

36

Citations of the *Somnium Scipionis* in my text are to Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica and De Legibus*, ed. and trans. Clinton Walker Keyes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; and London: William Heinemann, 1928); this is pp. 270-72. The translation is from Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), pp. 73-74.

37

See Jordan, *passim*.

38

Macrobius, *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. Jacobus Willis, 2 vols. (Lisiae, Ger.: Aedibus B. G. Teubneri, 1963), II, 96; trans. Stahl, p. 186.

39

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia2ae., q. 91, a. 2. Text Blackfriars, XXVIII, 20-25; trans. Fathers, I, 996-97.

40

For a discussion of Chaucer's acquaintance with the idea of the "law of kynde," particularly as evinced in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, see Gareth W. Dunleavy, "Natural Law as Chaucer's Ethical Absolute," in *Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 52 (1963), 177-87.

41

Robertson, p. 124.

42

Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XVII, ll. 91-105; text and trans. Charles S. Singleton, *The Divine Comedy*, 13 vols., Bolingen Series LXXX (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), II, 184-85.

43

On Chaucer's conception of love, and that of the later Middle Ages in general, see especially Robertson and C. S. Lewis. See also *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1973).

44

Mitchell and Provost, "Introduction," p. 8.

45

Edmund Reiss, "Chaucer's Parodies of Love," in Mitchell and Provost, p. 27.

## CHAPTER II

## Universal Love

The first group of poems to be examined--Truth, Gentillesse, 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 mundane love), and the importance of man's following the precepts of natural law, particularly as expressed by Boethius and in Christian tradition. Second, none have speakers whose characters are brought into the foreground. The speakers are all "everyman" types, expounding 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 acting out of Divine Love and the "law of Kynde" in human living.

Strangely, perhaps, critical appraisal of the poem has virtually ignored this aspect, and concentrated largely upon the Envoy. The majority of these studies share the assumption that the Envoy and its enigmatic reference to "thou Vache" (l. 22)--probably the courtier Sir Philip de la Vache--are somehow central to the poem's meaning.<sup>1</sup> 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,"<sup>2</sup> but the Envoy survives in only one manuscript. If the Envoy is so important to the poem, this is difficult to explain.<sup>3</sup> Further, the Envoy seems quite anticlimactic after the dramatic exhortation of the third stanza: "Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!" (l. 16). The most likely explanation is that the poem itself was written and in fact circulated before the Envoy, and that Chaucer added the Envoy later, perhaps in the period 1386-89 (the time of the ascendancy of the Gloucester faction in the English government), when both Chaucer and Sir Philip de la Vache were out of favor. Perhaps Chaucer revised the poem at that time; then the critical concentration upon these lines would seem quite misdirected.

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, and how that meaning colors



the lines of the poem. 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, in some ways, to belong.

Now as a ballade, Chaucer's poem consists of three stanzas (plus the Envoy, if we are to accept it) of seven pentameter lines rhyming a b a b b c c. Further, each stanza ends with a refrain. The repetition of the refrain naturally puts greatest emphasis upon that repeated line:

And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede.  
(ll. 7, 14, 21, 28)

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.<sup>4</sup> Most commonly, Chaucer uses the word in the sense of a moral or ethical principle--what the OED calls "the character of being true . . . true to a person, principle, cause, etc.; faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty, constancy, steadfast allegiance" (sb. 1). Or, 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" (sb. 4). Unquestionably Chaucer considered this one of the most important, if not the most important, of all moral virtues. His Knight, paragon of nobility, values in especial "Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" (l. 46). If one had truth, one was an honorable human being. One's word was his bond. Arcite in the Knight's Tale, who despite his other failings is nothing if not noble,

challenges Palamon to single combat for love of Emilye with the words "Have heer my trouthe, tomorwe I wol nat faille" (l. 1610). And the Franklin, aspiring to true nobility in his own right, has Arveragus, the husband in his tale, pronounce "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (l. 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. In the Squire's Tale the noble-born tercelet takes up with a kite, deserting his beloved Falcon, who complains that he "hath his trouthe falsed in this wyse" (l. 627). 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?" (l. 312). But Chaucer's supreme example of one who breaks her trouthe is, of course, Criseyde. When she departs from Troilus on the eve of her delivery to the Greeks, Criseyde vows to return to him in ten days, saying that Troilus has no need to fear,

Syn to be trewe I have yow plight my trouthe.  
(Bk. IV, l. 1610)

And it is on this thread of hope that Troilus 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)

In addition to being a moral virtue, trouthe in Chaucer's time referred also to "true religious belief or doctrine; orthodoxy" (OED, sb. 9). In Chaucer's day, Christianity, and specifically orthodox Catholicism, was the truth. For this the Church had Christ's own testimony, according to the scriptures, in statements like the one made to Pilate in John 18:37:

For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.

Or in this, earlier in John:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14:6)

Or, finally, in the statement which seems to have provided Chaucer with the refrain of his poem:

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (John 8:31-32)

Chaucer often uses trouthe in this sense. In the Second Nun's Tale, for example, Valerian, nominal husband of that militant 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 (in a general or abstract sense)" (OED, sb. 10). 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 conceded that the basic philosophy of Truth "shows the influence of Boethius, though it does not closely follow particular passages."<sup>5</sup> 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--all else was subject to the change and flux of time. Man instinctively desires happiness and, in order to be happy, seeks goodness. But he cannot find true goodness, and hence true happiness, in seeking the things of this world, because these things are impermanent. Wealth, power, honor, 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 this ben these things 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 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 alle in lovyng the eend of good.

(Bk. III, pr. 2, 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, pr. 10, ll. 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 hence the Truth ("I am the way, and the truth"). Now Jesus told Pilate that He had come into the world to give witness to the truth; it must be stressed that the Christian not only accepts Christ's words as the doctrinal truth, but also views Christ's life as a model of right living, and in this way, too, Christ gives witness to the truth in the additional sense of "conduct in accordance with the divine standard; spirituality of life and behaviour" (OED sb. 9. b)--living, to put it into terms I have already used, according to natural law. This, obviously, implies the ethical virtue of truth already noted.

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 dwelle with sothfastnesse" (l. 1), or truth. One should leave the world and dwell with truth, in the sense that many follow the way of the world (seeking mundane love), but only a few follow the way of truth (seeking eternal love), as suggested in the famous metaphor from the Sermon on the Mount:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14)

But 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. But 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; (ll. 2-4)

These things mentioned by Chaucer--"thy good" (property), "hord" (hoarding, 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, ll. 6-14)

But the same attitude is manifest, once again, in the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.  
 (Matthew 6:19-21)

The first stanza of Truth concludes with the admonition to the reader to desire no more than is good for him, and to "Ruele wel thyself, that other folk canst rede" (l. 6). Now this last 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"; this reading would, again, recall the Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not, that you be not judged," Jesus said. "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7: 1,5).

After a stanza of philosophical and religious commonplaces, the first occurrence of the refrain "And trouthe thee sha<sup>l</sup> delivere . . ." refers undoubtedly to the philosophical Highest Good, since this is the quintessence 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" (l. 6).

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

Tempest thee nocht al croked to redresse,  
 In trust of hir that turneth as a bal;  
 Gret reste stant in litel besinesse;  
 Be war also to sporne ayeyns an al;  
 Stryve not as doth the crokke with the wal. (ll. 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, honor, 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 impermanent, always subject to the will of Fortune, who may snatch them away at any time with a spin of her fickle wheel. "Swich is my strengthe," says

**Boethius' Fortune:**

and this pley I pleye continuey. I torne the whirlynge  
wheel with the turnyng seacle; 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, ll. 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. But 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. It may be in this sense that one is to take the line "Gret reste stant in litel besinesse." But again, Christ gives a similar admonition in the Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. . . . And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? . . . Therefore do not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matthew 6:25-33)

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 (l. 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 others, recalling the "Judge not, that ye be not judged" of Matthew, as well as the philosophical commonplace to "know thyself":

Daunte thyself, that dauntest otheres dede (l. 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. (ll. 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 wildernesse:  
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forthe, beste, out of thy stal!  
Know thy contree, look up, thank God of al;  
Hold the heye wey, and lat thy gost thee lede; (ll. 17-20)

This image of life as a pilgrimage is traditional. There are for example some biblical parallels, most notably Hebrews 11:13-16:

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. . . . they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

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 wepyng, I wist anon 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 born . . . o lord and o kyng, and that is God, is lord of thi cuntre, which that rejoisseth hym of the duellynge 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, ll. 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" (l. 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 of sorts, and Chaucer may suggest this in his powerful "Forth, beste, out of thy stal!" of line 18. Be obedient to God, in other words--bridle yourself to natural law, and keep your eyes on your true home.

This "pilgrimage" figure occurs not only in the Bible and 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, for the Chaucerian speaker does advise his readers to hold this world as a lesser good, and to seek instead the true and eternal love of God. But 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, the graveyard pessimism, of the typical contemptu mundi poet. Certainly Chaucer emphasizes the necessity of our keeping our eyes on the eternal; we have an obligation, however, to live right in this world while we are here.

Compare, for example, the early fourteenth century lyric beginning "Lollay, lollay, little child." Here, the poet, in an ironic lullaby, addresses the child in words similar to Chaucer's:

Child, thou ert a pilgrim in wikedness ibor:  
 Thou wandrest in this fals world--thou lok thee befor!  
 (ll. 25-26)<sup>6</sup>

Like the reader of Truth, the child in this poem is advised not to trust in the gifts of Fortune, for they are false:

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. (ll. 19-22)

But there is, in nearly every contemptu mundi poem, a streak of pessimism not found in Truth. The child is warned "Deth shall come with a blast, ute of a well dim horre" (l. 27), and "Deth thee shall betide with bitter bale in brest" (l. 34). In another poem, the reader is told

Thu shalt in orthe wonien and wormes thee to chewen,  
 And of alle ben lot that her thee were ilewe.

And in still another:

Thou that art but wormes mete, powder and dust,  
 To enhance thyself in pride sette not thy lust.  
 . . . . .  
 Sette thine herte in Heven above and thenke what joye is there,  
 And thus to despise the world I rede that thou lere.

Chaucer never advises his listener to despise the world, never reminds him of impending death, and never dwells on worms or any other memento mori. Instead, Chaucer exhorts the audience to think of God, hold the "heye way," and let his spirit lead him. The difference may well be the result of the ethical meaning of the truth which sets men free. Beyond being a philosophical principle, Chaucer's trouthe is an active ethical principle which governs lives in a manner similar to that which Jesus advised in the Sermon on the Mount, the spirit of which seems to partially govern this poem. The Sermon on the Mount is not a contemptu mundi, advising people to despise the world and look forward only to the next. Rather it is a plan for living a Christian life

by putting one's faith in God rather than in the world. This is what is meant by the "heye wey"--it is the straight and narrow gate of Matthew 7:14. And the country which the pilgrim seeks is not only the "Fatherland" of Boethian philosophy, but also the kingdom of God--a place, Christ makes clear, that is of this world, not the next:

Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. (Matthew 6:33)

Surely an examination of the philosophical dimensions of Truth affords the most fruitful interpretation of the poem. Curiously, earlier scholars have focused on, almost been obsessed with, two aspects of the poem that lead away from rather than into this important Chaucerian piece: those aspects are the Envoy and the tradition of the poem's late date. Tradition long held that Truth was composed by the poet at the end of his life.<sup>9</sup> The apparent contempt for this world and desire for the next seemed appropriate for one's deathbed. But 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. And though it may not have been the poem's original intent, it may well have been sent to ease the pain of one who, having lost favor at court, needed to be reminded of those things which are truly valuable. Whatever biographical details may have prompted the poem's composition, it is a piece of value and a superb early example of the Chaucerian philosophical lyric.

Gentillesse 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 which are truly valuable. Robert K. Root, commenting on this poem as well as the famous speech on the same topic which 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."<sup>10</sup> 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, gentilesse 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. And what Chaucer is really doing is holding out 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.

Like Truth a ballade, Gentilesse consists of three seven-line stanzas in iambic pentameter lines rhyming a b a b b c c. The refrain "Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe" repeats in lines 7, 14, and 21. In ominous-sounding tones it drives home the point that no one, no matter what his earthly position, can be considered noble unless he is also virtuous. The mitre was, of course, one of the official pieces of

symbolic ecclesiastical garb conferred upon a bishop or abbot. **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. By diadem Chaucer may have been thinking not of a crown but of the original meaning of the word in Latin and Greek: "a band of cloth, plain or adorned with jewels, worn around the head, originally by Oriental monarchs, as a badge of royalty" (OED, sb. 1. b). 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 gentilesse--  
 What man that claimeth gentil for to be  
 Must followe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse  
 Vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee. (ll. 1-4)

It is remarkable first of all because its structure is extremely unusual in Chaucer. The first line is an absolute construction, independent of any normal syntactical relation with the rest of the sentence. The sentence seems deliberately constructed to emphasize that first line, standing as it does first and alone. And the initial line is crucial to the poem. First, it introduces the theme of gentilesse, that is, of

true nobility. It also implies the idea of heredity which pervades the lyric, by speaking of the first stock, that is, the original ancestor from whom the rest of the lineage derives. The appositive "fader of gentillesse" indicates which line 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 noght the revers, saufly dar I deme" (ll. 5-6). Stanza two 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 rightwysnesse,  
 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 noght gentil, thogh he riche seme,  
 Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe. (ll. 8-14)

The poem seems to work in this way: there are two sets of contrasting pairs--the first stok or Fader (ll. 1, 8, and 19) contrasts with "richesse" (l. 15) and with the "mytre, croune, or diademe" (ll. 7, 14, 21). These correspond roughly to the other pair of contrasting concepts: "vertu" (ll. 4, 5, 12) and its associated qualities "rightwysnesse" (l. 8), "trewe," "sobre," "pitous," "free" (l. 9), "clene," full of "business" (l. 10) and "honestee" (l. 11), as opposed to "vyces" (ll. 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 (ll. 12, 13, 17, and 20): the heir of the "first stok" is virtue--"This first stok was ful of rightwysnesse" (l. 8), but the heir of the world could conceivably be vice--"Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse" (l. 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.<sup>11</sup> But there seems 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. And 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. But I think it unlikely that Chaucer intends 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 vertuouse 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. (ll. 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" (l. 19), who must be identified with the "firste stok, fader of gentillesse" (l. 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. The climactic refrain line, following the parentheses and modifying the "no man" of line 16, emphasizes again the limitations of earthly power as compared with true nobility.

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 rule out the possibility of riches and virtue being united (and his audience may well have conceived of them united more often than not), 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, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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 the fourth tractate of the Convivio. Lowes also noted Chaucer's debt to Jean de Meun.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me, however, that the most obvious and immediate source of the idea is the Bible itself. One of the constantly repeated themes in the letters of

St. Paul is the Christian's inheritance of grace through Christ. In Galatians 4:3-7, St. Paul describes God's ability to "adopt" all as heirs:

When we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Paul repeats the idea in at least four other places (Romans 8:19, Galatians 3:29, Ephesians 3:6, Titus 3:7). The letter of James also contains the same idea, emphasizing how the poor of the world are those who inherit the true riches of God's grace:

Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the Kingdom which he has promised those who love him? (James 2:5)

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.<sup>14</sup> Why would so many writers, most of whom owed their livelihood to the good will of the aristocratic audience for whom they performed their works, deliberately antagonize that audience by praising the virtues of democracy? Furthermore, if

this poem was written, as seems likely, in the 1380's, not long after Chaucer's translation of Boethius which seems to have influenced the poem, then the fear awakened by the Peasant's Revolt of 1381 was still fresh in the minds of Chaucer's audience, and still ringing in their ears was the inflammatory rhetoric of the "mad priest" John Ball:

Whan Adam dalf and Eve span,  
Who was thanne a gentil man?

If Chaucer was talking about political or social equality, he may have been on dangerous ground. But he wasn't. 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 labor was necessary for the public good and the survival of the body politic."<sup>15</sup>

There was nothing, then, in Chaucer, that would smack of "democracy" to the gentles. George M. Vogt evaluates the evidence in this way:

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.<sup>16</sup>

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. The fact that the sentiment was so widespread probably gave it the efficacy of a platitude: it went in one ear and out the other. This, at least, is one possible explanation.

Let me suggest another. 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 drede!" (ll. 1610-12)

I suggest, however, that one look at the idea from the top down, as one of Chaucer's noble audience 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 which 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."<sup>17</sup> 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 in spirit by practicing wisdom, charity,  
loyalty, and humility.<sup>18</sup>

Whether Chaucer knew of Lull's book is irrelevant. 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, gentil knyght. (ll. 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."<sup>19</sup>

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 inheritance does not make me truly "noble" ("Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse" l. 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 gentil 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" ll. 2-4 ). Therefore I should act according to my role in life: love virtue and shun 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 world, whether they wore "mytre, croune, 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 gentillesse 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 gentillesse, a world where true nobility has ceased to exist. A ballade, like Truth and Gentillesse, the poem is also related to those two poems thematically. Truth is a major attribute of the Christian virtue implied by the term gentillesse, but the second stanza of the poem stresses how that very truth, as well as other qualities associated with gentillesse, is noticeably lacking in these times:

Trouthe is put doun, resoun is holden 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 fikelnesse,  
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse. (ll. 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. Gentillesse, or nobility, is a human quality that stems from that same Christian virtue, and Chaucer's poem on gentillesse 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 that golden age is gone, and truth and gentillesse are lost with it.

The chief reason for this decline is a lack of stedfastnesse. The earlier discussion of Truth and Gentillesse points fairly clearly to what Chaucer meant by "stedfastnesse." Stedfastnesse is stability, perfect harmony, the orderly adherence to natural law. It is when man breaks this natural law, strays from the truth established by Divine Love, that the sublunary world begins to turn to chaos.

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 lines of other jeremiads. The Envoy is similarly traditional."<sup>20</sup> 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."<sup>21</sup> Specific sources have been searched for,<sup>22</sup> but the most important fact is simply that the poem is a conventional trope, as discussed by Curtius.<sup>23</sup>

But Chaucer, as we have seen and will see time and time again, 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. During Richard's reign, there were two periods when the lines of Lak of Stedfastnesse would have been particularly appropriate: the first was the period of 1386-89, during the period of Gloucester's influence; the second was the period 1397-99, the time of Richard's most despotic acts. A close reading of the poem, however, suggests that hopeful tone would be much more fitting during the 80's.

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 worthinesse,  
 And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse. (ll. 22-28)

Even though J. E. Cross sees no reason to assume that this is addressed



to King Richard at all, since "Prince" was the common mode of address in any Envoy,<sup>24</sup> the advice is most certainly meant for a king ("cherish thy folk," "wed thy folk"), and it seems sensible to assume it was addressed to Chaucer's king. Shirley commented, in his manuscript version of the poem, that it was written in the poet's last years and sent to the King at Windsor Castle. Consequently scholars have often assigned the poem to the period 1397-1399. But Shirley is not particularly reliable--note, for example, his questionable attribution of Truth to Chaucer's deathbed. Still, Skeat accepted the late date for this poem,<sup>25</sup> and Brusendorff considered 1397 a date "when the political situation would certainly have been suitable for the spirit of the poem."<sup>26</sup> It was in 1397 that Richard, in retaliation for the treasonous activities of the Gloucester faction in the late 1380's, took vengeance by executing Arundel, exiling Warwick, and imprisoning his own uncle the Duke of Gloucester, who was subsequently murdered. It was, Haldeen Braddy notes, also in these last years that Richard's reign became "particularly noteworthy for lavish expenditures, constant drawing upon the exchequer, and permanent defaulting on all monetary obligations."<sup>27</sup> It is certainly possible to conceive of Chaucer cautioning the King against such monetary excesses in the lines quoted above, particularly in the admonishment to "hate extorcioun." And Braddy further supports the late date for the poem by noting that even the earliest of the three poems of Deschamps which he claims served as Chaucer's models was not written until 1390, and that Chaucer did not receive any of Deschamps' poems until 1393, probably through his friend Lewis Clifford.<sup>28</sup>

All of this makes a fairly convincing case for dating the poem 1397

or later. But I would hold with those who believe the poem to be earlier. First of all, the already mentioned association of the poem with the Boethian group would put it in the 1380's, when Chaucer translated the Boece and wrote the other "Boethian" lyrics as well as other works under the influence of the Consolation, like the Troilus and, probably, the original version of The Knight's Tale. Robinson notes that "both the characterization of the age and the admonition to the sovereign would have been equally appropriate between 1386 and 1390."<sup>29</sup> And Robinson also points to a similar passage in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women, written in the late 1380's:

For he that Kyng or lord is naturel,  
 Hym oughte nat be tyraunt and crewel,  
 As is a fermour, to don the harm he can.  
 He moste thynke it is his lige man,  
 And that hym oweth, of verray duetee,  
 Shewen his peple pleyne benygnete, (G, 355-361)

Certainly that political situation was unstable enough in 1386-90 to warrant Chaucer's criticism. When Gaunt left for Castille in search of a throne in July of 1386, Gloucester and his party took the opportunity to seize power, dismiss Richard's favorites and create an eleven-man commission to oversee the King. When Richard resisted, his enemies marched on London and compelled parliament to condemn and execute several of Richard's advisors. Richard regained power in 1389 when he declared his intention to rule in his own right, having attained full adult age. The fact that Gaunt returned from Spain later that year also helped to stabilize the situation.

It would seem, then, that either period has its claims to the poem. Both 1397-99 and 1386-89 were periods of the kind of political instability that may have occasioned Chaucer's ballade. 1386-89 was,

in addition, the period of strongest Boethian influence, while 1397-99 is more likely if one considers the influence of Deschamps. Indeed, the strongest evidence favoring the later date is Braddy's assertion that Lak of Stedfastnesse was based on one of Deschamps' poems. But there is no real proof that Deschamps was Chaucer's source, merely because he expresses similar thoughts. We know that Deschamps knew and admired Chaucer's work. Is it not possible that Chaucer was Deschamps' source?<sup>30</sup> Or, more likely, is it not just as possible that another work may be the common source of both poets? And if that is the case, then the most obvious source is Boethius.

Robinson, in discussing the refrain "al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse," refers the reader to similar lines in the Troilus<sup>31</sup>: "Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges," Troilus begins at one point, "Yet were al lost, that dar I wel seyn certes, / But if thi grace passed oure deserts'" (Bk. III, ll. 1261-1267). And later, in a closer parallel, Troilus sings again of the love that binds all:

And if that Love aught lete his bridel go.  
 Al that now loveth asondre shold lepe,  
 And lost were al that Love halt now to-hepe.  
(Bk. III, ll. 1762-1764)

Both of these passages recall Boethius' Consolation, Book II, metre 8 discussed in my Introduction:

And yif this love slakede the bridelis, alle thynges  
 that now loven hem togidres wolden make batayle contynuely,  
 and stryven to fordo the fassoun of this world. (ll. 16-19)

The "al is lost," then, might come as easily from Boethius as from Deschamps. And certainly the steadfastness of constancy whose loss Chaucer laments is that condition of order which Love brings to an otherwise chaotic universe. In Boethius' words--

That the world with stable feyth varieth accordable  
 chaungynges; that the contrarious qualities of elementz  
 holden among hemself allyaunce perdurable; . . .--al this  
 accordance of thynges is bounde with love, that governeth  
 erthe and see, and hath also comandement to the hevene.

(Bk. II, mtr. 8, ll. 1-16)

What is true on the cosmic plain is true in the political microcosm:  
 truth and virtue, gentillesse itself, are gone in the poem's world.  
 Without these earthly manifestations of that Divine Love which binds  
 the universe, human affairs run into the same chaos that would  
 characterize the universe without love to make it steadfast. Divine  
 order, "steadfastnesse," is gone and "al is lost."

All of this dating and source hunting would be trivial if it did  
 not have a direct bearing upon the interpretation of the poem. In  
 this case, it does. If the poem were written in the period 1397-99,  
 when Richard was acting in his most despotic and, some would say,  
 irrational manner, there are two possibilities for its purpose. Chaucer  
 may be implying that, since Richard began his purge of the opposition  
 party in 1397, England has suffered much. Therefore, Richard should  
 alter the acts of tyranny and, by correcting himself, correct the  
 situation in England. Such a reading is probably implied by John  
 Gardner when he calls Lak of Stedfastnesse an "angry poem." Gardner  
 detects an angry tone in "the rush of unstressed syllables" in lines  
 like "vertu hath now no dominacioun; / Pitee exyled, no man is  
 merciabile" (ll. 16-17).<sup>32</sup> This contention must ultimately remain  
 subjective and unprovable, but Gardner makes another observation.  
 The language, he says, while

pretending to speak of general evils, subtly strikes out at the king himself--truth "put down" like a rebellion [l. 15], "domination" stolen from the rightful ruler, virtue [l. 16] and the quality of mercy "exiled" [l. 17].<sup>33</sup>

This seems a keen observation, but Gardner does not elaborate. And even if he did, by trying to make precise correspondences to actual events in Richard's last years, the interpretation would seem strained.

But from a logical point of view, would it seem safe for Chaucer to condemn a reigning monarch outright, even "subtly," particularly one whose actions were as rash and seemingly irrational as Richard's after 1397? Brusendorff suggests that, if the poem really is "a reflection on his [Richard's] failure to do justice," then it is "a reflection which Chaucer would hardly have dared to address to the King," and suggests another purpose: "it was probably intended as a Machiavellian compliment to Richard on his bold bid for supremacy."<sup>34</sup> This seems even less likely. To suggest that Chaucer was a "Machiavellian" is to completely misjudge his character (would a Machiavellian assert that "Truth is the highest thing a man may kepe"?). Further, it seems unlikely that Chaucer would compliment Richard--as a royalist, he had no love of the Gloucester faction, but as a lifetime friend of Gaunt and dependent on the Lancaster family, it is hardly conceivable that Chaucer would have commended Richard for the actions of the last two years of his reign.

I would suggest that the tone is neither angry nor that of a Macchiavellian compliment. It is rather one of despair moving into hope. Chaucer looks back upon a better world, a world governed by the harmony of natural law, and laments its loss:

Sometyme the world was so stedfast and stable  
That mannes word was obligacioun; (ll. 1-2)

The alliteration of "stedfast and stable"--the two qualities describing divinely ordained order--with "sometyme" 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 one's word--that is, personal integrity which is a large part of truth. But Chaucer immediately contrasts the lurid 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. (ll. 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 turned "up-so-down."

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 honorably. 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.<sup>35</sup> To upset it, as it has been upset here in the first stanza of the poem, is a grave sin, a violation of natural law and harmony. This upsetting of order and degree, of "stedfastnesse," seems more appropriate to the years 1386-88 than later, for it was in those years that Gloucester and the "appellant lords" upset the order of the state by usurping the king's real power. And certainly

Gloucester's treason was a breaking of "truth"--his own oath of allegiance to the rightful king. The word and the deed, then, are here "nothing lyk."

Chaucer may be alluding to this political turmoil in the first lines of the second stanza:

What maketh this world to be so variable  
But lust that folk have in dissensioun? (ll. 8-9)

"Variable" is simply another word for "lak of stedfastness." The world is no longer stable, ordered, because of all of the dissension. Chaucer may well be speaking of the dissension among the Gloucester and Royalist factions. The next lines describe in a general manner the values of this "up-so-down" world, where one is considered generally incapable if he can't wrong his neighbor, and where wretchedness is engaged in wilfully.

For among us now a man is holde unable  
But if he can, by som collusioun,  
Don his neighbour wrong or oppressioun.  
What causeth this but wilful wrecchednesse,  
That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse? (ll. 8-14)

This is all undoubtedly an extension into the general population of the kind of corruption found in the highest circles.

The following lines (ll. 15-21), about the absence of Trouthe, Pitee, and Vertu (already quoted above), which Gardner saw as "subtly striking out" at the King, may in fact subtly suggest political activity, but perhaps that of the Gloucester party rather than the 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. The exiled "Pitee" may even be Richard's favorite Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who was exiled by the "Merciless Parliament" in 1388. And the line "no man is merciable" could allude to that same parliament, which condemned to death Nick Brembre, Robert Tresilian, and Simon Burley--three of Richard's advisors whom Chaucer knew well. Discretion, that virtue by which men make responsible decisions, is now blinded by covetousness, Chaucer says in line 18. 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 three 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 Richard calls up the possibility of that former Golden Age coming again. In these lines, quoted above, Chaucer exhorts the king to bring back all of those values now out of fashion: "desyre to be honourable," he tells the King (l. 22), "Cherish thy folk and hate extortion" (l. 23); let nothing reprehensible be done in your land. "Shew forth thy swerd of castigation" (l. 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" (l. 27). All of this sounds like advice which 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 take the up-so-doun world and set it right. And there is a note of hope and desperation--if he can't set things right, who can? The last line, in this spirit of hope and rebirth, alters the refrain to fit the mood:

And wed thy folk agein to stedfastnesse. (l. 28)<sup>36</sup>

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. Others may have been angry--like Langland, for instance, whose Resoun declares

' . . . bi þe rode, I shal no reuthe haue  
 While Mede hath þe maistrye in þis moot-halle.  
 Ac I may shewe ensamples, as I se otherwhile;  
 I sey it myself,' quod he, 'and it so were  
 That I were kynge with crowne to kepen a rewme,  
 Shulde neuere wronge in þis worlde þat I wite my<sub>3</sub>te,<sup>37</sup>  
 Ben vnpunished in my powere, for peril of my soule?'

But 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 spirit induces me to date the poem about 1389, the point at which Richard threw off the shackles of the Gloucester faction and assumed power in his own right. Here was a new beginning for Richard, and perhaps served as the point of hope which inspired the Envoy to the poem.

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:

Allas, allas! now may men wepe and crye!  
 For in oure dayes nis but covetyse,  
 Doublesesse, and tresoun, and envye,  
 Poyson, manslauhtre, and mordre in sondry wyse. (ll. 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" (l. 3042), offering the possibility of new life by proposing the politically expedient marriage of Emilye to Palamon. Tragedies happen, but they cannot be allowed to frustrate life. One must go on living, making the most of what one has.

Similarly, in the end of Troilus and Criseyde, Troilus, 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 Troilus' last days, Chaucer concludes his fifth book with a "palinode." Here Troilus, ascended to the eighth sphere hears the music of the spheres which denotes natural law. From that height, and that new perspective, Troilus 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 Troilus' bloodstained footsteps-- "Repeyreth hom 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 upon the wretchedness 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.<sup>38</sup>

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 slant 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, re-writing 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 feldes yeve hem by usage" (ll. 3-4) says Chaucer, as compared with Boethius' "They helden hem apayed with the metes that the trewe feeldes broughten forth" (ll. 1-3). Also quite similar are the next lines of both poems, except for one marked difference. Boethius says "They ne destroyeden ne desseyvede nat hemself with outrage" (ll. 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 forpampred, 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" (l. 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 eaten in the former age. Norton-Smith notes that Chaucer, in cataloguing such details, was trying to be "as accurate and up-to-date as possible," making the poem, as it were, applicable to his contemporary age.<sup>39</sup> Then Chaucer takes Boethius' next lines--"They weren wont lyghtly to slaken hir hungir at even with acornes of ookes" (ll. 5-6)--and shortens them, but is more specific about precisely what kind of simple food was eaten: "They eten mast, hawes, and swich pounage" (l. 7). The point is that there are natural nuts and fruits which in the poet's day would be considered "pannage," or food for swine. For the last line of his stanza, Chaucer looks later in Boethius' poem at the line "And dronken of the rennyng water" (ll. 16-17), which he changes to "And dronken water of the colde welle" (l. 8). Aside from the fact that welle rhymes with melle, Chaucer may have had other reasons for changing the line. A well, for one thing, besides being a spring of water, could also be more specifically, "a spring of water supposed to be of miraculous origin or to have supernatural healing powers": (OED sb.<sup>1</sup> 1. b)--the implication could be a kind of sanctity in the simplicity of these early men. Moreover, the connotation of "well" as "a state of good fortune, welfare, or happiness" (OED a. 1) may also be implied.

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 nec ullis / saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus" (Bk. I, ll. 101-102), ("The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful.").<sup>40</sup> In a similar passage, Jean de Meun says "La teere n'ert point lors aree, / Mes, si cum Diex l'avoit paree, / Par soi meimes aportoit / Ce dont chascuns se confortoit" (ll. 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" [p. 169]).<sup>41</sup> Chaucer renders the lines "Yit nas the ground nat wounded with the plow, / But corn up-sprong, unsowe of mannes hond, / The which they gnodded, and eete nat half ynough" (ll. 9-11). Chaucer seems to have known both other versions, but adds the detail of how the men "gnodded," or rubbed and crushed the grain in their bare hands, without the use of the mills mentioned in line six. The figurative "wounding" of the earth with the plow is likewise Chaucer's addition. The suggestion is that this man-made technological advancement, the plow, has somehow a negative effect on the natural environment as men knew it in the former age. The wounding foreshadows the warfare which Chaucer mentions later in the poem, and suggests a link between the two activities.

In this light one must interpret the next line, "No man yit knew the forwes of his lond" (l. 12), a line which has no corresponding line in any of the sources. Nor are there sources for the next two lines: "No man the fyr out of the flint yit fond; / Unkorven and ungrobbed

lay the vyne" (ll. 13-14). It is in these original lines that Chaucer's purpose evinces 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, and are linked to that luxury in this stanza by their juxtaposition to the final two lines: "No man yit in the mortar spyces grond / To clarre, ne to sause of galantyne" (ll. 15-16). These lines are suggested by lines 6-9 in Boethius' poem, which Chaucer renders in his translation with a parenthetical comment:

They ne coude nat medle the yift of Bachus to the cleer hony  
(that is to seyn, thei coude make no piment or clarree).

The lines also suggest a relationship with these of Jean de Meun: "sanz querre piment ne clare" (ll. 8379-80), ("No claret or spiced honey wine they drank" [p. 169]). Chaucer adds the detail of the galantyne--a sauce for fish or fowl which was apparently made by adding spices to wine. This, 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 to date, notes that this rhetorical device "establishes an ominous sense that the happy time had to end."<sup>42</sup>

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" (ll. 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."<sup>43</sup> 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, for these lines are condensed quite a bit from the Boethian lines

Ne they coude nat medle the bryght fleeses of the contre of  
Seryens with the venym of Tyrie (this is to seyn, thei coude  
nat deyen white fleeses of Syrien contre with the blood of a  
schellefyssch that men fynden in Tirie, with which blood men  
deyen purpre).

The condensing of these lines also fits Chaucer's plan for this stanza, which is an example of the rhetorical figure anaphora, or the repetition of the same words at the beginning of successive lines. For the stanza continues

No flesh ne wiste offence of egge or spere;  
No coyn ne knew man which was fals or trewe;  
No ship yit karf the wawes grene and blewe;  
No marchaunt yit ne fette outlandish ware;  
No trompes for the werres folk ne knewe,  
Ne toures heye and walles rounde or square. (ll. 19-24)

The fact that Chaucer omits lines 16-17 of Boethius' metre here suggests that he has some definite purpose in arranging the lines as he does. Those lines in his source refer to the manner in which these people of the former age slept--something Chaucer includes later, but seems to consider irrelevant at this point. Here, from speaking at length about the agricultural and dietary habits of the first men, and the luxuries which the present age has imposed upon the natural world, Chaucer goes on to enumerate in rapid succession other developments of more modern times which are also, in their own way, alterations of



nature by man-made technology. And the parallel series seems ordered in a climactic manner: the most important alteration--the building of walled and fortified cities and the sounding of the trumpets of war--comes last in the series, but seems intimately connected with all the other "luxuries." The connection is suggested by the parallelism. When man first began to want more than was provided for him naturally, and therefore began to alter the environment and create new technology, he started the long chain of events which led to the wars and fortifications mentioned in the last lines of the stanza. The same desire for more than nature provides which made men want to dye cloth seems also to have been behind the forging of weapons--the swords and spears of line 19 are a technological advancement over the fist or club.

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 (l. 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 (ll. 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" (l. 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 23-24. This implication is even stronger when one considers that the ship "karf," or cut, the waves, like a sword. Schmidt notes how this line

associates "Mercantilism (ware) with militarism (werre)."<sup>44</sup> When one recalls the "wounded" earth of line nine, the association of all these activities becomes apparent: as desiring more than nature provides was the impulse behind the plowing, so it is also behind mercantilism and, ultimately, warfare. The wounds of the plow and the wounds of war are, thus, interrelated.

In comparing these lines with Chaucer's sources, one can see, as with the lines concerning the dying of cloth, that the poet was concerned with condensing each point into a single line, so that the rapid succession from point to point became clear in the parallelism of successive lines. Lines 19 and 20 are original with Chaucer. Line 21, about the ships, is a shorter form of Boethius' "Ne no gest ne straunger ne karf yet the heye see with ourse or with ships" (ll. 18-20). Line 22, about the merchants, also condenses Boethius' "ne they ne hadden seyn yit none new stroondes to leden marchandise into diverse contres" (ll. 20-22). Whether Chaucer's choice of the word "outlandish" for "foreign" was prompted by any connotations the word may have had of strange or bizarre merchandise I do not know for certain. The OED records the first use of "outlandish" in this way in 1596 (a. 2.) But considering Chaucer's concentration upon excess luxury, there may well have been that connotation: goods from foreign countries were luxuries which only the rich could afford, so the "outlandish" may well relate to the "forpampred" of line five. Chaucer's next line, "No tromps for the weres folk ne knew" (l. 23), loses the alliteration and some of the parallelism in Boethius' line "Tho weren the cruele clarious ful hust and ful stille" (ll. 22-24), but is put into the form

which fits better into this stanza. The sense is not changed. 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: "nondum praecipites cingebat oppida fossae" ("Not yet were cities begirt with steep moats") reads the Metamorphoses, Book I (l. 97).

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 coveytise, that first our sorwe broghte!" (ll. 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" (ll. 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?" (ll. 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. Chaucer then seems for the most part to have skipped over lines 29-32 in Boethius. 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's lines 31-32, quoted above, though the similarities are not at all pronounced. Chaucer passes instead to the last lines of Boethius' poem:

Allas! What was he that first dalf up the gobbettes or the weyghtes of gold covered undir erthe and the precyous stones that wolden han be hydd? He dalf up precyous periles.  
(ll. 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 gemmes soghte. (ll. 27-30)

Again, the verbal parallels are not particularly close, though the idea of digging for gold and gems in the bowels of the earth is present in both. Once again Chaucer's lines show parallels to Ovid more than to anyone else:

nec tantum segetes alimentaue debita dives  
poscebatur humus, sed itum est in viscera terrae,  
quasque reconciderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris,  
effodiuntur opel, inritamentu malorum.  
(Bk. I, ll. 137-141)

(Not only did men demand of the bounteous fields the crops and sustenance they owed, but they delved as well into the very bowels of the earth; and the wealth which the creator had hidden away and buried deep amidst the very Stygian shades, was brought to light, wealth that pricks men on to crime.)

Ovid's lines more explicitly speak of men actually working down in the darkness of the bowels of the earth, as Chaucer's "lurkinge in derknesse" suggests, than Boethius', whose gold is simply "covered under erthe." Chaucer's word "lurkinge" emphasizes the sinister nature of the activity, and he adds the idea of mining as a "swety bysinesse," emphasizing the coarseness of the pursuit. 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 hence led to the luxuries and the disasters Chaucer describes in the first three stanzas. Further,

the word "grobbe" (l. 29), as Schmidt notes, echoes the "ungrobbed" of line 14. "The two actions of digging, in the one instance referring to the cultivation of vines, in the other to the mining of precious ores, are associated through the economical and telling use of the single word."<sup>45</sup> Both actions arise out of covetousness--the desire for more.

With stanza five, Chaucer departs from his main sources, and draws, as Robinson notes, upon John of Salisbury's Policraticus, viii, 6, or Jerome's Adversus Jovinian, ii, 11.<sup>46</sup> 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 bussches 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 t'assaile. (ll. 32-40)

The irony of marching into battle to win only a wilderness or a few bushes wherein 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.

The emphasis of the sixth stanza is again upon the luxuries themselves rather than upon warfare, the result of desiring those luxuries. In composing his verses, Chaucer used both Boethius-- "They slepen holsome slepes upon the gras . . . and layen undir

the schadwes of the heye pyn-trees" (ll. 15-17)--and the following lines from the Roman de la Rose:

Et fesoient en terre fosses.  
 En roches et en tiges grosses  
 Et quant par nuit dormir voloient  
 En leu de coites aportoient  
 En lor chasiaus monceaus de gerbes  
 De foilles ou de mousse ou d'erbes. (ll. 8393-94; 8398-8402)

(They made their homes in earthly caves  
 Sometimes they refuge took among the rocks  
 Or in the hollow trunks of mighty trees,  
 At evening when they wished to go to sleep  
 In place of beds they brought into their homes  
 Great heaps of moss or leaves, or sheaves of grass. [p. 170])

What Chaucer does to these lines is add details for the sake of contrast:

Yit were no paleis-chaubers, ne non halles;  
 In caves and [in] wodes softe and swete  
 Slepten this blissed folk withoute walles,  
 On gras or leves in parfit quiete.  
 Ne down of fetheres, ne no bleched shete  
 Was kid to hem, but in seurtee they slepte. (ll. 41-46)

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 featherbeds 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 "withoute walles" 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,

Hir hertes were al oon, withouten galles;  
 Everich of hem his feith to other kepte. (ll. 47-48)

Covetousness, then, chokes out 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 (l.) 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. At any rate, 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."<sup>47</sup> Thus the real importance of these "toures" is the way they recall the "toures hey" of line 24 and the "walles" of line 43: 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. Aside from the fact that I do not believe, as Norton-Smith apparently does, that this poem belongs to Chaucer's, and Richard's, last years, and that I think it unlikely that Chaucer would even covertly condemn the king before those 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 once again, describe a world dominated by covetousness:

Allas, alas! now may men wepe and crye!  
 For in oure dayes nis but covetyse,  
 Doublesse, and tresoun, and envye,  
 Poyson, manslauhtr, and mordre in sondry wyse. (ll. 60-63)

In the end, then, The Former Age seems not such a pessimistic poem after all. Through the pessimism of the final lines shines 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."<sup>48</sup> The cause is covetousness. The answer to 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. That poem, in fact, may appear to be out of place in this chapter. An ABC is sentimental, simplistic, even simple-mindedly pious--what does it have to do with the self-conscious, philosophically reflective Boethian lyrics?

