

## CHAPTER 17

# Love Visions and Love Poetry

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For C. S. Lewis, the fifteenth century saw a change in the medieval representation of love. Whereas the high Middle Ages had pitted private desires and public duties against each other in the great romances of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Isolde, a revalorization of marriage at the end of the period promised happier outcomes.<sup>1</sup> This chapter covers some of the same territory charted by Lewis, who was amongst the first critics to afford serious attention to the later Middle English love visions. It follows a development whereby, alongside poems that continue to describe men's experience of love after the fashion of Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la rose* (c1240), we start to find works that attempt to reach a resolution in matrimony of the tensions between desire and duty. It differs from Lewis and echoes some more recent commentators where it expresses doubt regarding the success of those attempts. Where their defence of marriage falls short, the texts addressed in this chapter invite contemplation in particular of women's experiences of love. Throughout the love poetry of the fifteenth century, Middle English writers increasingly evince frustration with traditional expressions of male desire and seek to develop new modes of writing that are capable of encompassing women's wants, including the possibility of women's same-sex desire. It is no coincidence, it will be argued, that the first long English poems in women's voices belong to this text type and period.

The chapter begins with an extended survey of the genre of poetry in English in which the new literary interest in love is most evident: the love vision. Particular attention will be afforded to the influence of Gower's *Confessio amantis* on the developments in love ideology that characterize fifteenth-century writing in this form. At its close, the chapter considers the great variety of shorter love lyrics that survive from the fifteenth century and the invention of the Middle English amorous verse sequence. While continental poetry could boast a long history of such cycles, poets writing in English were slow to take up this form. Fifteenth-century love poetry in English will thus be shown to innovate both where it departs from continental traditions and where it reapplies those traditions to create new literary possibilities.

### The *Complaint of the Black Knight* and *Temple of Glass*

Because they demonstrate both the rich inheritance of the genre and its potential at the opening of the fifteenth century, Lydgate's love visions are an obvious place to begin this survey. They have tentatively been dated to the 1420s and are probably the earliest narrative

<sup>1</sup> See C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), especially 232–96.

poems that this chapter will treat.<sup>2</sup> Both works appear to have been popular: the *Complaint of the Black Knight* survives in nine manuscript copies and the *Temple of Glass* survives in ten, two of which are extracts, and one early print (1477? STC 17032).<sup>3</sup> Of the two, the *Complaint* best illustrates the conventional parameters of the genre as Lydgate inherited it. In it, a love-sick narrator describes waking up one May morning and departing on a walk that takes him into a garden; there he drinks from a well and happens upon a wounded knight dressed in black and white. Surprised at his discovery, the narrator hides; overhears the knight complain of his unsuccess in love; returns home; and writes up his experience.

Lydgate's literary debts in the *Complaint* are manifold. The descriptions of the morning walk and the garden scene draw on a tradition going back to the *Roman de la rose*, and the meeting with the knight and the overheard complaint have clear parallels in the *Book of the Duchess* and in the poetry of Machaut, Froissart, and Oton de Granson.<sup>4</sup> The poet's use of mythological references to adumbrate women's suffering in love also owes something to his fourteenth-century predecessors. Amongst the trees in the garden, the poet sees 'Daphene closed vnder rynde' (64; *rinde: bark*) and

The philbert\* eke\* that lowe doth enclyne      hazelnut tree; also  
Her bowes grene to the erthe dovne  
Vnto her knyght icalled Demophovne.  
(68–70)

But aside from these allusions to the legends of Daphne and Phyllis, the *Complaint* concentrates overwhelmingly on the male experience of bad love. The knight complains that the one woman who could cure him only aggravates his wound. In a miniature allegory of court justice, he asserts the unfairness of his treatment: Truth has been put out by Falsehood at a sham hearing presided over by Cruelty. He continues: he is like all those legendary lovers who deserved success but did not get it; love favours the false and love service goes unrewarded.

At the close of the *Complaint*, Lydgate offers a glimpse of a more equitable kind of love. The poet prays that before sunrise the next day, each of his readers will have been able to embrace his lady. He clarifies:

I mene thus, that in al honeste,  
Withoute more, 3e may togedre speke  
Whatso ye liste\* at good liberte,      Whatever you desire  
That eche may to other her hert breke,\*      disclose their feelings  
On Ielosie oonly to be wreke\*      avenged  
That hath so longe of\* malice and envie      out of  
Werred\* Trouthe with his tiranye.      Waged war on  
(659–65)

Lovers are imagined here in easy conversation, but a limit is set to their interaction. They might embrace and speak 'in al honeste, / Withoute more'.

<sup>2</sup> On the uncertain dating of Lydgate's love visions, see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bibliography* (Victoria, BC, 1997), 14.

<sup>3</sup> NIMEV 1507 and 851; see John Norton-Smith (ed.), *John Lydgate: Poems* (Oxford, 1966). Lydgate's love visions are cited from this edition. Norton-Smith gives the *Complaint of the Black Knight* the title that it has in some early copies, the *Complaynt of a Loveres Lyfe*.

<sup>4</sup> See Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London, 1970), 84–91; and Sue Bianco, 'New Perspectives on Lydgate's Courtly Verse', in Helen Cooney (ed.), *Nation, Court and Culture: New Essays on Fifteenth-Century English Poetry* (Dublin, 2001), 95–115 (at 97–102).

Any questions that this curious formulation might raise are swiftly passed over in the *Complaint*, whose dispatch is begun directly after the lines just cited. The idea of honest courtship receives fuller treatment in the *Temple of Glass*, although the tension that it comprises is not so much resolved as exposed there. In the *Temple*, Lydgate stakes out new ground for the love vision by taking as his subject the solution of one woman's amorous dilemma. It opens with the poet's transport to the temple of the title, on whose walls are depicted a multitude of legendary sufferers in love. The edifice is filled with visitors whose various love complaints are reported; amongst them are several women who lament that they have been married against their will, or that their lovers have tired of them.

One woman is singled out from the crowd and her complaint is given verbatim. At its heart is what appears to be an expression of unhappiness in marriage:

For I am bounde to þing þat I nold:* Frelī to chese þere lak I liberte, And so I want of þat myn herte would, The bodi is knyht,* alþouze my þouzt be fre; So þat I most,* of necessite, Myn hertis lust outward contrarie—* Thogh we be on,* þe dede most varie.	<i>I would not be bound must outwardly oppose Although we are one</i>
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(335–41)

Venus promises to remedy the woman's situation; provides her with a lover; and extracts from the lover a promise that his affection for the lady will remain 'grovndid opon honeste',

That no wizt* shal, þurugh euil compassing,* Demen amys of hir in no degre. For neiper merci, reuþe,* ne pite She shal not haue, ne take of þe non hede Ferþer þen longiþ vnto* hir womanhede.	<i>person; design compassion pertains to</i>
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(870–5)

Venus finally joins the lovers in a golden chain and the poem ends with celebrations that are so loud that they wake the dreaming narrator.

