# Standing in the Shadow of the Master? Chaucerian Influences and Interpretations

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Edited by

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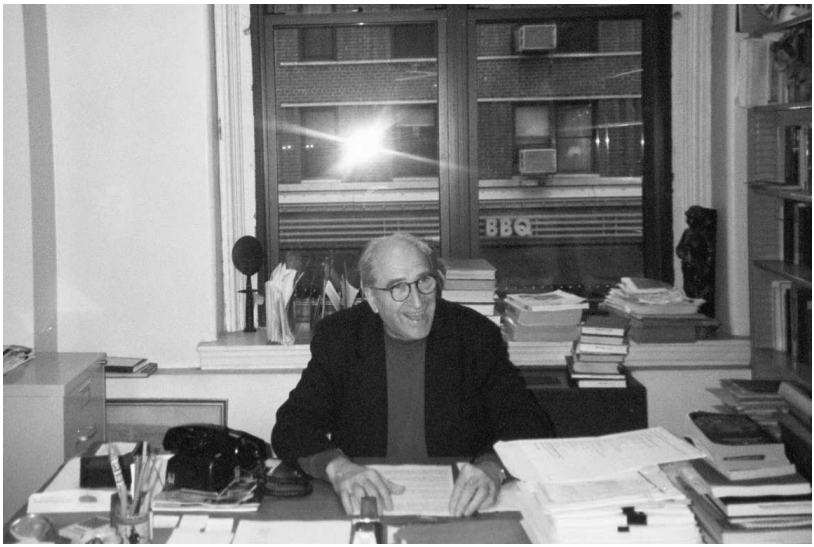
In memory of Robert R. Raymo



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# PREFACE

This volume grew out of a session at the 2008 International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds, which I organized and chaired. This session, Standing in the Shadow of the Master: Chaucerian Influences and Interpretations, included three very different papers that nonetheless raised an intriguing set of issues clustered around questions of Chaucer's supremacy in the canon as we complete the first decade of a new century. One of the papers dealt with the works of the Scottish Lydgateans; the author of the paper, William Sweet, who was at the time a young graduate student at Oxford, started out his presentation with a discussion of the session title and the idea of Chaucer's "shadow." In his view there were many other fine writers who cast very nice shadows of their own, thank you very much. Alice Spencer and Sonya Veck, each of whom has also contributed an article to this collection, went on to offer their own unique interpretations of the topic. Out of these presentations, as well as many provocative audience responses, grew the idea of a volume addressing Chaucer's influence and some ways of interpreting it. The range, depth and quality of the articles included in this collection speak for themselves, and it was my great honor to bring this project to fruition.

This book is my second with Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and I would like to again thank my editor Amanda Millar and the entire staff of CSP for their diligence, helpfulness, and overall professionalism.

I would like to thank Jeff Katz for his endless patience in working out teaching schedules that accommodate my summers in the UK, and thanks to my good friend Pat Wright for providing me with my other family and home in Malmesbury where much of this volume was completed. Thank you to Judith Raymo and Ruth Sternglantz for their help. My deepest gratitude goes to Karen Mruk, Kurt Behnke, Eva Dorsey, Roberta Newman, and Mary Roma for their support. Also I must mention my family: Gail Asher and Cheryl and John Wagenhoffer, as well as those who have left us, my parents Gertrude and Joe Bishop, and my cousin Michael Asher. Their support and love is much appreciated.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to my recently departed and much missed mentor and friend Prof. Robert Raymo for being such an inspiration to me in my career and life in general. In every way possible he taught me what it means to be a good teacher and scholar as well as a human being of integrity and honor. I dedicate this book to him.

—Kathleen A. Bishop
New York University

# PART I:

# INFLUENCES

# "DISGRACES THE NAME AND PATRONAGE OF HIS MASTER CHAUCER": ECHOES AND REFLECTIONS IN LYDGATE'S COURTLY POETRY

WILLIAM T. ROSSITER

The critical history of John Lydgate's works is inextricably bound up with that of Chaucer. In many ways, Lydgate's reception illustrates the development of literary criticism from the Renaissance to the present day, whereby his poetry serves to delineate Chaucer's singularity – or at least it did so until very recently.[1] Derek Pearsall has pointed to Lydgate's works as constituting a Chaucerian conduit:

> There is something quite touchingly ironic in the fact that it was Lydgate who helped to make the way broad for Chaucer's poetry to be accessible to later readers, particularly by ensuring that the language of the poetry was more widely and serviceably current, and that it is Lydgate who is trampled underfoot in the flood of admirers who flock to the older poet. (1990, 40)[2]

The subsequent audience would pass through Lydgate in order to reach Chaucer, and from this perspective Lydgate may be seen as responsible for his own critical fate. He did profit from his connection with Chaucer well into the seventeenth century, and was commended by Warton and Gray, amongst others, in the eighteenth, but with the advent of Joseph Ritson's *Bibliographia Poetica* in 1802 his career took an almost irreversible turn for the worst. Lydgate's reputation has never quite recovered from Ritson's dismissal of his 'stupid and fatigueing [*sic*] productions, which by no means deserve the name of poetry, and their stil [*sic*] more stupid and disgusting author, who disgraces the name and patronage of his master Chaucer' (Ritson 1802, 88). Ritson's bile infected later critics such as Lounsbury and Saintsbury, who, like their predecessor, 'searched the works of Lydgate in the hope of finding Chaucer', but were duly disappointed (Renoir 1967, 56).