But An 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 in the pantocrator figures in the domes of Greek-style churches) 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 An ABC, Chaucer can be observed doing what he does so

often in later lyrics: personalizing and particularizing the abstract concept of universal love, here presenting it in the person of Mary.

Chaucer's An ABC is, perhaps, his earliest surviving poem, if its traditional association with Blanche of Lancaster has any truth in it.<sup>49</sup> The poem is a translation of a prayer included in Guillaume Deguilleville's Le Pelerinage la Vie Humaine, a long French narrative composed about 1330. But I think too much has been made of Chaucer's relationship to his original, which is not particularly close--a fact which justifies the study of Chaucer's poem in its own right.<sup>50</sup> Besides, not much will be served by repeating the same kind of comparison I have just done with The Former Age. 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 indelibly 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.<sup>51</sup>

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,<sup>52</sup> there is a tension between the speaker's impassioned state in lines like

Loo, how that theeves seven chasen mee!  
Help, lady bright, er that my ship tobreste! (ll. 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. (ll. 183-184)

In these final lines a resolution of the tension occurs, and hence, 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,<sup>53</sup> 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, and co-redemptress of mankind. Secondly, Chaucer unifies the poem through certain image patterns which tie the stanzas together. William Rogers, in the only published critical analysis of the poem of any length, noted the recurring legal imagery.<sup>54</sup> Other image patterns which run through the poem are the image of the sinner fleeing to Mary's succor, the association of Mary with the Courtly Beloved, and the depiction of the Virgin as Physician of the Soul.

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 "al merciabie queene" in line one, and she is "merciabie / . . . To penitentes that ben to merci able" in lines

182-184. And the speaker uses the word "mercy" no fewer than eleven times in between, twice asking Mary directly to "Have mercy" (l. 7), "mercy, ladi" (l. 36). Mercy seems her chief attribute as she is called the "cause of grace and merci" (l. 26), "ful of swetnesse and merci evere" (l. 51), "Mooder, of whom oure merci gan to springe" (l. 133), and "ladi ful of merci" (l. 173); Chaucer, for variety's sake, occasionally uses the Latinate synonym: Mary is "queen of misericorde" (l. 25).

But mercy is not the only quality attributed to the Virgin in Chaucer's poem. Mary is able to dispense mercy, or divine clemency, because she feels such pity, such sympathetic compassion, for the suffering sinner. She watches sinners with "pitous eyen cleere" (l. 88), she is "of pitee well" (l. 126), and she shows abounding pity to those who ask for it (ll. 135-136).

As a direct consequence of her unlimited pity and mercy, Mary is figuratively represented as a haven of refuge for penitent 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.

Six times the speaker in particular, or mankind in general, are described as fleeing--"al this world fleeth for soccour" to Mary, says the speaker (l. 2), and "To thee I flee, confounded in error" (l. 3). Again in line 41, the speaker addresses Mary saying "Fleeing, I flee for socour to thi tente," and later he asks in despair "I caityf, whider

may I flee?" (l. 124). Finally his "fleeing" ceases as the speaker finds his refuge in line 148: "Receyve me--I can no ferther flee!" And in all of this, the holy Mother is a "haven of refute" (l. 14), twice the sole given of comfort--"Comfort is noon but in yow, ladi deere" (l. 17), once again called the speaker's "hope of refut" (l. 33), and no fewer than seven times the speaker's, and mankind's, succor: "This thanke I yow, socour of al mankynde!" (l. 168).

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 (l. 9), says the speaker, so that "thin herte is ay so free" (l. 11). Further, Mary is "largesse of pleyne felicittee" (l. 12), and is "ful of bountee" (l. 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" (ll. 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. So, for example, in the fourteenth century English romance Sir Launfal, the protagonist impoverishes himself by giving away all of his own goods, but, since he is out of favor at the court, has no funds coming in. And Launfal is to be seen not as imprudent but as

admirably generous, and worthy of our pity since his own lord, Arthur, has been so stingy with him. Mary's bounty in An ABC, then, is a reflection of the chivalric ideal of the feudal society for which it was written.

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 evince 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 on the spiritual. 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, Gentillesse, and Curtesye" (ll. 66-68). In A Complaint to his Lady, the speaker says of his Beloved that "Hir name is Bountee" (l. 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" (l. 9). The same trait is observable in other Middle English lyrics. In the Harley lyric "Alysoun," for example, the speaker states



In world nis non so witer mon  
That all hire bounte telle con. <sup>55</sup>

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" (l. 14). The hard-hearted woman of A Complaint to his Lady is surnamed "Fair Rewtheles" (l. 26), while the speaker of Womanly Noblesse actually prays to his Beloved "with your pite me som wise avaunce" (l. 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" (l. 15), and that her beauty is so great "no man may atteyne / To mercy" (l. 23). The Knight in The Book of the Duchesse says that, when his Beloved finally acknowledged his love, "My lady yaf me al hooly / The noble yifte of hir mercy," (ll. 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 Troilus 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." (ll. 653-655)

But it is not only in her qualities of 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 (ll. 16, 62, and 181), is a typical epithet for the courtly Lady. Compare "Emelye the brighte" in "The Knight's Tale" (l. 1427), "my lady bright / Which I have loved with al my myght" in The Book of the Duchesse (l. 477), "O lady bright,

Venus" in The Complaint of Mars (l. 136), and "O lady bright, Criseyde" in Troilus and Criseyde (Bk. V, l. 1264), to cite only a few examples. Further, Chaucer includes a line in An ABC the connotations of which can not have been unintended: "Whoso thee loveth," he says, addressing the Virgin, "he shal not love in veyn" (l. 71).

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" (ll. 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,  
For which the eerthe acursed was ful yore,  
I am so wounded, as ye may wel seen,  
That I am lost almost, it smert so sore. (ll. 149-152)

The image of the Virgin as physician runs through the poem. In lines 67-68, the poem's speaker says

whan a soule falleth in errour,  
Thi pitee goth and haleth him ayein.

More specifically in lines 77-80, the speaker addresses the Virgin as his physician:

Now, queen of comfort, sith thou art that same  
To whom I seeche for my medycyne,  
Lat not my foo no more my wounde entame;  
My hele into thin hand al I resygne.

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 uplifting effect of the lady."<sup>56</sup> 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 hye 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, honor, 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 him and thus help him resist sin and error."<sup>57</sup> Gardner's reading, based on the "chastyse" of line 39, seems to place Mary into the same genus 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, who appears in the remainder of the poem. The crux of the matter is the word chastyse, and it may well be that this reading of line 39 is an editorial error.

J. Burke Severs noted some time ago that, of the fourteen manuscripts of An ABC, only one says "That, but thou er that day me wel chastyse" at line 39, while ten manuscripts give the line "That but thou er that day correcte me." Sheer numbers are no reason to prefer the second reading, but the manuscripts fall into two major groups: "Correcte me" is obviously the reading of the ancestor of one group, and of one of the two subgroups of the second set. It is most likely, Severs concludes, that the archetype read "correcte me." "Chastyse" he regards as a "scribal effort to regularize the rhyme scheme," since "correcte me" would alter the rhyme scheme from a b a b b c b c to a b a b b c a c. But Severs notes that The Former Age, written in the same verse form as An ABC, displays precisely the same irregularity in its sixth stanza. Apparently Chaucer merely decided to vary the stanza at this point. It is not unlikely that the same thing could

have occurred in An ABC.<sup>58</sup> The fact is that Severs' suggested reading makes much more sense, in the light of Mary's personal perfections presented in the remainder of the poem, as has been shown.

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.<sup>59</sup>

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."<sup>60</sup> 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 in lines 49-56, wherein Mary as Mother is called upon to quell 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,  
 Help that my Fader be not wroth with me.  
 Spek thou, for I ne dar not him ysee,  
 So have I doon in erthe, allas 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 rekenyng.  
 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. (ll. 129-136)

Again in these lines, the motherly compassion of the Virgin is sought to soften the sternness of the Father. But Chaucer is merely working with the tradition of Mariology--the sentiments he expresses date back hundreds of years. For example, St. Bernard, most avid of the twelfth century Mariologists, once declared in a sermon called the "Aqueduct" that, if the sinner finds God the Father or even Christ the Son too harsh, and fears to approach them, Mary is at least approachable.<sup>61</sup>

The second and more extensive pattern of images in *An ABC* stressing the Virgin's role as mediatrix is the pattern of legal terminology. Latin Christianity is, in its language and basic assumptions, pervaded by Roman law anyway; Miegge describes it this way:

The systematic theology of the West, centered in the idea of original sin and the necessity of a difficult ransom, had made Christ the symbol and warrant of all the Latin Church's system of ethics and discipline. Nothing is given, everything is bought and paid for, and although salvation is still a work of grace, yet insofar as grace recompenses the appropriate merits which grace itself helps to grow up in men's will, it is a system of retributive justice rigorously calculated upon merit. And this juridical structure of doctrine, characteristic of the Roman spirit had been fixed again by the code of honour of feudal society.<sup>62</sup>

For the average Christian, Mary was the only escape from the harsh judgement of the Father--she was his only advocate.

In An ABC, the legal imagery surrounding Mary as advocate begins in the first stanza. Here, the poet states his need for help, ending with the words "venquissed me hath my cruel adversaire" (l. 8). Now the word adversaire is deliberately ambiguous. The term means not only merely "opponent," but carries the secondary meaning of "the Adversary," that is, Satan. Further, the term was also the legal name for an opponent in a lawsuit (according to the Middle English Dictionary). The speaker needs help--he is losing his case to his adversary which, in spiritual terms, means that Satan is on the verge of winning his soul.

Lines 19-24 continue this legal imagery:

For, loo, my sinne and my confusion,  
Which oughten not in thi presence appeere,  
Han take on me a grevous accion  
Of verray right and desperacioun;  
And, as bi right, thei mighten wel susteene  
That I were wurthi my dampnacioun,  
Nere merci of you, blisful hevене queene!

Here, the speaker's sin and confusion appear allegorically in Mary's presence, that is, before her as if she were a tribunal. They take

action on the speaker, or make a formal demand of their rights from him, as in a court of law. This the speaker fears, since they may well sustain, or support their argument, and prove that he is worthy of damnation--thus winning the case for the Adversary. Only Mary's mercy can save the Speaker.

But in lines 36-37 the case has apparently gone to a higher court--

But mercy, ladi, at the grete assyse,  
Whan we shull come before the hye justyse!

The high Justice is God, and the grete assyse is apparently His court on Doomsday. The speaker's hope is in the Virgin, for she will be there with him, as the "we" of line 37 indicates, and his hope is in her mercy. Later in the poem, the speaker tells Mary what she should say to help his case. He wants her to remind God about how He became a man,

And with his precious blood he wrot the bille  
Upon the crois, as general acquitaunces  
To every penitent in ful creauunce;  
And therefore, ladi bright, thou for us praye.  
Thanne shalt thou bothe stinte al his grevaunce,  
And make oure foo to failen of his praye. (ll. 59-64)

Mary is told to cite the law by which her client is to be found innocent. God wrote this bill with His own blood: it was a general acquittance--both in the sense of payment or compensation, and the sense of a "document in evidence of a transaction" (MED)--to everyone in perfect faith. If the Virgin, then, pleads the case of sinners, their "foe," their "Adversary," will lose his case, his "grevance," or the ground of his complaint.

Don't let that same Old Foe boast, the speaker says later, that

. . . he hath in his lystes of mischaunce  
Convict that ye bothe have bought so deere. (ll. 85-86)



The lists are a place of trial by combat, wherein the speaker feels he is in danger of being convicted, that is, losing the battle against his Adversary, unless Mary sustains him. That trial is apparently in this world, where human beings must daily battle sin. But at the final judgement a sinner has only one advocate--here meaning both mediator and attorney, a professional legal advocate. With a slight dig at contemporary lawyer's fees, Chaucer adds that the Virgin is the cheapest advocate to get: she works for only a few Hail Marys.

Ne advocat noon that wole and dar so praye  
 For us, and that for litel hire as yee,  
 That helpen for an Ave-Marie or tweye. (ll. 102-104)

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. (ll. 133-134)

And again:

Ladi, unto that court thou me ajourne  
 That cleped is thi bench, O freshe flour!  
 Ther as that merci evere shal sojourne. (ll. 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" (l. 24 and 149), and "queen of misericorde" (l. 25), the "queen of comfort" (l. 77, 121), "Noble princesse" (l. 97), and ultimately "maistresse / Of hevene and erthe" (ll. 109-110). Indeed,

Chaucer goes so far as to say to Mary that God

. . . hath thee made vicaire and maistresse  
 Of al this world, and eek governouresse  
 Of hevne, and he represeth his justise  
 After thi will; and therefore in witesse  
 He hath thee crowned in so rial wise. (ll. 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. At any rate, 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 colors upon all the cults of Virgins and Mothers among the ancient pagan peoples--Mary becomes the Christian transformation of Isis, of Athena, of Diana.<sup>63</sup> 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-figure tended to invite some rather unorthodox if not heretical ideas.

Certainly the lines of Chaucer's which portray God as enfranchising Mary as governess of heaven and earth cannot be seen, in any sense, as an expression of orthodoxy. The idea may, however, be based upon a widespread tradition. In a book entitled *Speculum humane salvationis*, an anonymous but extremely popular work apparently written in about 1324,<sup>64</sup> Christ is presented as dividing His kingdom with His Mother, "reserving justice to Himself and entrusting mercy to her."<sup>65</sup>

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.** In this view Mary obtains her most significant power, and in the presentation of this view Chaucer strays most widely from orthodoxy. If he is relatively quiet about the immaculate conception and the assumption, Chaucer does not hesitate to see Mary's role in salvation as one equal to that of Christ Himself:

God vouched sauf thurgh thee with us to accorde (l. 27)

and

thurgh thee han we grace, as we desire (l. 32)

Through Mary, that is, not through Christ, do we attain grace.

**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,"<sup>66</sup> 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.  
 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. (ll. 81-86; emphasis mine)

Taking a suggestion from St. Paul, who had encouraged the parallel between Christ and Adam, saying "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men" (Romans 5:18), Justin Martyr and later Ireneus made

a similar parallel between Eve and the Virgin. In Adversus Hereses, Ireneus states

"Quemadmodum illa virum quidem habens Adam, virgo tamen adhuc existens . . . inobediens facta, et sibi, et universo generi humano causa facta est mortis: sic et Maria habens praedestinatum virum, et tamen virgo, obediens, et sibi et universo generi humano causa facta est salutis."

("as by her disobedience the virgin Eve was the cause of death for herself and for the human race, so the obedient virgin became a cause of salvation for herself and the human race.")<sup>67</sup>

Seeing Eve as a figure of Mary became commonplace in medieval times, and Chaucer suggests the parallel in his references to Eden and the fall. In ll. 149-152, the speaker recalls Genesis:

With thornes venymous, O hevene queen,  
For which the eerth acursed was ful yore,  
I am so wounded, as ye may well seen,  
That I am lost almost, it smert so sore.

The wounds, as Rogers notes, recall the wound healed by Mary as physician in ll. 79-80.<sup>68</sup> Another implication of the Virgin's role as the "new Eve" may be seen in ll. 180-181, near the close of the poem, where the Speaker says

Now ladi bryghte, sith thou canst and wilt  
Ben to the seed of Adam merciabie

The fact that Mary as a new Eve parallels Christ as the new Adam suggests a near-equal participation of Mary with Christ in the redemption of mankind. That participation was active and voluntary is noted by several theologians--even Thomas Aquinas, who in general is quite conservative concerning dogma, acknowledges Mary's assent to the incarnation.<sup>69</sup> This consent is also regularly depicted in more popular sources, like the lyric "I sing of a Maiden":

King of alle kinges  
To here sone she ches.<sup>70</sup>

But Albertus Magnus goes even farther, dwelling upon Mary's consent to her Son's sacrifice:

"Sub ipsa sua specie propria in qua eam genuit, spontaneo ejus consensu in ejus passione pro nobis omnibus obtulit: per quam sufficientissimam et gratissimam hostiam semel oblatam, Deum toto generi humano reconciliavit: qui nimirum excellentissimus actus patriae in opere Fuit."

(Mary "with her consent to the cross, offered Him for us all, and through that most sufficient and pleasing sacrifice only once offered, reconciled the entire human race to God.")<sup>71</sup>

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-redemptrix 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.<sup>72</sup>

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 Gentilesse 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.

## CHAPTER II: NOTES

1

The problem is caused by the unusual noun "Vache" (l. 22) which Skeat glosses as "cow." According to Skeat, Chaucer is here alluding to Boethius' Consolation of Philosophy, Book V, metre 5, "where it is explained that quadrepeds look down upon the earth, whilst man alone looks up towards heaven; cf. lok up in l. 19 of the poem. The sense is, therefore, that we should cease to look down, and learn to look up like true men" (Walter W. Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899], I, 82). Edith Rickert, however, in a convincing example of historical scholarship ("Thou Vache," MP, 11 [1913-14], 209-25), suggested that "Vache" is here a proper name, referring to Sir Philip de la Vache (1346-1408), who was son-in-law to Chaucer's friend Sir Lewis Clifford. Vache was out of favor at court between 1386-89 (the time of the ascendancy of the Gloucester faction), and if the poem was indeed written for Vache, it would have been written, in all probability, to encourage him in this time of trouble.

Others who have written about the Envoy include James F. Ragan, who considers "hevenlich mede" in line 27 a play on words consistent with Chaucer's punning use of Vache's name. Just as Vache means "cow," and so may continue the image of the beste in line 18, so, Ragan believes, there are other puns in the poem, particularly heye wey (high way, but also hay way) in line 20, and "hevenliche mede" (mede as reward, but also as meadow) in line 24. There would be, then, a series of images relating to cows and their habits ("The 'hevenlich mede' in Chaucer's Truth," MLN, 68 [1953], 534-35.). A. Wigfall Green, however, considers "Vache" a humorous reference to Chaucer himself as a kind of slow, bovine type ("Structure of Three Minor Poems by Chaucer," University of Mississippi Studies in English, 4 [1963], 79-82). More recently, David E. Lampe ("The Truth of a 'Vache': The Homely Homily of Chaucer's Truth," PLL, 9 [1973], 311-14) has suggested that "'Vache'=cow=man is not simply a comic undercutting of the moral earnestness of the poem," but rather should be understood "in terms of medieval iconography and bestiaries." Lampe believes that the beast images are intended not negatively, but rather positively: Chaucer is not referring to the lower nature of man in this context, as Skeat would imply; rather the beast is to be taken in the light of Boethius' statement that man should learn from the beasts to follow our instincts (Bk. III, pr. 11, ll. 87-89). The vache, further, is to be taken as an ox, symbol of the evangelist Luke, whose gospel opens with a sacrifice of such an animal. Commenting upon this symbol Rabanus Maurus had said that every Christian should be like an ox, a sacrificial victim, in that in renouncing worldly pleasures he sacrifices himself. Alfred David, however, calls Lampe's conclusions into question, largely because of the false premise about the meaning of vacca (vache), which David says is feminine, and hence cannot possibly refer to an ox ("The Truth about 'Vache'," Chaucer Review, 11 [1977], 334-37).

2 Robinson, p. 522.

3

Brusendorff thought that the Envoy was not even Chaucer's (The Chaucer Tradition [Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1925 ], p. 250), and Howard R. Patch seems to have considered it a later addition ("Desiderata in Middle English Research," MP, 22 [1925], 33). Skeat, however (Works, I, 82), believed that the reason the Envoy occurs in only one manuscript is that it was "suppressed owing to a misunderstanding of the word vache (cow)." Skeat's conjecture seems unlikely, especially is Rickert is correct in assuming that Vache is a proper name, but the Envoy is still generally accepted as genuine. One reason for this may be that the standard form of the ballade by the end of the fourteenth century usually included an Envoy (see Helen Louise Cohen, Lyric Forms from France: Their History and Their Use [New York: Harcourt, 1922], p. 13), but this was not an absolute necessity, and other of Chaucer's ballades (Gentillesse and Against Women Unconstant, for example) have no Envoys.

4

E. Talbot Donaldson, ed., Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), p. 963.

5

Robinson, p. 522.

6

"An Adult Lullaby," in R. T. Davies, ed., Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), no. 35.

7

"When Death Comes," in Davies, no. 16, ll. 21-22.

8

"Despise the World," in Davies, no. 83, ll. 29-30; 39-40.

9

This conjecture follows Shirley's note (see Robinson, p. 860) that Chaucer wrote the poem on his deathbed. Brusendorff (pp. 204-5) believed Shirley's statement and believed that, since Truth must have been written in about 1400, the resemblance between Chaucer's lines and certain lines in Confessio Amantis (Bk. V, ll. 7735-42), which purportedly quote Seneca, indicates Chaucer's debt to Gower for this poem. But Skeat is far more sensible, I believe, when he calls Shirley's note "probably a mere bad guess" (Works, I, 82).

10

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

11

Brusendorff, p. 258.



12 Bernard L. Jefferson, Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1917), p. 95.

13 John Livingston Lowes, "Chaucer and Dante's Convivio," MP, 13 (1915), 19-33.

14 George M. Vogt, "Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: Generositas Virtus, Non Sanguis," JEGP, 24 (1925), 102-24.

15 Albert B. Friedman, "'When Adam Delved . . .': Contexts of an Historic Proverb," in Larry D. Benson, ed., The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 225.

16 Vogt, p. 102.

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

18 Coghill, p. 8.

19 Coghill, p. 10.

20 Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Lyrics," in Beryl Rowland, ed., Companion to Chaucer Studies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 313-32.

21 Geoffrey Shepherd, "Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer," in Derek Brewer, ed., Geoffrey Chaucer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 267.

22 Skeat insisted that Chaucer was using Book II, metre 8 of Boethius (Works, I, 556). But Root (p. 75) asserted that the debt to Boethius, if it exists at all, is very slight. And Brusendorff suggested another source: three ballades by Eustache Deschamps. Chaucer's refrain, according to Brusendorff, "is almost exactly paralleled by the refrain of balade 234 of Deschamps" (p. 487).

23 Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 94-98.

- 24 J. E. Cross, "The Old Swedish Trohetsvisan and Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastnesse--A Study in Medæval Genre," Saga-Book, 16 (1965), 300.
- 25 Skeat, Works, I, 84.
- 26 Brusendorff, p. 274.
- 27 Haldeen Braddy, "The Date of Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastness," JEGP, 36 (1937), 486.
- 28 Braddy, pp. 485-86.
- 29 Robinson, p. 862.
- 30 Deschamps' refrain, Tout se destruit et par default de garde, which Brusendorff (p. 487) says almost exactly parallels Chaucer's refrain, can be roughly translated "all is lost, or destroyed, and for lack of keeping watch." But Chaucer is not talking about the world being turned around because people have not kept watch. "Lak of stedfastnesse" is lack of order, of natural law--quite another thing altogether. It is not necessary to conclude that Deschamps' line inspired Chaucer's.
- 31 Robinson, p. 862.
- 32 John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 66.
- 33 Gardner, Poetry, pp. 66-67.
- 34 Brusendorff, p. 274.
- 35 Besides, as Gardner puts it, it was "the business of authority to correct itself." See John Gardner, The Life and Times of Chaucer (1977; New York: Random House, 1978), p. 255.
- 36 There is some textual confusion about this line. George B. Pace ("Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastnesse," SB, 4 [1951], 105) notes

that one group of manuscripts reads "dryve thi peple ayen to stedfastnesse" in line 28. On textual evidence, Pace decides that "wed thy folk" is the correct reading. As Pace points out, "the variation between 'drive' and 'wed' considerably affects the interpretation of the poem, for each indicates a different attitude toward kingship." The line "wed thy folk" fits the hopeful tone of the closing lines better than the "dryve," which would portray Richard as more of a tyrant, and suggest again the association of the poem with Richard's final, tyrannous years.

37

William Langland, Piers Plowman (B Text), ed. J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), Passus IV, ll. 134-40.

38

Joseph Mersand, largely on the basis of the very high incidence of Romance words in The Former Age, thought it a very late poem, going on the assumption that "Chaucer added new Romance words to his vocabulary as he advanced in his literary career," and based on the fact that only here and in To Rosemounde does Chaucer use the word galauntyne, he assumes that both poems were written about 1390-93 (Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary [New York: Comet Press, 1937; rpt. 1939], pp. 120, 137). Most, however, like Robinson (p. xxix), believe that the poem, like the others in the Boethian group, was written between 1380, when Chaucer most likely wrote his translation of Boece, and about 1386. I would suggest a date somewhere between these two possibilities.

39

John Norton-Smith, "Chaucer's 'Etas Prima'," Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 119.

40

Citations of The Metamorphoses in my text are to Ovid, Metamorphoses, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; and London: William Heinemann, 1916; rpt. 1921). Line numbers will be given in parentheses.

41

Citations of the Roman de la Rose in my text are to Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974); line numbers will be given in parentheses. Translations are from The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton, 1962); page numbers will be given in parentheses.

42

A. V. C. Schmidt, "Chaucer and the Golden Age," Essays in Criticism, 26 (1976), 100.

43

Norton-Smith, p. 120.

44 Schmidt, p. 110.

45 Schmidt, p. 105.

46 Robinson, pp. 859-60.

47 Norton-Smith, p. 121.

48 Schmidt, p. 114.

49 This tradition goes back only as far as Speght, who in his 1602 edition of the poem has this heading (as quoted by Robinson, p. 855): "Chaucers A.B.C. called La Priere de nostre Dame: made, as some say, at the request of Blanch, Duchesse of Lancaster, as a praier for her priuat vse, being a woman in her religion very deuout." Aage Brusendorff rejected the idea since there was "no corroborative evidence whatsoever" (p. 241), and Rossell Hope Robbins dates the poem "about 1380," but gives no reason for his conjecture (p. 327). Most, however, agree that the poem must be early, whether commissioned by Blanche or not, and so date it, with Robinson (p. 520), before 1369.

50 Deguilleville's poem is printed in Skeat, I, 261ff. Both Skeat (I, 59) and Robbins (p. 328) see nothing in the poem but a simple translation. Most critics, however, agree with Wolfgang Clemen, who sees in the poem the "first example of Chaucer's art of free creative transposition" (Chaucer's Early Poetry, trans. C. A. M. Sym [London: Methuen and Co., 1963; rpt. 1968], p. 175).

51 P. M. Kean, Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), I, 193.

52 Edmund Reiss, "Dusting off the Cobwebs: A Look at Chaucer's Lyrics," Chaucer Review, 1 (1966), 55-65.

53 For a discussion of Mary's personal qualities and privileges in popular and theological thought, see especially Giovanni Miegge, The Virgin Mary: The Roman Catholic Marian Doctrine, trans. Waldo Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955). See also Hilda Graef, Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion, 2 vols. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963); and Marina Warner, Alone of All

Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

54

William Elford Rogers, "Image and Abstraction: Six Middle English Religious Lyrics," Anglistica, 18 (1972), 105.

55

"Alysoun," in G. L. Brook, ed., The Harley Lyrics (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1948), no. 4, ll. 25-26.

56

Gardner, Life and Times, p. 117.

57

Gardner, Life and Times, p. 117.

58

J. Burke Severs, "Two Irregular Chaucerian Stanzas," MLN, 64 (1949), 306-09.

59

Miegge, p. 130.

60

Miegge, p. 130.

61

Saint Bernard, In nativitate B. V. Mariae sermo De Aqueductu, in Opera Omnia, ed. D. Joannis Mabillon, in Jacques Paul Migne, Patrologica Latina, vol. 183 (Paris; 1854), pp. 438-47.

62

Miegge, pp. 142-43.

63

Miegge, pp. 68-82.

64

Warner, p. 265.

65

Miegge, p. 141.

66

Warner, p. 210.

67

Irenaeus, Libro quinque adversus haereses, Bk. III, ch. 32, ed. W. Nigan Harvey, 2 vols (1857; rpt. Ridgewood, N. J.: Gregg Press, 1965), II, 123-24.

68

Rogers, p. 101.

69

See Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, 3a, q. 30, a. 1. In Blackfriars ed., 60 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill; and London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1964 ff.), EI, 70. For the most readable translation see the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), II, 2179.

70

"I Sing of a Maiden," in Davies, no. 66, ll. 3-4.

71

Albertus Magnus, Mariale, q. LI. In Opera Omnia, ed. Augusti Borgnet, 38 vols. (Paris, 1890-99), XXXVII, 97.

72

Clemen, p. 177.

## CHAPTER III

## The Personal Voice

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 suspect.

A final development concerned the speakers of the lyrics. In the later poems, these speakers change from "everyman" personae with all distinctive characteristics relegated 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 *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan*, *Lenvoy 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.

The danger with such specific contexts and references was that the poem would lapse into merely topical verse, as happens in the Words unto Adam. But at its best this poetry achieved what Chaucer strove for: the illustration of the universally applicable lyric thought through an incident providing a specific narrative or dramatic context. A superb and eloquent example of this achievement is evident in one of Chaucer's best short poems, the Scogan.

Although Kittredge considered the poem entitled Lenvoy 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:"<sup>1</sup> If that were true, there would not be much sense in my expending time upon that poem here. But the fact is that Scogan is more than Kittredge thought it was--more, in fact, than most critics, until recently, have thought it was. But 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.<sup>2</sup> 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? Why does Chaucer shift topics at line 36, for example, from love to poetry, and in line 45 from poetry to friendship? 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 kydeness;  
 Myne thy frend, there it may fructifye!  
 Far-wel, and loke thow never eft Love dyffye. (ll. 43-49)

The traditionally accepted interpretation of these lines has been that Chaucer, residing at this point either in Greenwich or in Somerset as deputy forester of the royal forest of North Pemberton, is thus "forgete in solytarie wilderness." Consequently he is much farther from the stream's head than Scogan, who would have been at Windsor, "much nearer to the source of favour," as Skeat put it.<sup>3</sup> The poem, then, is

essentially a begging one, of the same ilk 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. Thus should the line "Mynne [mention?] thy frend, there it may fructifye" be interpreted. This position has most recently been defended by R. T. Lenaghan, who 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 poem.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 yields 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 Gentilesse.<sup>7</sup> 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 love.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.'"<sup>10</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup>

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 Polzella'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 or incidental 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).

Another look at the final stanza is in order, and it seems to me that the crucial lines of the stanza, around which much of the problem of interpretation revolves, are these:

Yet, Scogan, thenke on Tullius kyndenesse;  
Mynne thy frend, there it may fructifye! (ll. 47-48)

Clearly Tullius refers to Cicero, but beyond that the reference is not at all clear.<sup>12</sup> Standard interpretation is that the reference to Cicero is a device reminding Scogan of his friendship with the author, and suggesting that Scogan do a friend's office by recommending Chaucer for preferment at court. But no one has suggested any specific passage in Cicero which would support such a reading. And the final stanza is simply not appropriate when interpreted in this way, since it seems clear that the poem itself is not directed to the end of begging, and most intelligent recent critics--David, Polzella, French--have sought the purpose of the poem elsewhere.

Part of the problem is caused by the word frend in line 48. Chaucer seems to be switching the topic of the poem from courtly love to friendship. But that need not be a problem. The OED cites Caxton as the first to use "friend" to mean "a lover or paramour" (sb. 4), but that connotation seems certainly to have been current a century earlier. Anelida describes herself as Arcite's "frend" (l. 260). And Chaucer would have been well aware of the fact that ami in the verse of the trouveres meant both friend and lover. The context of the word, then,

implies that the "frend" about whom Chaucer advises Scogan in line 48 is not Chaucer himself, but rather the amorous "frend" discussed in the rest of the poem.

Thus if the reference to Tullius alludes to Cicero's comments on friendship, then those comments should be taken as applying to lovers as well. In De Amicitia, his major work on friendship, Cicero makes two important points which seem applicable to the Envoy to Scogan. First, Cicero stresses that friendship is based on mutual love rather than upon the expectation that one may profit from a relationship:

Quapropter a natura mihi videtur potius quam  
indigentia orta amicitia, applicatione magis animi  
cum quodam sensu amandi, quam cogitatione quantum illa  
res utilitatis esset habitura. (viii. 27)

(Wherefore it seems to me that friendship springs rather from nature than from need, and from an inclination of the soul joined with a feeling of love rather than from calculation of how much profit the friendship is likely to afford.)<sup>13</sup>

Not only does this statement imply that the association of love and friendship may very likely be intended, but more importantly it also suggests that the interpretation of Scogan as a begging poem is inaccurate. If the reader were really to "thenke on Tullius kyndenesse," he would see the inappropriateness of Chaucer's trying to use his friendship for personal gain.

The second point which De Amicitia makes is that one should choose one's friends carefully. In the first place, it is natural to befriend someone similar to oneself:

nihil esse quod ad se rem ullam tam illiciat et tam  
trahat quam ad amicitiam similitudo . . . . Nihil est  
enim appetentius similitum sui nec rapacius quam natura. (xiv. 50)

(nothing so allures and attracts anything to itself as likeness does to friendship . . . . For there is nothing more eager or more greedy than nature for what is like itself.)

With this in mind, one should choose one's friends only after careful consideration: "cum iudicaris, diligere oportet; non, cum dilexeris, iudicare" (xxii. 85); ("you should love your friend after you have appraised him; you should not appraise him after you have begun to love him"). While Cicero is talking about choosing a friend because he is virtuous, the implication is also that one should choose a friend because of natural affinity with him.

Perhaps it is in this light that we should read Chaucer's line "Mynne thy frend, there if may fructifye." The word mynne generally meant "mention," but could also mean "remember" or "bear in mind."<sup>14</sup> Thus one possible reading of the line may be "bear in mind" or "consider your friend, where it may be fruitful," which may be paraphrased as "Intelligently place your friendship, your love, where it is likely to prove most fruitful." In Cicero's terms, this would involve the love of a friend for whom one had a natural affinity. In this way, this last stanza becomes, not a sudden change on Chaucer's part to a begging posture, but rather a final comment upon what Chaucer had been talking about all along--Scogan's love. The poem had begun with Chaucer's chastising Scogan for forsaking his lady. But the implication in this last stanza is that Scogan, being "rounde of shap" (l. 31) had placed his love in an unlikely place, a place where it could not "fructifye," or be fruitful. Scogan had chosen as his love one who was not a "natural match" for him, and so had only himself, not love, to blame for his misfortunes.

What Scogan has in fact done in setting his love on one not naturally suited to him is defied the law of Love. Thus Chaucer can say in the end "loke thow never eft Love dyffye" (l. 49). But the law Scogan has broken is more than simply the law of the allegorical God of Love of the courtly love poets. Scogan has actually broken the natural law established by Divine Love--the law that says each should choose a mate "according to its kind," and should "be fruitful and multiply."

The reference to Cicero in line 47 may lend more support to the theory that Chaucer is here talking about natural law. Remember that Chaucer is referring to Tullius' kyndeness (not to his idea of friendship--that word comes in the following line). Kynde could mean "benign" or "sympathetic," but it could also, and in Chaucer more often does, refer to nature. I suggest that by kyndeness Chaucer implies the "law of kynde" or natural law, a concept of central importance in Chaucer's poetry and world view.

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 "Tullyus of the Drem of Scipioun" we have his own testimony in the Parliament of Fowls, wherein 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 shulde 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 thilke 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. Hence 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 thilke 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 divinely decreed 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, hevye, 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;  
emphasis mine)

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" (l. 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--"Tullius kyndeness."

If my interpretation is correct, the Scogan is much more tightly organized than has been previously suspected, since the reference to "Tullius" and exhortation to "mynne thy frend" now relate clearly to the rest of the poem. In stanza one, Chaucer bewails in mock-serious language the fact that

Tobroken been the statutz hye in hevene  
That creat were eternally to dure (ll. 1-2)

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. (ll. 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 deluge. 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 shap." 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 playe!" (l. 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 in stanza five, 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."<sup>15</sup> Chaucer's lines

But al shal passe that men prose or ryme;  
 Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme. (ll. 41-42)

may be by 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.")<sup>16</sup>

So it is that Africanus chides Scipio "Quaeso . . . quosqui humi defixa tua mens erit?" ("How long will your thoughts continue to dwell upon the earth? Do you not behold the regions to which you have come?")<sup>17</sup> The point may be, then, that Scogan, like Scipio, should turn his eyes from transient sublunar things and contemplate the eternal order, "thenke on Tullius kyndenesse."

Thus as David points out, the "stremes hed" of the final stanza is the metaphorical stream of grace, honor, and worthiness. Scogan, in his prime, is at the stream's head while Chaucer, humbly depicting himself in decline, is "in solytaire wildenesse."<sup>18</sup> But the point is that these things--grace, honor, and Fortune's other gifts--are transient because sublunary. The older poet, whom age has granted the leisure of philosophical reflection, has determined that these very real "statutz hye in hevене" presented ironically in the beginning are what are really important in life. The "law of kynde" is what matters, not poetry or even, ultimately, Cupid's love. It is the love which binds the universe which is important. That love implies loving one

whom nature would see as a fit object 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 a multitude of 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 perceptibly 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 favorite Boethian passage in Book II, metre 8 of the Consolation describes universal love as that which "halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrament of mariages 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 Bukton,<sup>20</sup> in the year 1396.<sup>21</sup> 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 Tales. . . . 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."<sup>22</sup> 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.

Scholars 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 the puzzle. 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"<sup>23</sup>; the Manciple's Tale "turns the simple legend into something ludicrously overblown"<sup>24</sup>; the Physician's Tale "reveals the proud and empty character of the narrator and pleases only by its awfulness."<sup>25</sup> We are confronted, then, with a skillful artist deliberately using his skills to create artistic atrocities. 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."<sup>26</sup>

Gardner's explanation posits a Chaucer influenced by the philosophical ideas of the nominalists. Such an assumption is not unlikely, as we have seen. Chaucer's well-established debt to the philosophy of Boethius, Augustine and Macrobius does not preclude 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 an urbane and 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 need only 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."<sup>27</sup> Ockham reached this position largely from a discussion of terms, of words themselves:

scientiae reales sunt de intentionibus, quia de universalibus supponentibus pro rebus; quia termini scientiarum realium, quamvis sint intentiones, tamen supponunt pro rebus. Sed logica est de intentionibus supponentibus pro intentionibus.

(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.)<sup>28</sup>

This deemphasis of the power of the word cannot help but have implications for literature: if even logic and science are only about "terms of concepts," rather than about reality, how much further removed from reality is a poem, in which one goes to great pains to compose a structure of words which refer, ultimately, only to themselves? 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."<sup>29</sup> 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. If the word could be made to correspond directly to something tangible, something empirically real, then the possibility of communication may be made greater. Ockham had called this "personal suppositio," which he distinguished from "simple suppositio" (in which terms stood for mental contents) and material suppositio (in which terms stood for spoken or written signs).<sup>30</sup> But at least occasionally Chaucer, in a characteristically playful and ironic voice, questions the validity of any kind of knowledge gained through language, or through any means other than divine revelation.

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).<sup>31</sup> Bacon followed Grosseteste in criticizing "the deductive logic and metaphysical speculations that so fascinated his scholastic contemporaries."<sup>32</sup> Bacon, in his Opus Majus, makes the following judgements:

Duo enim sunt modi cognoscendi, scilicet per argumentum et experimentum. Argumentum concludit et facit nos concedere conclusionem, sed non certificat neque removet dubitationem ut quiescat animus in



intuitu veritatis, nisi eam inveniat via experientiae;  
 . . . Ergo argumentum non sufficit, sed experientia.  
 (Bk. VI, ch. 1)

For there are two modes of acquiring knowledge, namely, by reasoning and by experience. Reasoning draws a conclusion and makes us grant the conclusion, but does not make the conclusion certain, nor does it remove doubt so that the mind may rest on the intuition of truth, unless the mind discovers it by the path of experience. . . . Therefore reasoning does not suffice, but experience does. (II, 583)<sup>32</sup>

This reasoning is the tool of speculative philosophy which proceeds by deductive argument, always based on a point from authority, or on some previous point in the argument. But experience is based on reality. Bacon says, in discussing certain aspects of rainbows, that "nec Aristoteles nec Avicenna in suis Naturalibus hujusmodi rerum notitiam nobis dederunt, nec Seneca, qui de eis librum composuit specialem. Sed Scientia Experimentalis ista certificat" (Bk. VI, ch. 2); ("neither Aristotle nor Avicenna in their Natural Histories has given us a knowledge of phenomena of this kind, nor has Seneca, who composed a special book on them. But Experimental Science attests them" [II, 588] ).