Lydgate's debt to Chaucer in the *Temple of Glass* remains a perennial topic in criticism.<sup>5</sup> The influence of the French poets on the text has also received attention.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the importance of Gower for Lydgate's concept of the love vision has been overlooked—but this seems crucial. In *Confessio Amantis*, Gower had developed at length a theory of 'honeste' love according to which the inevitable pangs of sexual desire might be restrained by reason and safely expressed in marriage.<sup>7</sup> Lydgate appears to allude to this idea in the *Complaint* and is keen to take it over more completely in the *Temple*. But he faces a problem. In *Confessio*, Amans's union with his lady is only ever a theoretical possibility and one which, famously, the poet eschews at the close of his work. In Lydgate's text, by contrast, the lady's conundrum is apparently resolved when she is united with her lover. Quite how satisfactory this remedy can be accounted is doubtful since Lydgate is stricter even than Gower. In the *Temple*, the necessity of abstinence is expressed more clearly than in the *Complaint*.

<sup>5</sup> Most recently, see Boyda Johnstone, 'Vitreous Visions: Stained Glass and Affective Engagement in John Lydgate's *The Temple of Glass*', *New Medieval Literatures*, 17 (2017), 175–200.

<sup>6</sup> See Susan Bianco, 'A Black Monk in the Rose Garden: Lydgate and the *Dit Amoureux* Tradition', *The Chaucer Review*, 34 (1999), 60–8.

<sup>7</sup> The classic exposition is J. A. W. Bennett, 'Gower's "Honeste Love"', in John Lawlor (ed.), *Patterns of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C. S. Lewis* (London, 1966), 107–21. Some of the tensions in this model are unpicked in Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis, MN, 2003).

'Abide awhile', Venus instructs the lover, 'and þan of þi desire / The time neigheth þat shal þe most delite' (1203–4; *the time neigheth*: the time will approach). The protagonists' final union is thus postponed.

One explanation for the inconclusive conclusion of the dream in the *Temple of Glass* is that it reflects a similar situation involving real people. There is a long history of readers pursuing this line of thought. One of the manuscripts transmitting the poem, now BodL MS Tanner 346, has annotations testifying to a curiosity regarding the lady's identity among its early readers. Next to lines 841–7 of that copy, where the lover expresses his desire for his lady's affection, someone has written '*hic vsque nescio quis*' (I still don't know who this is) (fol. 29v); and next to lines 970–6, where the knight begins his petition to the lady, an annotator asks exasperatedly 'who in all godly pity maye be[?]' (fol. 31v). Modern attempts to assign the poem to a particular occasion differ in their plausibility. Most recently, it has been suggested that the situation of the lady in the poem mirrors that of Jacqueline of Bavaria, countess of Hainault, who came to England in 1421 after repudiating her husband, John of Brabant; she was courted by Humfrey of Gloucester but could not marry him before obtaining the papal dispensation that came some time in 1422.<sup>8</sup>

This is the most satisfactory explanation currently available for the conclusion to the *Temple of Glass*, in which the lovers are instructed to content themselves temporarily with a chaste relationship. But, as the annotations to the Tanner manuscript demonstrate, this understanding was not available to all the poem's early readers. Although the dilemma expressed in the poem may have ended happily in reality, within the text, the long catalogue of unhappy lovers on the walls of the temple, the love complaints heard at Venus's court, and the lady's own complaint about her initial union all warn against the likelihood of an easy solution for the heroine (incidentally, whatever felicity Jacqueline enjoyed was short lived: already by 1428 her marriage to Humfrey had been declared void by pope Martin V and Humfrey had married one of her attendants, Eleanor Cobham). Indeed, it seems that the poem's optimistic ending can only be won at the expense of a shift in narrative focus. What began as a story set in motion by a woman's complaint to Venus is finally reframed as the celebration of a man's success in love: 'Thus is þis man to ioy and al plesaunce / From heuynes and from his peynes old / Ful reconciled' (1285–7).

### The Kingis Quair

It is perhaps not too much to claim that an air of unfinished business hung about the *Temple of Glass*. The textual history of the poem indicates that scribes as well as readers were keen to return to it. The manuscripts record different combinations of identifying mottoes for the lady, which suggests that the work could be repurposed, and the lady has a virulent complaint against jealousy that is transmitted in the earliest but not the later copies of the text, indicating that some reshaping of her character took place.<sup>9</sup> Lydgate's poem was also of interest to his poetic successors, one of whom was the author of the *Kingis Quair*.<sup>10</sup> Like the *Temple of Glass*, the *Quair* owes an important debt to Gower's notion of 'honeste' love, which here assumes a political cast. Like the *Temple* too, the *Quair* leaves a question mark

<sup>8</sup> See Julia Boffey, 'Shirley, Trinity College Cambridge MS R. 3. 20, and the Circumstances of Lydgate's *Temple of Glass*: Coterie Verse over Time', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 38 (2016), 265–73.

<sup>9</sup> See John Norton-Smith, 'Lydgate's Changes in the *Temple of Glas*', *Medium Ævum*, 27 (1958), 166–72. The alterations that Norton-Smith identifies as authorial were more probably scribal.

<sup>10</sup> NIMEV 1215.

over the permanence of its actors' felicity despite its apparent determination to end on a high note.

The speaker of the *Kingis Quair* describes his capture in youth by his enemies; an almost eighteen-year imprisonment at their hands; his sight during that time of a beautiful woman; and, after a dream in which he secures the help of Venus, Minerva, and Fortune, his unification with that woman and final enfranchisement. Here the historical background implied by the narrative is easier to determine. The poem's plot maps readily onto the biography of the man who is identified as the author of the work in two paratextual attributions recorded in the only manuscript that now contains it, BodL MS Arch. Selden. B. 24. In a colophon, the second of the poem's two scribes identifies it as the work of 'Iacobus primus scotorum rex Illustrissimus' (James I, the most illustrious king of the Scots) (fol. 211), and in a note preceding the opening of the poem, a later hand echoes this ascription, announcing 'the quair maid be King James of Scotland the first callit the kingis quair and maid quhan his majestee wes in England' (fol. 191v). James I of Scotland (1394–1437) spent eighteen years in English captivity. He was delivered to Henry IV in 1406 by pirates who intercepted the ship that was to take him to France from Scotland, where his family feared for his safety. Negotiations for his release were completed in 1423 and his return to Scotland as its monarch followed upon his marriage in early 1424 to Joan Beaufort, a niece of cardinal Henry Beaufort and second cousin to Henry VI.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Selden manuscript is thought to have been compiled in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, it is normally assumed that James wrote the *Kingis Quair* sometime between his marriage to Joan in February and his murder in 1437.<sup>12</sup> Internal evidence in favour of an earlier date within that span has been found by critics who see the poem as an attempt to translate the potentially compromising experience of imprisonment into a source of authority for the new king.<sup>13</sup> An important aspect of this design is the prominence afforded to the triumphant description of James's union with his lady. Again, the Gowerian precedent is important. In the final tale of the *Confessio*, Apollonius of Tyre is said to derive his right to rule from his decision to wed 'honesteliche':