Modern criticism largely adhered to this comparative evaluation, but rather than reviling Lydgate for not being Chaucer, has approached from the opposite direction, as Simpson argues:

> The clichés are now 450 years old, but criticism still repeats them, caught as it is in the disabling logic of periodization […] the discussion of other, 'medieval' writers, and especially of Lydgate, was generated by saying that they were *not* like Chaucer, and that in their unlikeness they conform to their age. Where Chaucer is a 'Renaissance' poet, his fifteenth-century imitators are irredeemably 'medieval'. (2002, 44-46)

Lydgate was, of course, partly culpable, as his works repeatedly align themselves with Chaucerian precedent: his *Temple of Glas* is built upon the same foundations as Chaucer's *House of Fame*; the *Siege of Thebes* is an addendum to *The Canterbury Tales* (whereby Lydgate's narrator effectively becomes a hybrid of Chaucer's Monk, Canon and Clerk); whilst the *Complaint of the Black Knight* recalls both the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Book of the Duchess*. In the midst of such mimesis it is necessary to recall not only the translative, accretive nature of medieval literary culture, but also Lydgate's motivation, critical reception of which may be interpreted as variations upon a theme – the dilemma of establishing poetic individuality in the light of a figure that instigates the English canon.[3]

Lydgate's emulation of Chaucer is not an enclosed action; rather acknowledgement of his illustrious predecessor is the necessary first step in the process of extrication. When we encounter such encomia as that in book II of the *Life of Our Lady*,

> And eke my maister Chaucer is ygrave
> The noble rhetor, poete of Brytayne
> That worthy was the laurer to haue
> Of poetrye, and the palme atteyne,
> That made firste, to distille and rayne
> The golde dewe, dropes, of speche and eloquence
> Into our tunge, thurgh his excellence (1628-34)[4]

it becomes necessary to bear in mind its counterpoint in *The Floure of Curtesye*:

> Chaucer is deed, that had suche a name
> […]
> We may assay for to countrefete
> His gay[e] style, but it wyl not be. (236-40)[5]

Praise is enabled in both examples by Chaucer's death, after which he may be placed upon one of the pedestals which upheld the figures of Virgil, Ovid and Lucan in his own *House of Fame*. Furthermore, Lydgate emphasizes the futility of mimesis, Chaucer's style 'wyl not be' counterfeited. Such praise constitutes a securing of Chaucer, a removal of him to an eminence whereby his influence may only exude benevolence. This elevation may be seen as the natural method by which the subsequent poet writes within and subverts the potentially egregious shadow of his predecessor, and it is a process which must be diligently worked out in the poetry.[6]

This essay will then examine how this process is worked out in Lydgate's courtly verse, which may be considered his most Chaucerian, given that Chaucer's reputation in the early fifteenth century rested to a large degree upon his aureate credentials – upon the *amour courtois* of the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus*. These were the poems which fired the imagination of Lydgate, Clanvowe, and Hoccleve. And yet Lydgate's courtly verse has received less attention as part of his critical reformation than works such as *The Fall of Princes*, the *Siege of Thebes* or the *Troy Book*, which are more amenable to new historicist excavation and socio-political allegoresis. This is not to say that lyrics such as *A Ballade, of Her That Hath All Virtues* or *The Complaint of the Black Knight* are necessarily divorced from such hermeneutics – far from it, the courtly lyric may be seen as reinforcing Lancastrian claims to legitimacy following the usurpation of Richard II in 1399. That is, they replicate the literary culture of the Ricardian court, thereby creating an aesthetic continuum which glosses over the political rupture. Nevertheless, the courtly lyrics do not point us to specific events in Lancastrian political history in the same way as some of the longer works would appear to.[7] Yet they do constitute an important moment in Ricardian-Lancastrian literary history, in that they illustrate Lydgate's appropriation of and elaboration upon the Chaucerian idiom, and his ultimate divergence from it. One of the key points of divergence in the lyrics, I would argue, is Lydgate's replacement of physical description, the rhetorical trope known as *effictio* or emblazoning, with a self-reflexive poetics which draws attention to the poet's own artistry, and therefore away from his predecessor.

Pearsall is thus correct when he speaks of Lydgate's attempts to provide 'not a servile imitation of Chaucer, but a *de luxe* version of Chaucer' (1990, 44). Lydgate is working away from the light of the Chaucerian sun, yet it still casts a shadow, and Pearsall's phrase is presumably to be read as a further assertion of Lydgate's inability to escape from beneath the Chaucerian aegis. But it is erroneous to posit

Chaucer as a singularity; the English poetic tradition is part of an international poetic continuum, and is understood as such by Chaucer himself:

> Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
> […]
> But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesye;
> And kis the steppes, where as thow seest pace
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (*TC*, V. 1786-92)[8]

Moreover, Chaucer is actually adding to a poetic tradition of adding one's self to a poetic tradition, as Wallace reminds us, '[l]ike Jean, Dante and Boccaccio before him, Chaucer takes sixth place in a series of six poets, completing a poetic fraternity that conjoins the pagan past and the Christian present' (Wallace 1983, 151).[9]

Lydgate continues this concatenation, but another continuum is set in motion by his references to Chaucer: that of critical idiom and literary history. One cannot help but notice the affinities between Lydgate's praise of Chaucer in the *Troy Book* and the Clerk's praise of Petrarch in the prologue to the *Clerk's Tale*:

> Noble Galfride, poet of Breteyne,
> Amonge oure englisch þat made first to reyne
> Þe gold dewe-dropis of rethorik so fyne,
> Oure rude langage only t'enlwmyne. (II. 4697-700)[10]

The core of Lydgate's extolment stems from the Clerk's reference to 'Fraunceys Petrak […] whos rethorike sweete | Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie' (*CProl*., IV E 31-33). Lydgate often aligns himself with the Clerk. For example, in the *Siege of Thebes* the Host demands of him, 'To telle a talë / pleynly as thei konne […] some tale / of myrth' (138, 68), recalling the words spoken in the *Clerk's Prologue*: 'Telle us som murie thyng […] Speketh so pleyn at this tyme' (*CProl*., E IV 15, 19).[11] Importantly, the *Clerk's Tale* is dependent upon the securing of Petrarch just as Lydgate repeatedly secures Chaucer, 'He is now deed and nayled in his cheste' (*CProl*., E IV 29). To paraphrase Barthes, the death of the *auctour* is necessary for the birth of the reader/rewriter.[12]

We need to recognize the dissimilarity between Lydgate and Chaucer not in terms of lesser and greater poet respectively, which is the charge that Simpson levels against previous Lydgate critiques, but with reference to Lydgate's deliberately differentiated style. It would not only be unfair

but, as Pearsall avers, unwise 'and singularly pointless to criticise Lydgate for lacking precisely what he has spent the resources of a very considerable art in trying to avoid' (1970, 103).