Important for Chaucer, however, is Bacon's distinction between two types of experience:

una est per sensus exteriores, . . . sed haec experientia non sufficit homini, quia non plene certificat de corporalibus propter sui difficultatem, et de spiritualibus nihil attingit. Ergo oportet quod intellectus hominis aliter juvetur, et ideo sancti patriarchae et prophetae, qui primo dederunt scientias mundo, receperunt illuminationes interiores et non solum stabant in sensu. (Bk. VI, ch. 1)

(one is gained through our external senses. . . . but this experience does not suffice him, because it does not give full attestation in regard to things corporeal owing to its difficulty, and does not touch at all on things spiritual. It is necessary, therefore, that the intellect of man should be otherwise aided, and for this reason the

holy patriarchs and prophets, who first gave sciences to the world, received illumination within and were not dependent on sense alone.) (II, 585)

Gardner proposes 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."<sup>34</sup>

All of this has a direct bearing on the meaning of the Envoy to Bukton. The poem is, apparently at least, a poem jocularly 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 "frely . . . / 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 as far as most readings of the poem go.

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:

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, "No man is al trewe," I gesse. (ll. 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: since Christ made no direct statement in answer to Pilate's question, Chaucer interprets His silence in what seems a manifestly false way: "As who saith, 'No man is al trewe,' I gesse." Certainly this has nothing to do with what Christ meant as He stood before Pilate, and the speaker's tossing an "I gesse" at the end is superbly appropriate--it undercuts the interpretation, since it is only a gesse, and furthermore the speaker's guess is wrong. But most of what we consider knowledge must be considered a guess as well, in Bacon's view.

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 wrien of is no wikkednesse,  
 Lest I myself falle eft in swich dotage. (ll. 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, lest he himself fall again into such dotage. The reader must do a doubletake when reading this sentence, since the words contradict themselves so often. 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 reneging on what he had just said in the previous line. Furthermore, though the "no man is a 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--that anything here may be a lie.

The second stanza opens with a familiar rhetorical device, an occupatio or refusal to describe or narrate--here used as a sort of ironic gambit 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 gnaws perpetually:

But I dar seyn, were he out of his peyne,  
 As by his wille he wolde be bounde 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 wepe! (ll. 11-16)

If Satan were out of his pain, he would never willingly be bound again. This Chaucer compares unfavorably to someone who would willingly be bound--anyone that foolish, Chaucer comments, God should never let out of his pain, and no one should pity him no matter how much he weeps.

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" is--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 by manifest implication. It should be further noted that the comparison with Satan is quite ambiguous, and undercuts even the implied condemnation of marriage in these lines. Satan is the principal sinner of the universe. His chain is meant to restrict evil, to contain sin--he is chained by God's will. If marriage is really the "chain of Satan," then it, too, is a kind of bondage established for the containment of sin, 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, wherein 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 aflame 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, take a wyf:  
 Bet ys to wedde than brenne in worse wise.  
 But thow shal have sorwe on thy flessh, thy lyf,  
 And ben thy wives thral, as seyn these wise; (ll. 17-20)

The concession of these first two lines is that marriage is God's  
 will, a fact which undercuts 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 thral. Further, he speaks of the  
 "sorwe on thy flessh" as if marriage were an endless torture, when  
 what Paul said was simply that one who was married had to be concerned  
 with wordly affairs and therefore could not devote his time totally  
 to spiritual ones:

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the  
 Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is  
 anxious about wordly affairs, how to please his wife,  
 and his interests are divided. (I Cor. 7:32-34)

Yet Chaucer, doubtlessly aware of how he had maneuvered these sayings  
 to his own advantage, still claims that they are from authority--  
 "as seyn these wise." This, of course, gets him off the hook, and  
 he can still say that he himself has written of marriage "no wikkednesse,"  
 since he was simply guilty of quoting St. Paul. Again, "no man is al  
 trewe."

Now Paul is an authority, one of the two basic roads to knowledge

according to Bacon. But a more certain means of obtaining knowledge, as Bacon noted, is experience, and the second half of stanza three concerns this other type of knowledge--empirical evidence:

And yf that hooly writ may nat suffyse,  
Experience shal the teche, so may happe,  
That the were lever to be take in Frise  
Than eft to fall of weddyng in the trappe. (ll. 21-24)

These seem at first to be the most scathing lines about marriage in the poem, but they are put in the realm of the subjunctive by the "so may happe" of line 22. All of this is merely a possibility; the speaker still preserves his vow not to say anything bad about marriage.

In the final stanza, the Envoy of the lyric, the poet sends Bukton the poem, which he calls "This lytel writ, proverbes, or figure" (l. 25). He advises Bukton to heed 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. (ll. 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 auctoritce  
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me  
To speke of wo that is in mariage." (ll. 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 asserted "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." (ll. 823-25)

Furthermore, the first part of the Wife's Prologue is a spirited defense of sexuality and, by extension, 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 sorwe!  
 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 flessh, 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 deel" (ll. 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 at best, and at worst completely contradicts the thesis of Bukton's speaker. The entire poem, then, is full of ambiguities, misdirections, half-truths, and even lies. Chaucer says he is going to do something, decides he dare not do it, says he won't do it, and then does it. He presents two paths to knowledge--that of authority and that of experience--and can come to no unequivocal 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 muddle 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 diatribe 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, unequivocal. Poetry and language, associated with abstractions, are not reliable conveyors 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 pondered. The fact that his words may not always be understood seems to have haunted him in Troilus and Criseyde. Not only did Chaucer the linguist know how language changed over the years--

Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is change  
 Withinne a thousand yeer, 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 publishing poet knew how even the words he wrote down could be twisted and misread in transmission. His worries at the end of Troilus--

So pray I God that non myswrite the,  
 Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge. (Bk. V, ll 1795-96)

are apparently founded upon fact and experience. The brief lyric Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn evinces, in the poet's words to his copyist,<sup>35</sup> 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" (l. 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.<sup>36</sup>

Now as a single stanza, preserved apparently by accident in a single manuscript,<sup>37</sup> Adam has not offered critics much to talk about, but it is, I am sure, more than what Marchette Chute calls it, "seven lines of doggerel."<sup>38</sup> One thing which is particularly striking about this poem is the tone--the anger, what Brusendorff called the "familiar nature of the curse," comes through loud and clear. It is not simply

a matter of what is said--though what is said here is certainly strong stuff:

Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,  
But after my makynge thou wryte more trewe (ll. 3-4)

But as is always the case with poetry, it is more importantly how it is said which really creates the angry tone. And where tone or mood are concerned, it is necessary to explore the often intangible realm of sounds and rhythms and the emotional reaction to them.

An aspect of the poem which is immediately noticeable is the length of the words: one must be struck by a kind of stacatto effect created by Chaucer's almost complete reliance on very short words in the poem. There are 56 words in these seven lines. Of these 56, 36 are of one syllable (by my count, that is; the total may vary depending upon one's scansion of the lines and decision about the pronunciation of final e's). These monosyllables should contribute, one would think, to the angry tone, conveyed in quick, sharp words. At the same time, only three words are of more than two syllables: negligence in line seven is the longest; the others are two words with lightly articulated final e's: renewe (l. 5) and bifalle (l. 1). The length of negligence gives it particular emphasis--and rightly so, since it is one of the two important charges which Chaucer levels against Adam.

All of this sounds plausible until one considers the fact that in most of Chaucer's poetry, monosyllables predominate. In Truth, for example, a poem with a sedate, philosophical tone, the first stanza contains 54 words, and of these, 39 are monosyllabic (again depending upon one's pronunciation of final e's). Can one speak of the same sort of stacatto effect in Truth? It is certainly not there. Perhaps

one reason for this is the fact that many of the longer words are put in emphatic positions, as rhyme words: sothfastnesse (l. 1), tikelnesse (l. 3), besinesse (l. 10), buxomnesse (l. 15), wildernesse (l. 17), and wreccednesse (l. 22). In Adam, most of the rhyme words, and hence most of the emphatic words, are monosyllabic or have lightly articulated final e's.

And this is the key, I think. Sheer numbers cannot tell the story of a poem, but emphasis may. This should also be kept in mind in considering the actual phonemes Chaucer uses. One is aware, I think, of several [r], [s], and [k] sounds in the poem, and these all contribute to the angry tone: the rasping r, the hissing s, and scraping k sounds all seem suited to the mood of anger. But a comparison with Truth, again, does not reveal a marked concentration of these sounds in Adam. There are by my count 18 [r] sounds in Adam, but there are 14 in the first stanza of Truth and 16 in the second. I count eight [s] sounds in Adam, but the first stanza of Truth contains 11 [s] sounds and the second stanza a surprising 15. The number of [k] sounds in Adam does seem high--there are nine, as compared with only three in each of the first two stanzas of Truth.

But again, the emphasis is what matters most. It is interesting to note that three words in this stanza begin with what is in Chaucer the relatively unusual sc- combination (two with scr-): scriveyn (l. 1), scalle (l. 3), and scrape (l. 6), and that combination does not appear at all in Chaucer's more sedate, philosophical ballades--Truth, Gentilesse, and Lak of Stedfastnesse, so it is difficult not to see Chaucer as purposefully choosing those sounds. Further, it is the combination of

these three sounds (s, k, r) together which give certain lines their particular cacaphony, creating the angry tone. The combined [s] and [k] sounds in line three serve to underline the violence of the curse:

Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle (emphasis mine)

And the combined [r], [s] and [k] sounds of lines six and seven emphasize the poet's ire at Adam's carelessness:

It to correcte and eek to rubbe and scrape;  
And al is thorough thy negligence and rape. (emphasis mine)

Rape here means, of course, haste, but one cannot help thinking of its other meaning (current in Chaucer's time) of "violent assault and seizure," suggesting that the inept copyist commits an act of violence upon the author's innocent work. It certainly appears that Chaucer wished to place special emphasis upon this word, since it comes last, is a rhyme word, and alliterates with all the other [r] sounds in the last two lines. The last impression given in the poem, then, is a word that connotes violence, and which, by its sound, contributes to the violent and angry tone of the poem.

Certainly the Words unto Adam will never be considered one of Chaucer's great poems, but equally certainly it is more than the doggerel that Chute claimed it was. 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 Troilus, is here objectified in the specific case of 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. In his concern with style,

displayed here, Chaucer attempts to utilize language to communicate something beyond the words themselves, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his distrust of those words as vehicles for 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 evinced in Bukton and in Adam come to fruition in one of his best lyrics, The Complaint of Chaucer to his Purse. This complaint has always been one of his most popular lyrics. Its 11 manuscripts place it behind Truth (with 25), Lak of Stedfastnesse (with 15), and An ABC (with 16),<sup>39</sup> but Purse is today probably the most anthologized of Chaucer's short poems, with the possible exception of the philosophical Truth. And these two poems represent well two important aspects of the poet's character: the quiet musing of Truth shows Chaucer's thoughtful, sometimes morose, pietistically philosophical and therefore thoroughly "medieval" character, while Purse represents the playful, parodying, even slightly irreverent, and again thoroughly "medieval" character. The one is "ernest," the other "game." 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 unequivocal meaning. The Complaint to his Purse is not a difficult poem and is relatively brief--Chaucer must have known that such a parody would begin to wear thin if stretched over too great a space.

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 others,<sup>40</sup> a genre which Chaucer is also expanding by his parody.

Surely the poem must be taken at face value, as a poem written to King Henry during a time when the poet was genuinely in dire financial straits.<sup>41</sup> It is first and foremost a begging poem, its intent to loosen the pursestrings of the new monarch. But Chaucer's method of begging was peculiarly Chaucerian. Even in his tight financial situation, Chaucer had not lost his sense of humor, 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 hit upon the happy device of addressing his purse as if it were a lady.

The complaint genre which Chaucer chose to parody was one of long and distinguished literary tradition. It seems to have sprung most immediately from the planctus, a late eleventh century genre which gave "fresh emphasis [to] the human suffering of the Passion. . . . Sometimes Christ utters the lament; but more usually, and in the earliest, it is the Blessed Virgin as she stands at the foot of the Cross."<sup>42</sup> When assimilated into the courtly love tradition, such "complaints" became utterances, again of human suffering, but this time of the suffering of the courtly lover whose lady does not grant him her love. 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.

This purpose and method are obvious from the first two lines.

These set up the parody:

To you, my purse, and to noon other wight  
Complayne I, for ye be my lady deere! (ll. 1-2)

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

I am so sorry, now that ye been lyght,  
For certes, but ye make me hevy chere,  
Me were as leef by layd upon my bere; (ll. 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" (OED a.1 14. b). This lightness obviously contrasts with the desired heaviness of the next line. The poet wants the purse to "make me hevy chere"--that is, to become full, heavy, once more. This is ironic since a lover would want anything but his Beloved's "hevy chere," or sorrow--he would want her "with lossum chere," like the Harley lyrics' Alisoun (l. 15).<sup>43</sup> But just as the courtly lover would die for his Beloved's "lossum chere," so Chaucer would just as soon be "layd upon my bere," unless his purse makes him this "hevy chere." 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 hevy ageyn, or elles mot I dye! (ll. 6-7)

The lines sound remarkably like so many typical courtly complaints, wherein the lover swears he will die unless his Beloved has mercy

Upon him. Compare, for example, these lines from Chaucer's Complaynt d' Amours, which describe, again, the speaker's impending death through lack of mercy:

Beginne right thus my deedly compleininge  
On hir, that may to lyf and deeth me bringe,  
Which hath on me no mercy ne no rewthe  
That love hir best, but sleeth me for my trewthe. (ll. 4-7)

The second stanza of Purse continues in much the same vein, with terminology applicable to both a lover's lady and the poet's purse.

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, (ll. 8-9)

Just as one's Beloved may cheer him merely with the sounds of her beautiful voice, as the speaker of Chaucer's somewhat ironic poem To Rosemounde is gladdened:

Your semy voys, that ye so smal out twyne,  
Maketh my thocht in joy and blis habounde. (ll. 9-10)

So the poet in Purse is equally gladdened by the "blisful soun" of his coins jingling together in his purse. And similarly, the golden color of the coins gladdens the poet--

Or see your colour lyk the sonne bryght,  
That of yelownesse hadde never pere. (ll. 10-11)

just as the golden hair of one's Beloved gladdens the heart of her lover--as, for example, in this line from the Harley lyric "A wayle whit as whalles bon," who is "A grein in golde that godly shon" (l. 2).<sup>44</sup>

The following lines of Purse are equally conventional in their courtly love application:

Ye be my lyf, ye be myn hertes stene,  
Quene of comfort and of good companye. (ll. 12-13)

Charles D. Ludlum has seen in these lines a new dimension to the poem, in which Chaucer incorporates "heavenly word-play," where before the double meaning involved only the "crassly material and the courtly." The "stere," or rudder, implies a "heavenly guide," according to Ludlum, and the "Quene of comfort and of good companye" is, says Ludlum, "surely punning on 'spiritual consolation' versus a very earthly solace," since comfort had in Middle English the connotation of sexual union."<sup>45</sup> The pun may well be there, though the "surely" seems a little strong. The formula "Queen of comfort" has already appeared in Chaucer's ABC (line 77 and again in line 121), and so may well have such "heavenly" connotations. But if the meaning of "sexual union" really was current, the term comfort is quite appropriate in a poem of the courtly tradition. As for the lady's being the "stere," or rudder of the poet's heart, guiding its course, governing its actions, such a sentiment is quite common in the poetry of courtly love. Chaucer's *Troilus*, in fact, uses a similar image for Criseyde in his Canticus Troili in Book V of that poem, wherein the Beloved is the star by which the lover is guided:

'O sterre, of which I lost have al the light,  
 With herte soor wel oughte I to biwaille,  
 That evere derk in torment, myght by myght,  
 Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille;

(Troilus and Criseyde, Bk. V, ll. 638-641)

The "heavenly word play," I would suppose, is to be expected in a parody of the courtly love tradition, not because Chaucer is also parodying any religious tradition, but because, as was remarked in the discussion of the ABC and elsewhere, religious imagery and the imagery of courtly love were so intertwined that many images were interchangeable in the two traditions. Generally, when Chaucer uses religious imagery

in courtly love poetry, it is done for the purpose of contrasting transient earthly love with the steadfast love of God. Here, however, that contrast seems to be of secondary importance--rather the purpose of the religious language is to contribute to the playful examination of the possibilities of multiple connotations of words and the parody of form.

The third stanza plays quite heavily upon this imagery with its religious connotations, but again, the courtly love allusions are of chief importance:

Now purse, that ben to me my lyves lyght  
And saveour, as doun in this world here, (ll. 15-16)

Ludlum considers "lyves lyght" an allusion to the familiar opening of John's gospel <sup>46</sup> ("In him was life, and the life was the light of men" [John 1:4]), and certainly Chaucer uses similar words in his ABC to Mary, calling her "verrey light of eyen that ben blynde" (l. 105). But Mars also calls Venus his "lady bryght" (Complaint of Mars, l. 136), and Chaucer's Rosemounde is told "as the cristal glorious ye shyne" (l. 3); therefore, the religious connotation of the words is not necessarily of primary importance. It should be noted that part of the word play here may involve the double meaning of "lyght." Chaucer uses the word in the first stanza to mean both "not heavy" and "morally lacking," but here to mean something luminous. Still, the word used here recalls the earlier use of "light." The association may even imply that the speaker has chosen for his "lyves lyght" something which is definitely "light"--that is, lacking in substance. The implication then would be that Christ should be the speaker's true "light." But such a suggestion is very subtle, if it is there at all.

In the next line, saveour is unquestionably a word borrowed from religious imagery, but it is not uncommon to speak of one's Beloved in terms that make her a kind of secular savior. Mars calls Venus "my savacyoun" (Mars, l. 215). Other of Chaucer's courtly love poems speak of the Beloved bringing grace, like the savior: the lover of A Complaint to his Lady, for example, begs her "of your grace graunteth me som drope" (l. 125). All things considered, **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.**

The next line has caused a good deal of controversy:

Out of this toune helpe me thurgh your might (l. 17)

Disagreement has centered upon the interpretation of the ambiguous "this toune." Most interpretations have not been very convincing because they attempt to make specific connections between this line and particular circumstances in Chaucer's personal life.<sup>47</sup>

E. Talbot Donaldson gives, I think, a more accurate reading of the line, but his reasons at arriving at that reading are not at all convincing, and he nowhere expresses them satisfactorily, to my knowledge. Donaldson emends "toune" to read "tonne" (though all manuscripts agree with the reading "toune"), and sees "tonne" as a variant spelling of "tun," which he glosses as meaning "predicament."<sup>48</sup> But I can find no evidence in the OED that tun ever meant predicament.

I do, however, believe that Donaldson is right in interpreting

the line to mean "help me out of this predicament," and here is why: in the fourteenth century, the phrase "come to town" had the idiomatic meaning "to make one's appearance, arrive, come in, . . . to become common" (OED, sb. 8 a), as in the opening line of the well-known Harley lyric "lenten is come with love to toune"--there is no literal reference to any specific "town" of any sort. The concrete "town" to which some physical being might "come" is here used figuratively for an abstract condition or state of being into which some other abstract quality comes: so that when "lenten is come with love to town," the abstract spring and love are said to have arrived, or come into being among people. Using this as a clue, one might infer that the expression "out of town" could mean, simply, "out of this particular condition or state of being," so that in Chaucer's line "out of this toune helpe me thurgh your might," the poet is asking his purse to help him with its might to get out of the particular condition in which he finds himself--a condition indicated in the following lines:

. . . helpe me thurgh your might,  
 Syn that ye wole nat ben my tresorere;  
 For I am shave as nye as any frere. (ll. 17-19)

These lines are quite obscure. Chaucer asks the purse to help him with its might, since it will not be his treasurer. It is difficult to see what other might a purse could have other than its monetary might, and since the purse will not be the speaker's treasurer--refuses, apparently, to hold the poet's treasure--that does not seem to be the meaning of might here. Perhaps the poet, carried away by his own rhetoric, imagines the purse here to have powers of its own beyond those of a sublunary purse--just as the lover, in a courtly love poem, begins

to endow his lady with supernatural powers. Indeed, the word "tresorere" is one Chaucer once applied to Mary in the ABC, wherein the Virgin is "tresorere of bounty to mankynde" (l. 107). This inflated rhetoric is undercut sharply in the next line, however, with the quite colloquial expression "shave as nye as any frere"--the speaker is flat broke. But again, at the close of the stanza, 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, or the Pearl)--to "beth hevy agen, or elles moot I dye" (ll. 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 with identical rhyme schemes, 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 triple ballade Complaint of Venus, To Rosemunde (without an Envoy), and Against Women Unconstant (also without an Envoy). In his use of a verse form which would immediately suggest to his audience a courtly love poem, Chaucer enhances his parody of the language of love.

In the Envoy, however, 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! (ll. 22-26)

It has been shown that the first lines of the Envoy carefully recap Henry's claims to the kingship as agreed to by Parliament on 30 September 1399: the right of conquest ("O conquerour of Brutes Albyon"), which M. Dominica Legge explains meant specifically "the acquisition by peaceful means of an inheritance vacant through the misconduct and ineptitude of his predecessor"; the right of inheritance ("by lyne"); and the right of election ("and free eleccioun").<sup>49</sup> It has also been remarked that the reference to England as "Brutes Albyon" is unique in Chaucer. Mary Giffin thought it an allusion to the Earl of March, who had had a better claim to the throne than Henry, tracing his line through the legendary kings of Britain back to Brutus himself, but over whom Henry was able to triumph.<sup>50</sup> But it seems unnecessary to posit such an obscure allusion. "Brutes Albyon" serves the purpose of heightening the diction of the Envoy and giving it the proper decorum for its royal recipient.

After reviewing Parliament's claims, Chaucer acknowledges Henry as "verray kyng"--thus in the poem Chaucer specifically acknowledges his allegiance to the new king, if there had ever been any doubt. And it would be difficult to see the next line, "And ye, that mowen alle our harmes amende," as anything but flattery, though there is doubtlessly also a note of optimism that Henry really will be able to set right the government which Chaucer must have seen as being in a sorry state during the last years of Richard. But the "all our harmes" refers not only to the country, of course, but must also apply to particular cases, and here is where Chaucer's final line, "Have mynde upon my supplicacioun," comes in. One specific "harme" which the new king



may quickly "amende" is Chaucer's poverty, and in that spirit the poem is offered.

Chaucer had known Henry all the king's life. He was certainly aware of Henry's tastes. It was a fortunate circumstance for Chaucer that the poet's temperament, which would not allow him to write a straightforward begging poem, fit well with the literary taste of the new king. Henry apparently enjoyed such outlandish wit as the addressing of a love poem to a purse, and that sort of poem Chaucer was only too willing to provide. As Gardner puts it, "King Henry was apparently amused. Anyway, he paid."<sup>51</sup>

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 solely 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 multiple connotations of the language in Purse evince a concern here, as in Bukton and even 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 universally applicable theme, the playful 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 several steps removed from direct experience of the particular, the ability of language to communicate truth in a manner comprehensible to the human intellect is highly doubtful. Still, the closer language comes to representing the object itself rather than an abstract mental concept, the stronger the 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.

## CHAPTER III: NOTES

1

George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1915), p. 36.

2

The date has been established as either 1393 or 1391, since both of these years, according to the chroniclers, were sufficiently rainy to justify Chaucer's lines "now so wepith Venus in hir spere / That with hir teeres she wol drenche us here" (ll. 11-12). Lounsbury, for example, describes the year 1393 as a year when "chronicles mentions the floods of water that came down in such abundance that at particular places even walls were swept away" (Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer, 3 vols. [New York: Harper and Bros., 1892], I, 37). But Brusendorff suggests 1391 as more appropriate because Chaucer speaks of a "diluge of pestilence: (l. 14), and 1391 is marked as a very wet year with a wide-spread pestilence (Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925], p. 291).

Brusendorff's chief reason for arguing the date of the poem is that he wishes to make a case for a new identification of Scogan. Most scholars have followed Walter W. Skeat (The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899], I, 83) and Kittredge ("Henry Scogan," [Harvard] Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 1 [1892], 109-117) in accepting Henry Scogan, tutor to the sons of Henry IV and author of a "Moral Balade" in which he includes the text of Chaucer's Gentillesse. Henry Scogan certainly knew Chaucer, and refers to him twice in his "Moral Balade" as "my maistre Chaucier." But the reason Brusendorff objects to his identification as the addressee of this poem is the term "hoor and rounde of shap" by which Chaucer refers to both himself and Scogan. Henry Scogan would have been only about 32 years old in 1393--certainly old enough to be "rounde of shap" but definitely not yet "hoor." Since Henry Scogan inherited the family manor upon the death of his older brother John late in 1391, Brusendorff conjectures that John, not Henry, was the man to whom Chaucer sent this poem (p. 292). Robinson, however, noting the humorous tone of Chaucer's poem, does not see the age of Scogan as important, and points out that there is no evidence of any association between Chaucer and John Scogan (p. 863).

The possibility that this Scogan is to be identified with the "Scoggin" of the popular Elizabethan jest book Scoggins Iests, a court fool, is dismissed by Skeat (Works, I, 83), but defended by Willard E. Farnham, though Farnham can explain the fact that the Scoggin of the Iests is called "John" only by saying that both John and Henry are common names ("John Henry Scogan," MLR, 16 [1921], 120-28). That is not very convincing evidence.

3

Skeat, Works, I, 558.

4

R. T. Lenaghan, "Chaucer's Envoy to Scogan: The Uses of Literary Conventions," Chaucer Review, 10 (1975), 48.

5

Walter H. French, "The Meaning of Chaucer's Envoy to Scogan," PMLA, 48 (1933), 289. According to French, Scogan apparently quarrelled with his lady, and asked Chaucer to write a poem to help smooth things over. This poem, therefore, is Chaucer's assurance of his good wishes, but refusal to give Scogan active support. In the end, the reference is to Atticus' friendship to Cicero, French says; "Scogan, therefore, and not Chaucer, is to profit by recalling their friendship; and the profit has nothing to do with worldly advancement. Thus the reference to Cicero is appropriate" (p. 291).

6

Marion L. Polzella, "'The Craft So Long to Lerne': Poet and Lover in Chaucer's 'Envoy to Scogan' and Parliament of Fowls," Chaucer Review, 10 (1976), 279-86. Polzella says that in Scogan, as in poems like the Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer is developing a "complex analogy between the romantic activity of the lover and the artistic activity of the poet" (p. 279). Thus the early stanzas on Scogan's blaspheming against the god of love, and that on Chaucer's inability to write poetry anymore, and poetry's impermanence, are related, and the last stanza brings the two together: "more important than any financial reward is the ability to produce 'newe corn' in 'prose or ryme'. Without creative success, the poet is 'dul as ded', much like any courtly lover whose suffering is unrequited" (p. 283).

7

Alfred David, "Chaucer's Good Counsel to Scogan," Chaucer Review, 3 (1969), 266.

8

David, p. 267.

9

David, p. 269.

10

David, p. 269.

11

David, p. 272.

12

Some have thought this an allusion to Cicero's Epistle VI, ad Caecinam (Robinson, p. 863), though Skeat believed it to be an allusion to De Amicitia (Works, I, 558). R. C. Goffin refers the reader to the Roman de la Rose, wherein Cicero is referred to as an authority on the love of friendship ("'Envoy de Chaucer a Scogan'," MLR, 20 [1925], 318-321). Thomas Phipps suggested the legendary Tullus Hostilius, third king of Rome; that suggestion has not been generally accepted, and Phipps never mentions why that identification would be important in the poem ("Chaucer's Tullius," MLN, 18 [1943], 108-09).

13

Citations of Cicero's De Amicitia in my text are to William Armistead Falconer, ed. and trans., De Senectute, De Amicitia, De Divinatione (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; and London: William Heinemann, 1923). Chapter and line numbers will be given in parentheses.

14

The word mynne comes from Old English where it meant not only "mind" but seems also to have implied "desire" and "love"; certainly it meant "love" in Old Norse. As such it was related to the Middle High German "minne"--the equivalent of the French fin amor. I am not suggesting that Chaucer knew any German, though one as widely traveled as he in diplomatic and courtly circles may well have been aware of the term. But perhaps "love" as an obscure connotation of "mynne" survived from Old English into the fourteenth century. Line 48 would then read "place your love in the person with whom it will prove the most fruitful." However, I can find no other instance in Middle English where "mynne" meant "love," so there is no solid evidence to support this conjecture.

15

David, p. 273.

16

Citations of the Somnium Scipionis in my text are to Clinton Walker Keyes, ed. and trans., De Re Publica and De Legibus (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; and London: William Heinemann, 1928). This is VI, xvii, 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.

17

Cicero, VI, vii, p. 268; trans. Macrobius, pp. 72-73.

18

David, p. 272.

19

Some have actually considered this poem to be evidence that Chaucer's own marriage was unhappy, though this is absurd. As Kittredge commented, "such utterances" were probably "no more seriously meant than the jests which are passed upon an intending bridegroom by his intimates at pre-nuptial 'stag dinners' now-a-days" ("Chaucer's Envoy to Bukton," MLN, 24 [1909], 15).

20

Ernest P. Kuhl made the case for a Peter Bukton of Yorkshire, a knight attached to the Lancaster family ("Chaucer's My Maistre Bukton," PMLA, 38 [1923], 318-32). Haldeen Braddy later added that this same Peter Bukton was entrusted with the custody of Richard II at Knareborough Castle after Henry's ascension ("Sir Peter and the

Envoy to Bukton," PQ, 14 [1935], 368-70). Most critics have conceded that Peter is a more likely candidate, since he is more likely to have been intimate with Chaucer, than Robert Bukton of Suffolk, an esquire of Queen Anne, who was suggested by Tatlock (Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works, [1907; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963], pp. 210-11).

21

Mention of the "Wyf of Bathe" in line 29 indicates that the poem is a late one. The allusion in line 23, that one would be better off "to be take in Frise" than to be married, was seen by Skeat as a reference to the expedition, led by William of Hainault, against Friesland, which set out in August of 1396 and stayed until October. Skeat notes that Froissart's descriptions of the practices of the Frieslanders, who apparently put their prisoners to death when there were none of their own people to exchange them for, make the allusion fitting (Works, I, 85). Skeat is almost certainly correct, but John Livingston Lowes adds a qualifying note: "it was the preparations for the expedition which gave the allusion pertinence, whereas the outcome of the expedition, in point of fact, left it with little relevance," since William won the battle decisively (John Livingston Lowes, "The Date of the Envoy to Bukton," MLN, 27 [1912], 47-48). The poem, then, was most likely written shortly before August of 1396, or at least before October.

22

John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 298.

23

Gardner, Poetry, p. 319.

24

Gardner, Poetry, p. 332.

25

Gardner, Poetry, p. 294.

26

Gardner, Poetry, p. 225.

27

C. Warren Hollister, Medieval Europe: A Short History, 4th ed. (New York: Wiley, 1978), p. 310.

28

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.

29

Gardner, Poetry, p. ix.

30 Ockham, Summa totius logicae, I, c. lxii-lxiv; c. lxxviii, in Boehner, pp. 64-74.

31 Hollister, p. 274.

32 Hollister, p. 275.

33 Citations of Roger Bacon are to The "Opus Majus" of Roger Bacon, ed. John Henry Bridges, 2 vols. (1897-1900; rpt. Frankfurt: Minerva-Verlag, 1964). The translation is that of Robert Belle Burke, 2 vols. (1928; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962).

34 Gardner, Poetry, p. 156.

35 Much critical ink has been spilled attempting to identify just who this Adam was. Brusendorff discovered the existence of an Adam Chaucer, who up until 1374 rented a tenement in Smithfield, and accordingly Brusendorff suggested that "it is possible that the scribe was a relative of the poet, and this may to some extent explain the familiar strength of the curse" (p. 57). But there is not further evidence that this Adam Chaucer was related to our Chaucer, or that he was a scribe. Various more likely candidates have been suggested. Ramona Bressie proposed an Adam Stedeman whose name appears on a University of Chicago list of 14th and 15th century scribes ("Chaucer's Scrivener," TLS, 9 May 1929, p. 383). Manly offered Adam Acton as a candidate; this Adam is mentioned in the records for 1379-85 of the Collegiate Church of St. George at Windsor. Manly points out, though, that Acton was a limner, not a scrivener, which is to say, an illuminator of manuscripts rather than a scribe of the sort Chaucer describes (John Matthews Manly, "Chaucer's Scrivener," TLS, 16 May 1929, p. 403). Bernard M. Wagner found yet another fourteenth century scrivener, named Adam Panckhust, who is listed as one of forty members of the Scrivener's Company for the period 1392-1404, in the records preserved at the Bodlian ("Chaucer's Scrivener," TLS, 13 June 1929, p. 474).

36 For a description of the state of publication in Chaucer's time, see Robert K. Root, "Publication Before Printing," PMLA, 28 (1913), 417-31.

37 See Skeat, Works, I, 538-39.

38 Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), p. 153.

39

A. I. Doyle and George B. Pace, "A New Chaucer Manuscript," PMLA, 83 (1968), 22-34.

40

For a summary of scholarship on this point, see Robinson, p. 865.

41

This has led, in fact, to speculation that Chaucer was something of a spendthrift: he had been granted an annuity of 20 marks by Richard in 1394, and Richard granted him an additional tun of wine in October of 1398. But this was apparently not enough for Chaucer to live on. Chaucer's difficulty with his creditors has been noted more than once: beginning in the late 1380's, Chaucer began to be sued for debt, first by John Churchman, then by Henry Atwood, then by William Venour, and finally by Isabella Bukholt, apparently the most voracious of them all (see John Gardner, The Life and Times of Chaucer [New York: Random House, 1977; rpt. 1978], p. 280.). It was because of her suit for fourteen pounds in 1398 that Chaucer received special protection from Richard on May 4, exempting him for two years from any lawsuits except for pleas connected with land (see Curt F. Bühler, "A New Lydgate-Chaucer Manuscript," MLN, 52 [1937], 8.).

The truth is, it was not so much that Chaucer was a spendthrift, but that he had great difficulty during the 1390's in getting the payments rightfully due him. As Marchette Chute summarizes, "he was constantly borrowing small sums on account, not because he had to have them but because there was no other way of getting actual cash out of the slowest of all the Westminster offices" (p. 231). Now as will be seen, it was this difficulty in getting cash out of Westminster that led to Chaucer's problems, and not the poet's prodigality.

It was once believed that, since some of the manuscripts of Purse do not contain the Envoy, Chaucer may have written the poem before the ascension of Henry and merely appended the Envoy after Richard's deposition and submitted the poem to the new king (see Robinson, p. 523). This seemed especially likely since the Envoy could not possibly have been written before Sept. 30, 1399, the date of Richard's abdication, and would not have served any purpose if written after Oct. 13, the date of Henry's coronation and also the date which appears upon Henry's grant to Chaucer of 40 pounds yearly for life, in addition to the 20 pounds already granted by Richard (see Chaucer's Life-Records, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966], p. 525.). The speed may suggest that Chaucer had the poem already written, and was able to get it to the new king immediately. Bühler thought that Purse may actually have been written for Richard during Chaucer's difficulties in the Isabella Bukholt affair, and so was written before Richard's grant of protection May 4, 1398. Florence R. Scott, on the other hand, believed the poem had been written between Sept. 30 and Oct. 13, 1399, but considered the remarkable haste of Henry's response a



reflection of the debt which Henry owed Chaucer, and Chaucer's family. Scott points out that Thomas Chaucer, the poet's son, had guard of Queen Isabela at Wallingford Castle, while Thomas Swinford, Chaucer's nephew, was guardian of Richard at Pontrefact. In view of these facts, Scott concludes that the poem is not really a tribute to Henry, nor a lament for poverty. "It is rather a document offered by an astute courtier, reminding a highly esteemed master that a little generosity to an old and tried servant would be gratefully received--indeed might be even a matter of noblesse oblige" ("A New Look at 'The Complaint of Chaucer to His Empty Purse,'" ELN, 2 [1964], 86-87.).

These conjectures, however, have been sufficiently disproved by what is probably the most important article yet to appear on Purse-- Sumner Ferris's "The Date of Chaucer's Final Annuity and of the 'Complaint to his Empty Purse.'" Ferris shows quite conclusively that, because of the fact that letters patent were frequently antedated, add that it appears in the Patent Roll among other papers dated in February, although the document by which Henry confirmed and increased Chaucer's annuity "is dated October 13, 1399, it was in fact not issued or enrolled till February of 1400, and . . . the 'Complaint' was written about this time, too, when the poet's finances were probably at a very low ebb" (MP, 65 [1967], 47.). Now Chaucer's 20 mark annuity from Richard had been due on Sept. 29, the day before the abdication, when the government obviously was in some turmoil. Obviously he was not able to get the money then. He tried to go through channels but was still unable to receive any payment after Henry became king. This fact may explain another incident in Chaucer's life: on Christmas Eve, 1399, he took out his famous fifty-year lease on the house in Westminster. As Andrew Finnel explains, one way to escape from debt was to seek "sanctuary in the churches or royally chartered sanctuaries, one of which was Westminster Abbey" (Andrew J. Finnel, "The Poet as Sunday Man: 'The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse,'" Chaucer Review, 8, [1973], 150.). After so many months without a salary, Chaucer's resources must have been getting low, and besides, his immunity to lawsuit was questionable after Richard abdicated, and the two years would be up the following May in any case. Chaucer was not actually able to wring his money from the Exchequer until February of 1400, the month in which, according to Ferris's highly probable theory, Henry finally did officially grant him his new annuity.

42

R. T. Davies, ed., Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 40.

43

"Alysoun," in G. L. Brook, ed., The Harley Lyrics (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1948), no. 4.

44

"A wayle whit as whalles bon," in Brook, no. 9.

45

Charles D. Ludlum, "Heavenly Word-Play in Chaucer's 'Complaint to His Purse,'" N & Q, 23 (1976), 392.

46

Ludlum, pp. 391-92.

47

Skeat's idea that the line indicated that Chaucer wished to get away from London to some cheaper place of residence was widely accepted for a long time (Works, I, 564). But it seems unlikely. Why should he want so badly to leave London and the court, where his circle of closest friends was? Besides, why should he have taken a fifty-year lease on the house in Westminster if he wished to leave London? Bühler, believing the poem to have been written before the Envoy, believed that "Chaucer wants money to enable him to leave Greenwich and thus avoid an expected encounter with the sheriff," who would be looking for him in connection with the Isabella Bukholt lawsuit (Bühler, p. 8). It is unlikely that "this toun" refers to Greenwich, though, if Ferris's suggested date for the poem is right. Finnel thought that, since Chaucer was living in Westminster perhaps to take advantage of its sanctuary, what he really wanted was to be able to leave the abbey and show his face without fear of arrest. Thus using the meaning "town=garden or enclosed place," Chaucer may mean "help me so that I can leave this enclosure, this monastery" (Finnel, p. 153). Such an interpretation is ingenious, but it is hard to believe that the king, the intended audience, would really understand the allusion in that sense, since he must needs be familiar with many of the circumstances surrounding Chaucer's private life and be able to catch a very personal allusion that Chaucer was making as well. Gardner, recalling the religious imagery of "this light" and "saviour" in the previous lines, sees a religious meaning of "this toun" as "this world, the Old Jerusalem" (Poetry, p. 70). This, too, is ingenious, but if it were true, what would the line mean in the poem? That Chaucer's purse may lead him out of this world, into the City of God? This would seem inconsistent, for Chaucer's method up to this point has been the use of terminology which had ironically ambiguous meanings, appropriate to both the purse and the lover in different senses: the shining yellow of line 11 is both the Beloved's hair and the purse's gold. But the "heavenly City" to which the purse would apparently lead the poet "out of this toun" can only mean one thing, and would be appropriate only in the religious sense. It can in no way apply to the purse, since the purse can in no way literally lead Chaucer to the heavenly Jerusalem. And the concept cannot be used metaphorically, because to be a metaphor the heavenly city would have to figuratively express something in the literal earthly city--something it cannot do since by definition the two are diametrically opposed. Gardner's suggestion, then, cannot be accurate.

48

E. Talbot Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), p. 541.

49

M. Dominica Legge, "Gracious Conqueror," MLN, 68 (1953), 18.

50 Mary Giffin, Studies in Chaucer and his Audience (Quebec: Hull, 1956), pp. 89-105.

51 Gardner, Poetry, p. 70.

## CHAPTER IV

### Courtly Love

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 Provençal troubadours,<sup>1</sup> was immense and inescapable for a young poet trying out a rather revolutionary idea: the writing of serious poetry in English.<sup>2</sup> Nor could Chaucer, after his first Italian journey in 1372, ignore the significant contribution to the courtly tradition made by Dante and the *stilnovisti*. But Chaucer no sooner absorbed the conventions of French and Italian love literature than he began to modify them and to demonstrate the inability of the ideal to bear close scrutiny.

It would be tempting to digress into a long exploration of the ideal of courtly love and all its intricacies. But C. S. Lewis, Maurice Valency, Frederick Goldin and others have already provided valuable studies on the subject.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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 being."<sup>5</sup> The problem with this idea, at least in Chaucer's eyes, 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. To replace Christ with the courtly Beloved must have gone against Chaucer's grain.