Lo, what it is to be wel grounded:  
For he hath ferst his love founded  
Honesteliche as forto wedde,  
Honesteliche his love he spedde\*      advanced  
And hadde children with his wif,  
And as him liste\* he ladde his life.<sup>14</sup>      as he desired  
(VIII. 1993–8)

Success in marriage will lead to success on the throne: this is the claim being made for James, in line with the Gowerian model, which argued that a king's ability to govern depended on his capacity first to regulate his own private desires. It is not for nothing that Gower is listed—before Chaucer—as one of the poet's two 'maisteris dere' in the final stanza of the *Quair* (1373–4).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See the ODNB entry for James by M. H. Brown.

<sup>12</sup> See Julia Boffey (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century English Dream Visions: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2003), 90–93. The poem is cited from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> See Sally Mapstone, 'Kingship and *The Kingis Quair*', in Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (eds), *The Long Fifteenth-Century: Essays for Douglas Gray* (Oxford, 1997), 51–69. More recently, see too Joanna Martin, *Kingship and Love in Scottish Poetry, 1424–1540* (Aldershot, 2008), 19–29.

<sup>14</sup> Cited from G. C. Macaulay (ed.), *The English Works of John Gower*, EETS, e.s. 81, 82 (London, 1900–1).

<sup>15</sup> On the relationship between the *Kingis Quair* and *Confessio Amantis*, see further Joanna Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford, 2004), 74–81.

In the positive tones that mark the poem's allusion to James's marriage, Lewis famously heard something new. In the *Kingis Quair*, Lewis writes, 'the poetry of marriage at last emerges from the traditional poetry of adultery'. As such, he suggests, 'it is the first modern book of love'.<sup>16</sup> But the closing celebration of the poet's union with his lady in the *Kingis Quair* is undercut by references to the Ovidian legend of Philomela that run throughout the text. In that story, Philomela is brutally raped by Tereus, her sister Procne's husband, and, after avenging herself on Tereus by having him eat his son, Itys, is turned into the nightingale (*Metamorphoses*, VI. 412–674).

The first reference to this story comes towards the opening of the *Quair*, where the poet recalls how a chorus of nightingales put him in mind of love shortly before he first glimpsed his lady. That the birds are not merely part of the text's amorous décor is made clear when the poet shows himself imploring one of them to repeat its song for her 'for the love of Proigne, thy sistir dere' (380):

Lift up thyne hert and sing with gude entent,  
And in thy notis suete the tresoun telle  
That to thy sister, trewe and innocent,  
Was kythit\* by hir husband false and fell;\*      shown; treacherous  
For quhois\* gilt, as it is worthy wel,      whose  
Chide thir\* husbandis that are false, I say,      those  
And bid thame mend, in the twenty deuil way!  
(386–92)

In *Troilus and Criseyde* (2. 64–70), Chaucer had invoked Philomela's legend at the moment where Pandarus begins to plot Troilus's union with his niece, thereby alluding to his heroine's vulnerability just as the love story is getting under way. Mention of the nightingale at this moment in the *Kingis Quair* might likewise encourage us to fear for the lady's future. But in the lines just cited, the poet attempts to redirect sympathy away from Philomela to her sister: Philomela is instructed to sing about Procne's woes as a wife.

An optimistic interpretation of this innovation would infer that the poet hereby demonstrates his awareness of the history of women's mistreatment by men, even within marriage, and that this awareness will allow him to craft a more equitable relationship with his own wife.<sup>17</sup> It might also be that the idiosyncratic use to which the Philomela story is put in the *Quair* is designed to the comic detriment of James, with a view to highlighting the erstwhile superficiality of his learning or the dizzying heights of his amorous enthusiasm. A parallel might be drawn with the poet's optimistic but fallacious use of Boethian philosophy to demonstrate the supposed security of his new-found good fortune.<sup>18</sup> The *Quair* offers a retrospective on its author's career and the poet is not averse to making himself risible in that perspective: the four stanzas in which he goes on to beg the nightingale to sing are clearly intended as a joke at his expense. Interpretations of this sort would be easiest to secure if James himself performed the poem. Such a scenario seems not unlikely given

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 237.

<sup>17</sup> See Elizabeth Robertson, "'Raptus' and the Poetics of Married Love in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale and James I's *Kingis Quair*', in Robert M. Stein and Sandra Pierson Prior (eds), *Reading Medieval Culture: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Hanning* (Notre Dame, IN, 2005), 302–23.

<sup>18</sup> See further Lois E. Ebin, 'Boethius, Chaucer, and *The Kingis Quair*', *Philological Quarterly*, 53 (1974), 321–41, where a comparison with Chaucer's *Troilus* in Book IV of *Troilus and Criseyde* is explored.

what is known about the intimate and convivial settings in which poetry was enjoyed at fifteenth-century English and Scottish courts.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, the *Kingis Quair* would travel more widely. The most recent work on the text of the poem argues that it was issued twice, once for James's bride and her acquaintances in England, and a second time for 'a somewhat broader audience in Scotland'.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the century it had reached the household of Henry, Lord Sinclair (d. 1513), who appears to have commissioned the Selden manuscript, not earlier than c1489.<sup>21</sup> A sense of the reception that the *Quair* received in this context can be gleaned from the texts added to the book after its copying. These include Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*, in which the deity denounces men's mistreatment of women; the *Lay of Sorrow*, a complaint in a woman's voice about her abandonment by her lover; and the *Quare of Jelusy*, in which a poet's sympathy with a lady he spies weeping spills over into an emotional diatribe against jealousy.<sup>22</sup> Amongst a readership whose interest in women's experience of love is attested by these texts, the side-lining of Philomela's suffering in the *Kingis Quair* may have jarred. The owners of the Selden manuscript, who were relatives of James, can scarcely have been unaware of his grisly murder on the night of 21/22 February 1437; they may also have known about the difficult circumstances in which Joan herself died later in 1445.<sup>23</sup> At a remove from its subject, the *Quair* could lend itself to less hopeful readings not only of its protagonist's likely end but also of its central relationship.