Lydgate's lyrics implicitly refer to their own artistry, their own process, which is evident in a poem such as *A Ballade*, *of Her that hath All Virtues*:

> Fresshe lusty beaute, ioyned with gentylesse,
> Demure appert, glad chere with gouuernaunce,
> Yche thing demenid by avysinesse,
> Prudent of speeche, wisdam of dalyaunce,
> Gentylesse, with wommanly plesaunce,
> Hevenly eyeghen, aungellyk of vysage:
> Al þis haþe nature sette in youre ymage.
>
> Wyfly trouthe with Penelope,
> And with Gresylde parfyt pacyence,
> Lyche Polixcene fayrely on to se,
> Of bounte, beaute, having þexcellence
> Of qweene Alceste, and al þe diligence
> Of fayre Dydo, pryncesse of Cartage:
> Al þis haþe nature sett in youre ymage.
>
> Of Nyobe þe sure p*er*seueraunce,
> Of Adryane þe gret stedfastnesse,
> Assured trouthe, voyde of varyaunce,
> With yonge Thesbe, exsaumple of kyndenesse,
> Of Cleopatres abyding stabulnesse,
> Meeknesse of Hester, voyde of al outrage:
> Al þis haþe nature sette in your ymage.
>
> Beaute surmounting with feyre Rosamounde,
> And with Isawde for to beo secree,
> And lych Iudith in vertu to habounde,
> And seemlynesse with qwene Bersabee
> Innocence, fredame, and hye bountee,
> Fulfilled of vertu, voyde of al damage:
> Al þis haþe nature sette in youre ymage. (1-28)

The poem's form is, as its title proclaims, a '*Ballade*' in the French style, complete with refrain and *l'envoi*.[13] Yet there is a minor, but discernible, shift away from those French poems with which Lydgate was so familiar – characteristic of what Nolan describes as Lydgate's 'unique deployment of residual forms with unexpectedly new contents' (2006, 26). The French octosyllables are replaced by decasyllables, and the refrain is semantically

altered with every repetition as it is absorbed by the couplet of the rhyme royal, providing each stanza with an individuate status yet without rupturing the sequential flow.

Physical *descriptio* is rendered superfluous by the symmetrical harmony of the form (seven stanzas of seven lines), which provides a spatiotemporal harmony. If the physical virtues are expressed by the poem's physical structure, Lydgate need only focus upon the abstract qualities which complete the figure of the text's idealized 'Her'. This suggestive displacement of corporeal via poetic form – what we might term the body-text – is in fact supported by the French *auctours* of the *artes poeticae* who informed late medieval aesthetics. As Robin Hass posits:

> The bulk of [Geoffrey of Vinsauf's] discussion is devoted to the prescription of epithets that portray a body that is aesthetically pleasing – a form that is ordered, proportionate […] The attributes of the beautiful (order, proportion, color) are the components of good poetry. In addition to being associated with verse, aesthetic characteristics comprise the beautiful female form at the same time that the female body is presented as a text […] Reading a beautiful poem resembles viewing a beautiful woman, and both processes evoke pleasure. (2002, 392-97)

Lydgate's avoidance of *effictio* presents the text as naked, even though his intention in the omission of such description is most likely to maintain a sense of propriety. A monk writing courtly love lyrics is one thing, a monk dipping his quill in what Andrew Cowell (1999) terms the 'dye of desire', which stains the beauty of the unadorned body-text, is another. When it comes to the rhetorical ornamentation of the female body he directs his accretion towards the abstract virtues, not the palpably manifest.

As has been argued, one effect of such a methodology is the production of an increasing self-reflexivity inherent within the text.[14] When one reads the opening stanza of Lydgate's description of the perfect lady, one cannot help but notice that almost every adjective may be read as reflecting back upon the descriptive strategy which the poet employs in order to convey 'Her'. Lydgate's poem, like his lady, has 'Yche thing demenid by avysinesse' and is 'Prudent of speeche'. The refrain compares, and to a certain extent aligns 'nature' with the artistic, signified by 'ymage', which reinforces the argument that the description is directed towards itself. It is not the ostensible object (the lady) who possesses 'Al þis' but 'your ymage', the body-text, in accordance with the *artes rhetoricae*.

The refrain, which deliberately highlights Lydgate's undoubted source, the '*Balade*' from Chaucer's prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, invites comparison with the Chaucerian equivalent – 'My lady cometh, that al this may disteyne' (F 255); 'Alceste is here, that al that may desteyne' (G 209) – in a display of intertextual distinction. Chaucer's refrain directs the virtues of his stanza and its referents towards 'My lady', Lydgate points to 'your ymage', that is *his* poem. As with all of Lydgate's Chaucerian echoes, it is necessary both to acknowledge influence and recognize deliberate, subtle alteration. As Chaucer's prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* exists in two texts (F and G) it is difficult to place the text which Lydgate may have known and worked from. There is every possibility that Lydgate depended upon a manuscript containing elements of both surviving texts, but which is no longer extant. Such a possibility would perhaps explain Lydgate's reference to 'Alceste' (to whom Chaucer's entire '*Balade*' is dedicated but whose name does not appear in the F text version), and the resonance of the F text's refrain in Lydgate's 'al this'. Yet Lydgate clearly reworks his *ballade* in other ways, for example the inclusion of Chaucer's 'Greseylde' and 'Rosamounde', which reaffirms the poetic genealogy cited by Chaucer himself at the close of the *Troilus*, and by extension ratifies Lydgate's appension to it.