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 tainted 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 sole object of his will and love. As a result, she becomes for him the Highest Good. She is idealized, made into a goddess; the object of his love becomes the idol he worships.

Chaucer, however, was more interested in loving women than in

worshiping goddesses. According to Chaucer's philosophical ideas, it was a grave error to turn from the Highest Good and put one's faith in mundane things. That was lak of stedfastnesse; that was Scogan's error. Love between man and woman should not be of the idealized sort, but should be of the sort "ther it may fructifye," as Chaucer told Scogan, and implied behind the ironies of Bukton. For Chaucer the truest 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. That 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 vehicle by which the lover was led from concupiscent 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.

Surely 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 posed by courtly love. Chaucer was of a somewhat more practical bent, and seems to have had a good deal of trouble actually separating the ideal from the particular woman. For Chaucer, therefore, instead of the 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 evinces 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 covertly condemns the system of courtly love even when he most seems to extol it.

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 pieces 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,"<sup>7</sup> 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 so, ultimately, 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 deeply felt 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. In the philosophical poems of the 1380's, this problem was not so extreme. Truth, Gentilesse, Lak of Stedfastnesse, The Former Age, all are more essays in verse than 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 allay 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 that strongest of human emotions, and thus in one sense the most "lyrical" of topics, human love. Now undeniably, 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 automatically hit a responsive chord in the audience. Unfortunately, it also saddled 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 application, 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 so that Brusendorff thought it should be printed as three separate poems.<sup>8</sup> Certainly there is no striking continuity of thought, but that is not

atypical of 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."<sup>9</sup> 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 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 biggest elaboration upon this theme comes in the penultimate stanza, where the speaker makes 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 spille,  
 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," cares nothing for him:

She that mighte me out of this brynge  
 Ne reccheth nought whether I wepe or synge  
 So liteſ 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 smerte,  
 And of your grace graunteth me som drope;  
 For elles may me laste no blis ne hope,  
 Ne dwelle 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]. (ll. 95-97)

He will love her till the end -- "Hir love I best, and shal, whyl I may dure" (l. 30). This love takes the form of service, which he will continue until his death (which, due to his suffering, is likely to be soon):

What have I doon that greveth yow, or sayd,  
 But for I serve and love yow and no mo?  
 And whilst I lyve I wol ever do so; (ll. 60-62)

This service is a manifestation of the remarkable humility of the courtly lover, who is so unworthy of the lady that all he can really hope for is to do his lady's will, and even then as the unworthiest of all her servants. This humility is something to watch in the lyrics, because it becomes more important as Chaucer more fully develops his persona. In this complaint, the speaker says that anyone as good and fair as his lady must needs expect a multitude of servants, and "leest worth of alle hem, I am he" (l. 66). "Thogh that I be unconnyng and

unmete / To serve, as I coude best, ay your hynesse" (ll. 69-70); he is the most eager to do her will, in spite of his unworthiness. He merely wants to serve her, that is all, for he has no delusions that she should ever return the love of one so unworthy as he:

For I am not so hardy, ne so wood,  
     For to desire that ye shulde love me;  
     For wel I wot, alas! that may nat be;  
 I am so litel worthy, and ye so good. (ll. 84-87)

The killing pangs of love, the lady's lack of pity, and lover's eternal love, and the lover's unworthiness to do anything but serve his Beloved -- these are the themes which unite the poem and which are repeated in varying forms over the otherwise rambling 127 lines of poetry which make up A Complaint to his Lady. All are thoroughly conventional, and so left little room for Chaucer's poetic imagination in the development of the theme of the poem. As a result, he seems to have turned that imagination instead to experimentation in the form of the poem.

When Hoccleve called Chaucer the "firste fyndere of our fair language,"<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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" technique,<sup>12</sup> so that, even in this experimental poem, form is still wedded to content. But for the moment it will be expedient to consider form separately.

The first two stanzas of the poem are written in rime royal -- seven decasyllabic line stanzas rhyming a b a b b c c. Chaucer used the same pattern in two other early poems, the Complaint unto Pity and the Anelida and Arcite, but the Complaint to his Lady may well be the earliest of the three. This is suggested by its very conventional and somewhat fragmentary nature (note the apparent missing line after line 22, the incomplete lines 73 and 97) which marks it as, probably, an experimental draft. These two stanzas would then be the first rime royal stanzas in English. Chaucer was to develop the . . . into a narrative verse of great power, and utilize it to its fullest extent in the Troilus. The second section of the poem, lines 15-39, contains two incomplete stanzas in terza rima -- again, the first use in English of that verse form, "obviously," according to Skeat, "copied from Dante."<sup>13</sup> This would date the Complaint to his Lady around 1373, sometime after Chaucer's first Italian journey from December 1, 1372 to May 23, 1373. At that time he was negotiating in Genoa over the choice of an English port for commerce, but apparently also visited Florence, and would have become familiar with the work of Dante as well as Petrarch and Boccaccio. Finally, the third and longest section of Lady (lines 40-127) is written in ten decasyllabic line stanzas rhyming

a a b a a b c d d c. Paul Clogan has noted that this form, again, is used here for the first time in English, and that it resembles the nine-line stanza which appears in the Complaint of Anelida and Arcite.<sup>14</sup> But the stanza in Anelida rhymes a a b a a b b a b -- the effect is, I think, something quite different. For in the Anelida stanza, the pattern of the stanza moves in one continuous thought; in the Lady stanza, there is a definite break between lines six and seven -- a change in the rhyme pattern which Chaucer, in most stanzas, utilizes to correspond with a change in the thought expressed, as in

My dere herte and best beloved fo,  
 Why lyketh yow to do me al this wo,  
     What have I doon that greveth yow, or sayd,  
 But for I serve and love yow and no mo?  
 And whilst I lyve I wol ever do so;  
     And therefore swete, ne beth nat yvel apayd.  
 For so good and so fair as ye be  
     Hit were right gret wonder but ye hadde  
     Of alle servantes, bothe of goode and badde;  
 And leest worthy of alle hem, I am he. (ll. 58-67)

Here, the first six lines present the fact that the speaker's only crime is his love of his lady, while the second four move to the idea that the speaker is the least worthy of all the lady's many servants. Thus this ten-line stanza is more similar to the Italian sonnet, with its octave and sestet, than to the nine-line stanza in the Anelida.

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. Clemen's contention was that Chaucer, in the Complaint to his Lady, is giving a simple, sincere utterance in the poet's own "speaking voice," and notes line 58 -- "My dere herte and best beloved fo" -- and line 82 -- "But leveth wel, and be not wrooth therefore" -- as specific examples of this idiomatic fourteenth-century English

"speaking voice."<sup>15</sup> Chaucer, trying to reproduce in verse the rhythms of natural speech also sometimes uses enjambment (as in lines 40-41: "In my trewe and careful herte ther is / So moche wo . . ."; or lines 69-70: "Thogh that I be unconnyng and unmete / To serve . . .") rather than breaks or pauses at the end of lines.<sup>16</sup> Clemen also notes that here, in Lady, a characteristic quirk of Chaucer's style begins to emerge: his reliance upon conjunctions to contrast, to connect, or to form transition.<sup>17</sup>

All of this may well be true. That Chaucer's most characteristic style is rather colloquial is widely believed. This is what Charles Muscatine calls the "bourgeois style," characteristic of many of the most admired Canterbury Tales.<sup>18</sup> But this does not preclude poetic diction. I must contend that, here in the Complaint to his Lady at any rate, 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 exposito, 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, wherein Love is, as was customary, personified and made a god who compells the speaker. That personification is repeated in lines 33 and 36, 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. Lines 24-27 of the poem employ this technique -- the Lady's "name is Bountee, set in womanhede, / Sadnesse in youthe, and Beautee prydelees / And Plesauce, 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. The following lines, which in their sense recall the opening of the Book of the Duchess, are twisted quite out of their normal order -- the noun clause of line five is actually the subject of the sentence, while the verb appears after the expletive hit in line four, and the first three lines are all adverbial:

The longe nightes, whan every creature  
Shulde have hir rest in somewhat, as by kynde,  
Or elles ne may hir lif nat longe endure,  
Hit falleth most into my woful mynde  
How I so fer have broght myself behynde, (ll. 1-5)

Of Vinsauf's myriad "figures of speech," or "ornatus facilis," Chaucer uses a good many in the Complaint to his Lady. Lines eight and nine could be called a commutatio -- a reversal of order in successive clauses:

This same thoght me lasteth til the morwe,  
And from the morwe forth til hit be eve;



Line 13 might be seen as disjunctio, the use of different verbs, in succession, to express the same idea: "to wepe ynough, and wailen al my fille." Here the characteristically English alliterative pair "weep and wail" is used in a Latin rhetorical ornament--a clear example of Chaucer's fusing of the traditions. Later, Chaucer uses a sententia in the proverbial sounding "As good were thanne untrewed as trewe to be" (l. 117). There is repetitio in "good leyser and good leve" (l. 11), and tractio (another type of repetition) of the word wo in lines 39-42. Most commonly, Chaucer uses exclamatio, in outbursts like "Allas!" (l. 35, l. 50, l. 86, l. 100), and interrogatio, 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,

Allas! 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 flavor 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 contentio, or antithesis. The whole of A Complaint to his Lady does, in fact, revolve 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 dialogue.<sup>19</sup> 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, "Petrarchan paradoxes" as it were, 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 ultimately 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 rings 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) in lines 87-89: "I am so litel worthy, and ye so good. / For ye be oon the worthiest on-lyve / And I the most unlykly for to thryve." It takes the form of an oxymoron in "my swete fo"

(l. 37) and "beloved fo" (l. 58), and it is used as the speaker presents his antithetical emotions: "For bothe I love and eek drede yow so sore" (l. 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" (ll. 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 virtually always, even at his most "colloquial," conscious of rhetorical devices. Geoffrey of Vinsauf had said that "lightness" of style, or *literal* use of words, did not necessarily preclude the use of rhetorical devices, despite its "plain" appearance, and accordingly discussed 35 "plain colors":

Si sermo velit esse levis pulchrique coloris,  
Tolle modos omnes gravitatis et utere planis,  
Quorum planities turpis ne terreat aures.

(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.)<sup>20</sup>

The *Complaint of his Lady* is not, by any standards, a great poem. But it is less disjunct than most critics have felt, and at least as unified as most medieval poems on the same subject. And it is notable in Chaucer's development as an early 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 idiom -- the feat which Lydgate commemorated in his *Life of Our Lady*, calling Chaucer the poet who

. . . made first to distille and reyne  
 The golde dewe droppis of speche and eloquence  
 In-to our tounge thour3 his excellence  
 And founde the flourys first of rethoryk  
 Our rude speech oonly to enlumyne  
 That in oure tunge was never noon him like.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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 graceful bit of conventional love poetry."<sup>24</sup> Root, like others, had a mild interest in the poem for its difficult rhyme scheme. The three nine-line stanzas of the ballade rhyme a a b a a b b a b, and the six-line Envoy rhymes a b a b a a, so that only two rhymes are used in the thirty-two extant lines, the a rhyme occurring eighteen times (what would be line thirteen of the poem, an a rhyme, is missing in the single surviving manuscript, probably due to a scribal error, according to Brusendorff<sup>25</sup>). Root noted, however, that it should be admitted that Chaucer chose two rather easy rhymes.<sup>26</sup>

But one result of Chaucer's choice of rhyme words ending in suffixes like -aunce and -esse was his use of very long, latinate words -- something rather uncharacteristic of the poet. As noted previously, monosyllables seem to be the rule in the lyrics. But in Womanly Noblesse, the constant repetition of three and four syllable words, like remem-

braunce (l. 7), perseveraunce (l. 8), and unbuxomnesse (l. 26), in emphatic positions as rhyme words has the result of heightening the diction: long words are in themselves characteristic of formal diction, and furthermore the association of Latin or French words with the pulpit or the court rather than the peasantry gave such words, again, a more formal connotation. Once again Chaucer is experimenting with his language. Here, his result is that this poem seems far more formal than most of his other lyrics, even those intended to be formal in diction. 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 purportedly 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."<sup>27</sup> 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 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 world, and can convert even outward appearance to ulterior, poetic-symbolic purposes.<sup>28</sup>

This goes far in explaining 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 preclude 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, flesshy, not gret therwith,  
 Ryght white handes, and nayles rede,  
 Rounde brestes; and of good brede  
 Hyr hippes were, a streight flat bak. (ll. 952-957)

Certainly the description of the woman is an idealized and a stock one. But at least one gets the impression there is a woman there somewhere, 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 wel me liketh your womanly countenance,  
 Your fresshe fetures and your comlynesse (ll. 5-7)

The entire poem follows this pattern. There are some fifty-four nouns in the thirty-two lines of the poem. The most concrete of these are the ones which describe the lady's position with relation to the speaker: she is his *maystresse* (l. 7), his *lady* (l. 27), his *sovereigne* (l. 28).

Other nouns describe the lover's mental anguish: his distresse (l. 9), his duresse (l. 14), his peynes (l. 17), his wo (l. 21) and his hevynesse (l. 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" (l. 28) -- but that is being used metaphorically, and is not being described in itself. Most of the nouns are generalized abstractions, like governaunce (l. 2), noblesse (l. 3), plesure (l. 4), allegiaunce (l. 21), wommanhede (l. 28), and goodlihede (l. 30). It is as if the poet is here describing a love completely disembodied, totally cerebral.

That suspicion becomes even stronger when one notices the references throughout the poem to mental processes. Chaucer speaks of remembraunce in the first stanza (l. 1), wyl in the second stanza (l. 16), and resoun in stanza three (l. 24), corresponding to the three parts of the soul -- memory, understanding, and will -- that 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 è creato e da sensato nome,  
 d'alma costome e di cor volontate.  
 Vèn da veduta forma che s'intende,  
 che prende nel possibile intelletto,  
 come in subietto, loco e dimoranza. (ll. 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.)<sup>29</sup>

The words are mere jargon to anyone unfamiliar with Aristotelian epistemology.<sup>30</sup> Cavalcanti was most certainly aware of this, since he ends his poem with the words

. . . ch'io t'ho sì adornata  
 ch'assai laudata sarà tua ragione  
 de le persone c'hanno intendimento:  
 di star con l'altre tu non hai talento. (ll. 72-75)

(. . . I have so provided you  
 that your reasoning will be praised abundantly  
 by those who understand:  
 you have no wish to be with others.)

His is an elitist view of love; only a few can really understand its workings, and the lady is one of those.

Some of the tenets of scholastic realism were discussed earlier (see pp.17-18). But, briefly, 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 agent or 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:

de ratione memoriae est quod sit thesaurus vel locus conservativus specierum . . . Unde patet quod memoria non est alia potentia ab intellectu. Ad rationem enim potentiae passivae pertinet conservare, sicut et recipere.

(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 receive.)<sup>31</sup>

Now love per se can be an intellectual experience, or it can be a physical experience. Love is a concept directly connected with the appetitive powers. According to Aquinas, "omnia suo modo per appetitum inclinatur in bonum, sed diversimode" ("all things in their own way are inclined by appetite towards good, but in different ways,") so that a concupiscent sort of desire is appropriate to the sensitive soul, but "quaedam vero inclinatur ad bonum cum cognitione qua cognoscunt ipsam boni rationem, quod est proprium intellectus . . . Et haec inclinatio dicitur voluntas," ("when things have an inclination towards the good, but with a knowledge whereby they perceive the aspect of goodness; this belongs to the intellect . . . such inclination is termed will").<sup>32</sup>

Concupiscent love, then, was the sort associated with the appetitive powers of the sensitive soul, but more refined love, the intellectual love of the stilnovisti, was that associated with the will, the

intellectual faculty. Chaucer was aware from his reading of Boethius of what Aquinas asserts, that "Amoris autem proprium objectum est bonum" ("the proper object of love is the good")<sup>33</sup> but Boethius writes nothing comparable to Aquinas' further assertion that "dicendum quod amor est aliquid ad appetitum pertinens, cum utriusque obiectum sit bonum. Unde secundum differentiam appetitus est differentia amoris." ("love is something pertaining to the appetite; since good is the object of both. Wherefore love differs according to the difference of appetites").<sup>34</sup> That idea Chaucer more than likely picked up from the Italian love poets.

The higher form of love is, of course, intellectual love, and that must be the love that the stilnovisti experienced since, as Guinizelli had proclaimed, true love seeks its dwelling always in *Al cor gentil*.<sup>35</sup> 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 subsequently understands her to be beautiful because of her affinity with the universal form of beauty with which he compares her in his memory.<sup>36</sup> The implication of this for Dante became increasingly important in the *Vita Nuova* and especially in the *Comedy*. Maurice Valency describes the situation in a passage which I quote in full 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 *summum pulchrum* 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 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.<sup>37</sup>

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," since it contains the "remembraunce" -- has intellectualized the speaker's 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 bent 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. When Aquinas asked the question "Whether Love is cause of all that the Lover Does," he answered in the affirmative, saying "dicendum quod omne agens agit propter finem aliquem, ut supra dictum est. Finis autem est bonum desideratum et amatum unicuique. Unde manifestum est quod omne agens, quod cumque sit, agit quamcumque actionem ex aliquo amore." ("every agent acts for an end, as stated above . . . Now the end is the good desired and love by each one. Wherefore it is evident that every agency, whatever it be, does every action for love of some kind").<sup>38</sup>

The problem with seeking to love an earthly woman intellectually is that the woman always gets in the way. 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. Cavalcanti warned that love (as it existed in the sensitive soul ) can cloud the intellect:

For di salute giudicar mantene,  
 chè la 'ntenzione per ragione vale:  
 . . . . .  
 non perchè oppost'a naturale sia,  
 ma quanto che da buon perfetto tort'è,  
 per sorte non pò dire om ch'aggia vita (ll. 32-33, 38-40)

(It deprives reason of well-being  
 For now desire does the work of reason:  
 Not that love is inimical to the body  
 But insofar as a man has turned from one true good  
 he cannot be said to have any life)

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 (the storehouse of the

phantasms), 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 does appear before the lover's eyes, may cause him to choose what he can see rather than what he can't. At any rate, his reason is impaired. 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" (l. 21). Now the pain is caused by the unattainability of the loved one; as Cavalcanti said, love "vol ch'om miri in un fermato loco" ("makes one yearn for what he cannot reach") (l. 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 reminiscent of the ABC, the lover asks for abiding grace (though only God's grace truly abides), and for the pity which will abate 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 to his lady as one arrived at through use of the rational faculties:

And thynketh by resoun that wommanly noblesse  
 Shulde nat desire for to do the outrance  
 Ther as she fyndeth non unbuxomnesse. (ll. 24-26)

Where the courtly lady, paragon and emblem of "womanly noblesse," finds her lover totally devoted in service, she should want to "do the outtraunce," the utmost in her power, to make him happy. The irony of this in terms of Aquinas' epistemology is, of course, that reason would say nothing of the sort, since 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" (l. 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, l. 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, (ll. 29-30)

This is in stark contrast with the haughty 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. This is rather a conventional sort of humility by a poet who means it somewhat ironically: he has just composed a poem in a tortuously difficult rhyme scheme and built up nearly totally of abstractions. And although he has not explored it 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 Troilus. 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."<sup>39</sup> Certainly it is true that the influence of Machaut is pervasive. But I think that Womanly Noblesse points to Dante and the stilnovisti as another important source for the love lyrics.

Chaucer seems to have come home in 1373-4 filled with new ideas from the great Italian poets, and one of those ideas was the interest in the psychology of love as expressed in the "sweet new style." 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. Even in the Complaynt D'Amours, which is a demonstrably early poem,<sup>40</sup> and one derived largely from the Machaut tradition,<sup>41</sup>

Chaucer is able to utilize the circumstance of the poem's actual delivery before its audience to imply a dramatic situation to which the poem's speaker can react.

Perhaps the best way to understand a poem like the Complaynt D'Amours, then, is to interpret it in the light of its presentation before that courtly audience. That such poems as the Complaynt 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 . . . (ll. 66-69)

But "rede" could very easily mean simply "interpret" or "decipher," a meaning still in common usage, and since the poet refers to something he has "seid" rather than to something he has "written," it may safely be assumed that the poem was composed to be read aloud at some gathering, probably, as the last stanza notes, for some St. Valentine's Day gathering. 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 little flirtation."<sup>42</sup> 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 shal his makd' (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."<sup>43</sup> Just what this



exchange consisted of must have been, for Chaucer, similar to the situation which Frederick Goldin in describing the early troubadour lyric and the minnesang 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.<sup>44</sup> In a sense, what Goldin is describing is a debate which the performer engages in with his audience -- and this is the clue, I believe, to the structure of the Complaynt D'Amours.<sup>45</sup> The debate structure is much more obvious here than it was in the antitheses of A Complaint to his Lady, and as such, it looks forward to the more formal and obvious debate structure of the lyric Fortune, which I discuss in chapter six.

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 beginning, 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 deeth 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 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."<sup>46</sup> 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 of spite, 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 favors. Not only does she lack pity, but 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. Of course she has no pity on him. 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.

Allas! 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 sha! 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:

. . . For she of my folye  
Hath nought to done, although she do me sterve;  
Hit is nat with hir wil that I hir serve! (ll. 33-35)

Note the shift in pronouns from the second person yow (l. 31) to the third person she (ll. 33 and 34) and hir (l. 35), reflecting the speaker's shift from addressing the lady herself to addressing the courtly audience, here within the same stanza. It is not enough that the lover forgive his lady; she must be justified to the courtly audience as well.

Stanza six continues the lover's apology for the lady. Since he loves her "without e hir reed" (l. 37), his death brings "no blame unto hir womanheed" (l. 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" (l. 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 diseas, and of my deth also;  
For with oon word she mighte be my bote (ll. 43-45)

But she will not even do that, and in this she seems most at fault, for, 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! (ll. 48-49)

This causes the poet to marvel, 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" (ll. 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 al this no lak to hir, pardee,  
But God or Nature sore wolde I blame (ll. 57-59)

Once again, as in Womanly Noblesse, Chaucer has presented a speaker whose reason has been hampered 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, as it were, from his individual situation. But his reasoning process is clouded: he blames God for his problems because the Beloved was created by Him. Chaucer returns to this argument again in the Brooch of Thebes section of the Complaint of Mars, discussed in chapter six. 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 err by desiring mundane goods. 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 merely likes to see him suffer. But this stanza, spoken as the answer of the truly courtly man to his enemies' accusations, ends in a marvel of self-sacrifice, the epitome of love service: since the lady laughs at his anguish, he will continue to suffer in order to bring her pleasure:

I ne oughthe to despise my ladyes game;  
 It is hir pley to laughen whan men syketh,  
 And I assente, al that hir list and lyketh! (ll. 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 . . . (ll. 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 taking pity upon him. But the speaker of the Complaynt D'Amours does not even do this. His true love will not even allow him to complain about his lady, for fear she might take offense; he fears in this stanza that he might have said something through "unkonninge" (l. 69) that might have displeased her, and so begs her to forgive him if he has:

A trewer servaunt shulle ye never have;  
 And, though that I have pleynd unto you here,  
 Foryiveth it me, myn own lady dere! (ll. 75-77)

The real cleverness of the Complaynt 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.

Stanza twelve sums up what has taken place in the body of the poem: the speaker will love his lady forever, and humbly serve her, for she is, in the religious terminology so common in courtly love poetry, his

alpha and omega:

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 (ll. 78-80)

Furthermore, she is his sun: "Sonne of the sterre bright and clere of newe" (l. 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." Just as the planet gives off no light of its own, but reflects that of the sun, so the Beloved is the source of whatever dim light he may give off. She is, by implication, the source and inspiration of this poem, as well as of the lover's gentillesse, his true nobility evinced in the poem.<sup>47</sup>

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! (ll. 82-84)

Now clearly the word repente has ironic connotations: one repents a sin, and the speaker is committing a sin in preferring the earthly joy of his Beloved to the Highest Good, and particularly in blaming God for his trouble. But the speaker, ironically swearing by God and "by me trouthe" -- two things he has renounced in turning from the Highest Good -- vows never to stop sinning.

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 hints that even the perfect courtly lover is inadequate; truth resides only in the Highest Good. Thus

there 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.



## CHAPTER IV: NOTES

- 1 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, 1957), pp. 11-57.
- 2 For the intriguing theory that Chaucer actually began his career by writing lyric poetry in French, see Rossell Hope Robbins, "Geoffroi Chaucier, Poete Francais, Father of English Poetry," Chaucer Review, 13 (1978), 93-115.
- 3 See C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936; rpt. 1958); Maurice Valency, In Praise of Love: An Introduction to the Love-Poetry of the Renaissance (New York: MacMillan, 1958; rpt. 1961); Frederick Goldin, The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyric (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967); and Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economou, eds., In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature (Port Washington, N. Y. and London: Kennikat Press, 1975).
- 4 Goldin, pp. 40-41.
- 5 Ferrante and Economou, p. 7.
- 6 cf. Lewis, p. 197.
- 7 Thomas Tyrwhitt, Canterbury Tales, 5 vols. (London: T. Payne, 1775-78), V, xxii.
- 8 Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 273.
- 9 Wolfgang Clemen, Chaucer's Early Poetry, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen and Co., 1963; rpt. 1968), p. 186.
- 10 Thomas Hoccleve, Regement of Princes, in Caroline Spurgeon, ed., Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion: 1357-1900, 3 vols. (1925; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), I, 22.

- 11 John Lydgate, Fall of Princes, in Spurgeon, I, 37.
- 12 Clemen, p. 186.
- 13 Walter W. Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), I, 76.
- 14 Paul M. Clogan, "The Textual Reliability of Chaucer's Lyrics: A Complaint to His Lady," Medievalia et Humanistica, 5 (1974), 186.
- 15 Clemen, p. 187.
- 16 Clemen, p. 186.
- 17 Clemen, p. 187.
- 18 See Muscatine, pp. 58-97.
- 19 See Clemen, p. 187; and Clogan, p. 187.
- 20 Geoffrey of Vinsauf, Poetria Nova, in Ernest Gallo, The Poetria Nova and Its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971), II, 1099-1101. The translation is from Geoffrey of Vinsauf, The New Poetics, trans. Jane Baltzell Kopp, in Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 72-73.
- 21 John Lydgate, Life of Our Lady, in Spurgeon, I, 20.
- 22 In The Athenaeum, 9 June 1894, p. 762.
- 23 Arthur K. Moore, The Secular Lyric in Middle English (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1951), p. 131.
- 24 Robert K. Root, The Poetry of Chaucer, 2nd ed. (New York: Peter Smith, 1922), p. 79.
- 25 Brusendorff, p. 277.

26

Root, p. 79.

27

Robinson, p. 859.

28

Muscatine, pp. 14-15.

29

Guido Cavalcanti, "Donna me prega . . .," in German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and a History, trans. Frederick Goldin (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), no. 30.

30

For an epistemological discussion of love, see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, part I, especially questions 75-86, and 1a2ae, especially questions 26-28. Citations of Aquinas in my text are to the Blackfriars edition, 60 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill; and London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964 ff.). The translations are from the edition of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947). On love see also Valency, pp. 205-55, and J. E. Shaw, Guido Cavalcanti's Theory of Love (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949), passim.

31

S. T., 1a, q. 79, art. 7. In Blackfriars, 11 (1970), 170-72; trans. Fathers, I, 403.

32

S. T., 1a, q. 59, art. 1. In Blackfriars, 9 (1968), 170; trans. Fathers, I, 294.

33

S. T., 1a2ae., q. 27, art. 1. In Blackfriars, 19 (1967), 74; trans. Fathers, I, 707.

34

S. T., 1a2ae., q. 26, art. 1. In Blackfriars, 19 (1967), 62; trans. Fathers, I, 704.

35

See Guido Guinizelli, "Al cor gentil," in Goldin, German and Italian Lyrics, no. 20, l. 4.

36

Shaw, pp. 11-12.

37

Valency, p. 250.

38

S. T., 1a2ae., q. 28, art. 6. In *Blackfriars*, 19 (1967), 106; trans *Fathers*, I, 713.

39

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

40

The poem must have been one of Chaucer's earliest compositions in English. The cryptic heading "an amorowse compleynte made at wyndesore in the last May tofore Nouembre" is, Skeat admits, inexplicable, but the mention of locality here is interesting, since Chaucer became a "valet of the king's chamber" in 1367, and so "must frequently have been at Windsor, where the institution of the Order of the Garter was annually celebrated on St. George's Day (April 23)" (*Works*, I, 90). The poem, then, may have been written any time after 1367--perhaps even antedating the *ABC* and the *Book of the Duchess*, if Skeat's interpretation of the heading's significance is correct.

41

Haldeen Braddy suggested a close affinity between this poem and Oton de Granson's *Complainte amoureuse*. Not only are the titles similar, says Braddy, but both were written for St. Valentine's Day (as lines 85 ff. of Chaucer's poem reveal), and there are a few verbal parallels as well; though Braddy admits that "much of the wording is the conventional phraseology of the typical complaint," he still insists that "the agreements in the large particulars--occasion, language, and subject--suggest, however, that the French and English poems are to be regarded as companion pieces" (*Chaucer and the French Poet Graunson* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947], p. 56). I would suggest there is no such suggestion. First of all, *Complainte D'Amours* or *Complainte Amoureuse* was the conventional name for a whole genre of love complaints, and would be a convenient title with which a poet or scribe could label an untitled poem in that mode; secondly, a myriad such poems must have been written on the occasion of Valentine's Day, since that was the traditional lover's day; and third, as we have already seen, and as Braddy admits, the language of these complaints was so standardized that it would be far more remarkable if we found two which did not have similarities in language. As it is, there is nothing extraordinary about the verbal parallels Braddy notes, and on the whole I must reject his conjecture that the two poems are "companion pieces," or even that one influenced the other. Certainly, though, the style which the French poem displays is an example of the style which greatly influenced Chaucer.

That style was most effectively practiced by the master of the fourteenth century love lyric in French, Guillaume de Machaut. Wimsatt contends that the *Complaynt D'Amours* owes its inspiration directly to Machaut. Concentrating upon the two most striking aspects of the lover's argument in the *Complaynt D'Amours*, Wimsatt traces them both to poems of Machaut's. The first, that the lady actually derives pleasure, as expressed in ll. 61-63 of the *Complaynt D'Amours*,

in the lover's suffering, Wimsatt finds in Machaut's poem "De desconfort, de matyre amourens." Similarly, the poet's excusing of the lady for her hardness of heart, and his blaming instead God or Nature for making her that way (ll. 55-56), Wimsatt traces to Machaut's dit, familiar to Chaucer as the main source for the Book of the Duchess, the Jugement dou Roy Behaingne (Wimsatt, p. 72). Wimsatt's parallels are much more precise than those claimed for Graunson by Braddy, and it is certain that the influence of Machaut upon Chaucer's love lyrics was inestimable. Still, that influence does not, in the Complaynt D'Amours, take the form of direct imitation on Chaucer's part.

42

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

43

P. M. Kean, Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), I, 37.

44

Goldin, "The Array of Perspectives in the Courtly Love Lyric," in Ferrante and Economou, p. 94.

45

Many attempts have been made to describe the structure of the poem. Wimsatt simply said that "clear narrative and rhetorical divisions are lacking" (Wimsatt, p. 71). A. Wigfall Green thinks the poem falls into five sections. Stanzas 1-3 he sees as introductory and introspective, setting forth the speaker's reasons for the complaint. Stanzas 4-6 are general, predicting the author's death from his love pangs. Stanzas 7-9 are a tribute to the lady's beauty and a discussion of her unkindness, while stanzas 10-12 beg the lady not to be angry and also reiterate the lover's claim that he will die for her love. Finally, stanza 13 is an Envoy ("Chaucer's Complaints: Stanzaic Arrangement, Meter, and Rhyme," University of Mississippi Studies in English, 3 [1962], 21.). There are a good many problems with this arrangement. First, stanza one obviously stands by itself as an introduction of the speaker ("I, which that am the sorwefulleste man" [l. 1]), while stanza two begins a direct address to the lady ("I love you best, swete hert" [l. 14]). Second, Green lumps unrelated things together into the same divisions of the poem: what, for example, does the speaker's dying for his lady have to do with her not being angry with him in stanzas 10-12? Finally, this arrangement reveals no plan, no progression, no order, no relationship between the sections of the poem. It is as if Chaucer simply wrote each section as a self-sufficient unit, and parts of the poem are interchangeable. At first reading the poem may actually appear to be that way, but a closer reading will, I think, reveal a more careful construction.

Robbins, on the other hand, saw the first of the thirteen rime royal stanzas as a proem, with a balancing epilogue in the

last stanza. The eleven stanzas making up the body of the poem are divided into "two terns of direct address to his lady (stanzas 2-4, 10-12), and five parenthetical stanzas generalizing on her lack of pity" ("The Lyrics," in Beryl Rowland, ed., Companion to Chaucer Studies [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968], p. 319.). There are some problems, however, with lumping stanzas 3-9 together, since as Green noted there is a definite break between stanza 6, which begins "I am of my sorrow the cause" (l. 36), and stanza 7, which claims "she is the verray rote / Of my disease" (ll. 43-44). There is also a break between stanzas 8 and 9, since in stanza 9 the speaker begins to blame God and Nature for his troubles. Still, in one way Robbins's makes more sense than Green's description, since there is an obvious shift in pronouns in stanzas 5-9, where the speaker breaks off addressing the lady directly and begins referring to her in the third person.

46

Green, p. 21.

47

For an explanation of the astrological reference, see Mahmoud Manzalaoui, "Chaucer and Science," in Derek Brewer, ed., Geoffrey Chaucer (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1975), p. 260.

## CHAPTER V

## The Individual Voice

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 dimly present, if at all. And the speaker in each of these poems is the conventional courtly lover, praising his lady, bemoaning 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,

spurred on no doubt by the kind of role-playing that performing poetry before an audience could generate (as in the Complaynt D'Amours), creates individual speakers. These are real people instead of abstractions, and as real people they undercut 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 recapture 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 "Prynccesse" in line 73 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 mournfully 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. (ll. 79-82)

The irony of these lines should not escape notice; for Chaucer not only translated Granson's three ballades, adapting the Frenchman's eight-line stanzas rhyming a b a b b c c b, thus duplicating Granson's "curiosite," or intricacy of metre, but he also added an original ten-line *Envoy* in an even more complicated metre, rhyming a a b a a b b a a b -- thus using only two rhymes at the same time he was bewailing the fact that "rym in Englissh hath such skarsete." 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.<sup>2</sup> This bit of good-humored one-upsmanship masquerading as flattery probably indicates that Chaucer and Granson were on friendly terms, perhaps even that there was a possibility of Granson himself seeing this verse or hearing it performed.<sup>3</sup>

As for Chaucer's claim that he translated Granson "word by word," there are those who disagree with him. Skeat marvelled at the closeness of Chaucer's translation in lines 27-31 of the Complaint of Venus, where the French

Veillier on lit et jeuner a la table,  
Rire plourant et en plaignant chanter,  
Baissier les yeux quant on doit regarder,  
Souvent changier couleur et contenance,  
Plaindre en dormant et songier a la dance.<sup>4</sup>

becomes the English

As wake abedde, and fasten at the table,  
Wepinge to laughe, and singe in compleynynge,  
And doun to cast visage and loking,  
Often to chaunge hewe and contenance,  
Pleyne in slepyng, and dremen at the daunce.

But on the whole, Skeat sees the poem as largely a paraphrase, rather than an accurate translation.<sup>5</sup> Robinson, too, mentions that, while the second and third ballades follow the originals 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."<sup>6</sup> But there is a very obvious reason for this: Granson's ballade is spoken by a man, Chaucer's by a woman. The sex of the object of the speaker's love had to be changed, and with it the references to the Beloved had to be altered and made appropriate to the gender being described. Thus Graunson's line "Il a en li bonte, beaute et grace" became in Chaucer "In him is bounte,

wysdom, governaunce" (l. 9), virtues considered more appropriate for a man. Galway acknowledges the necessity of these kinds of changes, but then goes on to say "but where such alternatives were not required the English rendering is a marvel of word for word fidelity," implying that this is to Chaucer's credit.<sup>7</sup>

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 evinces, 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 unheard of 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. The woman-as-lover Chaucer also treated in the person of Criseyde, and she, as will be seen, provides some edifying 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 languish in love but rather to be the object of love; her heart is to be won by noble deeds and service, not overcome suddenly by a glimpse of a fair face; she is not a suitor but rather grants, or withholds, favors to or from those who serve her. This being the case, how could a poet express the usual woe and travail 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 (those of Christine de Pisan, for example) -- 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

And shal I preye, and weyve womanhede?  
Nay! Rather deth then do so foul a dede! (ll. 299-300)

She would be casting aside her femininity by becoming the suitor, and that would be dishonorable. The speaker of the *Complaint of Venus*, then, could not be pictured as suffering in the service of her beloved. Nor could she 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 sustains her. With the second tern, 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. Skeat, I think, misinterprets this section when he says that "jealous suspicions arise, but are put aside."<sup>8</sup> The speaker here is not suspicious of her lover, or fearful that he will break faith with her during their separation. Rather she is wary of the jealousy of others -- she and her lover must stay apart for fear of what others will say. Ultimately, though, in the third ballade, the speaker refuses to let jealousy get the better of her, 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 tern. 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 most cogent study of the Complaint of Venus yet published, 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."<sup>9</sup> This explains the bulk of the changes made from Granson. Chaucer translated, in Venus, only the first, fourth and fifth of Granson's Cinq balades ensuivans.<sup>10</sup> Norton-Smith notes that the second of Granson's poems, a catalogue of his lady's perfections, is omitted not only because it would have entailed rewriting with an appropriate change of gender, but also "because enumerating qualities were unsuitable for the unified, continuously progressive plot which Chaucer wished to construct." In other words, the clearly unified pattern of effect (the lamenting of cause [Jealousy] to solution [joy in the lover], which I have been describing, would be broken by an irrelevant catalogue of perfections. And Granson's third poem, concerning the lover's service and pains, and his lady's lack of mercy, was also inappropriate to the female persona, and to the theme of a happy love threatened by outside forces.<sup>11</sup>

A closer look at the text of the poem will illustrate these 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. (ll. 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 (ll. 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" (l. 9), the fact that he is "of knyghthood . . . parfit richesse" (l. 12), his "noblesse" (l. 13), and the fact that Nature "so wel hath formed him" (l. 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 contenance,  
And me to serve is al his besynesse,  
That I am set in verrey sikernesse. (ll. 18-21)

The fact that hers 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 gentillesse. (ll. 7-8)

It is true that Granson's speaker says something very similar:

Ne je ne truis nul homme qui me blasme (l. 7)

but the words mean something completely different when coming from the mouth of a woman in a courtly love situation. 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. Therefore the male speaker of Granson's ballade can easily say "no one can blame me." A woman, however, once she has granted her love, must always be careful that the love remain a secret, in order to protect her honor and her 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?' " (Bk. II, ll. 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, ll. 760-764)

But ideally, the love must be kept secret in order to bloom and grow -- the "talebearers" and the "gossip-mongers" of courtly literature must not be allowed to pierce the private world of the lovers. The jealousy which the speaker berates in ballade two, then, is the jealousy of others which seeks to destroy the precious thing she and her lover have nurtured. 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 ought to be happy, but she cannot restrain her unhappiness. She has said that no one ought to blame here, 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 color, complain when they sleep and dream when they should be dancing. This is, the speaker tells us, "al the revers of any glad felyng" (l. 32). It is fitting, the speaker says ironically, that people should pay so dearly for love's "nobil thing" (l. 26), that is, the joy love brings.

The pain in the speaker's case is all caused by one thing: enforced 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. (ll. 33-36)

Now as has already been noted, Skeat believed these lines to be "Venus' " condemnation of her own tendency to be jealous of her lover. More recently, John Gardner built up a rather elaborate interpretation of the poem following this notion, arguing that "the pagan vision in Venus' complaint . . . parallels the Christian vision without ever becoming subject to it." This Gardner can say because "Jelosie' which, like Eve, 'wold al know thurgh her espyng' carries overtone suggestions of concupiscence, but Venus rejects jealousy." Venus, unlike Eve, turns

from temptation and so is able to preserve the Eden-like paradise in which she and her lover exist together.<sup>12</sup> The interpretation is tempting, but the fact that Chaucer had in mind the malicious jealousy of others, rather than the speaker's jealousy, is suggested by her use of the term "the jelous" in line 62--as if referring to a group of people, rather than her own emotion, in which case it would have to be simply "jealousy." A further indication of this is seen in the way these lines echo the lines of Guillaume de Lorris' section of the Roman de la Rose, in which Malebouche ("Evil Tongue"), who has been spying on the lover and Bel Acuel ("Fair Welcome"), runs to tell Jalousie ("Jealousy"), who, roused against the lover, builds a castle in which to keep the Rose and Fair Welcome from the lover--the same kind of enforced absence found in Venus, but in the Venus lines, Jealousy herself takes the part of Guillaume's Evil Tongue:

Malebouche, qui le couvine  
 De mains amans set et devine  
 Et tout le mal qu'il set retrait,  
 Se prist garde du bel atrait  
 Que Bel Acuel me daignoit faire,  
 . . . . .  
 Malebouche des lors en ça  
 A enhaïr me commença  
 Et dit que il metroit son oel  
 Que entre moi et Bel Acuel  
 Avoil mavés acointement.  
 Tant parla li glos folement  
 De moi et du filz Cortoisie  
 Qu'il fist esveillier Jalousie,  
 Qu se leva en effreor  
 Quant el oï le gengleor. (ll. 3511-3515; 3521-3530)

(Next Evil Tongue, who thinks or fancies wrong  
 In all affairs of lovers, and retails  
 All that he knows or weens, began to spy  
 Between me and Fair Welcome, sweet accord.  
 . . . . .)