#### Richard Roos's *Belle Dame Sans Merci* and the *Isle of Ladies*

The concern with women's experience of love that animates the *Temple of Glass* and, more subtly, the *Kingis Quair*, finds clearer treatment in contemporaneous poetry that explicitly envisages women's severance from love. The best example of writing of this sort in English is the Middle English *Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which is attributed to Sir Richard Roos (c1410–82) and dated to the mid fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> In that poem, a knight whose own lady is dead relates a conversation that he overheard between another man and a woman who steadfastly refused to accept his love. The woman bats away every love commonplace that the man can muster in support of his case. He faults her eyes for his affliction, but she lays the blame with anyone who falls for a glance. He asks her why she disdains him, and she replies that she neither loves nor hates him, nor wishes to hear of his love for her. He suggests that his love will be fatal; she replies that his sickness is easy: 'but fewe people it causeth for to dye' (294).

<sup>19</sup> See Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996), 130–2.

<sup>20</sup> William A. Quinn, 'Red Lining and Blue Penciling *The Kingis Quair*', *Studies in Philology*, 108 (2011), 189–214 (at 190).

<sup>21</sup> See Julia Boffey, 'Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden. B. 24 and Definitions of the "Household Book"', in A. S. G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie, and Ralph Hanna (eds), *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths* (London, 2000), 125–34.

<sup>22</sup> NIMEV 666, 482, 3627.5; see further Julia Boffey, 'The *Kingis Quair* and the Other Poems of Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden. B. 24', in Priscilla Bawcutt and Janet Hadley Williams (eds), *A Companion to Medieval Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge, 2006), 62–74. For a complete account of the Selden MS and its contents, see Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards (intro.), *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer and The Kingis Quair: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Arch. Selden. B. 24* (Cambridge, 1997), 1–60.

<sup>23</sup> See the ODNB entry for Joan by M. H. Brown.

<sup>24</sup> NIMEV 1086; see Dana M. Symons (ed.), *Chaucerian Dream Visions and Complaints* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2004). The text is cited from this edition.

Eventually, the would-be lover is forced to retire, and the narrator reports a rumour that he did in fact die shortly after the interview. Men are told not to boast of their affections or risk going unbelieved. Women are told not to be like the lady in the poem. As he comes to the close of his text, however, Roos seems to hedge his bets:

And ye, ladies, or what astate ye be,  
Of whom worship hath chose his dwelling place,  
For Goddis love, doo no suche cruelté,  
Namly to hem that have deservyd grace.  
Nor in noo wise ne folow not the trace  
Of hire, that here is named rightwisly;\* *rightfully*  
Whiche, by reason, me semeth\* in this cace, *it seems to me*  
May be called la belle dame sanz mercy.

(821–8)

The French text from which Roos translates this poem, Alain Chartier's *Belle dame sans merci* (1424), is more straightforward in the last four lines of this stanza:

Que ja nulle de vous ressemble  
Celle que m'oyez nommer cy,  
Qu'on appellera, ce me semble,  
La belle dame sans mercy!<sup>25</sup>

(797–800)

(Let none of you resemble she whom you hear me name here, who shall be called, it seems to me, La belle dame sans merci).

The qualifiers added at the close of the English text—'rightwisly', 'by reason', 'in this case'—fill out the longer English line. At the same time, they indicate that the final judgement of the lady is pending. Chartier's *Belle dame* was a true *succès de scandale* that prompted a long series of responses whose earnestness is difficult to gauge.<sup>26</sup> Roos's version of the poem prepares it for an English audience; his principal innovation is the addition of a prologue in which he describes waking out of a half-sleep to the memory of his commission to write the work. By giving Chartier's poem the trappings of a love vision, Roos facilitated the extension of the *querelle de la belle dame* in England, where the text appears to have been popular: it survives in seven manuscript copies.<sup>27</sup>

One other text that might briefly be mentioned here is the *Isle of Ladies*, which survives in two sixteenth-century manuscripts but which is thought to have been written in the fifteenth century.<sup>28</sup> The narrator of the *Isle* relates how he was transported in a waking dream to a mysterious island that was entirely enclosed in walls of glass. There were weathervanes in the form of songbirds and towers shaped like flowers. The sole inhabitants of the island

<sup>25</sup> Cited from J. C. Laidlaw (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier* (Cambridge, 1974). The translation is mine.

<sup>26</sup> See David F. Hult and Joan E. McRae (eds), *Le Cycle de la Belle dame sans mercy* (Paris, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> On Roos's translation, see further Ashby Kinch, 'A Naked Roos: Translation and Subjection in the Middle English *La Belle Dame Sans Mercy*', *JEGP*, 105 (2006), 415–45. More recently, see too Olivia Robinson, *Contest, Translation, and the Chaucerian Text* (Turnout, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> TM 1860; see Anthony Jenkins (ed.), *The Isle of Ladies or The Ile of Pleasaunce* (New York, 1980). The text is cited from this edition.

were women and their self-sufficiency is emphasized. Whoever was there might find their every need met:

for flower, ne* tree,	<i>nor</i>
Ne thinge wherein pleassaunce myght be,	
Ther fayled none for every wighte;*	<i>person</i>
Had thay desyred day and nyghte	
Richesse, hele,* beawty, and ease,	<i>wellbeing</i>
Withe everye thinge that hem* might please,	<i>them</i>
Thynke, and haue, hit* cost no more.	<i>it</i>

(129–35)

The means by which the women are maintained in this condition are precarious, involving their queen in a treacherous voyage every seven years to retrieve three magic apples. The arrival of the dreamer is the first in a series of events that will see her reign toppled. While the poem ultimately relates the defeat of the women, the opening description of their independent existence and a concentration throughout on the strategies of resistance that they adopt makes the *Isle of Ladies* an engaging pendant to Roos's *Belle Dame Sans Merci*.<sup>29</sup>

### The Flower and the Leaf and the Assembly of Ladies

The interest in women's experience of love that animates the late-medieval English love vision finds its fullest expression in two poems that are written in a woman's voice, both of which are dated to the third quarter of the fifteenth century: the *Flower and the Leaf*, which exists uniquely in an early print (1598; STC 5077) but was once included in the late fifteenth-century compilation that is now Warminster, Longleat House, MS 258; and the *Assembly of Ladies*, which survives in three manuscripts.<sup>30</sup> As these poems' early misattribution to Chaucer demonstrates, their premodern readers could interpret them as the work of a male author. More recent commentators have stressed the likelihood that the poems were written by women and explored the ramifications of taking their accounts of their authorship seriously.<sup>31</sup> While both works purport to offer an especially informed view on women's experience of love, they differ broadly in attitude and tone. One striking similarity between the texts is their more or less oblique treatment of women's same-sex desire.

In the *Flower and the Leaf*, an insomniac narrator wanders one spring morning into a marvellously constructed arbour that affords a view of the field behind it while shielding its occupant from vision without. From this vantage point, the arrival of a host of richly dressed ladies bearing chaplets of leaves upon their heads is observed. The women are followed by a company of men who also wear chaplets of leaves: trumpeters, kings of arms, heralds, knights, and henchmen. The men joust; meet the ladies; and, in pairs, the men and women go to dance and sing under a laurel tree. There then enters a company of men and women bearing chaplets of flowers. They also dance and sing, but their celebrations are

<sup>29</sup> See further Boyda Johnstone, "Far semed her hart from obeysaunce": Strategies of Resistance in *The Isle of Ladies*, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 41 (2019), 301–24.