Lydgate's great respect for his idealized Lady and her referents also contrasts with Chaucer's overall attitude towards his paragons of womanhood, which is, as his refrain asserts, one of 'disteyne'. Virtues are incorporated only to be repeatedly negated at the close of the stanza, whereas those listed in Lydgate's revision culminate in and are subsumed by the refrain. Furthermore, the Lydgatean litany of virtues, as has been mentioned, constitutes an accretive removal of the physical 'ymage' from the reader's field of imaginative vision, and so may be considered an implicit refiguring, or rather disfiguring, of Chaucer's explicit negation. It is an accretion achieved through reduction, displaying Lydgate's often overlooked ability for *abbreviatio*. Of the twenty-two figures who appear in Chaucer's twenty-one lines, Lydgate includes only eight, although he complements his selection with two Chaucerian heroines ('Gresylde' and 'Rosamounde'), two Biblical figures ('Bersabee' [Bathsheba] and 'Iudith'), and one classical heroine ('Nyobe'). In accordance with the descriptive ethic of the entire poem Lydgate must expurgate the four male figures (Absolon, Jonathas, Demophoun and Jasoun) and erase physical *descriptio* such as 'gilte tresses'and 'fair body'.[15]

Lydgate's laudatory epithets are, like their referents, selected carefully, each attempting to contain the quintessence of the allusion whilst providing a catalogue of virtues which elude definition; terms such as 'bounte,

beaute' and 'diligence' that tend towards a cumulative obfuscation of the figure. Just as the sense of the physical ideal is dependent upon our awareness of the poet's handling of the form, so does the description of that ideal lie beyond the descriptive content of the stanza. Lydgate presupposes an audience not only familiar with the heroines of Homer ('Penelope') and Virgil ('Dydo'), but also with contemporary poets who continue the lineage, with 'Gresylde' suggesting not only Chaucer, but also Petrarch and Boccaccio.[16] Lydgate's lady receives her physical virtues from the text's reflective 'ymage', but the description of those virtues develops out of the reader's interaction with other texts. The *corpus in absentia* becomes a composite of intertextual poetic beauty created across literary history, and the lack of specificity allows it to be individualized by each reader – we are given the opportunity to re-member the body in accordance with our own *rezeptionästhetik*.

As Renoir argues, 'mere classical name dropping is not enough to earn a poet his place among the Renaissance humanists' (1967, 72), and Lydgate is undoubtedly relying upon his Chaucerian example at the very least in terms of structure. Yet it would be erroneous to suggest that Lydgate was almost entirely ignorant of the works of antiquity, given the fact that he had access to one of the greatest libraries in England, had studied at Oxford, and had the foremost early English humanist for his patron.[17] *Florilegia* were available to the fifteenth-century reader, but in Lydgate we sense a greater familiarity between the author and his exempla than we would of a lesser poet in possession of an encyclopaedia of classical literature. This sense of affinity perhaps stems from those quintessential, almost Homeric epithets: Penelope is the perfect example of 'Wyfly trouthe'. Similarly, 'fayre Dydo', another abandoned heroine whose fate was less happy than that of the wife of Odysseus, is associated with 'diligence'. Despite the likelihood of Lydgate's familiarity with classical texts, however, a number of the referents here may be found in Chaucer's *Legend*. Nevertheless Lydgate's organization and expurgation of these figures, and the self-reflexive adjectival phrases he assigns to them stem from his own desire to provide the '*de luxe* version of Chaucer' for which Pearsall argues.

This is achieved formally by transplanting Chaucer's rhyme royal stanzas from their original narrative framework, and embedding them within his own structure in order to achieve a greater sense of harmony. After the three Chaucerian stanzas are concluded the tone changes:

> What shoulde I more reherce of wommanhede?
> Yee beon þe myrrour and verray exemplayre
> Of whome þat worde and thought accorde in deed,

And in my sight fayrest of alle fayre,
Humble and meek, benyngne and debonayre,
Of oþer vertues with al þe surplusage
Which þat nature haþe sette in your ymage.

I seo no lack, but oonly þat daunger
Haþe in you voyded mercy and pytee,
Þat yee list not with youre excellence
Vpon youre s*er*uantes goodely for to see;
Wher-on ful soore I compleyne me,
Þat routh is voyde to my disavauntage,
Siþe all þees vertues be sette in youre ymage.

Lenvoye.

Go, lytel balade, and recomaunde me
Vn-til hir pyte, hir mercy, and hir grace;
But first be ware aforne, þat þou weel see
Disdayne and daunger be voyde out of þat place,
For ellys þou may have leysier noon, ner space,
Truwly to hir to done my message,
Which haþe alle vertues sette in hir ymage. (29-49)

Lydgate surprises the Ritson reader here by offering up a refutation of prolixity: 'What shoulde I more reherce of wommanhede?' The existence of the body-text is reinstated in the fifth stanza through the blurring of the beloved with her 'ymage'. It is unclear to whom 'Yee' refers if we do not credit the poem's implicit self-orientation. If 'Yee' refers to the Lady then she herself is only an example, a signifier or reflection of one more accomplished than her, a 'myrrour and verray exemplayre | Of whom that worde and thought accorde in deed'. The pivotal preposition here prevents us from a reading of 'Yee' as *Her that hath all Virtues*. However, if we read 'Yee' as referring to the poem itself the lines make more sense: the stanzas are a true ('verray') reflection of one (the lady) who holds word, thought and action ('deed') – that is both abstract virtues and their physical manifestation – in perfect 'acorde'. Yet there is by extension of such interpretation a further reading: if 'Yee' does refer to the beloved then the one 'Of whom þat worde and thought acorde in deede' is the poem, and 'in my sight fayrest of alle fayre'. Art surpasses Nature in its 'Beaute surmounting' as the text displaces the body. There is indeed an argument to be made for such a displacement, as Simpson says of Lydgate's *The Churl and the Bird*:

> The startling, candid message of *The Churl and the Bird* is, instead, that there is nothing inside. [...] This is a text about the importance of rhetorical process above sentential meanings. Equally, the bird's emptiness is a warning against hoping for too much from court poets; once captive, they can teach us the art of listening, but no more. [...] [T]his text [is] more complex and light-footed than has previously been noted. (Simpson 2006, 139)

There is a deliberate transposition of the lover into what Sandra Bermann terms an 'erotically charged plane of words' (1988, 27), towards a semantic displacement devoid of erotic sentiment, or in which physical sexuality is reconfigured as abstract feminine virtues.

It is the lover who knows of the lady's 'oþer vertues', that is, her physical attributes, of which she possesses, he is keen to remind us, a 'surplusage'. And it is the constraint of the lover's latent desire for the beloved's body that cannot manifest itself explicitly through *effictio*, due to the poet's sense of propriety, which forms the basis of the penultimate stanza. The opening emphasis upon visible beauty and the speaker's privileged position – the lover as viewer of the beloved's body, 'I seo no lack' – prepares us for the 'but' which immediately follows. There is a lack, and it is the lack that the poet has striven throughout to maintain; the absence of the revelation, and therefore submission, of the beloved's physical body to rhetorical *descriptio*, and by extension to the lover's carnal desire. Can the lady be said to possess all virtues if she is explicitly described as lacking 'mercy and pytee'? Clearly not, but can we take the desirous lover's claims at face value? Mercy and Pity can only be made manifest through response to external stimuli: we *show* both as reactions. The lover is pleading for such a demonstration. We are then forced to reinterpret the previous stanza(s) as being directed toward this implicit request: 'worde and thought' must be shown to 'acorde in deed', else they cannot be said to exist. Ergo the accusation that the beloved is of 'routh […] voyde to my disavauntage' is not only a request that she look 'Vpon youre seruantes goodely for to see', but simultaneously that *he* be allowed to look upon her 'goodely for to see'. To possess 'oþer' (physical) virtues in 'surplusage' (note the crucial addition of 'Siþe' to the refrain), and not share them with the lover – who is by this point 'ful soore' with desire – is a pitiless withholding. As Thomson argues, the 'idea of "pity" in it [the courtly love lyric] is […] barbarous, for it simply means yielding to a lover's pressure' (1964, 121). The lady is thus suspended within the paradox of having to relinquish one virtue (Chastity) in order to practise another (Mercy), and it is upon this painfully unresolved decision that we reach the envoy.

It is no accident that Lydgate's 'Go, lytel balade', reprises Chaucer's words at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* ('Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedye', V. 1786), as Criseyde herself faced a similar moral dilemma, and the tragic culmination of Chaucer's poem may have been interpreted as advocating the retention of chastity at all costs: 'Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love […] Swich fyn his lust' (*TC*, V. 1828-31).[18] However, as in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the last word must go to the poet, and not the lover, not only via the device of the envoy but also due to the indeterminacy of 'þat place', which may be read as referring either to 'hir' or to that 'space' which contains her 'ymage'; the poem itself. The chiastic 'daunger' of rhetorical revelation – more adornment, by means of *effictio*, is added in order to establish less, whereas less detail reveals more of the naked text – is didactically emphasized: 'be ware aforne, þat þou weel see'. The ultimate displacement arrives in the poem's altered closing couplet, which declares the inextricable collusion of Art and Nature. It is in fact 'my message, | Which haþe alle vertues sette in hir ymage'. This last line is entirely dependent upon the reader: we may either interpet 'hir' as the Lady, in which case 'my message' has conferred virtue upon her ('sette [virtue] in hir ymage'); or 'hir' may refer to the poem itself which has the beloved's 'ymage' set within it. As Meyer Lee has argued in relation to 'Lydgate's Laureate Pose':

> the great claim of the epideictic poet is that he or she brings into being a verbal double of the ideal nature of that which he or she praises. And in the extreme, this claim goes beyond analogy and insists that the poem has made manifest ideality per se. The most authentic poem of praise, in this sense, becomes an instance of the same ideal nature that makes the object praiseworthy in the first place. This understanding of poetic praise would have been quite familiar to Lydgate […] the poem will be a memorial to itself. (2006, 42-47)

Thus, whilst the form contains the poem, it simultaneously gives rise to a self-reflexive semantic indeterminacy which ensures that though it may be 'constreyned undir woordes fewe', its meaning cannot be closed under them.

There remains in the courtly love poems an implicit debate between the enabling and disabling semantic and expressive effects of formal constraint. And if the ambiguous language of the *Ballade* subverts the poem into a thesis in favour of a self-sustaining poesis, then the *The Floure of Curtesye* initially presents us with the ostensible antithesis:

> And so, for anguysshe of my paynes kene,

> And for constraynte of my sighes sore,
> I set me downe vnder a laurer grene
> Ful pitously; and alway more and more,
> As I behelde into the holtes hore,
> I gan complayne myn inwarde deedly smerte,
> That aye so sore craunpisshed myn herte. (43-49)

Once again the shadow of Chaucerian influence hangs over the poem, and indeed it was originally credited as Chaucer's, being included in Thynne's 1532 edition.[19] Yet Lydgate's poem veers between genres, including elements of both the dream vision framework and the *pleynt*: the sleepless poet reminiscent of the *Book of the Duchess*, roused from his bed by the sound of birdsong, which echoes the commotion of the *Parliament of Fowls*; yet the speaking voice is that of the Lover figure who appears in Chaucer's *Complaints*. The topoi are familiar but, as in the *Ballade*, Lydgate's organization of and reaction to them render it more than what Schirmer terms 'yet another perambulation through the gardens of the French allegorical school in which the poet had so often wandered' (1961, 34). *The Floure of Curtesye*'s status as 'a near-flawless piece of craftmanship' reaffirms Lydgate's preoccupation with form as semantic expedition, as Pearsall argues:

> its [Lydgate's love poetry's] significance [is] not in relation to real life but in the harmony of its parts […] What counts is not recognition of the accuracy of the emotions displayed, but delight in the ordering of these emotions into a formal pattern which is internally coherent and harmonious and basically conceptual. (1970, 94-97)

The overall distinction between life and text, if such a distinction can be said to exist at all, poses a problem for the reader of Lydgate's lyrics. Not all medieval monks were strangers to love (as Boccaccio frequently reminds us in the *Decameron*), which leads one to question what Pearsall terms 'our sense of the preposterousness of a monk writing love-poems' (1970, 84). To consider Lydgate as being entirely unfamiliar with the fundamental desire which is the animating principle of *fin amour* would perhaps be taking the computer analogy too far.[20] The London copyist John Shirley, who evidently knew Lydgate well, upbraids him for bewailing the infidelity of women via marginal comments which remind the Monk of Bury of his vocation: 'Be stille Daun Johan. Suche is youre fortune […] be pees or I wil rende this leef out of your booke' (cited in Pearsall 1970, 75). Spearing also argues that the section of the *Temple of Glas* (lines 196-206) which describes 'those who were entered into religious orders in their youth, and who must now hide their true feelings

[…] was Lydgate's own situation', and that it 'is not, I think mere sentimentality that makes one detect more feeling and better poetry in this passage than in most other parts of the *Temple*' (Spearing 1976, 174). This is not to say that the speaking voice of the *Floure of Curtesye* is any less of a fictionalized subjectivity. The Author we encounter in Lydgate's *amour courtois* poetry is as much of a fabrication as Chaucer's bumbling caricatures of himself; differentiated, but not entirely alien.

Nevertheless, Lydgate must be seen to extricate himself from any potential charges of impropriety. In a quasi-Barthesian manner semantic responsibility passes from the Author to the Reader, who, to borrow Wolfgang Iser's term, 'concretizes' (1974, 274-75) the text through inference.[21] This enables the poet to plead *habeas corpus*, as Renoir posits:

> Whenever his poetry verges on the religion of love, he inserts whatever unobtrusive statements might of necessity afford him a technical plea of not guilty; whenever his topic includes an erotic situation, he either stops short of the expected conclusion or he makes it ambiguous enough to leave the actual consummation of the sexual act to the reader's imagination. […] it is we, and not the poet, who are disregarding the teachings of the Church. (1967, 84-85)

However, even if one were to maintain that Lydgate is entirely unversed in the actuality of 'Th' olde daunce' (*TC*, III. 365), wherein 'worde and thought acorde in deed', desire still insidiously permeates the text, as what Barthes terms the 'dialectics of desire' (1975, 4).[22] These are produced at the edges of Lydgate's body-text, at the points of reception. The first point of reception stems from Lydgate's taking of 'pleasure' in the Chaucerian text, a form of textual intercourse which is achieved through the re-membering of the precedent in his own poem. The second point is constituted by the reader's reception of Lydgate's revisioning. However, an eroticized hermeneutics may produce feelings in the transitional author (in this instance Lydgate) which are tantamount to sexual frustration when the site of pleasure becomes, as surely as it is wont to do, the site of pain. Such moments manifest themselves in Lydgate's verse as recurrent devices, leitmotifs and topoi, such as the *paragone* – the indescribable figure of desire who renders the poet's ability impotent – and the topos of false modesty. The performance anxiety of false modesty is, in Lydgate's case, often an authentic admission of poetic impotence, as Renoir has argued (1967, 54-55).

Yet there is a remedy in Lydgate's poetry which restores Barthesian pleasure: the incorporating fabulation whereby textual frustration is subsumed by the body-text. As the above stanza from the *Floure of*

*Curtesye* shows, the ordering, harmonizing process becomes part of the finished product. The restitutive beautification process through which frustration is assimilated by pleasure becomes almost an *essential* ingredient in the production of the poem. The courtly lover's 'anguysshe of my paynes kene' and 'sighes sore' are born of desire for 'actual consummation of the sexual act'. Yet the 'constraynte' of literary decorum necessitates that actual intercourse must be left to the reader's imagining. The lover is aware of this necessary absence, and so must also be constrained to imagination, the vividity of which leads him to 'complayne myn inwarde deedly smerte'. The complaint thus replaces both 'the sexual act' and the imagined rhetorical *descriptio* of it which ought to provide provisional sexual-textual pleasure and release for the lover. It is a form of displacement, which mirrors the sexual act by replacing sexual climax and dissemination with rhetorical equivalents ('alway more and more | As I beheld […] I gan complayne myn inwarde deedly smerte'), followed by the relative calm of the envoy. Such dissemination is intended to arouse the reader's own sexual desire via the *effictio* – the means by which the poet attracts his reader, or, more disturbingly, promotes the 'rape culture' of which Hass speaks – which is absent in Lydgate. And so what is transmitted to the reader of the *Floure of Curtesye* is not the erotic imagining of the beloved's body-text but the space where it ought to be (but is not). We may consider such a continuous deferral of sexual-textual frustration, which is in fact a deferral of absence, as a form of sexual Derridean *différance*.[23] Lydgate may have doubted the propriety of the traditional *effictio*, yet he has replaced it with an erotically charged absent presence which has twice the force of that which it is intended to displace.