So Evil Tongue began to slander me,  
 Saying that ill relationship he'd seen  
 Betwixt me and Fair Welcome. Recklessly  
 The rascal talked of Courtesy's fair son  
 And me till he awakened Jealousy,  
 Who roused in fright when she the jangling heard.)<sup>13</sup>

This is the sort of jealousy which lovers need fear. And this same jealousy Chaucer introduces again, in lines not paralleled in Granson, in stanza three of this ballade. Here he 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, but we must buy it dearly--love gives much sorrow and much pain. The gift is pleasant for a time, but becomes burdensome after a while, because of the confusion wrought by jealousy: jealousy causes us to be constantly "in drede and sufferyng" (l. 45), to "languishe in penaunce" (l. 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" (l. 50), that is, love's entanglement. 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 turmente!" (l. 53).

It is significant that Granson does not mention jealousy in his third ballade. Granson speaks of continuing to serve his Beloved in spite of the danger she exhibits:

Combien qu'elle est envers moy dangereuse,  
 De lui servir ne seray jumaiz las. (ll. 7-8)

And in spite of the pain which his lady puts him through, he will remain

joyous:

Or aime, Cuer, ainsy que tu pourras,  
Car ja n'aras paine se doulereuse  
Pour ma dame que ne me soit joieuse. (ll. 13-15)

But Chaucer's speaker makes Jealousy into an evil torturer, trying to get her to renounce 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. (ll. 62-64)

The torture which Jealousy puts her through must be her separation from her lover. And her means of overcoming this, she emphasizes several times in ballade three, is to find happiness in seeing him when it is possible--"sufficeth me to sen hym when I may" (l. 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. (ll. 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."<sup>14</sup> That intricate form includes the overall unity of the poem as well as the complex, "curious" metre of the Envoy, which Green was specifically

referring to. So it must be with a grain of salt that we read the lines of the Envoy in which Chaucer begs to be forgiven for his "litel Suffiscaunce":

For elde, that in my spirit dulleth me  
 Hath of endyting al the subtilte  
 Wel nygh bereft out of my remembraunce; (ll. 76-78)

Chaucer's bemoaning his loss of creative power due to age should be taken just as seriously as his lamenting the scarcity of rhyme in English mentioned previously--that is, not seriously at all. This is merely the conventional humility of the poet aware that he has just written a remarkably skilful poem, like Chaucer's reference to the muse "rusting in her sheath" in the Envoy to Scogan. The question also arises as to how seriously we should take Chaucer's reference to his age, since the rest of the Envoy is ironic. Most scholars have tended to accept the genuineness of this statement. Even Robinson, who cautions that reference to age is "not to be interpreted too precisely," decides that the statement would certainly be "most natural" in the 1390's.<sup>15</sup> That date, however, does not ring true somehow. Neither the subject matter nor the tone seems to be compatible with the ironic kinds of lyrics Chaucer was writing in the nineties: the Envoys to Bukton and Scogan, Merciles Beauty, To Rosemounde. An earlier date for Venus would seem more likely. In this regard it might be pointed out that these lines are a verbal echo of certain lines in Anelida and Arcite, where the speaker declares his intent to tell a story

That elde, which that al can frete and bite,  
 As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,  
 Hath nygh devoured out of oure memorie. (ll. 12-14)

Time in both passages is seen as the cause of mutability. In Venus it steals the poet's power, in Anelida it steals the memory of the story. The similarity of sentence structure as well as the repetition of words suggests the possibility of a close proximity in the composition of the two poems. I would make the following suggestion: Chaucer, in the early 1380's, began contemplating the problem of the female point of view in the courtly love situation. He wrote the Anelida, which he appears to have abandoned in order to use the Teseide in a more fitting manner in the Palamon. He wrote the Complaint of Venus in the same period, and his interest in the point of view of the courtly mistress culminated in his brilliant characterization of Criseyde in the middle eighties.

In this view, Chaucer would have been only about forty years old when he wrote the Venus. That hardly categorizes him as dulled by old age. But then, if he wrote the poem in the early nineties as is generally believed, he still would have been only fifty -- and even in the Middle Ages, when one's life expectancy was not as great as ours, a fifty-year-old man was hardly a candidate for senility. The comments about age must be construed, I think, as the half-serious musings of a middle-aged man who realizes he's not as young as he once was, but who demonstrates through this poem that he is certainly not over the hill. And depending upon the mood of the poet, those kinds of comments may have been just as likely at forty as they would have been at fifty.<sup>16</sup>

What this earlier date may help to explain about the poem is the apparent sincerity of the emotion expressed. The lack of the sort of irony that grows gradually stronger in Against Women Unconstant, Merciles

Beaute, and To Rosemunde makes this poem more akin, in temperament, to A Complaint to his Lady -- there does not even seem to be the subtle undercutting of Womanly Noblesse or the Complaynt D'Amours, hinting at the inadequacy of the courtly love tradition.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that, whatever reservations Chaucer may have personally had concerning the ideal of courtly love, he was able to empathize with those who did hold 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 undercuts the tradition: by making the woman the speaker, Chaucer removes her from the ideal abstraction and makes her a speaking human being -- not, to be sure, 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 unheard of. Against Women Unconstant and Merciles Beaute belong to a sub-genre of the 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."<sup>18</sup> The rebellious posture goes at least as far back as the early troubadors. Bernart de Ventadorn's famous "Can vei la lauzeta mover" ends with this stanza:

Pus ab midons no'm pot valer  
 prec's ni merces ni'l dreihz qu'eu ai,  
 ni a leis no ven a plazer  
 qu'eu l'am, ja mais no'lh o dirai.  
 Aissi'm part de leis e'm recre;  
 mort m'a, e per mort li respon,  
 e vau m'en, pus ilh no'm rete,  
 chaitius, en issilh, no sai on. (ll. 49-56)

(Since these things do me no good with my lady,  
 prayer, pity, the rights I have,  
 and since it is no pleasure to her  
 that I love her, I shall not tell her again.  
 Thus I part from her, and I give it all up.  
 She has given me death, and I will answer her with death,  
 and I am going away, because she does not retain me,  
 a broken man, in exile, I know not where.)<sup>19</sup>

But the difference in Chaucer's is in intent. In Bernart's lines, the cruelty of the lady is depicted to shame her into granting the lover some reward. 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 vehement, and the sarcasm of his refrain line ("In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene") so cutting, 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.** 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 keen lust for new things. The poet takes his leave of her, saying that rather than blue, the color of constancy, she should wear green, the color, according to Machaut, of fickleness.<sup>20</sup>

Madame, for your newfangelnesse,  
 Many a servaunt have ye put out of grace  
 I take my leve of your unstedfastnesse  
 For wel I wot, whyl 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. (ll. 1-7)

The two most striking comments in this stanza, it seems to me, are the second and fifth lines. First, the speaker says that the lady has put many servants out of grace. Grace here means, most immediately, favor, or "the condition or fact of being favoured" (OED, sb. 7). The lady has, in other words, dropped many of her lovers, or denied them her favor 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" (sb. 11.b.), and a state of grace as "the condition of one who is under such divine influence" (sb. 11.d).

Now as we have seen repeatedly, religious imagery has a tendency to work its way into courtly love poetry. So this image is not unconventional -- the lady's praise is often couched in religious terms in order to make her a quasi-divine being, worthy almost of worship,

certainly of devotion. What is remarkable here is that the lady is the one who puts people out of grace -- she performs a perversion of the divine role. 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.

This contrast between God and the lady as a reverse-god figure continues in the striking fifth line. If one continues the contrast implied in line two, the lady's love is juxtaposed to God's love, which binds the universe in eternally valid law. God's permanence is implied by its contrasting element, the lady's instability.

Two extremely important images make up the second stanza. The first, the image of the mirror, is thematically crucial to the poem:

Right as a mirour nothing may enpresse,  
But, lightly as it cometh, so mot it pace,  
So fareth your love, your werkes bereth witesse (ll. 8-10)

The meaning is obviously that her love has the same permanence as a mirror image. The image in the mirror remains as long as the object being reflected remains -- as soon as that object is removed, the image disappears. The image, which has no real physical existence, cannot impress in the sense of "press into," or make a permanent mark upon, the mirror. Similarly, her love disappears as soon as the current lover is out of sight; he makes no permanent impression upon her sensibilities.

The image may be confusing because it seems to mix the metaphor of the mind as the mirror with one of the mind as waxen tablet, upon which experience may impress an image, and scholars have had difficulty

explaining these lines.<sup>21</sup> But Chaucer had a precedent for this very image in the Consolation of Philosophy. In Book V, metre 4, Boethius describes the Stoic theory of epistemology by using the images of a tablet and a mirror. In Chaucer's translation, this passage is one of the most heavily glossed of the entire work -- evidence of Chaucer's strong interest in the passage: the stoics

wenden that ymages and sensibilities (that is to seyn, sensible ymaginaciouns or ellis ymaginaciouns of sensible thingis) weren enprinted into soules fro bodyes withouteforth (as who seith that thilke Stoyciens wenden that sowle had ben nakid of itself, as a mirour or a clene parchemyn, so that alle figures most first comen fro thingis fro withoute into soules, and ben emprinted into soules); ryght as we ben wont somtyme by a swift poyntel to fycchen lettres emprinted in the smothnesse or in the pleynesse of the table of wex or in parchemyn that ne hath no figure ne note in it. (Boece, Bk. V, mtr. 4, ll. 6-19)

Boethius' Philosophy, however, argues against this idea, saying that if the mind develops nothing itself, but merely passively receives, if it merely

yeldith ymages ydel and vein in the manere of a mirour, whennes thryveth thanne or whennes comith thilke knowynge in our soule, that discernith and byholdith alle things?  
(Bk. V., mtr. 4, ll. 25-29)

To understand these lines, one must understand the context in which they are presented. Boethius has just finished discussing (Bk. V, pr. 4) the various grades of cognition among sentient creatures. Man has within him lower and higher powers of cognition (which the scholastics would have called the sensitive soul and the rational soul). What the stoics had described was the power of cognition of the sensitive soul. It remained, after that function, for the rational soul of man to work upon the received images, so that rational thought may take place.

What Chaucer is implying, then, when he compares the lady's mental facilities 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 extolled by Dante and Cavalcanti, for instance. Their love was a function of the rational soul, which abstracted the universal form from the phantasm caught by the sensitive soul. This higher love, then, involved an intellectual operation. The lady's love in this poem, however, involves only the bestial following of her appetites, and therefore changes with her every whim.

The epistemological interpretation of these lines is reinforced by the fact that the mirror image may well have suggested, to readers familiar with the opening of the Roman de la Rose, the fountain, the "mirror of Narcissus," wherein the dreamer first beholds the reflection of the Rose:

Car Cupido, li filz Venus,  
 Sema ici d'Amors la grainne,  
 Qui toute a tainte la fontainne,  
 . . . . .  
 Du miroër, entre mil choses  
 Choisi rosiers chargiés de roses (ll. 1588-1590; 1615-1616)

('Tis Cupid, Venus' son, there sows the seed  
 Which taints the fountain, . . .

Among the thousand things reflected there  
 I chose a full-charged rosebush (pp. 32-33)

Upon seeing the Rose in the mirror, the Dreamer is seized with a desire for the flower; he "lusts after" it, and refuses to listen to the voice of Reason. D. W. Robertson explains the significance of the mirror image of the Roman in this way:

As we have seen, love is "inborn": it arises from the contemplation of an image in the mind of the "corporal sense" or by "the lower part of the reason." The well, in other words, is that mirror in the mind where Cupid operates. It has been tainted by Cupid ever since the Fall, when cupidity gained ascendancy over the reason.<sup>22</sup>

Or, to put it in terms of the psychology of love which Chaucer learned from the Italians, discussed earlier in my section on Womanly Noblesse, the mirror is that part of the mind--the imagination--in which the images, or phantasms, of perceived objects appear and are contemplated by the sensitive soul. Love, that is, concupiscent love, occurs when the appetite is directed toward one of those images. This explains why the Dreamer in the Roman will not listen to his Reason: the appetite is a power of the sensitive soul, not of the intellect.

How precisely does this image apply to Chaucer's poem? It can be safely assumed that the influence of the Roman de la Rose was so pervasive that Chaucer's use of a mirror image in a courtly love poem would immediately, for many in his audience, call to mind that similar image in the Roman.

To see how Chaucer may be utilizing the familiar figure from the Roman, it is necessary to examine closely the two figures of speech. In the Roman, the mirror is likened to the imagination, and the mirror image to the phantasm. In Chaucer's image, the lady's love is like the mirror, and the object of her affection like the mirror image. The parallel seems clear: the lady's love is based upon her desire of the phantasm of whatever lover happens to appear in her imagination. Her love, then, is a lower sort of love, that of the "sensitive soul." If her love were of the intellectual variety,

her reason, her active intellect, would abstract the universal form from the phantasm, and would store it in the memory. Then her will, her intellectual desire, would be inclined toward that universal form. Since the universal is constant and one, if her love were of that nature, it would be steadfast. But since she loves instead the image of the transient particular, her love changes as she contemplates different particular lovers. Thus the impermanence of her love Chaucer compares to the impermanent image in the mirror.

So the mirror simile suggests a philosophical description of the psychology of love. The mirror has to do with knowing and understanding. Since this is true, another well-known mirror image may also be associated with this poem--the famous passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.  
Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even  
as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love  
abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.  
(13: 12-13)

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 dimly. 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 leads us to know only partial truths. In the case of the lady, she knows only the partial truth of the phantasm. In the next world, our

knowledge will be complete: there will be no need for abstraction from phantasms, for "mirrors" and "images," because we will know the universal directly, like the angels. But for now, the only glimpse we can get of that 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. If Chaucer really intended this image to be an allusion to St. Paul, then the tenor of that famous passage from Corinthians must also be inferred: love is one thing in this world which is permanent. The lady's love is not permanent, though. Nor, for that matter, is the speaker's, since he forsakes his lady--again, the mirror image is appropriate since the lover, in condemning the lady's faults, is also condemning his own, reflected in her. But these loves are impermanent because they are misplaced. They are put upon the objects of this world, rather than upon things eternal:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away;  
as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge it  
will pass away. (I Cor. 13:8)

The same may be said for lovers.

It should be noted that line 10, "your workes bereth witness" (i.e., to her inconstancy), also has a biblical ring to it. Jesus had said

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see  
your good works and give glory to your Father who is in  
heaven." (Mt. 5:16)

and St. Paul added

each man's work will be come manifest; for the Day will  
disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and  
the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.  
(I Cor. 3:13)

What the lady's works have made manifest, have "borne witness to,"  
is not her 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. (ll. 11-14)

This image may be proverbial,<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>  
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 of  
flux 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 enshrined as a sort of reverse-  
saint in the religion of love:

Ye might be shryned, for your brotelnesse,  
Bet than Dalyda, Creseyde or Candace; (ll. 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.

In the lines immediately following, Chaucer begins to play with words, presenting an oxymoron reminiscent, once again, of descriptions of the Goddess Fortuna:

For ever in chaunging stant your sikernesse;  
That tache may no wight fro your herte arace. (ll. 17-18)

Note that the arace here related to the enpresse of line eight as a writing or tablet image, and a direct contrast may be implied: the lady is so inconstant that nothing can make a permanent impression upon her, but that inconstancy itself is a stain which nothing can erase. No one, says the speaker, can remove from the lady's heart this blemish: that her only constancy exists in her constantly changing. This is precisely characteristic of Fortuna. In Chaucer's translation of the Boece, Philosophy says to the protagonist

"Thou wenest that Fortune be chaunged ayens the; but thou wenest wrong, yif thou that wene: alway tho ben hir maneres. Sche hath rather kept, as to the-ward, hir proper stablenesse in the chaungynge of hirself." (Bk. II, pr. 1, ll. 49-54)

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 the inconstancy of 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 province -- 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 wel tweyn purchace;  
 Al light for somer, ye woot wel what I mene,  
 In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene. (ll. 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), wherein it merely refers to the wearing of light clothes in warm weather. Here, the speaker's "ye woot wel 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 diatribe against his faithless Beloved. But in his language -- in his picturing her as a perverted deity or a reverse-saint, in his depiction of 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 of Fortune's baubles, representative of a whole world characterized by its lak of stedfastnesse, a poem which, it may be noted, Skeat

compared to this one.<sup>25</sup> But the speaker of this poem may be self-deceived. He condemns his Beloved for offenses he commits himself -- that is, inconstancy and placing her love in worldly things. The two lovers, the lady and the speaker, are individuals, like those images in the mirror. They are not the Highest Good, and it is foolish ever to think so. 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 of a twist 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.

That humorous, self-effacing tone is chiefly what recommends this poem as Chaucer's. For there is no convincing external evidence establishing this poem in the Chaucer canon. But with the support of important scholars,<sup>26</sup> and in view of the aforementioned humor of the poem's third section, I shall assume the genuineness of Merciles Beaute.

But having done so, I am confronted with certain difficulties in the poem, chief of which is the question of the poem's unity. Donaldson conjectured that Merciles Beaute "may be a group of three poems."<sup>27</sup> That possibility seems supportable by two arguments: first, the roundel was a self-contained verse form, used as a complete poem, but Merciles

Beaute is made up of three roundels. Secondly, the tone of the third roundel seems to shift so radically from that of the first two, and without any apparent continuity of thought, that it seems to make sense to regard the third roundel as an independent poem.

Yet, despite these objections, Merciles Beaute, much more than the similarly maligned Complaint to his Lady, 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<sup>28</sup> (and this is another reason to regard Merciles Beaute as authentic). 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. Certainly the triple roundel is unusual, if not unique -- I have found no other occurrence of it. But Chaucer was an experimenter with verse forms -- the Complaint to his Lady is evidence of that, as

are the numerous forms which Chaucer used in other poems and which he practiced for the first time in English: the ottava rima, rime royal, and the heroic couplet. 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 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. It is my contention that the poem expresses, in its three roundels, what Skeat calls three "movements,"<sup>29</sup> 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 her. The three parts are also linked, as will be seen, by imagery as well as by progression.

Beginning with the first tern, it is obvious that this poem will abound in the 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 thourghout my herte kene. (ll. 1-3)

The word kene here is a bit confusing. But I would suspect that Chaucer is playing upon the ambiguity, capitalizing on the double meaning of the word. For kene may be an adjective, modifying herte and meaning "eager": the beauty of her eyes has wounded his heart, which is eager

for her love. Or kene may be an adverb modifying woundeth: the beauty of her eyes has sharply, even painfully, wounded his heart. Or, perhaps more likely, Chaucer intends the ambiguity, and intends to suggest both meanings.

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 . . . (ll. 4-6)

Now the alliteration in these first two stanzas is worth noting. This is a poem in which Chaucer was again practicing the kinds of verbal experiments already seen in the Words unto Adam and the Complaint to his Purse. Again Chaucer is pushing words to communicate more than what they say. The alliteration that links the important words slee, sodenly, and sustene in the first stanza, and repeated lines (6-7)-- the hissing s sound--seems intended to contrast with the airy h sound that alliterates helen, hastily, and hertes in stanza two. And since the first stanza is concerned with the biting wound of love, and the second with the soothing healing of that wound, the alliteration seems appropriate--the harsh s versus the soft h.

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. (ll. 8-10)

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 mouth 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. (ll. 90-91;97)

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 implied here has something of a Catch-22 ring 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. Accordingly the second tern moves from the traditional lovers' wound / beloved as physician image to the equally conventional personified abstractions who play out a miniature psychomachia in the middle part of the poem. 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 (ll. 14-15), while Daunger, 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 of the second tern, 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:

Allas! that Nature hath in you compassed  
 So greet beautee, that no man may atteyne  
 To mercy, though he sterve for the peyne. (ll. 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, wherein she is seen admiring her own handiwork in the person of the Formel Eagle:



. . . 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 everi vertu at his reste,  
 So ferforth that Nature hireself hadde blysse  
 To loke on hire, and ofte her bek to kysse. (PF, ll. 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 third tern 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. This third part just does not seem to fit. But that is the point: it is not supposed to. The contrast signals the complete shift in the speaker's attitude. In the first two terns, he has been the conventional courtly lover, pleading for his lover's mercy and proffering his truth. But the lady will not yield. Hence, in the last tern, the speaker has decided to abandon his love. Appropriately, 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 in the last: he really is one of the false lovers he swears not to be in line 18.

Certainly the third tern 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,"<sup>30</sup> which is to say the last tern:

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,  
 I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;  
 Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene. (ll. 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 renouncing his love.

The importance of these lines and those that follow is the creation of an individual persona who is speaking this poem. 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 from whose mouth would come a lyric poem. The poem no longer is uttered by a fuzzily 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.

So when Chaucer contrasts his "escaping fat" to his being "in prison lene," though the primary meaning is of course figurative -- he has escaped with his health rather than pining away for love -- he cannot help but imply a literal reference to his own real portliness, and hence to the unlikely form he has for a lover.<sup>31</sup> This individualization

of the unlikely lover is continued in the idiomatic and decidedly uncourtly expression "I counte him not a bene" (l. 29). This and the similarly idiomatic "I do no fors" (l. 31) and "[ther] is non other mene" (l. 36) contrast sharply with the very courtly language of the first two terns -- "I may the beautee of hem not sustene" (l. 2), of "For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne" (l. 16). The contrast in tone is therefore accompanied by a corresponding contrast in language: again, Chaucer is experimenting with words and contrasting connotations of differing levels of diction.

And the imagery of the third tern 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 answepe, and seye this and that;  
I do no fors, I speke right as I mene. (ll. 30-31)

And the humorous picture of Love and the Poet each expunging the other's name from his books seems more like a depiction of some petty disagreement among spiteful but not very formidable neighbors than a real allegory in the courtly mode:

Love hath my name ystrike out of his sclat,  
And he is strike out of my bokes clene  
For evermo; [ther] is non other mene. (ll. 34-36)

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 spitefully juvenile attitude toward love (strike me from your slate and I'll strike you from mine!), 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 vehemently 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 feigning all along--his trouthe was simply verbiage, abandoned with the rest of the courtly trappings in the third roundel, where the poet dons the more comfortable natural idiom.

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 sharply undercut in the final roundel. That closing tern 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 as it were. 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 overtly 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 on face value 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 extant ballades (though its style suggests it is later). 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 humor it is distinctively Chaucerian."<sup>32</sup> More recently Robbins has held that "the language of the entire ballade is conventional, and the lady is addressed with the expected formulas of any salut d'amour."<sup>33</sup>

And R. T. Davies, speaking particularly of the first stanza of the poem, calls it "finely magniloquent . . . Its images and rhetorical figures are conventional." Davies goes on to find examples of exclamatio (apostrophe) in line one -- "Madame"; translatio, or metaphor, in line one where the lady is "of al beaute shryne," and in line seven, where her dancing is "an oynement unto my wounde"; and imago and exposito, or simile with amplification by variation, in lines 3-4: "For as the cristal glorious ye shyne, / And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde."<sup>34</sup>

If so much in To Rosemounde is so typically conventional, why the difference of opinion about the poem? The difference arises over three other figures which occur later in the ballade. First, the poet says at the beginning of stanza two that, even though he weeps enough to fill a tyne, or a very large vat, full of tears, sorrow will not

confound his heart:

For thogh I wepe of teres ful a tyne,  
Yet may that wo myn herte nat confounde (ll. 9-10)

Then, at the beginning of stanza three, the lover in simile is compared with a fish wallowing about in sauce:

Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne  
As I in love am walwed and ywounde. (ll. 17-18)

And later in the same stanza, the speaker makes the preposterous boast of being the equal of "Tristram":

For which ful ofte I of myself devyne  
That I am trew Tristram the secounde. (ll. 19-20)

The apparent absurdity of these three images has called into question the seriousness of the poem. Donaldson contends that here "the extravagance of courtly images and attitudes is exaggerated."<sup>35</sup> Edwin J. Howard more bluntly declares that "no one who can say that he weeps many a brewing vat (tyne, l. 9) full and wallows in love like a large fish, a pike, in gelatin can be taken as completely serious in his declaration of passion."<sup>36</sup> Says Gardner, "conventional love longing and Chaucer's love of food get comically mixed up."<sup>37</sup>

Davies is a bit more cautious. He admits that the tone, certainly, of the first four lines of stanza three is "a little ridiculous, a fish swamped in sentiment, a rueful version of that Tristram who was the ideal lover." But it is possible that these lines are expressed with serious intent. "What is thought comic varies from age to age," Davies cautions, so that it is quite possible that these lines, which seem incongruous to us, may have seemed perfectly decorous to Chaucer and his audience.<sup>38</sup> Both Davies and Robbins catalogue other references to the lover as fish.<sup>39</sup> None of these is really close, though, to the

image here. Criseyde compares herself without Troilus to a fish out of water:

How sholde a fissh withouten water dure? (Bk. IV, l. 765)

This comparison underlines how desperate her situation is; a fish must have water to live. While the fish in sauce may be similar in that it is out of its natural habitat, the point is quite different. Rosemounde's lover is wallowing in love like a fish in sauce, not dying without love like a fish out of water. Again, in Book III of Troilus, lines 31-35, in the narrator's invocation of Venus, the goddess is addressed as she who knows the mysteries of love's cause:

Ye knowe al thilke covered qualitee  
Of thynges, which that folk on wondren so,  
Whan they kan nought construe how it may jo  
She loveth hym, or whi he loveth here,  
As whi this fissh, and naught that, comth to were.

Here, the fish are like people in that one never knows when one will be struck by love. As Davies recognizes, neither of these is remotely like the lover's comparing himself to a fish that "is cooked and served up in a sauce."<sup>40</sup> Further, no one has found any sort of parallel to the poet's weeping "of teres ful a tyme" (l. 8). Lowes discovered another comparison with Tristram in one of Froissart's poems, in which one line reads "nom ai Amans, et en surnom Tristrans."<sup>41</sup> But this is less blatantly boastful than Chaucer's line: Froissart's speaker, in assuming the "name" of "Tristran," implies his faithfulness by allusion. Chaucer's speaker, on the other hand, says with unabashed confidence that "I am trewe Tristram the secunde" (l. 20).

It is, then, hard to justify the seriousness of these lines by a comparison with other poems: there really seems to be no precedent.

Still, Robbins is unwilling to accept an ironic reading of these lines, saying "these possibly dissident phrases have to be reconciled with the strict courtly tone of the rest of the poem and justified in the overall context."<sup>42</sup> But the absurdity of these lines remains manifest. The fact is, if these lines are intended seriously, then this is a very bad poem. But if, on the other hand, the apparent absurdity of these lines is intended, if To Rosemoude is, like the Envoy to Bukton, an example of Chaucer's deliberately "bad art," then this poem is in reality a humorous comment upon the speaker himself. And that, I think, is the real purpose of the poem.

But this leads to a quandary. How does one prove humorous intent, except perhaps by one's initial reaction to the incongruity of the lines? But this, as has already been noted, may differ with time. I suggest a different approach: if Chaucer's intent was not ironic, then why did he choose these particular images?

What makes a poem one thing and not something else is chiefly a matter of what conscious choices the poet has made. In To Rosemoude, Chaucer chose a ballade form with three eight-line stanzas rhyming a b a b b c b c -- the ottava rima of the Monk's Tale. It was a complex rhyme scheme and Chaucer had to be careful in picking his rhyme words. For the b rhyme, repeated twelve times in the ballade, he chose the -ounde sound -- having chosen to name the lady Rosemoude, the "rose of the world," the poet committed himself to finding rhymes for that name. But that does not seem to have presented any great difficulty, since it was easy to speak of the lover's wounde (l. 7), and words like rounde (l. 4), bounde (l. 13) and founde (l. 23) are



quite common. For the c rhyme, Chaucer made it easy on himself by choosing the -aunce suffix as the rhyming sound, which gave him dozens of choices for rhyme words (as is shown by the poem Womanly Noblesse, which uses the -aunce rhyme 18 times). The ballade's refrain, which is repeated at the end of each stanza and so received more emphasis than any other line in the poem, is a c rhyme. It draws attention to the fact that the lady gives the speaker no favors: "Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce" (ll. 8, 16, 24).

But for the a rhyme Chaucer chose what is for him an unusual rhyme sound: -yne. Only two other examples of this rhyme occur in all of Chaucer's minor poems, including Anelida and Arcite, and one of those is imperfect. In lines 77-80 of the ABC, the poet says

. . . thou art that same  
 To whom I seeche for my medicyne,  
 Lat not my foo no more my wounde entame;  
 Myn hele into thin hand al I resygne.

And in The Former Age, the poet rhymes "vyne" and "galantyne" in lines 14-16. To demonstrate further the unusual occurrence of this -yne rhyme in Chaucer, it should be noted that in Chaucer's longest complete work, the Troilus, this particular rhyme is used a mere thirteen times. Since there are in the Troilus some 3500 rhymes, that means that only roughly one in three hundred is of the -yne variety. Contrast this with the number of times Chaucer rhymes trouthe and routhe, or trewe and newe, in that same work, and the anomalous nature of this rhyme becomes clearer.

Why then would Chaucer choose this very unusual rhyme to use in an intricately rhymed ballade like To Rosemounde, in which he would have to use it six times? I submit that it was because he had in mind

two words in particular that he wanted to draw special attention to by placing them in the position of the a rhyme in successive stanzas -- that is, tyne and galantyne. These are the key words of the two incongruous images -- the poet's weeping "of teres ful a tyne," and the poet as a "pyk walwed in galauntyne." Why should Chaucer wish to place these words in such emphatic positions? The most apparent explanation must be that he wanted to stress their incongruity.

If that is not the case, why did Chaucer not use more conventional images, with more common words? Galantyne Chaucer uses in only one other place -- that line in the Former Age already noted. Tyne is never used again in all of Chaucer's works. There were certainly much more common words which could have been used in much more conventional images if Chaucer had so desired. Of the 32 rhyme-words ending in -yne in all of Troilus and Criseyde, eight are the word pyne. It would have been quite easy for Chaucer to have included in a conventional courtly lyric a line delineating "his wo, his pleynt, his languor, and his pyne," as appears in the Troilus (Bk. V, l. 268). Similarly, the traditional image of the wound of love which appears in line six of To Rosemunde could be expanded, emphasizing again the lady as the lover's only cure. Accordingly the poet could have addressed a line, as the speaker of the ABC does (l. 78), "To whom I seeke for my medicyne."

But the fact is, of course, that Chaucer did not choose any of the more obvious and more conventional images, and that says something about the ones he did choose: Chaucer considered the images of the tyne and the galauntyne so vital to the poem that he chose them to

establish the a rhyme of his ballade, foregoing other more likely possibilities; further, he emphasized them by placing them in the first lines of the second and third stanzas. The most likely conclusion seems to be that Chaucer was deliberately drawing attention to the absurdity of these images, purposely flaunting his own bad verses. Why?

It has to do with the process mentioned earlier regarding Merciles Beaute. 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 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 shap" of the Envoy to Scogan, but as more of a pretentious egoist -- he is an incompetent lover with delusions of his own primacy in love's service. It may be pertinent 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 intertwined: 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, ll. 53-55)

(Song, I believe they will be few  
 who truly understand your meaning,  
 so subtle and hard are your words.)<sup>43</sup>

But the same sentiment -- the idea that skill at versification was somehow a mark of the lover's special nobility -- dates back as far as the early troubadours. Bernart de Ventadorn begins one of his love songs

Non es meravelha s'eu chan  
 melhs de nul autre chantador,  
 que plus me tra'l cors vas amor  
 e melhs sui faihz a so coman. (No. 21, ll. 1-4)

(Of course it's no wonder I sing  
 better than any other troubadour:  
 my heart draws me more toward love,  
 and I am better made for his command.)<sup>44</sup>

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. But the ideal lover implies the ideal poet, and since the poem itself is absurd, the implication must be that the lover's boasts are so much hot air, and that in love he is as much a failure as he is in poetry.

Perhaps what Chaucer is doing here is undercutting 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 solely 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 full well that true nobility, gentillesse, comes from the love of God and not of the self or any mundane 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.

Certainly the poem begins on a high note. 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.<sup>45</sup> 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; he need do no more than see her dance to cure his malady, even though she does him no "daliaunce." 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 by renouncing any claim to love's guerdon: just loving the lady is enough. As he says later,

Suffyseth me to love you, Rosemounde,  
Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce. (ll. 15-16)

But that nobility of love is a pose, 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 undercuts the courtly pretensions with a jolt. The speaker exaggerates his sorrow to the point of depicting himself weeping a vat full of tears -- a poetic blunder which also undercuts the speaker's pretensions of love by making them seem ridiculous. He goes on to say that her voice makes his thought abound in "joy and blis" (l. 12) -- another incongruity, since he has just been crying a tyne-full, although this may be intended as one of love's paradoxes, like the oxymorons of A Complaint to his Lady. The speaker goes on to pompously comment upon his own high courtesy, but there may be a pun intended here:

So courtaysly I go, with love bounde,  
That to myself I sey, in my penaunce  
"Suffyseth me to love you . . . (ll. 13-15)

There is, first, the somewhat humorous implication that the speaker, well aware that he is playing a role, stands back to observe himself admiringly and compliments himself upon his courtliness in determining that merely loving Rosemunde will suffice. But the imagery is interesting as well. The speaker is bound by love's usual chains, yet walks curtaysly. Could it be that Chaucer is punning on the connotation of "courtesy" or "curtsy" as a respectful bow, implying that the weight of love's chains bows him down as he walks? This binding, and the lover's courteous rejection of physical pleasures, are also seen as a "penaunce" (l. 14), a word bringing to the poem the conventional idea of a religion of love, and recalling the fact that the lady is the shrine of all beauty in line one. It is as if the

lover is behaving as an ascetic in love's religion.

Religious imagery, conventional as it is in the courtly lyric, still must always suggest, however quietly, that source of true love toward which the lover's will should be directed. Further, the exaggerated asceticism of these lines seems unnatural. Natural law requires the equal love of compatible mates, not the sublimation of desire in penance. The speaker's love works counter to natural law, because his will is not set on the Highest Good. Only in this does true nobility lie, and so Chaucer shows the speaker's nobility to be mere histrionics.

The third stanza opens with the most grotesque image of all: the lover is "walwed and ywounde" in love like a "pyk walwed in galauntyne." The galauntyne links by rhyme with the other absurd image of the tyne, and these together serve to undercut the apparent seriousness of the "shryne" image of line one, to which they are also linked by rhyme. Here, not only is the image ridiculous, but the words themselves have a ludicrous sound which Chaucer emphasizes by repetition of "walwed" and alliteration of the w sounds: "walwed and ywounde" could sound romantic only to a very tin ear. It sounds harsh, and lacks the mellifluous flow and latinate ornateness, reminiscent of Womanly Noblesse, of a line like "I brenne ay in amorous plesaunce . . . Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce" (ll. 22-24), with which it is intended to contrast and undercut. The grotesque "pyk" image is followed immediately by another of the speaker's self-commendatory remarks. It is precisely the fact that he wallows like a fish that makes him "devyne" himself "trewe Tristam the secounde" (l. 20).

The allusion has not been sufficiently explored, I believe. No one has seen fit to go beyond Skeat's note, that "Tristram was a famous example of 'truth' or constancy, as his love was inspired by having drunk a magical love-potion, from the effects of which he never recovered."<sup>46</sup> But there were certain other aspects of the traditional legend of Tristan which make the allusion to him very appropriate in this poem. First, the name "Tristan" itself means sorrow -- he was the archetypal suffering lover. Chretien de Troyes, for example, giving a list of Arthur's knights in Erec, mentions "Tristanz qui onques ne rist" ("Tristan who never laughed.")<sup>47</sup> This sorrow fits well with the vat of tears wept earlier by the poet. It should be remembered, too, that the metaphor of love's wound and the lady as healer was enacted literally in the Tristan legend: Tristan dies in the end while waiting for Isolde, who is privy to the secrets of all magical healing potions, to arrive to save him -- so that the reference to Tristan fits in well with the lady as "oynement unto my wounde" in line seven.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the Tristan legend with regard to this poem is the tradition that Tristan, besides being the great lover, was also a most accomplished singer and minstrel. When he first arrives in Ireland and becomes acquainted with Isolde (hoping to be cured of the wounds he has suffered doing battle with Isolde's kinsman, Morholt), Tristan goes disguised as a minstrel. It is thus as a singer that Tristan first finds favor in Isolde's eyes. Here is Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the story:

sus wart sin harpfe dar besant.  
ouch besande man zehant



die junge küniginne.  
 daz ware insigel der minne,  
 mit dem sin herze sider wart  
 versigelt unde vor verspart  
 aller der werlt gemeiner  
 niuwan ir al einer,  
 diu schoene Isot si kam ouch dar  
 und nam vil vlizecliche war,  
 da Tristan harpfende saz.

. . . . .  
 er machetez in so rehte guot  
 mit handen und mit munde,  
 daz er in der kurzen stunde  
 ir aller hulde also gevienc  
 daz ez im zallem guote ergienc. (ll. 7809-7819, 7828-7832)

(And so they sent for his harp, and the young Princess, too, was summoned. Lovely Isolde, Love's true signet, with which in days to come his heart was sealed and locked from all the world save her alone, Isolde also repaired there and attended closely to Tristan as he sat and played his harp . . . He regaled them so well with his singing and playing that in that brief space he won the favour of them all, with the result that his fortunes prospered.)<sup>48</sup>

Tristan, then, whatever else he was, was the epitome of the lover-singer. In boasting of himself as a second "Tristram," the speaker boasts not only of his true loving, but of his skillful singing. That is why the line is so ironic coming as it does directly after the ludicrous fish image: that image in itself destroys the audience's faith in the singer's skill, and, by extension, in the lover's worth as well. The poet finishes off the poem with three lines declaring the perpetuity of his love, and concludes with the refrain:

My love may not refreyde nor affounde  
 I brenne ay in an amorous plesaunce  
 Do what you lyst, I wyl your thral be founde  
 Though ye to me ne do no daliaunce. (ll. 21-24)

His love will never grow cold because it burns "ay," forever. He will be her servant forever, no matter what she does -- even though she grants him no favors. It is as if he has drunk Tristan's love

potion, the effects of which will never wear off.

But by now the audience knows better than to believe this speaker. He has characterized himself as an incompetent poet of grotesque and ludicrous imagery, and a poseur in the game of love, more concerned with observing and lauding his own performance than in sincerely loving his lady. He shows bad taste and bad judgement in praising his own "courtesy," and he writes a bad poem. 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 indictment 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 Rosemunde, 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 can be known and

loved, is ludicrous in a world where only the individual can be truly known.

## CHAPTER V: NOTES

1

The belief is based on Shirley, who, going on the assumption that Mars was written concerning the affair of John Holland and Isabel, Duchess of York, appends to one of his manuscript transcriptions of Venus the following statement: "Hit is sayde that Graunsome made this last balade for Venus, resembled to my lady of york; aunsurning the complaynt of Mars" (see Walter W. Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed., 6 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894], I, 560.). That, of course, is impossible since Granson's verses are spoken by a man. But Skeat, noting the address in line 73 to "Princess," cautiously accepts the association with Isabel, saying "Shirley's statement . . . should rather have referred to Chaucer, who may have produced this adaptation at the request of 'my lady of York,'" since Isabel had a right to the title of "princess," as the daughter of Pedro, king of Spain (Skeat, Works, I, 561). Haldeen Braddy also accepted without qualm the identification of "Venus" with Isabel of York (Chaucer and the French Poet Graunson [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947], p. 83.). But the identification seems dubious at best. There is no real reason to see Mars and Venus as companion pieces, particularly since the Venus of the Complaint of Mars is immediately unfaithful to Mars, at her first opportunity, while the speaker of the Complaint of Venus is eternally faithful. Recently, John Gardner has again argued that Mars and Venus should be seen as companion pieces, denying that the Venus-Mercury liaison in Mars necessarily implies lechery (The Poetry of Chaucer [Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977], p. 90.). But Gardner's belief is supported by a doubtful interpretation of Venus which will be discussed below. Skeat, in contrast, asserts the independence of Venus (Works, I, 86). And Robinson believes that the so-called Complaint of Venus "had originally no connection with the Complaint of Mars," and that the identification of Venus with Isabel of York is "doubtful" (Robinson, p. 521). Robinson goes on to cast further doubt upon this identification by noting that most of the manuscripts read "Prynkes" rather than "Prynness" in line 73, so that the poem, Robinson suggests, may have actually been written, like Fortune, for the three princes, Lancaster, York, and Gloucester. But it is clear that Robinson himself does not fully believe that suggestion, since he admits that the subject matter is inappropriate for such a group--besides, he prints "Prynness" in his own text (Robinson, p. 862). Furthermore, what would have been Chaucer's purpose in changing the speaker of Granson's ballades into a woman, if he were not writing for a female patron, and, as the Envoy seems to suggest, at her request (since he protests that his making the translation was not totally voluntary, it being "a gret penaunce" to do so [l. 79]). I think it must be accepted that the poet is addressing a "princess" in line 73.