<sup>30</sup> NIMEV 4026 and 1528; see Derek Pearsall (ed.), *The Floure and the Leafe and the Assembly of Ladies* (London, 1962). Both poems are cited from this edition.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see Ann McMillan, "Payre Sisters Al": *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Assembly of Ladies*, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 1 (1982), 27–42; and Alexandra A. T. Barratt, "The Flower and the Leaf and The Assembly of Ladies: Is There a (Sexual) Difference?", *Philological Quarterly*, 66 (1987), 1–24.

spoiled by a sudden blast of heat and a storm that leaves them bedraggled. The men and women who were protected under the laurel tree help the newer arrivals to recover. The leaf queen invites the flower queen to dine with her and, as they depart, both groups parade before the arbour in which the poet is hidden. The poet catches the attention of one of the departing leaf ladies and extracts from her a moralization of the scene.

For a reader of the poem (as opposed to an audience member who sees it performed by a woman), the revelation of the speaker's gender is delayed until the close of the text, where the departing leaf lady addresses her as 'doughter' (462). Earlier in the poem, the traditionally male associations of the place that this speaker occupies have been emphasized. We are told that her arbour was made by a man: 'he that tooke the cure / It to make, y trow, did all his peine' (62–3; *y trowe*: I trust). Indeed, the uniqueness of her situation is remarkable. Women are always being spotted in arbours in late-medieval literature; this is how the lady is first glimpsed in the *Kingis Quair*, for example. In the *Flower and the Leaf*, while the ladies of the leaf dance in the field, the speaker enjoys a privileged position:

And, Got wot,* me thought I was wel bigone,*	<i>knows; situated</i>
For than I might advise hem,* one by one,	<i>scrutinize them</i>
Who fairest was, who coud best dance or sing,	
Or who most womanly was in all thing,	

(186–9)

It is difficult to think of another medieval poem that offers so clear an account of the pleasures of being a *voyeuse* of other women. It is characteristic of the indirect ways in which premodern texts imagine same-sex attraction that, for the private reader, this scene becomes visible only in retrospect.

Notwithstanding this innovative moment, a sense of belatedness hangs about the vision. The route that the speaker takes to her arbour is said to be 'forgrownen ... with grasse and weede' (45) and, when the departing leaf lady gives her moralization of the scene in the field, it transpires that all of its actors are dead.<sup>32</sup> The meanings attributed to the plants that the leaf women carry are of particular interest. The flower queen is said to be Diana, who carries a branch of *agnus castus*, a willow-like plant, in token of her virginity. Those amongst her followers who wore chaplets of the same plant likewise 'han kepte alway her maidenhede'; those wearing chaplets of laurel were 'hardy' and 'wan by deed victorious name'; and those wearing chaplets of woodbine 'never were / to love untrue in word, thought, ne dede' (472–90). By contrast, the adherents of the flower are said to have 'loved idelnes / and not delite of no busines' (536–7).

When she puts active and true-loving women on a par with virgins, the moralizing lady of the leaf achieves what is perhaps the most perfect iteration of the Gowerian ideal of chaste love that the fifteenth century has to offer.<sup>33</sup> But the couching of the moral in the *Flower and the Leaf* suggests that, like the actors in the field, the ideal might be a thing of the past. The ludic context in which the poem asks to be seen further discourages over-earnest interpretation. Late-medieval French and English poets, including Chaucer, refer to a 'game of love' in which participants took the part either of the flower or the leaf and

<sup>32</sup> For an alternative reading of these elements of the poem, see Paul Battles, 'In Folly Ripe, In Reason Rotten: The Flower and the Leaf and the "Purgatory of Cruel Beauties"', *Medium Ævum*, 72 (2003), 238–58.

<sup>33</sup> For a more sceptical reading, see Derek Pearsall, 'The Flower and the Leaf and the Assembly of Ladies: A Revisitation', in Anne Marie D'Arcy and Alan J. Fletcher (eds), *Studies in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Texts in Honour of John Scattergood* (Dublin, 2005), 259–69.

argued for the superiority of their emblem; a participant might take either side: an outcome in favour of the leaf was not inevitable.<sup>34</sup> When the poet is finally identified as an adherent of the leaf at the end of the text, the primary purpose of the work as a playful ‘move’ to benefit that team is indicated. Certainly, the difference between the two companies, who engage in the same pursuits of song and dance, does not seem especially great, and the stakes are not high. In a break with convention, the narrator of this love vision is presented as perfectly content. It is a mystery why she cannot sleep at the outset ‘for there nas erthly wight, / As I suppose, had more hearts ease / Then I’ (19–21; nas: *was not*).

The equanimity of tone that defines the *Flower and the Leaf* is absent in the *Assembly of Ladies*, a poem that seems altogether less satisfied with medieval love traditions. In that work, the poem’s speaker, who is identified as a woman at the outset, is attempting a maze one September afternoon when she is met by a man who asks why she is so pale. The speaker responds with a story about a dream that she had in an underground chamber at the heart of the labyrinth. Having fallen asleep there once, she was met by Perseverance, usher to lady Loialte, who had requested that the dreamer attend a council at her palace, Pleasaunt Regard. The dreamer and her fellowship should go there to present their petitions to Loialte and they should arrive wearing blue gowns that bear their personal mottoes. The narrator continues the story of her dream: en route to Pleasaunt Regard, she interacts with different members of Loialte’s all-woman household—Diligence, the dreamer’s guide; Discretioun, Loialte’s chief purveyor; Aqueyntaunce, her lodgings warden; and Contenaunce the porter—her petition is read out before Loialte along with the petitions of her companions and, although Perseverance had indicated that Loialte would be favourable to them, Loialte finally postpones her judgement in a brief speech, after which, the dreamer says, she awoke.

The *Assembly* is remarkable for the interest that it manifests in the workings of the late-medieval great house.<sup>35</sup> The dreamer’s willingness to comply with the requirements of this world is not total, however. While she arrives at Pleasaunt Regard dressed in blue, her gown bears no motto, and she evades the enquiries that this omission excites. Her reluctance to overinvest in the scenario may be wise: Loialte’s deferral of her judgement suggests her inability to resolve the problems brought before her. It may be that the poem develops a critique of the contemporary legal system.<sup>36</sup> The notion that some sort of trick is underfoot is indicated by the decoration of the chamber in which the petitions are read. Its walls are said to bear engravings of the stories of women disappointed in love: Phyllis, Thisbe, Cleopatra, Melusine, Anelida, and others. But these have been partly obscured by a hanging of ‘umple’, a kind of fine linen (471).