The desire which rails against the form's narrow bind reaffirms itself as the aetiology behind the adoption of that form:

> For I my herte haue set in suche a place
> Wher I am neuer lykely for to spede,
> So ferre I am hyndred from her grace
> That saue Daunger I have none other mede;
> And thus, alas! I not who shal me rede
> Ne for myne helpe shape remedye,
> For Male-bouche, and for false Enuye. (78-84)

The above stanza may be read as representing the disruption ('I am hyndred') caused by Bloomian anxiety. The poet – temporarily focalized through the lover – does not know who will read or understand his works ('I not who shal me rede') as precisely that, *his*, due to the 'grace' of the exalted figure who presides over the complaint: explicitly the lady,

implicitly Chaucer. The question the poet is effectively asking is how that he may 'shape remedye' against critics who will accuse him of the 'false Enuye' that is mimesis; in the sense that imitation may be 'rede' as envy disguised as encomium. And not only does the poet fear that his Chaucerian inversions will arouse accusations of jealousy on his part, but he also fears charges of inferior retelling or 'Male-bouche' through comparison with his source.

Yet the lover, and by extension the poet, confirm their loyalty by disclosing that

> Whateuer I say, it is of du[we]te,
> In sothfastnesse, and no presumpcion;
> This I ensure to you that shal it se,
> That it is al vnder correction,
> What I reherce in co*m*mendacion
> Of her, that I shal to you, as blyue,
> So, as I can, her vertues here discryue. (106-12)

The interpretation of the lover's desire as being synonymous with that of the poet gains credibility from the St Valentine's Day trope (see the *Parliament of Fowls*), through which the customary letter equates sexual frustration with textual representation. It is 'you that shal it se', not "you that shal it hear", which reinstates the pleasuring of the reader who is superimposed on to the lady as the object of desire. Lydgate's 'du[we]te' to his predecessor expresses itself in a characteristic display of false modesty, yet his description of it places everything under a form of Derridean erasure, 'it is al vnder correction'. This line is itself a 'correction' of *TC*, III. 1331-2: 'For myne wordes, heere and every part, | I speke hem alle under correccioun'. Lydgate's admission is doubly erased, both in its admission of incompletion and in the fact that it does not belong to him. The poem, in its finished state, remains oddly unfinished, subject to a semantic indeterminacy born of the same hermeneutic process whereby it is brought into existence; again stressing the incorporation of frustration as essential to the poem's completion. The reference to 'her' not only signifies the beloved lady but also the beloved pretext from which the poet draws inspiration, just as the lover's song is inspired by his internalized image of the beloved.[24] Ultimately, as in the *Ballade*, the beloved and the poem fuse:

> And ouer this in her dalyaunce
> Lowly she is, discrete and wyse [and fre],
> And goodly glad by attemperaunce,
> That every wight of hygh and lowe degre

Are glad in herte with her for to be;
So that shortly, if I shal not lye,
She named is 'The Floure of Curtesye'. (141-47)

The autotelic language of this stanza is not fully revealed until its final line, whereupon 'her' and 'she' are unveiled as referring to Lydgate's poem itself: 'I shal not lye, | She named is "The Floure of Curtesye."' The topos of false modesty is retroactivally abandoned as the poet heaps praise upon his own work, praising its own subtlety and individuality ('discrete'), and also its successful combination of aureate, courtly terms (such as 'dalyaunce' and 'attemperaunce') with a populist poetic form. Thus 'every wight of high and lowe degre | Are glad in herte with her for to be'. Lydgate's poem achieves median 'attemperaunce' through its appeal to both 'high and lowe' readerships, and testifies to critical claims that the 'number and diversity of patrons for whom Lydgate wrote bear witness to the high respect in which his contemporaries held his talent' (Renoir 1967, 2).

Such poetic mediation, which has often been misread as mediocrity, leaves the poem 'fre' of obeisance to Chaucerian precedent. As a number of critics have noted, Chaucer's audience was not the same as that which received the poetry of Lydgate.[25] Yet what Paul Strohm (1982) terms a 'Narrowing of the "Chaucer Tradition"' was simultaneously a broadening of availability. In brief, 'Chaucer's select audience, with its taste sharpened on French literature, and its delight in allusions, wit and irony had ceased to exist' and was replaced by 'the new bourgeoisie' of the burgher class, as 'a radical transformation of the reading public was set in motion' (Schirmer 1961, 35-36). Those aspects of Chaucer's poetry which were favoured by this new audience may have narrowed, but the exclusive access of the Ricardian court to Chaucer's works was also contained in terms of textual dissemination; although this is not to say that Lydgate was similarly confined, far from it (see Simpson 2002, 55). Self-referentiality, one suspects, is bound up with a certain desire for recognition.[26]

The metamorphosis of the desired 'her' from source poem into *The Floure of Curtesye* declares its independence. The poem is declared to be 'fre' and so can progress to the self-referential *descriptio* which we saw in the *Ballade*, without fear of 'Male-bouche' or 'Enuye':

So trewly in menyng she is in-sette,
Without chaungyng or any doublenesse;
For bountie and beautie are togyther knette
On her persone vnder faythyfulnesse;
For voyde she is of newfanglenesse,

In herte aye one, for ever to perseuer
There she is sette, and neuer to disseuer.

I am to rude her vertues euerychone
Cunnyngly to discryue and write,
For, wel ye wot, colour have I none
Like her discrecioun craftely to endyte,
For what I say, al it is to lyte;
Wherefore to you thus I me excuse,
That I aqueynted am not with no muse.

By rethorike my style to gouerne
In her preise and co*m*mendacion,
I am to blynde so hylye to discerne
Of her goodnesse to make discrypcioun,
Save thus I say, in conclusyon,
If that I shal shortly [her] commende,
In her is naught that Nature can amende. (169-89)

Encomium redresses or at least displaces the 'anguysshe' felt earlier by the poet-lover, as the beloved's immutability, which previously caused 'constraynte', becomes a source of praise. The transposition of both beloved and desire into a 'trewly' linguistic or semiotic existence ('in menyng she is in-sette') releases rather than inhibits the poet-lover, as desire is vented as eulogy as opposed to plaint. His text-beloved is 'Without chaungyng or any doublenesse', and its/her fusion of abstract virtues and physicality are reiterated when Lydgate declares that 'bountie and beautie are togyther knette | On her persone'.