But that the princess was Isabel of York need not be assumed. Others have suggested that the recipient of the three ballades was, in fact, Isabel of Valois, the young princess of France whom Richard II

married in 1396. Margaret Galway, opposing the contention that the Isabel to whom Granson wrote several poems was actually Isabel of York, believed that the poems were actually addressed, in the spirit of courtly game, to the child princess, soon to be child queen. Galway contends that Chaucer, having received some of these poems from his friend Sir Lewis Clifford upon the latter's return from negotiating the marriage in France, translated three of the ballades for the six-year-old future queen--the poem was a lesson "in the language of her future subjects" ("Chaucer, Graunson, and Isabel of France," *RES*, 24 [1948], 278.). A different opinion is advanced by John Norton-Smith, who, noting the poem's dominant mood of the lover's languishing over the memory of the Beloved, suggested that the poem may have been written for Isabella after the deposition of her husband and their enforced separation in 1399 (Geoffrey Chaucer [London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974], p. 19.). Ultimately, all such identifications are only guesses, and the wise critic will take them with a grain of salt.

2

Galway, p. 277.

3

The fact that Granson was for some time a knight in the service of Chaucer's friend and patron John of Gaunt makes this kind of amicable relationship probable (see Braddy, *passim*). Besides, Chaucer's "showing up" of Granson would lose some of its poignancy if Granson were unaware of it.

4

For the text of Granson's poems, see Braddy, pp. 61-63.

5

Skeat, Works, I, 87.

6

Robinson, pp. 862-63.

7

Galway, p. 277.

8

Skeat, Works, I, 560.

9

Norton-Smith, p. 18.

10

Braddy, p. 61.

11

Norton-Smith, p. 18.

12

Gardner, Poetry, pp. 90-92.

13

Citations of the Roman de la Rose in my text are to Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974); line numbers will be given in parentheses. The translation is from The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton, 1962); page numbers are given in my text.

14

A. Wigfall Green, "Chaucer's Complaints: Stanzaic Arrangement, Meter, and Rhyme," University of Mississippi Studies in English, 3 (1962), 26-27.

15

Robinson, p. 862.

16

A date in the early 1380's would not be inconsistent with any of the evidence. Certainly it would destroy the possibility that the poem was written for Isabelle of Valois. But Isabelle of York came to England in 1372, so Venus could well have been written at any time after that if it was composed for her. Further, Granson was in England in the 1370's, fighting on the English side in the war, and Chaucer could certainly have been aware of his poetry at that time. A date in the early 1380's, then, seems reasonable (see Braddy, *passim*).

17

But cf. Rodney Merrill, "Chaucer's Broche of Thebes: The Unity of 'The Complaint of Mars' and 'The Complaint of Venus,'" Literary Monographs, 5 (1973), 1-61. Merrill sees a great irony in Venus' description of her lover, saying that she attributes "an image to her lover which only Christ can justify" (p. 53).

18

Russell Hope Robbins, "The Lyrics," in Beryl Rowland, ed., Companion to Chaucer Studies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 325.

19

Text and translation from Frederick Goldin, ed., Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres: An Anthology and a History (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), no. 26.

20

See Skeat, Works, I, 565.

21

Skeat compared Chaucer's lines to James 1:23-24 (Skeat, Works, I, 565):

For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer;  
he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirrour;  
for he observes himself and goes away at once and forgets

what he was like.

The similarity, however, seems to me only superficial--both have to do with mirrors, but in one case the man is shown forgetting what his image in the mirror was like, as one who only hears goes away and forgets what he should be doing, while in the other passage the image itself is seen as a symbol of impermanence. Tatlock suggested a similarity with these lines from the Merchant's Tale (see Robinson, p. 866):

Many fair shap and many a fair visage  
 Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght,  
 As whoso tooke a mirour, polissed bryght,  
 And sette it in a commune market-place,  
 Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace,  
 By his mirour; (ll. 1580-1585)

But these lines are further from the sense of those in Against Women Unconstant than those from James. For here, the mirror is like January's mind in the way the images flash by, but that has nothing necessarily to do with impermanence or instability.

22

D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 95.

23

Robinson, p. 866.

24

Arthur T. Hatto, EOS: An Inquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), pp. 91 ff.

25

Skeat, Works, I, 88.

26

Brusendorff called the imagery "grotesque," and considered the evidence for Chaucer's authorship weak. He even went so far as to suggest, in what he admits is a "piece of pure guesswork," that the author of this and certain other pieces was that same Scogan to whom Chaucer addressed his famous Envoy (Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925], pp. 440-41.). It is true that the single manuscript version has no indication of authorship, but that manuscript, Pepys 2006, does contain other Chaucerian material. In view of this, and noting the "thoroughly Chaucerian style and meter," Robinson declares that Merciles Beaute "may be accepted as authentic" (Robinson, p. 866). Skeat also thought the poem authentic, and Lowes, comparing Merciles Beaute to three poems by Deschamps which he thought inspired Chaucer's verse, considered this apparent influence significant since no other poet contemporary

with Chaucer can be shown to have been familiar with Deschamps' work (John Livingstone Lowes, "The Chaucerian 'Merciles Beaute' and Three Poems of Deschamps," MLR, 5 [1910], 33-39.). And more recently E. Talbot Donaldson notes that "While not certainly attributable to Chaucer, Merciles Beauty . . . has a characteristic Chaucerian ring and is generally accepted as his" (Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader [New York: Ronald Press, 1958], p. 960.).

27

Donaldson, p. 960.

28

R. T. Davies, ed., Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 43-44.

29

Skeat, Works, I, 80.

30

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

31

See Skeat, Works, I, 548, who quotes the Roman de la Rose to show that lovers should be lean.

It has been shown that the first line of this tern exactly paraphrases the Duc de Berry's reponse to the authors of the Cent Ballades--"Puiz qu'a Amours suis si gras eschape" (see W. L. Renwick, "Chaucer's Triple Roundel, Merciles Beaute," MLR, 16 [1921], 322-23.). That poem has been precisely dated between October 31 and November 6, 1389. As Robinson points out, "either one poet is echoing the other, or both are quoting a common source" (Robinson, p. 866). Since the Duc de Berry is unlikely to have read English poetry, his poem more likely antedates Chaucer's. That would put the date of Merciles Beaute around 1390.

32

Robinson, p. 521.

33

Rossell Hope Robbins, "Chaucer's To Rosemounde," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 4, ii (October, 1971), 74.

34

Davies, p. 328.

35

Donaldson, p. 960.

36

Edwin J. Howard, Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 83.



- 37 Gardner, Poetry, p. 69.
- 38 Davies, p. 328.
- 39 Davies, p. 329; Robbins, "Chaucer's To Rosemounde," p. 76.
- 40 Davies, p. 328.
- 41 John Livingston Lowes, "Illustrations of Chaucer Drawn Chiefly from Deschamps," Rom. Rev., 2 (1911), 128.
- 42 Robbins, "Chaucer's To Rosemounde," p. 76.
- 43 Text and translation from Frederick Goldin, ed., German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages: An Anthology and a History (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), no. 41, ll. 53-55.
- 44 Text and translation from Goldin, Lyrics of the Troubadours, no. 21, ll. 1-4.
- 45 Robbins, "Chaucer's To Rosemounde," p. 77. But Robbins goes on to conjecture that the round cheeks are a sign of youth (as opposed to lean and thin cheeks which would signify old age). This coupled with the lady's only other concrete attribute, her "semy voys, that ye so smal out twyne" (l. 11), where semy means "thin" (Helge Kökeritz, "Chaucer's Rosemounde," MLN, 63 [1948], 313-14), indicates, according to Robbins, that the poet is stressing the lady's youth, since a very young girl, rather than an older woman, would have a "thin and small" voice. Robbins adds to this the fact that nowhere in the poem does the lover actually ask the Beloved to grant him her grace or "pity," and concludes that, since girls were considered of marriageable age at fourteen (as is Virginia in the Physician's Tale), "if Rosemounde had been fourteen, then the poet would have wooed her with the traditional language. But love demands are absent, and the implication must be that Rosemounde is too young to accede to such requests. She must be a sub-teenager." Robbins goes on to conclude, joining several other critics, that the poem was probably written for Isabelle of Valois, seven-year-old bride of Richard II, on the occasion of her entry into London in 1396 (Robbins, "Chaucer's To Rosemounde," pp. 77-78. See also Galway, p. 278, and Edith Rickert, "A Leaf from a Fourteenth-Century Letter Book," HP, 25 [1927], 249-55.).
- Certainly all of this is possible. But it is the sort of thing which cannot possibly be proven conclusively. Edmund Reiss,

for example, sees the round cheeks as a sign of grossness, not of youth ("Dusting off the Cobwebs: A Look at Chaucer's Lyrics," ChauR. [1966], 63.). Nor is it really necessary for our understanding of the poem to postulate a sub-teenager as its subject. One need not be seven years old to have a small voice and round cheeks. And in any case, the poet addresses the lady as if she were ripe for love--there is no mistaking the words "I brenne ay in amorous plesaunce" (l. 22). And the fact that the speaker does not specifically ask the lady for love favors may not mean that she was too young to grant them, but rather that the poet wanted to emphasize the high, courtly nature of his love.

46

Skeat, Works, I, 550.

47

Chretien de Troyes, Erec et Enide, l. 1713. For the text of the poem, see Christian von Troyes, Erec und Enide, in Sämtliche Werke, ed. Wendelin Foerster, 5 vols. (1890; rpt. Amsterdam: Rddopi, 1965), III, 64. The translation is in Arthurian Romances, trans. W. W. Comfort (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1914), p. 23.

48

Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan, ed. Gottfried Weber (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967). The translation is that of A. T. Hatto (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1966; rpt. 1967), p. 145.

## CHAPTER VI

## The Lyric with Narrative

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 flesh-and-blood human being 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 province 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 province 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 was born the narrative-lyric hybrid, 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 better 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 complement his major theme of the two contrasting kinds of love. In these two poems, the lovers and ladies are both

sharply individualized as characters in the narrative portions of the poems. The juxtaposition of the specific individuals depicted in the narratives with their highly conventional spoken Complaints seems to undercut 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 manifest 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 sensible, 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, or the Ballades de Visage sanz Peinture. 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Rosemoude, 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 wherein the speaker engages in a debate, adopting and subsequently rejecting the points of view of different elements of the audience. What Fortune does is go the one step further: both sides in the debate are represented by speaking characters.

One problem which this creates is the clouding 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 nod in agreement, 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 both the Plaintiff and Fortune expound Boethian ideas. The situation is based, it is well known, on Book II of the Consolation of Philosophy, wherein 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 solely by the haphazard "error" of Fortune. Yet the Speaker refuses to sorrow for lack of Fortune's favor. There are other things, he suggests, which are more important than the baubles 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 lesser goods. In this way he is able to say he has true mastery over himself; those who turn from the Highest Good to pursue lesser goods are weak and lack control because they are doing something which they really do not want to do. As Philosophy explains in the Consolation,

"Than so as the ton and the tothir," quod sche,  
 "desiren good, and the gode folk geten good and not the  
 wikkide folk, than is it no doute that the gode folk  
 ne ben myghty and the wikkid folk ben feble."

(Bk. IV, pr. II, ll. 76-80)

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 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 favor of Fortune, but rather who knew her

character as one who continually lies. The speaker takes Socrates' example to heart, and in the thrice repeated refrain declares "For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye" (ll. 8, 16, 24).

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

No man is wrecched, but himself it wene  
And he that hath himself hath suffisaunce. (ll. 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;

Why should Fortune argue against the Plaintiff using the Plaintiff's own words? 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 thysel out of my governaunce? (ll. 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 become more than mouthpieces for philosophical pearls of wisdom--they begin to interact with each other as individuals in a real argument, rather than as personified abstractions mouthing precomposed lectures. As a result, the context of the debate becomes a good deal more lively. The Plaintiff, it seems, is assuming a pose, which Fortune is able to see through. The Plaintiff, stung 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 loaned 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-seeming. 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 through her workings. 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. (ll. 33-34)

In addition, Fortune continues, paraphrasing Boethius (Bk. II, pr. 4, ll. 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 posing, and reminds him that she has for some time "fostred . . . you in thy plesauce" (1. 42). He was born in her "regne of variaunce" (1. 45), she tells him, and he is therefore subject to her unstable whims. It is for her 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 affliction, 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. This implies that she has some power over the existence of that best friend, as if she could, if she so desired, remove him or her as well from the Plaintiff's life. This the Plaintiff catches hold of and bitterly denies. He thanks Fortune for revealing her friends to him--those "painted visages" who follow prosperity like parasites. These he is not sorry to lose, but his true friend, says the Plaintiff, is totally out of her power, and of him (or her) she can never deprive him:

My frend maystow nat reven, blind goddesse.  
 That I thy frendes knowe, I thanke hit thee.  
 Take hem agayn, lat hem go lye on presse! (11. 50-52)

Of these false friends, the Plaintiff states that their niggardliness in preserving their wealth--that is, apparently, their refusal to use any of it to help the Plaintiff in his plight--merely augurs the

fact that Fortune herself will soon "hir tour assayle" (l. 59), that is, assault the riches and power of those same false friends. For their greed to hold on to Fortune's gifts only preserves those gifts for the time when Fortune will take them back again. The stanza concludes with a proverbial "Wikke appetyt comth ay before syknesse" (l. 55)--that is, the false friends' "wicked appetite" for Fortune's baubles will end in the sickness of their fall from Fortune's grace. "In general," the Plaintiff concludes in the refrain of this third ballade, "this reule may nat fayle" (l. 56).

For a full understanding of the poem, it is important to contrast the actions of these niggardly "false friends" with those of the "beste friend" 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 favorite 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 favor, 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  
 Por ce que mon besoing savoit.  
 "Amis, dist il, faiz vous savoir,  
 Vez ci le cors, vez ci l'avoir  
 Ou vous avés autant cum gié,  
 Prenés en sanz prendre congie.  
 --Mes cum bien?--Se vous ne savés,  
 Tout, se de tout mestier avés;  
 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)<sup>2</sup>

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 the niggardliness of the 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 contends, 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, hence "Why sholdestow my realtee oppress?" (l. 60) she asks the Plaintiff. If all other forces in all the creation are able to perform their natural functions, if the heavens may shine, rain, or hail, or if the sea may ebb and flow as it is wont to do, why then should she alone of God's creatures be maligned for performing her natural function?

Right so mot I kythen by brotelnesse:--

In general, this reule may nat fayle. (ll. 63-64)

Her displaying her fickelness 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 is, in fact, a precept of 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 worldly 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 charge, that the changing world is governed by Fortune's error (ll. 1-4). Following the fourth book of Boethius, Fortune declares that she is in reality working out God's will in the sublunary world. The heavens, she claims, "hath propertee of sikernesse" (l. 69), but the earth "hath ever resteles travayle" (l. 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" (l. 68), call Fortune is in reality divine providence, the "execucion of the majestee / That al purveyeth of his rightwysnesse" (ll. 65-66): the implied conclusion is that those who scrafe against the mutability of Fortune are in reality bucking the preordained nature of the universe as ordered by the Almighty. "In general, this reule may nat fayle" (l. 72).

Now it should be noted that medieval dialectic, unlike that more recently proposed by Hegel, 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.<sup>3</sup> The point of this particular debate seems to be that Fortune is the victor. After all, she has the last word, and her two final points seem unanswerable--at least the Plaintiff makes no answer. The thesis seems to be that only the ignorant blame Fortune for her changing nature. A secondary theme seems to be that, while true friendship, like Christian charity, is outside the realm of Fortune's power, one can make use of evil Fortune to weed out his false friends.

All of this is pretty clear cut, and orthodox Boethian thought. Where Chaucer's personal genius shines is in the concluding stanza of the poem, "Lenvoy de Fortune." This Envoy, a seven-line stanza with two rhymes, a b a b b a b (as opposed to the eight-line stanza with three rhymes of the rest of the poem), has excited some critical responses explaining some of the historical allusions. Fortune begins by addressing "Princes," and asking them to prevent the Plaintiff from complaining about her. She promises to reward the princes if two or three of them, at her request, would relieve the Plaintiff of his pain, presumably by monetary assistance. If two or three of the "Princes" will not deign to assist the Plaintiff, then Fortune recommends that these Princes prevail upon the Plaintiff's "beste frend" to advance him to a better estate.

The majority of critics have interpreted the "Princes" as the

Dukes of Lancaster, York, and Gloucester. Robinson sums up the historical facts thus:

In an ordinance of the Privy Council, passed on March 8, 1390, it was provided that no gift or grant at the cost of the King should be authorized without the consent of the three dukes, or two of them. In l. 76 allusion seems to be made to the exact terms of the order. The beste frend, in ll. 32, 40, 48, 78, therefore appears to be the King himself.<sup>4</sup>

Robinson and many others have accordingly seen this poem as a begging poem, like the Complaint to his Purse: Chaucer is asking, in the Envoy, for a handout, since he has been down on his luck lately and could use the money. Skeat made the further observation that the poet, by making Fortune speak for him, "thus escapes making a direct appeal in his own person."<sup>5</sup> Historical sleuths have even attempted to seek out the particular misfortune in Chaucer's life which prompted his composition of this begging poem.<sup>6</sup>

There are three points in particular which seem to be overlooked by those who consider the Envoy to present a begging posture. First, it was quite customary to address an Envoy to a "Prince," no matter what the rank of the person being addressed. Chaucer's Lak of Stedfastnesse ends with an Envoy addressed to "O prince"; the Complaint of Venus addresses a "princesse." It would be natural, if Chaucer's intended audience was a group, to address them as "princes" without their necessarily having been the three Dukes.

Secondly, the "beste frend," as evinced by his description in the Roman de la Rose, was characterized by his generosity. The reference need not be to the King; rather it may be to an abstract "frend" who is willing to assist the everyman "Plaintif," and the fact that Fortune applies to the princes to intercede with the friend

may simply be an illustration of the fact, implied in lines 49-51 above, that the best friend is out of Fortune's power to give or take away. The best friend is simply the illustration of how true love, caritas, ought to knit together all people in brotherly affection. This kind of love is outside of Fortune's power because it is the participation by people in the Divine Love that binds the universe. The best friend may even be God or Christ--totally outside of Fortune's power.

But the third and most important point about the Envoy is the fact that it is Fortune herself who is speaking. The Plaintiff has clearly stated in the first ballade that "hir moste worshipe is to lye" (l. 22); and, further, that "I knowe hir eek a fals dissimulour" (l. 23). Considering the character of the speaker of these final lines, how seriously can one take them? If the "Princes" do as she suggests and assist the Plaintiff in return for obtaining some of Fortune's favor, she will, the poem has already made clear, take back all that she has given them and ruin them as well. Further, since the poem has already made clear the folly of trusting in Fortune, and the self-knowledge which one comes to when one finds ill fortune, then the only motive Fortune may have in asking others to bestow her baubles upon the Plaintiff is to cloud his self knowledge and to once more deceive him and bring him into her power.

The ending, then, is ambiguous--deliberately so, it would seem. If Chaucer really was interested in asking for preferment or for gratuity, why should he cloud the issue by having the dissembling Fortune do the asking? The Envoy represents Chaucer at his ironic best.



Equivocating Fortune asks for a handout on the part of the Plaintiff, but her motives are suspect. Is Chaucer's meaning, then, "please don't give me anything"? That, obviously, seems equally unlikely. I think the key is again the "beste frend," alluded to once more in the last two lines. If one gives to those who, through hard chance, have come to grief, one should not give in order to curry Fortune, hoping to see some return for one's investment; rather one should give purely out of Christian charity, like the best friend, like the visage sanz Painture.

The central theme of Fortune thus places it in the same category as poems like Truth or Gentilesse, 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,<sup>7</sup> except that in each of these poems of Chaucer's the narrative element is so radically reduced that only the bare bones of the story show, just enough 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. For 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 jumble of narrative and lyric elements which do not work together in a purposeful relationship.

But such a conclusion would be too hasty. 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, still three specific things are determined by

the narrative portion 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's old gimmick, the myopic, dim-witted narrator, caricature of himself."<sup>8</sup> 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 portion of the poem, then, does serve to put the lyric into a rhetorical, if not a specifically concrete, context, as a closer examination will show more clearly.

Structurally, the rhyme royal stanzas of the narrative portion fall into three sections. Malcolm Pittock considered the first three stanzas as forming an introduction which establishes the situation.<sup>9</sup> However I consider the third stanza to belong more clearly with stanzas four and five, since all three provide the narrator's reaction to and commentary upon the situation as he finds it. And the final three stanzas form what Pittock calls an "elaboration":<sup>10</sup> specifically what they do is introduce the theme of the speaker's "Bill of Complaint," and his inability to present it now that Pity is dead.

The poem begins, as many a courtly love poem, with the speaker

bewailing 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. By "besy" I assume the speaker means "anxious"--that is, his suffering is such that he is in a state of constant agitation--but also "busy" in the more general sense, since he has been searching so diligently for Pity for such a long time. 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 compleyn  
 Upon the crueltee 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 dashed by what he discovers in stanza two. Pity, the personification of human compassion and sympathy, is dead. The proper abiding place for pity, for compassion, is the human heart; thus Chaucer, playing on 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 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, in stanzas four and five, by his words. The speaker's reactions are violent and exaggerated. When he sees Pity lying on a bier,<sup>12</sup> he swoons. When he recovers, he looks "pitously" upon the corpse, and presses closely to it. He feels lost, and begins to pray for the soul of the deceased. Now these actions cannot be conceived of as anything but ludicrous. Since the speaker himself is not to be conceived of as an allegorical figure, his interaction with such figures on their own plane of existence seems ludicrous, even absurd, and this absurdity is capped by his actually praying for the soul of a personified abstraction. The narrator must be seen in this stanza as enormously obtuse and literal minded--characteristics which mesh easily with other aspects of the speaker's character as the poem develops it further.

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, as if all men were now affected by this overthrow of Pity by her opposite, 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? (ll. 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."<sup>13</sup> 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; (ll. 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 thereof, 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. And thus the speaker is again cast in a satiric light: he exaggerates his own importance in believing that what happens to him happens to all; and he is so short-sighted that he does not realize that it is only to him that the lady refuses to grant her pity.

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. The allegorical figures which surround the bier--Bounty, Beauty, Lust, "Jolyte," "Assured Maner," "Youthe," "Honeste," "Wisdom," "Estaat," and "Drede" and

"Gouvernaunce" (related, in all likelihood, to the French "Daunger")-- are all qualities which the ideal courtly mistress would possess. The lady sounds like almost any courtly mistress. For example, in the Complaint to his Lady, that other early Chaucerian poem with which Pity has much in common, the speaker describes the Beloved in quite similar terms, with many of the same abstractions:

Hir name is Bountee, set in womanhede,  
Sadnesse in youthe, and Beautee prydelees  
And Plesaunce, under gouvernaunce and drede; (ll. 24-26)

It should be noted that in Lady, too, the Beloved is void of pity. Her surname, the speaker claims in that poem, is "Faire Rewtheles" (l. 27).

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" (ll. 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

courtly mistress, and his love is so strong that he will die of it. But the lady reveals no inkling of 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 meekness and 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 Rosemounde or Merciles Beaute, the speaker of Pity is an unlikely lover. He is not very bright, he is quite short sighted, he is easily cowed by even possible failure, 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, for that matter, what we shall see shortly in Anelida and Arcite. The diction of Pity seems quite colloquial, at times idiomatic--the poem really uses, as Clemen noted years ago, the language of speech.<sup>14</sup> Nonessential parenthetical comments like "yf I shal not feyne" (l. 4) and "ther was no more to seye" (l. 21), or "as thoughte me" (l. 37) or "withouten any fayle" (l. 48) have the effect of creating a conversational tone, while expressions like "so yore ago" (l. 1) "never wight so woo" (l. 3), "doth me dye" (l. 7) or "ded as ston" (l. 16) have a very definite idiomatic ring to them. The result of this level of diction is to actually lessen the apparent nobility of the speaker; he is not the gentlest of lovers; love in fact does not seem to ennoble him in the usual ways. He is instead an average



man, one whose poem sounds like an everyday, mundane conversation, rather than a courtly speech. He is not one whose "cor gentil" raises him above the crowd and urges him to love.

The scene is now set for the recitation of the lyric, which the reader is to understand was intended for the speaker's lady as a request for her "pity," but which was never actually delivered to her. The reader must keep in mind two things, I think, while reading the Complaint itself: first, the speaker must be conceived of as a real person, not as abstraction. Consequently, the intended audience for the complaint must have been the speaker's Beloved, and not really the allegorical figure of Pity. What the speaker has given in the narrative is an explanation of why he felt he couldn't deliver the poem in person: the lady seemed to lack the pity he is asking for in the lyric.

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.<sup>15</sup> I would contend that Pittock is absolutely correct in his assessment, but I do not think he applies it to its best advantage. 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": the speaker calls his lady "Pity" first as a kind of senhal--one never named one's mistress in a love poem, since that would break the important rule of secrecy, without which love cannot endure. But secondly, the speaker calls his lady "Pity" because that is precisely what he wishes her to become toward him--the embodiment of the emotion pity.

Structurally, as Skeat first observed, the Complaint seems to divide itself into three sets of terns, or groups of three stanzas, each ending with a rhyme word: "seyne" (l. 77), "peyne" (l. 98), and again "peyne" (l. 119).<sup>16</sup> This would be a more beneficial 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, rather than simply the dividing rhyme. 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 (ll. 98, 99, 106, 116, and 119), not to mention three more times in the narrative portion 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.<sup>17</sup> I would alter that evaluation slightly: in the first five stanzas, the poet addresses his lady as if she were the personification of pity; in the last four, he addresses her more directly.

In the first stanza of the Complaint the intended audience is quite ambiguous. The speaker deliberately chooses words which may

incline the reader to think not of the courtly mistress but of the Virgin Mary:

Humblest of herte, highest of reverence  
 Benygne flour, coroune of vertues alle,  
 Sheweth unto your rial excellence  
 Youre servaunt, yf I durst me so calle,  
 Hys mortal harm, in which he is yfalle; (ll. 57-61)

The lady here is a gracious flower; she is a queen of high reverence, to whom one of her subjects has come seeking comfort from the "mortal harm" into which he has fallen. One could compare this to the following lines from An ABC, addressed to the Virgin. Here, the Lady addressed is "of alle floures flour"; she is also an "Almighty . . . quene," and the speaker, one of her subjects, has fled to her, "confounded in errour," seeking comfort or "socour":

Almighty and al merciable quene,  
 To whom that al this world fleeth for socour,  
 To have relees of sinne, of sorwe, and teene,  
 Glorious virgine, of alle floures flour,  
 To thee I flee, confounded in errour. (ll. 1-5)

The most important point here is the implication that the poet's lady, like Mary, is to be identified by her chief characteristic--that is, pity. The speaker ends the stanza with the claim that he is asking for Pity's help not only for himself, "But for your renoun, as he shal declare" (l. 63)--which, it could be added, is also what Chaucer's persona says to Mary in the ABC--if Mary will take pity upon his soul, she will be doing herself a favor, since she will be defeating her "old foe":

Lat not our alder foo make his bobaunce  
 That he hath in his lystes of mischaunce  
 Convict that ye bothe have bought so deere. (ll. 84-86)

With the next three stanzas of the Complaint the speaker presents a rather complicated argument in allegorical terms. Cruelty, the

"old foe" of Pity, has made an alliance with Bounty, Gentillesse, and Courtesy, and has deprived pity of its rightful place as the queen of those virtues. For "kyndely," the speaker says, Pity is to be allied with Bounty, Truth and Beauty. Further, "Manner" and "Gentillesse" are worth nothing without her. Unless Pity takes some sort of action to break the alliance of these qualities with Cruelty, then she will "sleen hem that ben in your obeisaunce" (l. 84).

The point, literally, 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 (l. 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."<sup>18</sup> The suggestion may indeed be there. Chaucer

may even be equating pity, in this stanza, with Christian charity and echoing the words of St. Paul, in that no matter what other qualities one has, one is nothing without it:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have  
not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.  
(I Cor. 13:1)

Still, it must be admitted that the poem is, after all, primarily a courtly love song, so when Pittock says that in the second part of the Complaint the "courtly love element is allowed to predominate,"<sup>19</sup> his emphasis seems wrong. The courtly love element dominates the entire poem, and the equation of pity with Christian charity is only an

undercurrent. The speaker's chief concern is that the lady should have pity upon him, and the kind of pity he has in mind is not Christian charity but rather the customary courtly euphemism for sexual favors.

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 renown will be harmed if she grants him no pity--certainly if Chaucer's chief aim was to extoll Christian charity he would not have suggested that the lady engage in that virtuous enterprise in order to assuage her own vanity. The verse can have meaning only if addressed to a courtly mistress: grant me your favors, says the lover, and you will be famed as the perfect courtly lady; deny me, and your renown 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 have no need to dread her, and in truth would not really love her either. These reactions are possible only if the lady is being addressed. And this may explain the very cryptic reference of line 92, wherein the speaker calls the lady "herenus quene." Skeat, who was undoubtedly correct, thought Herenus an error for Herines or Furies. But Skeat's further suggestion is that Chaucer's source for the idea was the Thebaid, in which only a personified Pity is able to control the Furies, who wage war: "Pity is called Herines quene, or queen of the Furies, because she alone is supposed to be able to control them."<sup>20</sup> This, however, seems to create a difficulty where none need exist. 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 pain and sorrow he has in abundance, unsought. 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 (which would be the case if he were addressing Pity), but rather because "ye rekke not whether I flete or synke" (l. 110). 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. (ll. 115-116)

It is curious that the speaker of the lyric comes across somewhat differently than the rather bungling, unlikely 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 portion 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 manifest 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-so-noble lover. What the narrative does is individualize the conventional, very general sentiments of the lyric, and undercuts 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; he comes full circle; he symmetrically rounds the poem off. 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" (l. 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, then, most graphically, 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 portion 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, add a richness to the lyric which it would not otherwise possess.

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. Setting aside the question of the supposed



"personal allegory," which adds very little to our understanding of the poem,<sup>21</sup> and the question of the supposed unity of Mars and the Complaint of Venus, which is not now generally accepted,<sup>22</sup> the poem is still 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 less spectacularly, for its manipulation of different speaking voices. The former aspect has been the root 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,"<sup>23</sup> more recently Gardiner Stillwell argued that the astrological framework is there to provide a serious comment on real human love and its relation to free will.<sup>24</sup> That point will be dealt with later. The main focus of this discussion, though, will be on the various speaking voices in the poem.

Once again, as he has so often, 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 shaþ pleyne pitously,  
 Ther mot be cause wherfore that men pleyne;  
 Or men may deme he pleyneþ 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 settings of the majority of his complaints."<sup>25</sup> 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. To see just how successful that experiment is, I propose to look at the poem, as it were, backwards--to begin by looking at the Complaint itself, and then observe how the Complaint proper gains concrete meaning by its placement in a narrative context.

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 tern, 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 Complaynt D'Amours.

Mars' Complaint consists of sixteen nine-line stanzas rhyming a a b a a b b c c. They are divided into five sections of three

stanzas each, preceded by a Proem. With each new tern, the speaker undergoes a corresponding shift in tone or subject matter. The Proem begins with the lines already quoted, and ends with the speaker's resolve to "reherse," as best his "troubled wit" may, the "ground" of all his "pyne" and "hevynesse." This sort of beginning is not unlike the opening lines of the Complaynt D'Amours, wherein 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 (ll. 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; (ll. 1013)

The first tern 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" (ll. 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 fortunéd and thewed  
 That thorough the world her goodnesse is yshewed. (ll. 174-181)

It scarcely needs noting how typical these hyperboles are. As Mars' lady is the "sours and welle" of all virtues, so the Beloved in Womanly Noblesse is the "auctour" of all "norture" (or "good manners," as Robinson glosses, l. 27). The lady Rosemounde is the shrine of

beauty "as fer as cercled is the mapemounde" (l. 2), just as Mars' lady is renowned "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 prydelees and Pleasaunce" (ll. 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 tern, three interrelated problems. In the first stanza, the speaker asks "To whom shal I then pleyne of my distresse?" (l. 191). He does not have an answer, but he does know that he cannot complain unto his lady, because she is also in distress. This is not altogether 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" (ll. 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 disease wel oughte I swowne and swelte,  
 Though I non other harm ne drede felte. (ll. 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 tern he finds that someone: it is God Himself. Clemens claimed that at this point the Complaint ceases to follow the conventional pattern,<sup>26</sup> but I do not think that this is completely true. For while it was far more common for the lover to blame specifically the pagan God of Love, as, for example, the speaker of the Complaint to his Lady chides:

Now hath not Love me bestowed weel  
 To love ther I never shal have part? (ll. 33-34)

Or while the lover might, as in the pseudo-Chaucerian "Complaint to my Mortal Foe," chide St. Valentine:

Saint Valentyne! to you I renovele  
 My woful lyf, as I can, compleyning;  
 But, as me thinketh, to you a quarele  
 Right greet I have, whan I remembringe  
 Bitwene how kinde, ayeins the yeres springe,  
 Upon your day, doth ech foul chese his makes  
 And you list not in swich comfort me bringe,  
 That to her grace my lady shulde me take.<sup>27</sup>

It is also possible to find the lover blaming God the Creator, as, it will be recalled, does the speaker of the Complaynt D'Amours:

Yit is al this no lak to hir, pardee,  
 But God or Nature sore wolde I blame. (ll. 57-58)

The speaker of Mars also blames God for, first of all, constraining "folk to love, malgre her hed" (l. 220), and then letting love's joy last but a "twynkelyne of an ye" (l. 222). Why force people to love something which does not last, Mars asks. Or, if love lasts at all, the love is filled with "mysaventure." Thus, claims the speaker,

Whether love breke or elles dure,  
 Al gates he that hath with love to done  
 Hath offer wo then changed ys the mone. (ll. 233-235)

The question is, how can a just ruler force us to love and then make the object of that love so insecure? The conclusion is that God "hath to lovers enemyte" (l. 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" (l. 238), and catches therewith "many a fisch," who "at first hath / Al his desir, and therewith al myschance" (ll. 240-241), where in the juxtaposition of desir and myschance Chaucer provides an implicit 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" (ll. 243-245).

The implications of these lines have been discussed at great length by several critics. As Chauncey Wood pointed out, the speaker here resembles Troilus, as well as Palamon and Arcite, in that he is attempting irrationally to "question [his] dilemma with some quasi-philosophical choplogic, usually depending upon Boethian arguments that are followed with some care all the way to a sudden, erroneous conclusion."<sup>28</sup> 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."<sup>29</sup> The key to these lines is, I think, the speaker's ironic statement that lovers have "ofter wo then changed ys the mone": unwittingly, he has undercut his own argument. It is precisely because lovers place their desires upon the things in the sublunary 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, hence 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 errour mysledeth hem into false goodes" (Bk. III, pr. 2, ll. 22-25).

The ambiguity of the fishing simile was first discussed by Neil Hultin, who noted two separate traditions for the hook image. It was, Hultin claims, in one sense a familiar image for the lure of sex, dating back at least to Augustine in Christian thought. But the second and better known tradition stems from Christ's words to Peter and Andrew in Mark 1:17: "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men."<sup>30</sup> The Christian metaphor of God bringing men to salvation, catching their souls so to speak, is perverted in this poem to God luring men to their destructions, in the speaker's mind, through the hook of "plesauce." But as Merrill interprets, the hook, that is, man's desire for temporal goods, causes pain but may cause him to seek permanent joy in lasting goods. The wound caused by the hook causes death only if the fish does not allow himself to be drawn in by the Fisher.<sup>31</sup>

The speaker's basic assumptions, then, are flawed. But the main point of his argument consists of his famous analogy of the Broche of

Thebes which occupies the fourth tern of the Complaint. This Broche of Thebes, according to the speaker, was an object which everyone wanted, but which, when one obtained it, one was in such dread of losing that he or she nearly went mad. And when the broach was lost, the owner was in "double wo and passioun / For he so feir a tresor had forgo" (ll. 255-256). The broach itself, according to the speaker, was not to blame, but rather its creator, for

. . . he that wroghte hit enfortuned hit so  
 That every wight that hat hit shulde have wo;  
 And therefore in the worcher was the vice,  
 And in the covetour that was so nyce. (ll. 259-262)

Similarly, the speaker claims, has he coveted his lady, and was mad until he obtained her "grace," and now is devastated once again in losing her. The lady herself was not to be blamed, however, but rather Him who made her:

That putte such a beaute in her face,  
 That made me coveyten and purchace  
 Myn oun deth; him wite I that I dye,  
 And myn unwit, that ever clamb so hye. (ll. 268-271)

Lest one be tempted, like Gardiner Stillwell, to see in these lines Chaucer's abandoning "all pretense of writing a typical love-complaint,"<sup>32</sup> I would invite a comparison with the lines from the Complaynt D'Amours quoted earlier--"God or Nature wolde I blame," says the speaker of that poem (l. 58), for creating his lady without the quality of mercy.

But the chief flaw in the speaker's argument in the present poem is that he is using a false analogy. The story of the Broche of Thebes, which, like most of the rest of this Complaint, gains special meaning only when the context of the poem is realized, was



created by Vulcan to avenge the adulterous affair between Mars and Venus. Vulcan gave the broach to the daughter of that illicit union, Harmonia, and the broach was thereafter the cause of great suffering to Harmonia and her descendents in the House of Thebes. But the broach was created deliberately with the power to cause harm. God created love only to draw men to Him, to the natural object of all true desires. It is man's perverted will which causes his own difficulties, according to Christian theology. The speaker realizes this in a line which seems tossed in as an afterthought: he blames God and "myn unwitting, that ever clamb so hie."

But I do not think that Mars realizes here the implication of his own words, nor truly believes that he, and not the Creator, is really at fault--though John Gardner interprets the final tern in the following manner:

Mars perceives his fall. His only recourse is to ask that knights better than himself (as he says), ladies who are true and stable, and other lovers like himself complain and thus not only share his suffering and that of Venus but also, hopefully, obtain mercy from . . . somewhere.<sup>33</sup>

Certainly the Broche of Thebes bears some resemblance to the Forbidden Fruit, but it is by no means clear that the speaker "perceives his fall." His only "disease" (l. 277) is the traditional lover's malady, and the only "fall" he perceives is the taming of his temperament by his service to his lady--as regards which he warns the "hardy knyghtes of renoun" (l. 272) to whom he addresses the first stanza of his fifth tern "The proudest of yow may be mad ful tame" (l. 278). The hardy knights should complain of the speaker's "hevynesse" out of "compassioun"

for his suffering in love--he does not ask them to pray for mercy because of his sin. The knights are also to complain for him because it is appropriate since he is their "patroun" (l. 275) and they are of his "devisioun" (l. 273). Here, for the first time, the speaker implies that he really is Mars, God of War and "patroun" of knighthood, the warrior's profession.

It becomes clear in the second stanza of the final tern that Mars' lady is Venus, the "emperise" 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. And so should all lovers complain, Mars says in the final stanza, for Venus, who "Was evere redy to do yow [i.e. the lovers] socour," always held them dear, ended their labors, was the "ensample of al honour," and "never dide but al gentillesse" (ll. 292-297). All lovers are therefore exhorted to show "kyndenesse," human emotion, for Venus' sake.