Nor is it clear that the dreamer’s complaint falls within Loialte’s remit. Her companions are shown to complain about a broken promise, service unrewarded, or unstable joy. But when the dreamer relays her own bill, it turns out that she seeks relief from another woman. Her complaint begins:

<sup>34</sup> See Pearsall (ed.), *The Floure and the Leafe*, 22–9.

<sup>35</sup> See further Janet M. Cowen and Jennifer C. Ward, “‘Al myn array is bliw, what nedith more?’: Gender and the Household in *The Assembly of Ladies*,” in Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (eds), *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe, c.850–c.1550: Managing Power, Wealth and the Body* (Turnhout, 2003), 107–26.

<sup>36</sup> See Wendy A. Matlock, “‘And long to sue it is a wery thing’: Legal Commentary in *The Assembly of Ladies*,” *Studies in Philology*, 101 (2004), 20–37.

Nothing so lief* as death to come to me	dear
For fynal end of my sorwes and peyne;	
What shuld I more desire, as seme ye—	
And ye knewe al aforne it for certeyne*	if you knew fully all the circumstances
I wote ye wold;* and for to telle yow pleyne,	I know you would think so
Without hir help that hath al thyng in cure*	who has charge of everything
I can nat thynk that it may long endure.	
(694–700)	

The ‘hir’ referred to here may be ‘Loialte’: the complaint has been related in response to a request from the man to whom the dream is being told.<sup>37</sup> But the bill is clearly introduced as a verbatim report: ‘And thus it seyde, without any more’ (693). Why would the dreamer refer to Loialte in the third person in a written submission to the lady?

If the dreamer’s bill were encountered as a stand-alone lyric, we should have no trouble interpreting it as an expression of a man’s thwarted love. In the context in which it appears in the *Assembly*, multiple readings are available. Perhaps this is an early expression of same-sex desire between women. Perhaps the dreamer requires another woman’s help to secure the love of a man. Or perhaps the complaint is not about love at all: the dreamer may require a friend’s help to get out of a different kind of fix. It has been pointed out that the bills read out in the *Assembly* might have to do not only with love but, more generally, with matters related to cohabitation at court or in a household.<sup>38</sup>

Expressions of same-sex desire hover on the edge of recognition in both the *Flower and the Leaf* and the *Assembly of Ladies*. In one sense this development is unsurprising. Where they focus attention on the knowability of women’s desire, these women-voiced visions develop to the fullest extent a preoccupation that lies at the heart of the form. If they were not written by women, then they at least opened an imaginative space within which women’s authorship could be conceived by future writers.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that the connection between women and the dream vision would endure well into the early modern period. Long after male poets had abandoned the form, Elizabeth Melville chose it to express her Calvinist vision of hell, *Ane Godlie Dreame* (1603), and Rachel Speght used a literary dream to frame an allegorical story of her life, the *Mortalities Memorandum, with a Dreame Prefixed* (1621).<sup>40</sup>

### Free-Standing Love Lyrics and Love Lyric Sequences

A variety of perspectives on the kinds of love explored in the love visions is afforded by a body of shorter, free-standing poems in Middle English that is both large and scattered.<sup>41</sup> One estimate puts the number of such poems at well over 400 and locates them in more

<sup>37</sup> So Barratt, ‘The Flower and the Leaf and The Assembly of Ladies’, 18–20.

<sup>38</sup> See Julia Boffey, “‘Forto compleyne she had gret desire’: The Grievances Expressed in Two Fifteenth-Century Dream-Visions,” in Cooney (ed.), *Nation, Court and Culture*, 116–28 (at 122).

<sup>39</sup> See Liz Herbert McAvoy, ‘Anonymous Texts’, in Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt (eds), *The History of British Women’s Writing, 700–1500* (Houndmills, 2011), 160–8 (at 167). On the potentially tactical anonymity of the *Assembly*, see too Simone Celine Marshall, ‘The Anonymous Author of *The Assembly of Ladies*,’ *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 114 (2013), 301–8.

<sup>40</sup> See Alexandra Barratt (ed.), *Women’s Writing in Middle English*, 2nd edn. (London, 2010), 283.

<sup>41</sup> For a sample, see Thomas G. Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics and Carols* (Cambridge, 2013), 188–213. The free-standing lyrics discussed are cited from this edition.

than 100 individual manuscripts.<sup>42</sup> An absolute formal distinction between the love visions and these shorter texts cannot be drawn since each of the visions includes lyric set pieces or cites lyric compositions. Where whole lyrics were intercalated, scribes could draw attention to this structural feature. Copyists of the *Temple of Glass* often marked up the lyric set pieces in that work, for example, and there is evidence to suggest that the balade with which Lydgate's lover woos his lady, beginning 'Princes of iouþe, and flour of gentillesse' (970), circulated independently.<sup>43</sup> In the *Flower and the Leaf*, the songs that the two companies sing are referred to by citations from their texts. It is useful to recall that these snippets are in French: 'Suse le foyle de vert moy ... / Seen & mon joly cueur en dormy' (177–8; under the green May leaf my joyful heart went to sleep) and 'Si douce est la Margarete' (350; the Marguerite is so sweet). Throughout the fifteenth century, the appeal of French love lyric remained strong.<sup>44</sup>

Like the love visions, the free-standing love lyrics are a rich resource for those considering late-medieval gender relations. Many of these poems manifest an interest in reliving men's experience of love pains. Lovers are shown begging a kiss (e.g., 'Gracius and gay'; complaining that they cannot see their ladies as freely as they would (e.g., 'Have godday, nou, Mergerete'); or worrying about their ladies' constancy (e.g., 'Thayr ys no myrth under the sky').<sup>45</sup> But even amongst these verses interesting perspectives are offered on women's roles. The speaker of 'Myn owne dere ladi fair and fre' complains that his jolly exterior does not reflect his inner turmoil but apparently receives some consolation from a confidante.<sup>46</sup> The poem concludes:

Mysel y wol myn arende bede;* The betur y hopè for te spede;* Non so wel may do myn nede—* A woman so me tolde.	<i>present my petition be successful do what I require</i>
(13–16)	

Other lyrics take a more obviously sceptical approach to the *topoi* of medieval love poetry. In 'Of my lady wel me rejoise I may', for example, Thomas Hoccleve parodies the traditional itemization of the lady's beauties.<sup>47</sup> This is the third in a sequence of lyrics in which Hoccleve shows first his request for the help of lady Money and then her negative response. Here the poet wreaks his revenge:

Of my lady wel me rejoise I may! Hir golden forheed is ful narw and smal, Hir browës been lyk to dym reed coral, And as the jeet* her yën* glistren ay.*	<i>jet; eyes; always</i>
(1–4)	

Hair might be golden, but a forehead should not be according to the standards of lyric beauty; nor should it be narrow. Lustreless red coral is unlikely ever to be an appealing shade and medieval poets do not traditionally single out black eyes for praise. Hoccleve

<sup>42</sup> See Julia Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1985).