The knitting together of 'bountie and beautie' via a balance of physical form and abstract matter is then placed in direct opposition to the *effictio* in the following stanza. The false modesty topos returns tinged with irony, thus 'I am to rude her vertues euerychone | Cunnyngly to discryue and write'. Lydgate will not 'discryue' the beloved's 'vertues everychone', that is both her abstract and her physical virtues, because this would render him 'rude', base. Furthermore, the reader well knows ('wot ye wel') that Lydgate possesses great rhetorical skill. Rather than 'colour haue I none', Lydgate has spectra in abundance, but he does not apply such colour to his *descriptio feminae* due to a sense of propriety. Lydgate thus aligns himself more with Alain de Lille's Reason than Geoffrey of Vinsauf: 'A mass of ferment discolours everything with which human speech or the human mind busies itself […] the wavering frame of the human structure recognises our work and calls for our anvil' (Lille 1973, 67-68).[27] The colours of rhetoric, when applied to the feminized text,

suggest impiety, as Alain posits elsewhere, '[man] discolours the colour of beauty by the meretricious dye of desire' (Lille 1980, 135). Lydgate therefore stops short of such coloration: 'what I say, al it is to lyte'. He is content to paint himself as colourless, 'I aqueynted am not with no muse'. Despite declaring that 'colour have I none' he invites 'rethorike my style to govern | In her preise and commendacion'. We may interpret this illogical reaffirmation of rhetoric in a variety of ways. Either Lydgate is separating rhetoric as a whole from the physically descriptive colours which are only a fragment of its demesne – the incitement to morality is more important perhaps – or is in fact distinguishing 'colour' from 'rethorike' entirely. A further possibility is that the third and fourth lines of the stanza form a continuum with the opening lines, and thus 'I am to blynde' to govern 'By rethorike my style'. This negation of the opening submission to that capability which the poet previously denied appears the most feasible reading, and also prevents him from attempting to delay the brief 'conclusyon' towards which he is striving: 'If that I shal shortly [her] commende, | In her is naught that Nature can amende'.

The central figure – aside from the speaker – in *The Complaint of the Black Knight*, a direct descendant of the 'man in blak' from Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (445), provides a final example of Lydgate's self-reflexive development of his master's lessons:

> But first, yf I shal make mensyou*n*
> Of hys p*er*sone, and pleynly him discrive,
> He was in sothe, with-out excepciou*n*,
> To speke of manhod oon the best on lyve –
> Ther may no man ayein[es] trouthe stryve – ,
> For of hys tyme, and of his age also,
> He proued was, ther men shuld haue ado.
>
> For oon the best ther of brede and lengthe
> So wel ymade by good proporsiou*n*,
> Yf he had be in his delyuer strengthe;
> But thoght and sekenesse wer occasiou*n*,
> That he thus lay in lamentaciou*n*,
> Gruffe on the grou*n*de, in place desolate,
> Sole by him-self, aw[h]aped and amate.
>
> And for me semeth that hit ys syttyng
> His wordes al to put in remembraunce,
> To me that herde al his compleynyng
> And al the grounde of his woful chaunce,
> Yf ther-with-al I may yow do plesaunce:
> I wol to yow, so as I can anone,

> Lych as he seyde, reherse[n] eu*er*ychone.
>
> But who shal helpe me now to compleyn?
> Or who shal now my stile guy or lede?
> O Nyobe! let now thi teres reyn
> Into my penne, and eke helpe in this nede
> Thou woful Mirre, that felist my hert[e] blede
> Of pitouse wo, and my honde eke quake,
> When that I write for this mannys sake. (155-82)

We notice immediately the characteristic non-description, although the figure of the knight seems somehow more defined than the lady of the *Ballade*; he appears to possess a particular shape, which nevertheless hovers on the edge of the reader's peripheral vision. Lydgate prepares his readers for a description, and pledges to 'pleynly him discrive', yet this plainness blurs into obfuscated generality as soon as it is attempted. We are informed that the knight was 'oon the best on lyve', which effectually says nothing. He is 'wel ymade in good proporsiou*n*', which likewise gives little away. There is a form of negative *amplificatio* operating here; Lydgate gives us no description of his knight, and he does so repeatedly, in various ways. Yet, as we have seen, there is reason for this; the knight is a literary product of the romance tradition. Lydgate anticipates his readership's familiarity with similar figures in numerous contemporary works and so does not need to digress with a formulaic depiction; the very mention will conjure up an image in the reader's mind. The knight's presence within the textual landscape, however, emanates from this 'good proporsiou*n*', and his 'brede and lengthe' give him dimensional existence.[28]

The description of the knight is featureless, yet his portrait still feels complete. He is, in Lydgate's negated *effictio*, truly 'with-out excepciou*n*', yet at the same time an established figure, 'For of hys tyme, and of his age also, | He proued was'. The reader cannot help but suspect that Lydgate is again incorporating a self-reflexive lexicon which is dependent upon contemporary notions of the body-text. Awareness of the text's self-consciousness is heightened following the knight's undescription by Lydgate's immediate shift to 'syttyng | His wordes al to put in remembraunce'. The physical form of the knight's 'good proporsiou*n*', creates the formal framework within which the poet-speaker may set 'His wordes […] ther-with-al I may yow do plesaunce'. Lydgate's 'plesaunce' here is equivalent to Barthes's pleasure, as 'yow' unequivocally refers to the reader.

The knight's complaint, the poem's speaker and the reader are drawn together in stanza 26: 'let now thi teres reyn | Into my penne […] felist my