Up until this final tern, nothing in the Complaint has distinguished it markedly from any other love complaints. These last three stanzas, though they are not labeled as such in any manuscript, 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 tern 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 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 color 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" (ll. 16-19). It is an appropriate and conventional day to sing a song about love; but one unconventional monkey wrench is thrown into the poem at this point: the speaker is supposed to be a bird. Now Chaucer's speaker has taken protean shapes in other poems: he has been Chaucer the man of affairs, the conventional courtly lover, the unconventional, unlikely lover, even a woman, but a non-human shape is something of a surprise. Still, it may be appropriate for Valentine's day--it is the day when the birds choose their mates, and the day when

people emulate the birds by doing likewise. 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."<sup>34</sup> 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. Jaufre Rudel sings:

Quan lo rius de la fontana  
 s'esclarzis, si cum far sol,  
 e par la flors aigentina,  
 e.l rossinholetz el ram  
 volf e refranh ez aplan  
 son dous chantar e l'afina,  
 dreitz es qu'ieu lo mieu refranha. (ll. 1-7)

(When the waters of the spring  
 run clear once more,  
 and the flower comes forth on the eglantine,  
 and on the branch the nightingale  
 turns, modulates, softens  
 his sweet song, and refines it,  
 it is right that I modulate mine.)<sup>35</sup>

And in at least one example, a pair of poems by Marcabru which depict a lover and lady sending messages through a starling, the bird itself speaks thus to the lady:

Di l'estornels: "Part Lerida  
 a pros es tan descremida,  
 c'anc no saup plus de gandida,  
 plena de falsa crezensa." (ll. 23-26)

(The starling says, "There's a valiant man out there  
 beyond Lerida you've been so vicious to,  
 he never found any defense  
 against you, you full of bad faith. . . .")<sup>36</sup>

and the bird goes on. 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 which Chaucer develops later on in the lines about the fisher and the Broche of Thebes in Mars' Complaint. The very first stanza of the Proem makes that contrast manifest:

Gladeth, ye foules, of the morowe gray!  
 Lo! 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 espye!  
 Lo! Yond the sunne, the candel of jelosye! (ll. 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, 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 worthwhile<sup>37</sup>:

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 hevvy morowe! (ll. 8-12)

The allusion to Saint John and the traditional religious imagery of light and darkness have been noted by both Hultin and Merrill. It may be worthwhile to point out also the parallel with the famous dawn song *Hymnus ad Galli Cantum* by the fourth century Christian Prudentius--a hymn so famous that Chaucer undoubtedly knew it. It also begins

with the voice of a bird, a cock:

Ales diei nuntius  
 lucem propinquam praecinit;  
 nos excitator mentium  
 iam Christus ad vitam vocat.  
 "auferte" clamat "lectulos  
 aegros, soporos, desides;  
 castique, recti ac sobrii  
 vigilate. iam sum proximus." (11. 1-8)

(The bird that is herald of day foretells by its note the nearing dawn; now Christ the awakener of our minds calls us to life, crying "Away with beds of sickness, slumber, and sloth. Be wakeful, pure, upright and sober, now I am near at hand.")<sup>38</sup>

Demons take joy in the night. Sleep weighs down a sinful heart. But the light of salvation chases these sins away, bringing the dawn of salvation and the light of grace to human beings. Also implied is the dawning of the day of Judgement, for demons scatter in fear as dawn approaches, and men are warned to turn from the darkness of sin to the light of God before it is too late.

sed vox ab alto culmine  
 Christi docentis praemonet  
 adesse iam lucem prope,  
 ne mens sopori serviat,  
 ne somnus usque ad terminos  
 vitae socordis opprimat  
 pectus sepultum crimine  
 et lucis oblitum suae. (11. 29-36)

(But the voice of Christ our teacher from the towering height [of heaven] forewarns us that day is now nigh at hand, lest our mind be enslaved to slumber, and lest even to the end of an indolent life sleep should weigh down our heart buried in guilt and forgetful of the light that is its own.)

Thus the bird's "tyme cometh eft that cese shal your sorowe" (l. 11) takes on a new meaning, and the bird's advice to the lovers becomes ironic. The bird's "consolation" to the lovers, as Hultin points out, places those lovers among those sinners who are unable to endure the

light of God's truth, and the consolation is further "called into question by the events of the ensuing narration."<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the audience would expect this contrasts sharply with the fact that the bird-narrator himself hasn't an inkling that his tale is inappropriate. He 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, synge  
 The sentence of the compleynt, at the leste,  
 That woful Mars made atte departyng  
 From fresshe Venus in a morwenyng. (ll. 22-26)

And as he ends the narrative portion of the poem, the bird, apparently oblivious 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!" (l. 154). The irony of this line becomes manifest as the story unfolds, for it is a story of illicit adultery, shame, unfaith-

fulness, and almost 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, as his exclamation of line 154 reveals, 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 in line 29. Here Mars, the fierce God of War, is tamed by the strictures of his courtly mistress, Venus, who "brydeleth him in her manere, / With nothing but with scourging of her chere" (ll. 41-42). It is decided between them that they will come together in Venus' "nexte paleys"--that is, in astrological terms, her next "mansion,"<sup>42</sup> which is Taurus. Now Mars makes an important speech in the following lines--one which colors 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 drede of deth may do me smerte,  
 For al your lust is ese to myn herte." (ll. 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" (l. 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?"<sup>43</sup> 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 foreknowledge is inevitable, but also irrelevant as regards his own personal culpability: 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. As for anyone who would question the coexistence of Providence with human free will, Chaucer would refer him to Boethius:

For certis this strengthe of the devyne science, which that embraseth alle thinges by his presentarie knowynge, establissheth manere to alle thinges, and it ne aweth nawht to lattere thinges. And syn that thise thinges ben thus (that is to seyn, syn that necessite nis nat in thinges by the devyne prescience), thanne is ther fredom of arbitrie, that dwelleth hool and unwemmed to mortal men; (Bk. V, pr. 6, ll. 283-291)

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 replete with meaning in view of the Proem, cries "'Alas, I dye! / The torch is come that al this world wol wrie.'" (ll. 90-91). If it is likened to the light of Christ's coming, then this light is certainly the light which will reveal, or uncover, or disclose all. And the lovers will certainly be found wanting--for theirs is the unnatural love of stanza one, rather than the natural love of the birds who glory in the coming of the day.

Mars leaps to his feet and arms himself, bidding Venus to flee. He stays to face Phoebus, "in peril to be sleyn" (l. 108), but in "double penaunce" (l. 109), for fear of the danger that his Venus may be in. Again, the events of the narrative add further clarification to the Complaint proper, for Mars' unspecific worry concerning his lady's welfare is now given concrete shape.

But a further ironic twist is given to that worry as the narrative concludes. For in the Complaint, Mars says of Venus

. . . she hath such hevyness,  
 For fere and eke for wo, that as I gesse,  
 In lytel time hit wol her bane be. (ll. 194-196)

The "I gesse" is significant, for the audience must have a different perspective if they have just seen the end of the narrative. Here Venus, having fled Taurus, has moved into "Cileneos tour" (l. 113)--that is, Gemini, the mansion of Mercury. Finding no one there, she hides in a dark cave, as "smokyng as the helle"--ironically, as Hultin points out, Venus can better endure the darkness of hell than

the bright light of salvation,<sup>44</sup> for she is wholly given over to love of mundane things rather than of the Highest Good. But Mercury later enters his palace, whereupon

Venus he salueth and doth chere,  
And her receyveth as his frend ful dere. (ll. 146-47)

Now "frend" was often a euphemism for "lover," as I have mentioned previously, and it seems clear that Chaucer here intends to imply that Venus has taken Mercury for her new lover. Recently Edgar S. Laird has given evidence of an astrological nature for the implication that Venus is here unfaithful to Mars: Mercury and Venus are, according to Laird, in a "sextile aspect," which, in terms of the general metaphorical language used by astrologers to describe the nature of aspects, is the aspect of "privy and secret love."<sup>45</sup> But a more obvious clue to the nature of the "friendship" here implied is that, in the mythology with which the medieval audience must be assumed to have been familiar, the adultery of Venus with Mercury was an established fact, and one which resulted in the birth of Hermaphrodite.<sup>46</sup>

Mars' trepidation about the safety of Venus, alone and without comfort, as he supposes, is seen to be ironic in the light of the audience's knowledge. And this information makes us read the Complaint in a much clearer manner. Not only was Mars wrong about the culpability of God in the events which occurred, but he was also quite mistaken about the nature of his own love for Venus. Though Mars proclaims his "hert forever I to her hette" (l. 185), he is deluded about the permanence of earthly love--a fact which is implied by the Boethian allusions of the Complaint, but driven home much more poignantly

by Venus' infidelity in the narrative. But neither Mars himself, nor the simple bird-narrator, ever realizes the full implications of what he says. Only the audience can recognize the implications, and can do so only when the abstract commonplaces of the Complaint proper are juxtaposed to the particular events of the narrative.

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.<sup>47</sup> One reason for this is the apparently fragmentary nature of the poem. Two recent 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.<sup>48</sup>

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 credence by Brusendorff's comments on this poem, which seem to have gone unheeded by subsequent generations of critics. Noting that the final stanza of the poem, which continues the narrative after Anelida's Complaint, appears in only four of the eight manuscripts containing the entire

poem, Brusendorff conjectured that this "peculiar and 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."<sup>49</sup> 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 fleeting, inconstant. Again in this poem, this point is brought home 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, this time in normal order, 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. For it seems, because of the invocation, that what follows will in some sense be epic in scope. 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 is here suggested. *Anelida and Arcite* opens with a dark metaphor which casts a shadow over the remainder of the poem. The narrator will tell an old story

That elde, which that al can frete and bite,  
As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,  
Hath nygh devoured out of our memorie. (ll. 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 sublunary 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 (l. 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 says this, but the imagery suggests it.

The invocation also contains the first hint that the narrator of the story is not 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*.<sup>50</sup> And as for Corynne, although there have been several questionable attempts at identifying this

source, the identity remains a mystery, and perhaps always will.

In all likelihood, there is no Corynne--the narrator is here engaging in a subtle sort of lie.

As the "Story" portion of the poem begins with a three-line Latin epigraph quoted 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 honor and glory in war. The description of Theseus' triumphant return is continued in stanza seven, wherein, 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 shall discuss below.

It is in this seventh stanza that a sudden shift occurs in the speaker's presentation. Midway through 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)

The transition is clumsy and incompetent; 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 complete in itself, this is a serious structural flaw. And the narrator's complimenting himself upon his "slye wey" of writing is the apex of ignorance. Furthermore,

as the poem continues, the narrator's competence becomes more and more a matter of doubt. 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 Anelida is introduced in line 71, 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, and he hasn't even the common decency to keep it to himself. He consistently tells the reader ahead of time everything that will happen. He blurts out the fact that Arcite is "fals" (ll. 11, 49, 140), reminds the reader of it in line 87 ("he was double in love") and again in line 97 ("he was fals; hit nas but feyned chere"). 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 puzzle out those things which the narrator, despite his veneer of over-confident omniscience, 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 remainder of her description



in stanzas 11-12 is just what one would expect of such a lady, except perhaps for an inordinate emphasis of her "stidfastnesse" (l. 81). But this emphasis becomes meaningful immediately in retrospect when one reads stanza 13, which introduces the contrastingly "fals" Arcite, who is "double in love and no thing pleyn" (l. 87). Having been told by the loquacious narrator twice before (in ll. 11 and 49) that Arcite is not to be trusted, and seeing him win his lady, Anelida, through false means in stanzas 13-14, one is led to expect a tale of betrayal in love. 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, and one can only wait for the cad's true colors to appear. In the meantime Arcite feigns 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 wel 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 wordly joys. That figure which gives pause is the proverbial comparison of Arcite to a horse "that can both bite and pleyne" (l. 157). The image is an emblem of treachery, of seeming what one is not, of playing false ("biting") and covering up ("pleyning"). The "horse" image is repeated in ll. 183-184, when Arcite's new lady drives him as she would her horse, holding him "narowe / Up by the bridil, at the staves ende." She is in complete control of him, but does not get close enough to be "bitten." She is a better "horsewoman," apparently, than Anelida. A third figure that recalls the latter two is Anelida's "Is that a tame best that is ay feyn / To renne away, when he is lest agast?" (ll. 315-316). The beast that runs away because he is no longer afraid of his master is like the horse who needs to be firmly controlled to prevent his biting: neither is truly "tame," though they give that appearance. 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.<sup>51</sup> The fact that Anelida is not able to keep her steed bridled, so that it runs wild, may well suggest the fact that her passions have run unchecked by her reason--her love of Arcite has blinded her to common sense, 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.

As the narrator sought to control the ship but never reaches "port" never completes the story he begins, so Anelida sought to control her "horse," but has been bitten and deserted. The image of the biting animal recalls, again, that initial metaphor of devouring time: can time be controlled? There is no doubt that people delude themselves into believing they can evade or control his devouring jaws, but he, like the horse, will eventually break loose and bite those who try to master him.

→ The story of the poem now proceeds as expected. Arcite leaves Anelida, and goes off to his disdainful new love. Arcite's service is hard, for this new love "made him bothe bowe and bende, / And as her liste, made him turne or wende" (ll. 186-187). In retrospect, Anelida's easy yoke ("She was so ferforth yeven him to plese, / That al that lyked hym hit did her ese" [ll. 111-112]) becomes all the more commendable, and Arcite's treachery the more heinous.

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 color was (l. 146). It may have been white, red, or green, but he does not mention blue (the color 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 and his self commendatory loquaciousness, 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.<sup>52</sup> 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, but may not seem completely unwarranted. However, when the narrator advises

Ensample of this, ye thrifty wymmen alle,  
 Take her of Anelida and Arcite,  
 That for her liste him 'dere herte' calle,  
 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)

his values seem somewhat twisted. 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. And the narrator's assertion that the reason Arcite loved Anelida "lyte" was that she was too meek contradicts what he has already said in stanzas 13-15--that Arcite was feigning from the beginning. The sympathy which the narrator evinces 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

distraught **woman**. But the metre of the poem leads the reader to expect such shifts: the Proem and the first four stanzas are a lament for what has happened, and are written in nine line iambic pentameter. Stanza five is sixteen lines; it introduces shorter lines and a new rhyme scheme. One anticipates a corresponding shift in thought, and is not disappointed. Anelida begins here to beg Arcite to return, and to contemplate various courses of action designed to win him back, all of which she rejects, saying that, even if she did win him to her again, he would simply, again, be false:

For though I hadde yow to-morowe ageyn,  
I myghte as wel holde Aperill fro reyn,  
As holde yow, to make yow be stidfast. (ll. 308-310)

Stanza five of the Antistrophe again displays a change in verse form, and a corresponding change in attitude: Anelida repents her judgement of Arcite, and begs him to have pity on her.

As the Complaint whirls from topic to topic, as Anelida frantically grasps at position after position, 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."<sup>53</sup> The Complaint is an unusual combination of natural speech rhythms and metrical **formality**. Those natural phrases, however, are not merely colloquial but impassioned. Lines like "And shal I pleyne--alas! the harde stounde-- / Unto my foo that yaf myn herte a wounde"

(ll. 238-239), or "And shal I preye, and weyve womanhede? / Nay! rather deth then do so foul a dede! / And axe merci, gilteles,-- what nede?" (ll. 299-301) are characteristic of a mind in a state of emotional upheaval--not, certainly, of one in carefully reasoned contemplation. And certainly the narrator's impassioned description, earlier, of her reaction to Arcite's betrayal

She wepith, waileth, swowneth pitously;  
To grounde ded she falleth as a ston;  
Craumpyssheth her lymes crokedly;  
She speaketh as her wit were al agon;  
Other colour then asshen hath she noon;  
Non other word speketh she, moche or lyte,  
But "merci, cruel herte myn, Arcite!" (ll. 169-175)

has not exactly placed her in the position of one who is to be admired for her calm rationality. So it is that, when she interprets events in her Complaint, her estimation of the situation is no more to be trusted than that of the narrator. She is clearly, as she herself states in one unquestionably accurate judgement, suffering from emotional distress: "my wit is al awaye" (l. 319).

One cannot, therefore, fully accept Anelida's fatalistic stand in lines 243-245:

My destinee hath shapen hit so ful yore;  
I wil non other medecyne ne lore;  
I wil ben ay ther I was ones bounde.

The lines immediately bring to mind those which Mars utters in his Complaint, condemning the Creator for compelling men to love "malgre her hed" (l. 220). In that poem, it was clear that that compulsion existed only in forcing men to desire the Highest Good. Mars' free will chooses to love the lesser goods of this world. Anelida's contention that it is inescapable destiny which forced her to love

Arcite and forces her to continue loving him contradicts the facts of the story as they are presented. Here, Anelida clearly acts out of free will, not destinal compulsion, when she grants Arcite her love:

But nevertheles ful mykel besynesse  
 Had he, er that he myghte his lady wynne,  
 And swor he wolde dyen for distresse,  
 Or from his wit he seyde de wolde twynne.  
 Alas, the while! for hit was routhe and synne,  
 That she upon his sorowes wolde rewe; (ll. 99-104)

But Anelida's reference to an outside force controlling her life recalls the reference in line 44 to Theseus' being "In al the flour of Fortunes yevynge." The possible implication at that point, it will be recalled, was that Theseus was about to experience a fall. Well the wheel has come full circle, but it is not Theseus but Anelida who has fallen.

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; time always gnaws away at all things transient. 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 portion of the poem, reinforces the appearance/reality opposition which now can be seen to permeate 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 remembrance. 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.

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 shal hem fynde as fast  
As in a tempest is a roten mast. (ll. 313-314)

Those who love are, in Anelida's opinion, which here concurs with the events of the poem, like those who trust in a rotten mast in a tempest. The mast gives the illusion of security, but it is in reality rotten, consumed by time. The earlier ship image, and the narrator's false confidence, false security, in his own powers, are called to mind. The ship of stanza three has never reached a haven--the story of



Theseus has never been brought to a conclusion. Like the ship of these lines in Anelida's Complaint, the "ship" of the narrative has relied on the false security of the narrator. Anelida's ship is destroyed by the tempest. Similarly, the narrator's "ship" never reaches its supposed destination.

Anelida at one point calls Arcite "My Swete Foo" (l. 272). In this oxymoron, all other figures of speech, and the drama of the entire poem, come together in microcosm. For the words contradict themselves. Arcite is sweet, but is a "foo." The ship seems safe, yet is destroyed. The beast seems tame, yet turns on its master. Arcite seems true, yet is false. The poem seems one thing, yet is another. There is no reconciliation. The reader pauses over "Swete Foo," but cannot reconcile the terms. He can, however, relate them to the irreconcilability of the poem itself.

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 facile "nothing thinketh the fals as doth the trewe" (l. 105), nor Anelida's pathetic "Wher is the trouthe of man? Who hath hit slayn?" (l. 312). It concerns, rather, "al the flour of Fortunes yevynge" (l. 44). Boethius listed all of the following as being under the governaunce of Fortune:

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.  
(Bk. III, pr. 2, ll. 115-119)

Clearly all of this is what Theseus has attained through his martial exploits through stanza seven. But what Boethius neglected to mention--

earthly love--is dealt with in the remainder of the poem, and this, too, is a transient joy, and hence under the governance of Fortune. The ultimate experience of the poem is the frustration of perception. What earlier commentators maintained 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.<sup>54</sup> Its substance, as I perceive it, is that very fragmentary nature which belies the poem's apparent easy definability. The poem forces the reader to alter his perception of the world: he can no more formulate the poem, pierce 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 joy, both here and in the Mars, which could almost be a companion piece to this poem, lies in a realm outside of the transient, apparent joys of this world. True felicity 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 manifestly, the Troilus, 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 piece together the true meaning of what is happening. The implication is that the reader, illumined by the revelation of Christ (the "dawning" of which the bird in Mars' Proem sings), has

no such excuse. And the emphasis upon human free will in both poems becomes, for the reader, all the more significant.

## CHAPTER VI: NOTES

1

Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 242-45.

2

Citations of the Roman de la Rose in my text are to Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la Rose, ed. Daniel Poiron (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974); line numbers will be given in parentheses. The translation is from The Romance of the Rose, trans. Harry W. Robbins (New York: Dutton, 1962); page numbers will be given in parentheses.

3

D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 11.

4

Robinson, p. 860.

5

Walter W. Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. 2nd.ed., 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), I, 77.

6

Margaret Galway suggested that Chaucer, who as Clerk of the King's Works in September of 1390 was robbed of his master's moneybags twice in a single day, was writing the poem in the hope of being released from his debt to the king (he was, in fact, released on January 6, 1391), and of getting a new position, which he did in June of that year ("Chaucer Among Thieves," TLS, 20 April 1946, p. 187.). Galway's idea seems to concur more readily with the allusion to the three Princes than does that of Edna Rideout, who believed the poem to be a response to Chaucer's losing his customs controllership upon the ascension of Gloucester in 1386 ("Chaucer's 'Beste Frend'," TLS, 8 February 1947, p. 79.).

7

See James I. Wimsatt, "Anelida and Arcite: A Narrative of Complaint and Comfort," Chaucer Review, 5 (1970), 1-8.

8

John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 81.

9

Malcolm Pittock, "Chaucer: The Complaint Unto Pity," Criticism, 1 (1959), 162.

10 Pittock, p. 162.

11 Pittock, pp. 161-62.

12 Skeat (Works, I, 62) saw this as a serious inconsistency and a flaw in the poem, since Pity is spoken of first as buried, then as lying in state. Whether this is a flaw I do not know, but Chaucer was striving not for consistency but for effect. He uses "buried" in line 14 to play on the word, and he presents Pity as lying in state in order to present the speaker's reactions and those of the other "mourners."

13 Pittock, p. 164.

14 Wolfgang Clemen, Chaucer's Early Poetry, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen and Co., 1963; rpt. 1968), p. 184.

15 Pittock, p. 162.

16 Skeat, Works, I, 460.

17 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), but Nolan's scheme leaves out the final two stanzas.

18 Pittock, p. 165.

19 Pittock, p. 165.

20 Skeat, Works, I, 62.

21 It was John Shirley who first claimed that the Complaint of Mars was composed at the request of John of Gaunt, and, according to Shirley, "some men sayne" it refers to "my lady of York, daughter to the Kyng of Spayne, and my lord huntingdon, some tyme Duc of Excestre" (see Skeat, Works, I, 65). Skeat seems to have accepted

the statement as true, and it has been supported strongly by Haldeen Braddy, since Valentine poems in general, "in the vogue sponsored by Oton [de Granson] . . . served not for abstractions, but for personal allusions" ("Chaucer and Graunson: The Valentine Tradition," *PMLA*, 54 [1939], 359.). But it has never been sufficiently explained why Gaunt, or for that matter Chaucer himself, would want to write a poem sympathetically treating a notorious affair between Isabel, Gaunt's sister-in-law and wife of one of England's most powerful men, and John Holande, Earl of Huntingdon and half-brother of Richard II, particularly since Holande later became Gaunt's son-in-law, marrying Elizabeth of Lancaster. Why on earth would Gaunt want to publish his son-in-law's adulterous escapades? Cowling suggested that in fact the poem refers to Holande's affair with Elizabeth when she was engaged to John Hastings, Earl of Pembroke, and is written to "excuse and to compliment" (George H. Cowling, "Chaucer's 'Complaints of Mars and Venus'," *RES*, 2 [1926], 405-10.). More recently George Williams argued that Mars actually represents John of Gaunt and Venus his mistress Katherine Swynford, Chaucer's sister-in-law, and that the Complaint is "essentially a plea for tolerance of Mars's illicit love that has been harshly rebuked" (*A New View of Chaucer* [Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1965], p. 58.). But neither Mars nor Venus is presented in a particularly admirable way--Mars cuts a rather pathetic if not foolish figure when he arms himself in lines 99-105, but cannot keep up with Venus because of the weight of his armor. Venus, meanwhile, flees to Mercury and seems to take him as her lover (ll. 141-147). It is difficult to conceive of Chaucer portraying such powerful people, and his own patrons, in such a way--and absurd to think that Gaunt himself would have requested it. It seems more reasonable to explain Shirley's note by way of Shirley's occupation and character: he was concerned with selling what he had copied, and his rubrics, as Brusendorff suggests, often read like the promotional copy of some modern publisher (Brusendorff, p. 219). The point is that Shirley knew that associating this poem with some juicy court scandal would inevitably arouse the interest of a potential buyer.

The most convincing evidence that this poem refers to events in the lives of actual people is the precise reference to the date April 12, which would seem to have no other purpose than to refer to a real event, according to Williams (p. 59). But the fact is, the date may also refer to a specific astrological event, in keeping with the frame of the poem. And as J. D. North has shown, in the year 1385, Mars was in conjunction with Venus in Taurus on 19 March; when the sun entered Taurus on April 11, Venus had left two days earlier. These events seem to parallel the events of the poem, and Chaucer's use of April 12 rather than April 11 is certainly a close enough estimate, probably based on actual observation, since the best almanacs available at the time put the sun's entry into Taurus a few days later (J. D. North, "Kalendres Elumyned Ben They: Some Astronomical Themes in Chaucer," *RES*, n. s. 20 [1969], 140-41.). Ultimately, then, there is no convincing reason to take Shirley at his word.

Shirley said of Venus that it was written for Isabel of York in the character of Venus. If that is so, then there is good reason

to consider the two poems as unified. This, in fact, is one of the arguments put forward by Rodney Merrill in the most recent and extensive study yet published on these poems. Merrill contends that the fact that Venus is a translation should be no reason to doubt the unity of the poems, and conjectures that Venus was composed later than Mars: Chaucer composed a poem showing John Holande as Mars making a Complaint concerning Isabel of York, Oton de Granson's "Lady," as Venus; Granson then answered with a series of ballades addressed to the same lady; finally Chaucer translated Granson and put the poems into the lady's own mouth as a "declaration of devotion to Grandson's rival" ("Chaucer's Broche of Thebes: The Unity of 'The Complaint of Mars' and 'The Complaint of Venus,'" Literary Monographs, 5 [1973], 9.). This reconstruction of events is clever and admittedly hypothetical, but is of use only if the topical allusions are in fact really in the poem, which is highly doubtful.

Merrill presents two more compelling reasons to reunite the two poems. The first is textual. Though the two poems do appear separately, as Robinson notes (Robinson, p. 857), Merrill contends that the best manuscripts print the poems as a connected whole, and that those which do not are, for one reason or another, unreliable. Further, the printing of the poems separately may simply "result from the tendencies of scribes to excerpt" (Merrill, p. 7). But scribes were, it should be noted, also just as likely to combine, as in the cases where Chaucer's Complaint to his Lady is treated as a continuation of the Complaint unto Pity. Nevertheless, the textual evidence remains the strongest argument for the unity of the two poems, though it is by no means conclusive.

Merrill's other reason for combining the two poems is the fact that he sees a thematic link between the Mars and Venus, where the question of moral responsibility raised by Mars in his Complaint is answered only in the Venus (Merrill, p. 19). But that "answer" comes in the form of a rather dubious reading of Venus' Complaint as having a double meaning, the first applying ironically to Mars, the second applying to Christ. Says Merrill: "the critical laughter at Venus' extravagance and self-deception stimulated by one reading, is an almost necessary preparation for us to be able to see and accept the higher love in the second reading as a fulfillment and replacement for the 'fol amour' in the first" (Merrill, p. 54). I find this interpretation unlikely for two reasons. First, as we have already seen several times, the language of love customarily suggested the language of religion, and vice-versa, so that a lover's description of his lady quite often sounded like praise of the Virgin. Why, then, in a poem written from a woman's point of view, should her description of her lover not bring to mind Christ Himself? It should be noted that the parallels Merrill cites--for example the fact that Venus' lover is "the best that ever on erthe wente" (l. 60)--are simply typical lovers' hyperbole, and certainly need not imply a description of Christ. And though Merrill speaks of "Christ's personal condescension to every individual mortal" (Merrill, p. 55), it is very difficult to see such an implication in Venus' words "me to serve is al his besnesse" (l. 20), which imply a courtly love relationship and no other. Secondly, Merrill seems to beg the question

several times, calling Venus' description of her lover's "bounte, wisdom, governaunce" ironic as it applies to Mars assumes that it applies to Mars (Merrill, p. 46). A more logical answer would be that it doesn't apply to Mars, and that the two poems are not related. Similarly, while in the Mars Phoebus is called the "candel of jelosye" (l. 7), Venus makes jealousy feminine, a change which Merrill excuses by saying Venus "emulates Mars in turning resolutely away from the concrete circumstances, even to the extent of making 'Jelosie' a woman" (Merrill, p. 49). Again, it is far more logical to assume two different poems.

In addition to the foregoing, there are other facts which lead one to doubt the unity of the two poems. First, there is the Envoy at the close of the Venus. Here, Chaucer refers only to the ballades which he translated from Granson. Were he to have wished the two poems joined, why would he have ended the entire work with an Envoy ignoring the first two-thirds of the poem? This fact was what led Furnival to separate the two poems in the first place, in his edition of 1871 (Frederick J. Furnivall, Trial Forewords to My 'Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems [London: Chaucer Society, 1871], pp. 90-91.). Secondly, putting a Complaint into Venus' mouth extolling her former lover seems quite inconsistent considering that fact that she seems to have already been unfaithful to him with Mercury. It seems, then, that the separation of the two poems, as printed by Skeat and Robinson, must be accepted. Accordingly, I will consider the Complaint of Mars independent of Venus.

23

John Matthews Manly, "On the Date and Interpretation of Chaucer's Complaint of Mars," Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, 5 (1896), 124.

24

Gardiner Stillwell, "Convention and Individuality in Chaucer's Complaint of Mars," PQ, 35 (1956), 69-89.

25

Nancy Dean, "Chaucer's Complaint, a Genre Descended from the Heroides," Comparative Literature, 19 (1967), 24.

26

Clemen, p. 195.

27

Text of "Complaint to my Mortal Foe" is from Skeat, ed., Chaucer: The Minor Poems. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), pp. 468-69, ll. 9-16.

28

Chauncey Wood, Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 154.



29

Merrill, p. 37.

30

Neil C. Hultin, "Anti-Courtly Elements in Chaucer's Complaint of Mars," AnM, 9 (1968), 70.

31

Merrill, p. 39.

32

Stillwell, p. 86.

33

Gardner, Poetry, p. 88.

34

Skeat, Works, I, 64-65.

35

Jaufre Rudel, "Quan lo ruis de la fontana," text and translation from Frederick Goldin, ed. and trans., Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), no. 19; line numbers are given in parentheses.

36

Marcabru, "Ges l'estorhels non s'oblida," text and translation from Goldin, Lyrics of the Troubadours, no. 13; line numbers are given in parentheses.

37

Hultin, p. 60.

38

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, "Hymnus Ad Galli Cantum," text and translation from Arthur T. Hatto, EOS: An Enquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry (The Hague: Mouton, 1965). Text originally published H. J. Thompson, Prudentius, I (1949), 6 ff.

39

Hultin, p. 60.

40

Stillwell, p. 72.

41

Wood, p. 120.

42

The astrological aspect of the poem is covered by Manly, Skeat, and others, and so I will not attempt to go into that aspect here except where it is relevant to my thesis.

43

Dean, p. 19.

44

Hultin, p. 62.

45

Edgar S. Laird, "Astrology and Irony in Chaucer's Complaint of Mars," Chaucer Review, 6 (1972), 230-31.

46

Wood, p. 151.

47

The poem has seemed to many either a poorly constructed jumble of epic and lyric, or merely, like the Complaint to his Lady, an early exercise in versification. Pratt said that "the characters and situation . . . are stock; the poem has almost no unity and almost no plot; indeed, one may question whether Chaucer had given much thought to the possible outcome of the slight fragment of narrative he had commenced" (Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's Use of the Teseida," PMLA, 62 [1947], 605.). Robbins enumerates the charges that "the epic invocation and the early story of Thebes are inharmonious with the tender complaint," and that, in the Complaint, Anelida's diction "is thoroughly conventional" (Russell Hope Robbins, "The Lyrics," in Beryl Rowland, ed., Companion to Chaucer Studies [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968], p. 322). Wolfgang Clemen, too, called the poem a failure because it manifests a collision of two fundamentally different styles (Clemen, p. 198). Even those who defend the poem do little more than damn with faint praise: James I. Wimsatt admits that the "reasons for the neglect [of the Anelida] are clear. . . . Nevertheless, there are other qualities--delicacy of tone, fineness of expression, and highly-wrought versification--which merit for the poem more attention than it has received" (Wimsatt, p. 1). W. P. Ker, long ago, said that the poem was "wanting in substance" but that its "fineness of style . . . prove[s] what elegance might be attained by the strong hand of the artist, when he chose to work in a small scale" (William Paton Ker, Essays on Medieval Literature [London and New York: MacMillan, 1905], pp. 82-83.).

48

Wimsatt cites Machaut and Froissart as Chaucer's inspirations, saying that in several of their long love poems, Complaints occur as set pieces, which are followed later by balancing poems of comfort. Wimsatt projects that, had Chaucer finished the poem, Anelida would have been given comfort, probably in a set piece balancing her Complaint (Wimsatt, pp. 1-8).

Michael Cherniss, in contrast, believes that the fragment is actually the beginning of what would have been a Dream Vision poem, with Anelida, rather than a Chaucerian narrator-persona, as the dreamer. The dream would probably have resolved her problems by

consoling her for Arcite's injustice and justifying her innocent suffering ("Chaucer's Anelida and Arcite: Some Conjectures," Chaucer Review, 5 [1970], 9-21.).

49

Brusendorff, p. 260.

50

On Chaucer's sources, see Pratt. See also Edgar F. Shannon, "The Source of Anelida and Arcite," PMLA, 27 (1912), 461-85; Madeleine Fabin, "On Chaucer's Anelida and Arcite," MLN, 34 (1919), 266-72; and Paul Clogan, "Chaucer's Use of the Thebaïd," English Miscellany, 18 (1967), 9-31. On "Corynne," see Robinson, p. 789; and Douglas Bush, "Chaucer's 'Corinne,'" Speculum, 4 (1929), 106-07.

51

On the symbolism of the horse, see J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 82, 311.

52

Clemen, p. 204.

53

Clemen, p. 207.

54

Ker, p. 82.

## CHAPTER VII

## The Narrative with Lyric

While it is apparent that Chaucer, in composing his lyrics, was aware that the conventional medieval lyric had certain weaknesses which he attempted to circumvent 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, aware as well of certain strengths inherent in lyric expression, deliberately sought in his full-blown narrative works 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 abjures 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 Troilus and Criseyde.<sup>1</sup> Robert O. Payne would add three additional passages from the Troilus,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

The most obvious question that comes to mind is, of course, why would Chaucer 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.<sup>4</sup>

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."<sup>5</sup> This is certainly true. If the narrative itself is running on, 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."<sup>6</sup>

Payne, taking a different approach, considers the lyric passages from a rhetorical point of view. Considering the lyric passages of *Troilus* 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, but that none but Antigone's song (Bk. II, ll 827-875) actually contributes anything 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 recognizes it as such by citing one as an example of the device."<sup>7</sup>

It is not merely 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 stylized and artificially presented when expressed as a lyric poem, but then Shakespeare's soliloquies are by no means to be taken as literal transcriptions of the movement of the character's consciousness either. 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 glaring weakness: in its overriding 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 clichés. 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 journalistic 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 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 Troilus 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, much as occurred in Mars or Anelida.

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 Troilus and Criseyde. I have chosen these nine lyrics because they



seemed to me the most manifestly 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 extant 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 hymself" (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.  
 Allas, 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)

This brief poem is, of course, structurally self-sufficient. It consists of eleven octasyllabic lines rhyming a a b b a c c d c c d. The fact that it is structured thus rather than in the octasyllabic couplets of the rest of the Book of the Duchess may be an indication

that this lyric was composed earlier, perhaps was one of the poet's earliest attempts at the Complaint genre, and is here introduced as an appropriate expression of the grief of the Black Knight in this story. Perhaps the poem originally consisted of two six-line stanzas, with a third line, omitted here, which had provided a closer rhyme for agoon (though Chaucer did at times rhyme -on with -oon, as in anoon and non in lines 179-180 of this poem). That third line may have been omitted because it did not fit the context of the story.

It is clear the poem shows the influence of a similar lyric in Machaut's Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne, as Kittredge demonstrated,<sup>8</sup> as well as Machaut's motet no. 3.<sup>9</sup> 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 all must concur she has no equal in her "goodnesse." The lamenting speaker typically bemoans the fact that a personified "Deth" did not take him as well.

While the lyric has nothing particularly remarkable to commend it, it does universalize, in its conventions, grief over the loss of one's Beloved. If the emotion expressed strikes a responsive chord in the reader, enabling him to feel sympathy for the bereaved knight, then the lyric has served its purpose. It shall 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." At any rate, the Dreamer begins to question the knight, and does not leave off 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 universalize 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 romp through the woods to a discussion of grief. Chaucer sometimes uses lyrics in some of his later poems in a somewhat 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, and justly so, for 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 Merciles Beaute.

Chaucer borrows from the French court poets Machaut, Deschamps, and Froissart his intricate rhyme scheme: ABB abAB abbABB (unless David Chamberlain is correct in assuming that the entire Parliament of Fowls is intended to have 700 lines, and the roundel should therefore rhyme ABB abABB abbABB<sup>10</sup>). That it was, like many of the French rondeaux, intended to be sung is suggested by the fact that some manuscripts of the poem include the marginal gloss Qui bien aime, a tard oublie ("he who loves well is slow to forget"). Skeat maintained that Chaucer was adapting his lyric to a known French tune, and that these words alluded to that tune, although, as Skeat conceded, "it is not quite clear to me how lines of five accents (normally) go to a tune beginning with a line of four accents."<sup>11</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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 in his conjecture 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.<sup>13</sup> The roundel, then, combines the aristocratic and the folk in a special way. As such, it is a perfect form for Chaucer, who likewise

characteristically 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 *Anelida and Arcite*), and for the *Parliament of Fowls* in particular, where birds from out of a folk tale hold court and speak with all courtesye. Further, the roundel again shows Chaucer working within the poetic traditions of his time, and bringing them to new plateaus of achievement.

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 vernal 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 chord 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 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."<sup>14</sup> Foulke and Smith, analyzing Frye's "comedy" in lyric forms, note that the poem as celebration of temporal experience corresponds to this "green world" comedy of Shakespeare.<sup>15</sup> 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 as they are, as well, 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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> This roundel, as these selected 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.

For 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 soft,  
 That hast this wintres wedres overshake,  
 And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!

The first thing that strikes one about these lines is the personification of "somer" (by which Chaucer means spring).<sup>18</sup> Here the "soft," 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 foul 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. As in Prudentius' hymn the light scattered the demons, and sinners were advised to shake off the "indolent life" which would "weigh down our heart," so the "somer sonne" chases away the "demons" of the dark, and will "overshake" the foul weather. 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.

A remarkable aspect of these three lines is the alliteration of s and w sounds. Chaucer was, as is well known, no admirer of the "alliterative revival" narratives popular in his day in the North and West Midlands--"I kan nat geeste 'rum, rum, ruf,' by lettre" he has his pilgrim Parson say ("Parson's Prologue," l. 43); however, we have already seen, in the Words unto Adam and in Merciles Beaute, for example, that Chaucer was quite sensitive to the use of sounds in the creation of a mood. Since Chaucer is concerned here with presenting "somer" as alive, busy, active, and winter as dark, sleepy--dead--it is no accident that he chooses the very low, deep, heavy tones of the w when speaking of the heavy weather that must be shaken off, and the lighter, fronted sound of the s in speaking of the lively summer season. The slight whistle-like sound of the lightly articulated s may even be intended to simulate the actual sound of the small birds' singing.

These 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.

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:

Wel han 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 in line 689 parallels the waking 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. For as the world casts off winter and wakes again, reborn, so wakes again within the birds' procreative urge, the urge to life which participates in the universal regenerative process.

Interestingly enough, this theme of the inclusion of the universal

within the individual, and the containment of the individual within the universal, is reflected in the stanzaic form of the roundel itself. 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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 evne acord" (l. 668). The lyric, then, appropriately caps off this section on Nature and the birds by manifesting, in its carefully constructed formal pattern, the concord that has been restored: the pandemonium, 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.

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" (l. 20), presumably about love. Scipio Africanus comes to the narrator in a dream, saying that, as a reward for his diligence, "sumdel of thy labour wolde I quyte" (l. 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 wellle 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!" (ll. 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 were  
There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;  
Th'eschewing is only the remedye!" (ll. 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 sanction 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 pleye a ravyshyng swetness,  
That God, that makere is of al and lord,  
Ne herde nevere beter, as I gesse. (ll. 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."<sup>21</sup> This natural garden contrasts with the temple of brass which the Dreamer finds in the midst 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" (ll. 260-261). No

sweet music pervades the Temple of Venus, but only pitious sighs, "engendered with desyr" (l. 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 to the Formel on Nature's arm:

"Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,  
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.<sup>22</sup> 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 likewise failed to see in the poem anything resembling an answer to the Dreamer's initial problem. Clemen said flatly that the roundel "has little to do with the matters that were under discussion."<sup>23</sup> Brewer thought that the poem had more to do with joy in nature than with any "logical solution of the original problem,"<sup>24</sup> 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."<sup>25</sup>

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 the reader 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),<sup>26</sup> 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 concord and harmony.

That the harmony of the universe is the ultimate cause of the harmony of the earth 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 thilke speres thryes thre,  
 That welle is of musik and melodye  
 In this world here, and cause of armonye.

That Chaucer's portrayal of the goddess Nature as the personification of that very force of natural harmony is evident in the description of her in lines 379-381 of the Parliament as

. . . the vicairie of the almyghty Lord,  
 That hot, cold, hevye, lyght, moyst, and dreye  
 Hath knyght by evene noumbres of acord,

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:

al this accordaunce of thynges is bounde with love,  
that governeth erthe and see, and hath also comandement  
to the hevne. . . . O weleful were mankynde, yif  
thilke love that governeth heven governede yowr  
corages. (Bk. II, mtr. 8, ll. 13-26)

This notion, the underlying theme, as we have seen, 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  
Benygnyly to chese or for to take,  
By hire acord, his formel or his make. (ll. 369-371)

And later, after the debate, "To every fouȝ Nature yaf his make / By evene acord" (ll. 667-668). The choice of a mate, one's individual love, should therefore be by mutual agreement, and hence appropriate, in agreement with the design of nature, in harmony with the scheme of 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. Chaos is the result.