<sup>43</sup> See David Fallows, 'Words and Music in Two English Songs of the Mid-15th Century', *Early Music*, 5 (1977), 38–43 (at 40–2).

<sup>44</sup> See Julia Boffey, 'The Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Fifteenth Century', in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study* (Cambridge, 1983), 3–14 (at 5–6).

<sup>45</sup> See respectively NIMEV 1010, 1121, 3534; Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics*, 199–202.

<sup>46</sup> NIMEV 2185; Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics*, 200.

<sup>47</sup> NIMEV 2640; Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics*, 213.

goes on to lavish mock praise upon his lady's 'bowgy cheekës ... as softe as clay' (5; *bowgy*: *baggy*); her oversized nose and mouth; her body 'shape as a footbal' (19); and the parrot-like noise that she makes when she tries to sing.

'Of my lady wel me rejoise I may' draws clearly into focus the anti-feminist potential of the late-medieval love lyric, in which undying devotion often seems ready to tip into bitter resentment. This makes free-standing lyrics spoken in a woman's voice especially difficult to interpret. One such poem, 'Whatso men seyn', begins by expressing incredulity at men's promises of constancy in love and ends with the assertion that, since men are so untrustworthy, women should behave likewise:<sup>48</sup>

Then semèth me Ye may well se They be so fre In every plase, Hitt were peté Butt they shold be Begeled,* pardé, Withowtyn grase.*	<i>beguiled grace</i>
(25–32)	

The poem survives uniquely in the Findern manuscript, CUL MS Ff. 1. 6, a book compiled from the late fifteenth into the sixteenth centuries into which several women's names have been written and that has been thought to contain some woman-authored texts.<sup>49</sup> One possibility is that 'Whatso men seyn' records a woman's playful resistance to men's wiles. But the evidence is susceptible to other readings. That women like to assume the moral high ground but are in fact no better than men is a commonplace in anti-feminist literature. Might this be a poem composed by a man (or a woman?) whose aim was to lampoon women? Was it copied (by a man? by a woman?) because its content was approved? or reprovved? or enjoyed with ironic detachment? Where it illustrates the overlap between the discourses of proto- and anti-feminism, a poem like 'Whatso men seyn' invites its readers to reconsider the difference that gender makes not only to the experience of love but also to the expression of that experience in poetry.

'Whatso men seyn' neatly demonstrates the versatility of late-medieval secular lyric, a quality that is a hallmark of the genre and that was no doubt crucial to its success. While organized sequences of love lyrics were popular in other medieval European languages, especially French, there seems to have been little appetite for collections of Middle English amorous verse that were framed or grouped in ways that might direct their interpretation more narrowly.<sup>50</sup> Two interconnected sequences of Middle English love lyrics buck this trend, and it is with a consideration of these works that this chapter concludes. Both of the sequences have a strong French connection, but both also turn the love lyric to fresh ends in English.

The largest of the two sequences is Charles d'Orléans's *English Book of Love*, which brings together lyric and narrative poems to tell a story of their author's enamourment,

<sup>48</sup> NIMEV 3917; Duncan (ed.), *Medieval English Lyrics*, 211–12.

<sup>49</sup> See Sarah McNamer, 'Female Authors, Provincial Setting: The Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript', *Viator*, 22 (1991), 279–310.

<sup>50</sup> See Julia Boffey, 'Cy ensuent trois chaunceons': Groups and Sequences of Middle English Lyrics', in Graham D. Caie and Denis Renevey (eds.), *Medieval Texts in Context* (London, 2008), 85–95.

bereavement, and retirement from and return to love service.<sup>51</sup> The poems are thought to have been written by Charles during a period of captivity in England that extended from his capture at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 to his release in 1440.<sup>52</sup> During this time, Charles also wrote poetry in French: about two thirds of the poems compiled in the *English Book of Love* have French parallels. That the author conceived of his English and French writings differently can be inferred from the arrangements that he made for their compilation. Just prior to his release, Charles ordered the production of at least two copies of his poetry.<sup>53</sup> Of these, one compiled the English verses organized in the fashion just described; that book is now BL MS Harley 682. In contrast, the copy of the French prison poetry disposed the works such that there remained space to include the poems that would be written into it after Charles's return to France. That book is now Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 25458.<sup>54</sup> In an odd sense, the *English Book of Love* might be considered the more 'French' of the two collections. In presenting himself as the compiler of a poetic sequence whose subject was ostensibly himself, Charles transferred into English the tradition of the *dit amoureux* that had been pioneered by his French predecessors Machaut and Froissart.<sup>55</sup>

Not only the disposition of the bilingual verses but also their texts differ across these two manuscripts. For example, in the French collection, balade 28 begins:

En la nef de Bonne Nouvelle  
Espoir a chargé Reconfort  
Pour l'amener de par la belle  
Vers mon cuer qui l'ayme si fort.  
A joye puist venir au port  
De Desir, et pour tost passer  
La mer de Fortune, trouver  
Un plaisant vent venant de France,  
Ou est a present ma maistresse,  
Qui est ma douce souvenance  
Et le tresor de ma lÿesse.

(B28:1–11)

(In the ship of Good News Hope has loaded Comfort to send him from my lady to my heart who loves her (or him: Comfort) so much. May he come with joy to the port of Desire, and swiftly to pass the sea of Fortune, find a pleasant wind coming from France where my mistress is at present, who is my sweet thought, and the treasure of my happiness).

<sup>51</sup> See Mary-Jo Arn (ed.), *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orléans's English Book of Love* (Binghamton, 1994). The English poems are cited from this edition.

<sup>52</sup> For a convenient biography of Charles, see Arn (ed.), *Fortunes Stabilnes*, 12–38.

<sup>53</sup> See Mary-Jo Arn, 'Two Manuscripts, One Mind: Charles d'Orléans and the Production of Manuscripts in Two Languages', in Mary-Jo Arn (ed.), *Charles d'Orléans in England (1415–1440)* (Cambridge, 2000), 61–78.

<sup>54</sup> See Mary-Jo Arn and John Fox (eds), *Poetry of Charles d'Orléans and His Circle: A Critical Edition of BnF MS. fr. 25,458* (Turnhout, 2010). The French poems are cited from this edition; the translation is mine.

<sup>55</sup> See further Rory G. Critten, *Author, Scribe, and Book in Late Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 2018), 149–59; and Denis Renevey, "'Short song is good in ale': Charles d'Orléans and Authorial Intentions in the Middle English Ballade 84", in Julia Boffey and Christiania Whitehead (eds), *Middle English Lyrics: New Readings of Short Poems* (Cambridge, 2018), 201–10.