By now the overriding importance of the roundel as a quintessential

expression of the Parliament's basic theme should be obvious. More than simply illustrating through its careful pattern and harmony the concord praised in the narrative, which was what Bennett saw in the lyric,<sup>27</sup> 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 the natural harmony, the Divine Love, which binds the universe "by evne nounbres 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 rhythmic harmony of the seasons. When it defies the natural law, it causes discord, as the lesser eagles' attempts to win the forme 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 clere" in the Prologue to the Legend of Good Women. Like the roundel in the Parliament of Fowls, this ballade has been praised enthusiastically 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."<sup>8</sup> R. T. Davies certainly considered the poem a separable entity, for 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."<sup>29</sup> 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 written prior to the rest of the Prologue.<sup>30</sup> Not only is the ballade in rhyme royal stanzas while the rest of the poem is in heroic couplets, but the fact that, in the F version of the Prologue, now generally believed to be the earlier version, the refrain reads "My lady cometh, that al this may disteyne" (ll. 255, 262, 269), while in the G version the line is altered to "Alceste is here, that al that may desteyne" (ll. 209, 216, 223), seems to indicate a continuing effort on the part of the poet to alter the lyric so that it would fit more neatly into the context of the

narrative, here by adding the name of the poem's heroine to the refrain, while originally the lyric's refrain had been more general.

Considered as a lyric, the poem is a conventional ballade without an Envoy--in the form it is identical with Gentillesse 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 of his lady in lines 848-1041 of the Book of the Duchess, wherein the lady is described from head to foot, while each particular virtue of which the lady is possessed is enumerated and dwelt upon at length. But poems with lists of proper names were also, Robinson asserts, a type of poetry common to the period.<sup>31</sup>

The "Hyd, Absalon . . . ," then, is a poem in which the lover praises his lady by comparing her favorably with important figures from the biblical, classical, or mythological past. Certainly the effect is one of elevation of the present by evoking through association the romance of the past. But there is also the simple fact of the sound of these names, which, as Davies mentioned in the quotation above, makes the lines "not only melodious but dignified and resonant." Names like Absalon, Lavyne, Polixene, Laudomia and Ysiphile add a resonance not otherwise accessible in Chaucer's more often monosyllabic or disyllabic Middle English.

Just what the individual figures enumerated signify, and what virtues seem most important to the poem's speaker, is the most important

point to consider in understanding the poem.<sup>32</sup> 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 peculiar 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--with a possible pun on "gilte=gilte=guilty," recalling Absalon's treacherous rebellion against his father King David, as described II Samuel. The fact that the first "important" quality mentioned in the poem is beautiful hair, and the fact that the "gilte" hair belongs to "guilty" Absalon, goes a long way to undercut 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" in the first sense. Nor can she be called "meek" in the sense of "submissive"--she is certainly not submissive to her husband's 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: "friendly 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 God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength by Esther's meekness, 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 repentance--another Christian virtue.<sup>33</sup> But Penelope and Marcia are told to make "no comparison" of their wifhood with that of the poet's lady.

As the catalogue moves on, two other favorable 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 crowning virtue, is "trouthe of love" (l. 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 an 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 setting 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 irony is that, had these ladies so renowned for their trouthe been acquainted with the truth that sets men free, that "delivers" them in Chaucer's ballade, then they would not have ended tragically; they would have found consolation for their earthly pain

in the ultimate truth of God.

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 undercuts 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 places it in the climactic position and 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 the love of daisies 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 prime 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, but these differ between versions. In the F, or earlier, version, the poem is spoken by the narrator himself, upon seeing the approach of the Lady Alceste. Long ago, Goddard asserted that in the F version of the Prologue, in having the narrator sing the song himself, Chaucer has vastly increased the irony of the poem. The song makes clear the narrator-dreamer's reverence for love and makes Cupid's subsequent tirade, in which he chastises the narrator for having written about the faithless Criseyde and for having translated the "heresy" of the Roman de la Rose, appear quite absurd: having the narrator sing the song makes us realize his devotion to love before Cupid himself accuses him of the lack of it.<sup>34</sup> Further, if my interpretation of the lyric is correct, the irony is even more pointed. For 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 in miniature 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. And the fact is that in such a comparison Love's saints come up wanting.

There have been difficulties perceived in the poem as it appears in F. Lowes noted several, the most serious of which was the "direct movement" of the narrative was interrupted, and the "time changed from



past to present."<sup>35</sup> It is true that the narrator, at the point of Alceste's entrance, includes the poem as part of a description of her, so as to praise her the more highly; he recites the poem as if it occurs to him while he is writing, rather than as he sees the lady. He says

And therefore may I seyn, as thynketh me,  
This song in preysyng of this lady fre. (F 248-49)

The fact that Lowes condemned this as a break in the "direct movement," and that Robinson seems to agree by saying that Chaucer's revision, the G version, putting the lyric into the mouths of the lady's attendants, "makes it [the lyric] form a distinct part of the action,"<sup>36</sup> reveals an attitude on their part conditioned by the "realist" school, that the "author" ought to be "refined out of existence"--that something which actually draws attention to the fact that something is a piece of literature, after all, is something to be avoided. But Chaucer's lyrics certainly abound with devices--the Envoys for example--that draw attention to the actual situation in which the poem is being performed. To perceive this as a flaw seems to deny much of the milieu of Chaucer's art.

John Gardner, avoiding a definite commitment as to which is the better version of the Prologue, sensibly discussed the changes as designed to change the characterization of the narrator and of the God of Love, in order to make the characters more consistent with the Legends themselves. The Legends, in Gardner's opinion, are to be taken as completely serious and sincere depictions of what Chaucer says they are: the God of Love's saints. The revision, says Gardner, changes the God of Love from foolish to elevated (since his

tirade against the narrator is not now so obviously unwarranted), and changes the narrator from a "comically simple minded worshiper" to one who "stupidly, is not a worshiper."<sup>37</sup> Gardner elaborates:

Realistically characterized, the narrator does not go into transports over daisies or anything else; he does not whimsically break into his narrative with a song but gives it to the god's attendants.<sup>38</sup>

Gardner seems to assume that the Legend is to be taken seriously, and therefore the G version, where the lyric is sung by Alceste's attendants, is more consistent with the overall tone: the narrator, in Gardner's view, really isn't a worshiper of the God of Love, but seems to be reformed and converted as he writes these Legends.

But it is very difficult to take Chaucer at his word and to really consider Medea, for example, a "saint" of any kind. The overriding tone is probably one of playfulness, but there is also irony involved in the implied comparison with the real Golden Legend. And if the entire Legend of Good Women is in fact ironic, then version F of the lyric seems actually to be the better of the two, because the narrator is more obviously treated in an ironic light, and the ironic lyric contributes to the irony of his characterization. When the attendants sing the song in G, however, the only function the song serves is to mark the climactic moment of the action when Alceste enters, and to emphasize the short-sightedness, perhaps, of her followers. This may improve the structure, as Robinson seemed to think, but it actually shows the lyric less well integrated into the Prologue. The F version of the Prologue may not be the better of the two versions, but it does better utilize the lyric within the narrative.

The "Hyd, Absalon . . . ," then, illustrates an effective use of the lyric to help to establish character in the narrative (at least in F). But Chaucer's use of the lyric within the narrative really culminates in the most important of his finished works, Troilus 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 slavishly 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 Troilus, 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 scattered through the poem. The Troilus 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 Troilus himself, which, like stop action in a film, momentarily freeze the action to concentrate upon character.

Once again we see treated the dominant theme running throughout Chaucer's 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. That, too, is the theme of Troilus and Criseyde, which illustrates by long and painful exemplum the impermanence of worldly love, and depicts in the end a Troilus 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 Troilus, 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."<sup>39</sup> As such they develop, in a progressively more insightful way, 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 poem,<sup>40</sup> and Charles Muscatine saw "some thirty-odd lyric monologues" in Troilus' mouth alone,<sup>41</sup> I see six passages in Troilus 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 è, che dunque è quel ch' io sento?" ("If it is not love, what then is it that I feel?") (l. 1),<sup>42</sup> 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 broadened its application. But remember that this lyric occurs in a narrative--the speaker is already particularized as Troilus, the former scoffer at lovers now turned lover himself.

That, then, is one reason for the change: it is quite consistent with Troilus' 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. I, l. 202), are indications that Troilus 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, Troilus still is confused as to the exact nature of love: "And if love is, what thing and which is he?" (Bk. I, l. 401).

Further, this confusion as to the nature of love itself reflects the overall theme of the poem: the confusion of worldly love with

universal love. The narrator has said, after Troilus was struck with love of Criseyde, that "Love is he that alle thing may bynde, / For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde" (Bk. I, ll. 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.

Ernest Wilkins, in pointing out these and other changes which occur in Chaucer's lines, considered such alterations evidence that Chaucer misunderstood Petrarch's text in several aspects.<sup>43</sup> More perceptively, however, Patricia Thompson sees Chaucer's changes in the first stanza as consistent with Chaucer's hero: "Troilus," she says, "an all-too-recent scoffer, has first to readjust his ideas."<sup>44</sup> One other change which Thompson points out is the addition, in Chaucer's line 406, of the detail of "For ay thurst I, the more that ich it drynke." This, Thompson shows, is consistent with two other additions which Chaucer made to Petrarch's Italian: The depiction of the speaker as not knowing "whi unwery that I feynt" (l. 410), and of love as a "wondre maladie" (l. 419). The three images work together to create a picture, conventional in courtly love poetry, of love as a disease, causing the feverish lover to faint, and to languish in unquenchable thirst--a suggestion which Petrarch's poem, concentrating specifically on love's confusing paradoxes, does not make. But Thompson, though admitting that the images are consistent with each other and with the character of Troilus, tossing in anguish upon his bed, still

considers these and other Chaucerian expansions as mere "padding" and considers Chaucer's poem in general as displaying a "loss of concentration" in comparison with the Petrarchan original.<sup>45</sup> This may in part be true, but it must be said in Chaucer's defense that he was following the principle of medieval poetry, as expressed by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, of expanding upon his basic material, by embellishing it with further elaboration. In addition, Chaucer's embellishments, while not necessarily improving upon Petrarch, do have the virtue of adding to the characterization of Troilus, and so of contributing to Chaucer's greater purpose.

Chaucer devotes the remainder of the first of his three stanzas to a fairly close rendering of the rest of Petrarch's initial quatrain.<sup>46</sup> If love is good, he contends, then where does all his woe come from? If love is bad, then why are his 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."<sup>47</sup> 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."<sup>48</sup> The opposing clauses, in effect, reflect the opposing forms of love. Payne is probably correct, but it should be added that Chaucer's use of contentio is less marked than Petrarch's, as the second stanza shows.

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.<sup>49</sup> If the burning comes

from the speaker's own will, then why the lamenting? Line 409 is a deviation from Petrarch, though: the Italian had continued the contentio with the line "If against my will, what does lamenting avail?" Chaucer, however, renders this "If harm agree me, wherto pleyne I thenne?" Or in other words, if these pains agree with me, why then should I complain at all? The line is more an expansion upon the idea of the previous lines, rather than a contentio. The point of Chaucer's change is difficult to see. One could say with Wilkins that Chaucer misunderstood the Italian, or speculate with Root (without any evidence) that Chaucer was using a defective manuscript of Petrarch,<sup>50</sup> but with a conscious artist one should assume a real purpose behind Chaucer's use of the line. What the change does here is completely eliminate the suggestion that this love could be something against the will of the lover. That is not really possible to a medieval thinker. Aquinas, for example, had said that the will is by nature inclined to the Good (see the earlier discussion of Womanly Noblesse, pp. 186-187). If one loved something, his will was directed toward it. That love may be misdirected, and so the will gone wrong, but that is the fault of the lover. In the rest of the stanza, Chaucer keeps the implication that Troilus burns "at myn owen lust" (l. 407), and as the stanza ends, keeps Petrarch's suggestion that the lover must consent to the love (l. 413). Another change from Petrarch which follows this same pattern occurs in line 412, for where Petrarch says of love "come puoi tanto in me" ("how can you have such power over me") (l. 8), Chaucer writes "How may of the in me swich quantite." The direction seems obvious: clearly Chaucer is doing



his best to emphasize Troilus' responsibility for his own plight. Not that Troilus realizes the full implications of what he says here-- he will always try to pin the responsibility for his actions on someone else, most notably in his famous "predestination" soliloquy in Book IV. Love does "bind alle thinge," but man has the power to turn from love of the Highest Good to love of lesser goods, as Troilus has done. Another Chaucerian addition to Petrarch, "O swete harm so queynte" (l. 411), plays on the double meaning of queynte, suggesting that Troilus' will has turned from love of the Highest Good to complete immersion in the "queynte" love of Criseyde.

The final stanza of Troilus' song is closest of all to the original, rendering Petrarch's sestet in seven lines. Like Petrarch, Troilus 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, 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," and the omission of one of Petrarch's lines--line twelve.

In the twelfth line of Petrarch's sonnet, the speaker depicts his metaphorical rudderless boat as being without its ballast of wisdom, and being, instead, laden with error. This must, again, be considered a deliberate and calculated omission. But what was its purpose? Patricia Thompson thought that, because the line implied a "moral judgement" of the speaker, it was "too solemn" for Chaucer's poem.<sup>51</sup> But considering Chaucer's other deliberate changes, which emphasize

Troilus' moral responsibility, his free choice of Criseyde's "queynte" love, there would be no reason to shrink from any "moral judgement" at this point. It seems more likely that Chaucer eliminated the line because it may have suggested a self knowledge of which Troilus is, at this point in Book I, as yet incapable. 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 Troilus, however, the error may have suggested Troilus' awareness of his error in choosing Criseyde's love over universal love--an awareness for which Troilus would not be ready until the end of Book V. That "error" may be suggested ironically, though, by the image of the rudderless boat. The early Irish peregrinus, for example, or Constance in the Man of Law's Tale, illustrates the religious significance of the rudderless boat: trusting in God, these saints allowed God's love to direct the course of their boats, and were, like Constance, brought to safety. But trusting in Criseyde's love, Troilus is tossed between conflicting winds, and has no harbor in sight.

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 Troilus, toward more partial good in place of the Highest Good. And third, that love is directed freely by the human will, and therefore Troilus, and all of us, are accountable for what we love.

This accountability is suggested again in the second and longest

important lyric passage of the *Troilus*, Antigone's song in Book II, lines 827-875. Reminiscent of the *Complaint of Venus*, 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."<sup>52</sup> 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 *Troilus*, 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 Troilus.

Antigone's song is a courtly lyric of seven rime royal stanzas. 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 forevermore all her "hertes lust to rente" (l. 830). She goes on to say that she does this 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 glowing, 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 I 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 applicable 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 detractors, 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.<sup>53</sup>

To Criseyde's objection in lines 772-73 that love will "thralen 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. 855-59)

Criseyde's fear that there is in love "evere som mystrust or nice strif" (l. 780) is belied by Antigone's insistence that she loves "withouten jalousie or strif" (l. 837). And Criseyde's fear that the love of man does not last--"for though thise men for love hem first torende, / Ful sharp bygynnyng breketh ofte at ende" (l. 791)--is answered by Antigone's insistence upon the permanence of her love:

"But I with al myn herte and al my myght,  
As I have seyde, wol love unto my laste,  
My deere herte, and al myn owen knyght,  
In which myn herte growen is so faste,  
And his in me, that it shal evere laste." (ll. 869-873)

And Ida L. Gordon noted the way in which Antigone answers Criseyde's

metaphorical statement that there always "som cloude is over that sonne" of love (l. 781), by the image of one who cannot look at the sun because of his own feeble sight<sup>54</sup>:

"What is the sonne wers, of kynde right,  
 Though that a man, feeblenesse of his yen,  
 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 pose 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 / Thise loveres, as they konne faire endite?" (ll. 885-86), 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, Troilus, 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. Look for example at Antigone's answer to the charge that love is "thralldom." 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 or strife is undercut in line 866 when she seems to admit

that there are rocky 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 patently false that no medieval person, schooled in the transience of "this world, that passeth soone as floures faire," would accept. Obvious by omission is 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 tinge of irony.

What, then, is it that convinces Criseyde? She is 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 evinces a power, "by suspending normal syntactic and logical relations, to make outlandish notions seem compelling, to make sense out of nonsense."<sup>55</sup> While Howard's notion of the lyric does not hold true 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 Troilus' first lyric, this song and Criseyde's reaction to it help to establish character. While Troilus' song suggested his confusion and lack of self-knowledge, his tendency to languish 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 Troilus. 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 colors some of Chaucer's characterization; it is rather that, within Criseyde herself, as, for that matter, in Troilus, 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."<sup>56</sup> Criseyde is aware of the dangers of the affair and of the likely impermanence of it--she goes into it with her eyes open. And the point is that she, like Troilus, must be held accountable. She is not predestined, but exercises her free will. She makes a conscious decision, not so much to love Troilus but to allow the feeling to come upon her: "she wex somewhat able to converte" (l. 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."<sup>57</sup> It is rather Criseyde's free decision, reached through her emotions, to ride the tide of events and allow this love to come upon her--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--Troilus and Criseyde have finally been brought together through the machinations of Pandarus, and spend a blissful night together. In the morning, a long aube-like scene occurs (Bk. III, ll. 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, ll. 1450-1470. 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> The significance of Criseyde's and Troilus' 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 Troilus itself.

Criseyde's poem begins with an address to Troilus as her "hertes lyf" (l. 1422). She laments the fact that she was ever born, because she feels such woe "That day of us moot make disseverance" (l. 1424). It is she who insists that the time has come for Troilus 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 evince



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 taking, though it is true that Chaucer is here following Boccaccio.<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Saville provides further support for Kaske's contention, 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.<sup>61</sup> Kaske points to other instances in this aube context of Book III where the conventional roles of lover and lady are reversed. Troilus' anguish at parting is much more intense than Criseyde's, according to Kaske (for Troilus sighs "ful soore" [l. 1471], will be "ded anon" if he must, for long, "fro yow sojourne" [ll. 1483-4]). Further, when Troilus asks Criseyde for assurance (ll. 1485-91) and she pledges faithfulness, it is another reversal of the prevailing pattern.<sup>62</sup>

This reversal of traditional roles, which shows Troilus as the one less able to accept the reality of the dawn, seems intended on Chaucer's part for two reasons. First, it may foreshadow the story's end, where Troilus remains the unswerving lover, refusing to accept the fact that he and Criseyde are parted forever, clinging to every shred of hope, 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 honorable for the lovers."<sup>63</sup> For Chaucer, however, this reversal of the normal order serves not to ennoble the lovers by setting them apart, but rather to emphasize the lovers' misdirected lives.

Criseyde expresses a desire that the night would last as long as the one "when Almena lay by Jove" (l. 1428)--the night when Hercules was conceived, which purportedly lasted some three months. She addresses the "blake night" (l. 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 labors, but this night is to blame for speeding by so fast that it allows for no rest. In the third stanza Criseyde refers again to God as the creator of nature, "maker of kynde" (l. 1437), and calls the night "unkynde," or unnatural, for its neglect of its office--like a monk rushing too quickly through his prayers. She expresses the desire that God, in punishment, will bind night eternally to her own hemisphere, so that it never will be day.

Now the irony in Criseyde's lines is hard to miss. For here is Criseyde, already having, in an "unnatural" manner, given her emotions provinance over her reason, and reversed the traditional male-female roles with Troilus, 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,"<sup>64</sup> by which she refers to Criseyde's line to the night "That shapen art by God this world to hide" (l. 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 out of step 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 element of the alba, the dawn.<sup>65</sup>

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 lesser goods and so are out of harmony with nature. And this aube, contrasted with Prudentius' famous hymn to the dawn, 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. Prudentius says

sunt nempe falsa et frivola  
 quae mundiali gloria,  
 ceu dormientes, egimus:  
 vigilemus, hic est veritas.  
 aurum, voluptas, gaudium,  
 opes, honores, prospera,  
 quaecumque nos inflant mala,  
 fit mane, nil sunt omnia. (ll. 90-97)

(False indeed and paltry are the things which, as though asleep, we have done for worldly fame. Let us be wakeful; here is true reality. Gold, pleasure, joy, wealth, distinctions, succes [sic], all the evil things whatsoever that puff us up, when morning comes, all are as nothing.)<sup>66</sup>

What make Criseyde's aube seem deliberately intended to contrast with the traditional Christian idea of the dawn are the deliberate references to God as creator and the ironic berating of the night for its "unkyndeness." 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!" (ll. 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,<sup>67</sup> but also emphasize the transience of all mundane things--as the power and glory of Troy, greatest of earthly cities, crumbled into dust, so the love of Troilus and Criseyde will vanish, as it must, in this sublunary world. And Criseyde's exclamation of how "hastili" her joy has been driven away by the dawn implies more than she intends, for it reflects the "hasty" demise of all wordly joys, and must of necessity

suggest that one joy that is eternal: the "kyndely" love of "God, maker of kynde."

Troilus' aube continues in much the same vein, but Troilus condemns the day itself. He curses the sun's coming into Troy, saying that it discloses what the night and love have stolen and concealed. The "envious day"--like the "candel of jelousy" 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. It is the "busy old fool" of John Donne, and Troilus asks what the sun could have lost, that it could be looking for here? He asks that God, "for his grace," quench the sunlight.

The irony of these lines must be obvious by now. Certainly it is the daylight, rather than the quenching of it, that is traditionally associated with God's grace. The sun's peering in at every crack suggests the spying of talebearers, but also, as the images of Troilus' first lines imply, the searching out of wrongdoing, of crime. As Prudentius writes:

vox ista qua strepunt aves  
stantes sub ipso culmine,  
paulo ante quam lux emicet,  
nostri figura est iudicis. (ll. 13-16)

(The loud music of the birds as they are perched beneath the very roof, a little before daylight shines forth, is a symbol of our Judge.)

The eyes of the sun, then, may also be the eyes of the all-seeing Judge, whose coming scatters darkness and sin.

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 reversal only serves to further underline Troilus' confused perceptions. He goes on to accuse the sun of having "slayn" 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 gilos, 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 wordly love over Divine. In this way the daylight may surely be seen as having slayn many a lover.

The last three lines of Troilus' second stanza introduce a mercantile image intended by Troilus to put the lovers' world on a higher plane than the mundane, secular world of buying and selling to which the sun, in his opinion, belongs:

"What profestow thi light here for to selle?  
Go selle it hem that smale selys grave:  
We wol the nought, us nedeth no day have." (l. 1461-63)

But Troilus' suggestion that the day offer its light to those who engrave small seals is interesting. Certainly the engraver of a seal would be an eager customer, needing as much light as he could get for working on such a small scale.

But the allusion to seals should be more than a remark tossed off by Troilus--if this poem is to be effective then the imagery should work toward a consistent end. The seals to which Troilus here alludes suggest a multiplicity of meanings. A seal in the figurative sense is "a token or symbol of a covenant: something that authenticates or confirms; a final addition which completes and secures" (OED). Now Troilus is about to ask Criseyde for some assurance which will seal their love, some token of her faithfulness to the covenant they have made. She answers him with a series of "impossibilities,"<sup>68</sup> vowing

"That first shal Phebus fallen fro his spere,  
And everich egle ben the dowves feere,  
And everi roche out of his place sterte,  
Er Troilus out of Criseydes herte." (ll. 1495-98)

Later Troilus, 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 han fully brought / Into youre grace, and bothe oure hertes seled" (Bk. IV, ll. 292-93). But Criseyde will break faith, break her vow, break the seal. So it is that the carvers of seals, makers of truth, are gladdened by the sun, but the lovers are not.

In addition, in keeping with the traditional association of the dawn with the judgement day, Troilus' allusion to the engravers of

seals may allude to the seven seals of the book of Revelation, upon the opening of which the apocalypse will commence. Again, if Troilus sends the daylight to the makers of those seals, he is like those sluggish sinners in Prudentius' hymn, who say "peccata, ceu nox horrida, / cogunt iacere ac stertere" ("Our sins, like grim night, force us to lie still and snore"), (ll. 27-28), rather than those who welcome the opening of the seals on Judgement Day, looking forward to the bright dawn of Christ's second coming. Further, the allusion to judgement day recalls again the reversal of natural order that Criseyde's and Troilus' aubes both display. This kind of reversal was traditionally associated with the end of time, when, as Christ says, "many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Mat. 19:30), and when, according to Isaiah,

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall feed;  
Their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. (Isaiah 11:6-7)

In his final stanza, Troilus changes from cursing the "cruel day" to chastizing the sun. Portraying the sun as a somewhat less than ideal lover, Troilus (confusing the Titan Sun with Tithonius, consort of Aurora, the dawn<sup>69</sup>) 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 pester 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, as he typically would, as being out of step with the



natural world, depicts the natural world anthropomorphically, in the form of the lovers Titan and Aurora, as being out of step with the courtly love situation. It is a clever new twist, but in the overall context must be seen as an example of Troilus' 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 mundane 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 Troilus of that universal love, though placed ironically in the mouth of a still misdirected Troilus who does not really comprehend the significance of what he says, follows almost immediately in Troilus' "Hymn to Love" which occurs near the end of Book III (lines 1744-1771).<sup>70</sup>

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. The lines with which Chaucer begins come from the middle of Boethius' poem (lines 13-16 and 21-24 in Chaucer's Boece). In Chaucer's altered version, the lines show 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, ll. 1744-1750)

The most significant alteration 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" (ll. 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."<sup>71</sup> This may be overstating the case somewhat, since it was possible, as in Dante's love for Beatrice, for the love of "couples" to belong to the universal harmony. It was when such a love became its own end, when the lover cried, like Criseyde, "felicite clepe I my suffisaunce" (Bk. V, ll. 763), that this kind of love was contrary to the natural order. But Troilus' love must be so construed, since he in fact sees no ultimate source for the love he shows as governing all, other than his love of Criseyde.

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 blatantly ironic considering the aube scene just described, Troilus, 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. Again, Chaucer is concerned with unity-- these lines follow more logically than Boethius' arrangement. The fact, says Troilus, that the greedy sea is held within certain limits, rather than flowing fiercely out to drown the earth, is Love's doing. And if ever Love should slacken its rein, "lete his bridel go," all would be lost, split asunder.

It has been noted that Chaucer uses all of Boethius' lines except the last, which reads "O weleful were mankynde, yif thilke love that governeth hevne governede your corages" (ll. 24-26).<sup>72</sup> Troilus 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!" (ll. 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, and to the wish that Love will protect all true lovers, reveals that, in Troilus' mind, there is no difference between the two modes of love. As Gordon puts it, "it's ambiguous which love is meant, and the point is that Troilus doesn't know the difference. Troilus' hymn shows that what his love is really seeking is the true happiness."<sup>73</sup> But that love is obviously misdirected, and that raises a further point about these last lines. Troilus 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 lesser goods, and that is what has happened in Troilus' case-- he has chosen the lesser love of Criseyde as the force which will govern his life. The ironic point is that what Troilus is wishing for in this lyric is that all hearts be compelled to the lesser 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, for no longer would love of God be the single unifying force in the universe, but all would be attracted to partial impermanent good, and chaos would result.

The importance of this lyric, here at the beginning of the downward turn of the action, when events begin to reach their now-inevitable conclusion, cannot be overemphasized. In translating Boethius' classic statement of love's power, and in depicting Troilus' disastrous

misunderstanding of the concept, Chaucer has presented here what John Hagopian calls a "microcosm of the whole poem."<sup>74</sup> Perhaps Robert Payne says it best when he remarks "however much a Neoplatonist one holds Troilus 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."<sup>75</sup>

The result of this confusion of the two kinds of love is illustrated by the last of the isolable lyrics in the Troilus, the second Canticus Troili. This poem, appearing in Book V, lines 638-644, after Criseyde has left Troy, is also, at a single stanza, the shortest of the lyric passages in Troilus and Criseyde. The single stanza occurs in place of what in the Filostrato fills five of Boccaccio's stanzas.<sup>76</sup> And this lyric, Rossetti suggested, is based on the mistranslation of one of Boccaccio's lines. For in Filostrato 5.62, Boccaccio wrote "disii porto di morte" ("I carry desires of death") which Chaucer may have read as "I desire the harbor of death." This, Rossetti thought, suggested the ship metaphor upon which the stanza is built.<sup>77</sup> But Howard R. Patch took issue with Rossetti's widely accepted explanation: another passage in the Filostrato (4, st. 143), Patch points out, makes use of the star, port, and death images, and Chaucer may have had this passage in mind. Furthermore, Chaucer refers to Criseyde as a star in Book I, line 175, and as a "lode-sterre" or guiding star in Book V, lines 232 and 1392.<sup>78</sup>

Patch is certainly on the right track in assuming that 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 wel oughte I to biwaille,  
 That evere derk in torment, nyght by nyght,  
 Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille;  
 For which the tenth nyght, if that I faille  
 The gydyng of thi bemes bright an houre,  
 My ship and me Caribdis wol devoure." (Bk. V, ll. 638-644)

Criseyde is the star which would guide the way for the speaker, Troilus, 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: she draws him like a compass needle, and casts her influence upon him like a heavenly body.

But Criseyde is in the Greek camp, and without her Troilus has no light. He has good cause to lament, he says, so that, bereft of his guide, every night he sails toward his death with the wind astern. If on the tenth night (that time at which Criseyde has vowed to return) he does not have her guiding beams for a single hour, he and

his ship will be wracked in Charybdis, the monstrous whirlpool of mythological fame which Chaucer would have known through Virgil and Ovid.

Such a bald summary does not really do the poem justice--it is a noteworthy extended metaphor. Certainly it is not particularly original: the Beloved as a guiding star is a rather familiar image, appearing, for example, in the apocryphal Chaucerian To My Lode Sterne and, probably most familiarly, in Shakespeare's

It is the star to every wandering bark  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.<sup>79</sup>

But what makes the lyric brilliant is the way its imagery relates to the rest of the poem. 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 in quintessential form the "double sorrow" of Troilus, and underline the real cause of that double sorrow. The problem at both points--when Troilus suffers for his love of Criseyde and then for his loss of her--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 midpoint of the poem, in Book III, Troilus 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). Troilus prays that Love will "cerclen 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 flowen  
 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, will drag him into Charybdis.

The reference to Charybdis which ends the last Canticus Troili is a carefully calculated allusion, if the songs of Books I and V can be considered together, as the recurring ship imagery suggests they might be. It is virtually impossible to think of Charybdis without thinking of Scylla: the two monsters have since antiquity been the figurative embodiment of the peril of running into one danger by striving to avoid its opposite. If the sorrow which threatens to kill Troilus, to shipwreck him, in the second Canticus Troili is his Charybdis, then the sorrow, the danger which threatens his rudderless boat in the first song, is his Scylla. Troilus' love-sickness threatened to kill him in the beginning--he suffered because he had not yet achieved Criseyde's reciprocal love, and was unable to conceive of a way to attain it. In attaining it through Pandarus' machinations he avoids Scylla but leaves himself wide open for Charybdis--



the loss of her once he has attained her. And that loss is finally what does bring him to wrack. The only way to avoid both dangers would have been to sail in a different direction--to sail toward the harbor of universal love rather than earthly felicity.

The lyrics of the *Troilus* present a skeleton 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 Troilus, 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 favor of romantic love, and helps to incline Criseyde toward accepting Troilus 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 Troilus 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 Troilus 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. Certainly it orders his life. But Troilus' problem is that the binding force of his life is transient--she is "slyding of corage"--and so his personal world collapses just as the cosmos would if universal love would slacken its rein. Thus the final Canticus Troili of Book V depicts Troilus' life as a rudderless boat, without the direction and order that Love could give it. Had Troilus' love been centered first on the Highest Good, and had he loved Criseyde as a natural mate, according to her worth, rather than worshipping her as the Highest Good, then Troilus' world would not have been chaos.

But Troilus 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 Troilus sees from the eighth sphere:

And ther he saugh, with ful avysement,  
The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye  
With sownes ful of hevenyss melodie.

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse  
This litel spot of erthe, that with the se  
Embraced is, and fully gan despise  
This wrecched world, and held al 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 foloweth so  
The blynde lust, the which that may not laste,  
And sholden aloure herte on heven caste. (Bk. V, ll. 1811-1825)

## CHAPTER VII: NOTES

- 1 Arthur K. Moore, "Chaucer's Lost Songs," JEGP, 48 (1949), 198-99.
- 2 Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance (1963; rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), p. 185.
- 3 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]), pp. 1-45.
- 4 Moore, p. 198.
- 5 Haskell, p. 33.
- 6 Haskell, p. 35.
- 7 Payne, pp. 84-85.
- 8 George Lyman Kittredge, "Guillaume de Machaut and the Book of the Duchess," PMLA, 30 (1915), 1-24.
- 9 Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Lyrics," in Beryl Rowland, ed., Companion to Chaucer Studies (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 315.
- 10 David Chamberlain, "The Music of the Spheres and the Parliament of Foules," Chaucer Review, 5 (1970), 35.
- 11 Walter W. Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), I, 525.
- 12 Payne, p. 143.
- 13 Peter Dronke, The Medieval Lyric (1968; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 188.

- 14 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1957; rpt. 1971), pp. 182-83.
- 15 Robert Foulke and Paul Smith, An Anatomy of Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), p. 829.
- 16 Wolfgang Clemen, Chaucer's Early Poetry, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen and Co., 1963; rpt. 1968), p. 167.
- 17 D. S. Brewer, ed., The Parlement of Foulys (London: Thomas Nelson, 1960), p. 25.
- 18 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 (1949), 82-83.
- 19 One might even suspect that the lyric was composed independently of the rest of the Parliament, and only later inserted into the longer poem. The fact that the birds, who purportedly are singing the song, refer to themselves in the third person (they and them rather than we and us in lines 687-689) is one indication of a prior composition. So is the fact that the song is said to be sung "To don to Nature honour and plesauce" (l. 676), but in fact does not mention Nature at all but rather St. Valentine. Such a suspicion is fueled by Brusendorff's observation that the roundel appears in only two of the surviving manuscripts of the poem. He conjectures that the other manuscripts may have left the poem out because it had, in the original, been inserted in the margin. If this theory is true, it suggests that the poem may have been added as an afterthought. See Aage Brusendorff, The Chaucer Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), p. 288.
- 20 J. A. W. Bennett, The "Parlement of Foules": An Interpretation (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 184-85.
- 21 D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 132.
- 22 Robertson, p. 132. See also Bernard Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 144.

23

Clemen, p. 167.

24

Brewer, p. 25.

25

Payne, p. 142.

26

Chamberlain, pp. 32-56.

27

Bennett, p. 184.

28

H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford History of English Literature, Vol. II, pt. I (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 10.

29

R. T. Davies, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 329.

30

Margaret Galway, "Chaucer's Sovereign Lady; a Study of the Prologue to the Legend and Related Poems," *MLR*, 33 (1938), 167.

31

See Robinson, p. 843. John Livingston Lowes notes that Froissart's poem which climaxes the *Paradys d'Amours*, one of Chaucer's main sources for the Prologue to the *Legend*, is a ballade which "names flower after flower, only to dismiss them in favor of the Marguerite" ("The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women as Related to the French Marguerite Poems and to the *Filostrato*," *PMLA*, 19 [1904], 650). Roland M. Smith proposed Froissart's ballade VI as a much closer parallel ("Five Notes on Chaucer and Froissart," *MLN*, 66 [1951], 29-30), and Robinson himself enumerates Machaut's *Voir-Dit* and six of Deschamps' lyrics as other examples of the "cataloguing" genre (Robinson, p. 843). One need look, again, only as far as the *Book of the Duchess* for a passage similar in its cataloguing of names and associating them with their particularly significant qualities:

Though I had had al the beaute  
That ever had Alcipyades,  
And al the strength of Ercules,  
And therto had the worthynesse  
Of Alysaunder, and al the rychesse  
That ever was in Babylone,  
In Cartage, or in Macedonye,  
Or in Rome, or in Nynyve;

And therto also hardy be  
 As Ector, so have I joye,  
 That Achilles slough at Troye  
 . . . . .  
 Or ben as wis as Minerva,  
 I wolde ever, withoute drede,  
 Have loved hir, for I moste nede. (ll. 1056-1074)

32

An interesting but totally speculative identification of the three biblical figures has been proposed by Margaret Galway. Galway believed that Ester was intended to represent Queen Anne, and that Absalon is supposed to signify King Richard, since, Galway says, Richard was supposed to have had "immensely abundant hair." Jonathan, faithful friend of David, is meant to represent Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, who was Richard's closest friend (Galway, p. 194); but these identifications have not been generally accepted. For one thing, if Chaucer had wanted to find a figure to represent the king, Absalon would be a terribly undiplomatic choice, and one which the courtier Chaucer was not likely to have made. The most significant fact about Absalon is that he led an unsuccessful rebellion against his father, King David. It would hardly be appropriate to identify a reigning monarch with such a rebel. Furthermore, Chaucer's characterization of the vain, effeminate Absalon in the Miller's Tale is a good example of the medieval attitude toward the biblical Absalon, as Paul E. Beichner has argued ("Characterization in The Miller's Tale," in Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, eds., Chaucer Criticism, Vol I: The Canterbury Tales [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960], pp. 117-29.).

33

See George Lyman Kittredge, "Chauceriana," MP, 7 (1910), 482-83.

34

Harold C. Goddard, "Chaucer's Legend of Good Women," JEGP, 7 (1908), 112; and 8 (1909), 49.

35

Lowe, p. 656.

36

Robinson, p. 843.

37

John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), p. 203.

38

Gardner, Poetry, p. 209.

39

Payne, p. 186.

40

Payne, p. 186.

41

Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 135.

42

Citations of Petrarch's Sonnet 132 are to Robert M. Durling, ed. and trans., Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 270-71; line numbers are given in parentheses.

43

Ernest H. Wilkins, "Cantus Troili." ELH, 16 (1949), 169.

44

Patricia Thomson, "The 'Canticus Troili': Chaucer and Petrarch," Comparative Literature, 11 (1959), 317.

45

Thomson, p. 319.

46

As Thomson points out (p. 320), Chaucer seems to have been quite sensitive to the structure of the sonnet, for he devotes one stanza to each quatrain, and a third to the sestet.

47

Payne, p. 198.

48

Payne, p. 202.

49

Thomson, p. 318.

50

Robert K. Root, ed., The Book of Troilus and Criseyde (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1926), p. 419.

51

Thomson, p. 318.

52

Donald R. Howard, "Experience, Language, and Consciousness: Troilus and Criseyde, II, 596-931," in Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg, eds., Medieval Literature and Folklore Studies: Essays in Honor of Francis Lee Utley (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1970), p. 182.

- 53 Sister Charlotte Borthwick, "Antigone's Song as 'Mirour' in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde," MLQ, 22 (1961), 232-33.
- 54 Ida L. Gordon, The Double Sorrow of Troilus: A Study of Ambiguities in Troilus and Criseyde (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 100.
- 55 Howard, p. 183.
- 56 Borthwick, p. 230.
- 57 Howard, p. 191.
- 58 Robinson, p. 823.
- 59 See R. E. Kaske, "An Aube in the Reeve's Tale," ELH, 20 (1959), 295-310.
- 60 R. E. Kaske, "The Aube in Chaucer's Troilus," in Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, eds., Chaucer Criticism, Vol II: Troilus and Criseyde and the Minor Poems (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), p. 171.
- 61 Jonathan Saville, The Medieval Erotic Alba: Structure as Meaning (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), pp. 153-54.
- 62 Kaske, "The Aube in Chaucer's Troilus," p. 172.
- 63 F. Xavier Baron, "Love in Chretien's Charrette: Reversed Values and Isolation," MLQ, 34 (1973), 379.
- 64 Saralyn R. Daly, "Criseyde's Blasphemous Aube," N & Q, 10 (1963), 443.
- 65 Saville, p. 56.
- 66 Text and translation of Prudentius are from Arthur T. Hatto, EOS: An Enquiry into the Theme of Lovers' Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry (The Hague: Mouton, 1965). Text originally published H. J. Thomson, Prudentius, I (1949), 6 ff.



67

Gardner, Poetry, p. 139.

68

See Susan Schibanoff, "Criseyde's 'Impossible' Aubes," JEGP, 76 (1977), 326-33. Schibanoff notes the irony of these lines, since the medieval rhetorical device of impossibilia was used most often in the genre of "lying songs," used (as in Donne's later "Go and catch a falling star") to warn of the "extreme unlikelihood of feminine constancy" (p. 327). The device has its roots in the "world upside down" topos described by Ernst Robert Curtius in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. William R. Trask (1953; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 94-98.

69

Skeat, Works, I, 482.

70

For the textual evidence that this poem was added in Chaucer's revision of the work, see Root, p. 494. But John V. Hagopian argues that, because of the poem's thematic importance, it cannot be considered to be an addition ("Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, III, 1744-77," Explicator, 10 [1951], no. 2.). Hagopian's assessment of the lyric's importance is accurate, but it does not follow that the poem cannot be an addition conceived by Chaucer to strengthen the poem in a happy spirit of revision.

71

Gordon, pp. 34-35.

72

Hagopian, no. 2.

73

Gordon, p. 35.

74

Hagopian, no. 2.

75

Payne, p. 205.

76

Thomas A. Kirby, Chaucer's Troilus: A Study in Courtly Love (1940; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 270.

77

Robinson, p. 833.

78

Howard R. Patch, "Two Notes on Chaucer's Troilus," MLN, 70 (1955), 11.

79

William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116," in Shakespeare: Major Plays and the Sonnets, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt, 1948), p. 1056, ll. 7-8.

## CHAPTER VIII:

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 clichés 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 Rosemunde, 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 Rosemunde), 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.

Part 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 which 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 which 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 only universals? Although his favorite 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 not 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 Troilus 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.

## CHAPTER VIII: NOTES

1

Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 245.

2

T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," orig. pub. 1919; rpt. in Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co. 1932; rpt. 1950), pp. 4-5.



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