Here is the parallel English text. Since the language is especially tricky, I offer a full translation:

Hoffa howe, myn hert! The schepe off Freche Teydyng  
Hope hath afresht with lusty Recomfort  
To cary to the fayrist borne lvyng,  
Which is myn hertis lady and cheef resort,  
And if he may attayne the ioyfull port  
(In self passage, y mene, to his desere),  
The See of Fortune playn to his plesere,  
A ioly wind als blowyng into Fraunce  
Where now abidyng is my sovl maystres  
Which is the swete of all my remembraunce  
And hool tresoure of my worldly gladnes.

(1037–47)

(Heave ho, my heart! Hope has provisioned the ship of Fresh Tiding with happy Comfort, to carry [him] to the fairest born living, who is my heart's lady and chief source of comfort, provided he may attain the joyful port (in safe passage, I mean, according to his desire), the Sea of Fortune being smooth to his liking. [And provided he meets] a favourable wind too blowing into France where my unique mistress now abides, who is the sweetness of all my memories and the whole treasure of my worldly gladness.)

In the French version, the poet imagines his lady sending him a message into England, a pose that allows him to express his confidence in her affection. The mood of the passage is hortative ('*a joye puist venir au port*') and the verse is elegant and finely balanced (the enjambment in lines 5–8 is especially nicely handled). In contrast, the English version of the balade imagines the poet enthusiastically dispatching a message to his mistress. The tone is more colloquial ('Hoffa howe, my hert!'); the mood is conditional, encompassing the possibility of failure ('and if he may attayne the ioyfull port'); and the longer English line results in some ungainly padding (e.g., 'In self passage, y mene, to his desere'). These differences are replicated throughout the parallel corpora of Charles's French and English verse.

It may be that Charles's more emotional and less polished English self-image simply reflects his imperfect mastery of the language. But these aspects of the poet's English persona also seem likely to have had political significance. Amongst Charles's captors, reports of his tricky nature were frequent. Shortly before his release, for example, Humfrey of Gloucester wrote to his nephew, Henry VI, adducing Charles's 'grete subtilite and cauteleux disposition' as grounds for keeping him in England.<sup>56</sup> By presenting himself as an unsuccessful and unsubtle lover, the poet might have hoped to erode his reputation for political guile.<sup>57</sup> Consideration of the transmission history of Charles's poetry lends weight to this suggestion. Amongst the French poems that Charles wrote during his imprisonment there survives an exchange of balades between the poet and his continental ally, Philippe

<sup>56</sup> Cited from 'Rymer's Foedera with Syllabus: April-June 1440', in Thomas Rymer (ed.), *Rymer's Foedera*, vol. 10 (London, 1739–45), 763–76.

<sup>57</sup> See Rory G. Critten, 'The Political Valence of Charles d'Orléans's English Poetry', *Modern Philology*, 111 (2014), 339–64.



de Bourgogne, in which the two men plot Charles's liberation. These texts would seem to have been released into the continent early but withheld from the poet's English audience, to whom Charles presented a depoliticized version of his work in both French and English.<sup>58</sup> The sequencing of the poetry in Harley 682 can be seen as part of an attempt to project a particular image of the poet to his insular audience. Just as the author of the *Kingis Quair* mobilized the conventions of the love vision for the purposes of political self-advertisement, so the Middle English lyric might be turned to the purpose of public image making in Charles's *English Book of Love*.

The second, much smaller, Middle English love lyric sequence is transmitted in BodL MS Fairfax 16, a manuscript dating to c1450.<sup>59</sup> It comprises twenty rhyme royal poems; in combination, they tell a story of decreasing satisfaction. The opening poems express the lover's dedication to his lady (1); announce his service to her (2); and describe her beauties and virtues (3). After this, he runs into difficulties: he complains that he cannot see his lady (4, 14, 17); twice he must depart (5, 10); other obstacles are raised by men, perhaps rivals, whom he mentions glancingly (11, 12, 13); and he complains that deserving lovers such as himself are no longer properly rewarded:

The world ys straunge, and now yt ys the guyse  
 Who that doth best aqwytte hym in hys trouthe  
 Shall sunnest\* be foryet,\* and that ys routhe\*.<sup>60</sup>      *soonest; forgotten; a pity*  
 (17. 424–6)

In the nineteenth poem, a speaker announces that he is compelled to praise the flower; he regrets that he lacks the skill of Chaucer, and attacks Lydgate for maligning love and women. Then, in the final text in the sequence, a 'parlement of love' is called at which Cupid hears complaints against Danger and promises to render judgement at a later date.

The authorship of the Fairfax Sequence remains a mystery, but there is one tantalizing clue. The eighth poem in the group, 'O thou Fortune, whyche has the governaunce',<sup>61</sup> also appears in Charles d'Orléans's manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale fr. 25,458, into which it was copied after Charles's return to his family home at Blois. Charles received many visitors from England there, one of whom was William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk (1396–1450), the man traditionally credited with writing 'O thou Fortune', and, by extension, the rest of the Fairfax poems. Although the case remains unsolved, William seems a likely enough author: he was known to Charles because he had been one of his keepers in England and he is credited with writing another group of French poems that survives in a manuscript copied by John Shirley.<sup>62</sup> Whoever wrote the Fairfax Sequence is to be credited with an ingenious anglicizing of the French form that it borrows. Much about the poems is drawn from the source that inspired French and English poets alike during the later Middle Ages, such as the reference to the game of the flower and the leaf and the 'parlement of love' with

<sup>58</sup> See Rory G. Critten, 'In France, In England, and Out of Europe: Locating Charles d'Orléans', *New Medieval Literatures*, 20 (2020), 174–215.

<sup>59</sup> See J. P. M. Jansen (ed.), *The 'Suffolk' Poems: An Edition of the Love Lyrics in Fairfax 16* (Groningen, 1989). The poems are cited from this edition.

<sup>60</sup> NIMEV 2295.

<sup>61</sup> NIMEV 2567.

<sup>62</sup> See further Derek Pearsall, 'The Literary Milieu of Charles d'Orléans and the Duke of Suffolk, and the Authorship of the Fairfax Sequence', in Arn (ed.), *Charles d'Orléans in England*, 145–56. On Shirley's attribution of French poetry to William, see too R. D. Perry, 'The Earl of Suffolk's French Poems and Shirley's Virtual Coteries', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 38 (2016), 299–308.

which the sequence closes. But the references to Chaucer and Lydgate, as well as the decision to write in rhyme royal throughout, are features of the Fairfax Sequence that allow for its situation alongside other fifteenth-century works that sought to forge a native tradition. The Fairfax sequence is also anticipatory of subsequent developments in English writing. Together with Charles's *English Book of Love* it offers a foretaste of the lyric poetry of aristocratic introspection that would flourish in the sixteenth century.