"Withoute Words": The Medieval Lady Dreams in *The Assembly of Ladies*

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From The Children's King Arthur Stories from Tennyson and Malory
(London: Henry Frowde and Hodder & Stoughton, 1900)
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Two poems, *The Assembly of Ladies* and *The Floure and the Leafe*, are unique among Middle English dream visions due to the gender of their narrators; both are narrated by women. In his edition of these two poems, Derek Pearsall argues that whether they were told by women or not is really of little importance.¹ There are many examples of men, such as Lydgate and Deschamps, writing as women. However, while men may speak for women in other types of poems, a woman narrator of a Middle English dream vision survives only in these two poems. Moreover, as Alexandra Barratt maintains, the totally fictional first person persona did not exist at this time.² Though Chaucer, Dante, and others created personae for their poems, these fictional creations generally shared many personality traits with their creators, such as profession and most of their physical attributes, including gender. The fictional persona was generally a naive counterpart of the author, inexperienced in love or of wavering spiritually.


Among the dream poems concerned with the popular theme of the unsuccessful lover who seeks to be educated on the art of love, the poems of Dunbar, *The Temple of Glass*, *The Assembly of Ladies*, and *The Floure and the Leafe*, to name a few, have been dismissed as conventional poems that simply propagate the material of *The Romance of the Rose* and other French love visions. Perceived as lacking originality and aesthetic complexity, they have received little or depreciative analysis. Yet, these poems were especially popular in the East Midlands, presumably among the aristocracy, since they reflect (and therefore illuminate for modern readers) aristocratic temperament. These works commonly reinscribe and perpetuate aristocratic attitudes, values, and codes of behavior. The female narrators of both *The Assembly of Ladies* and *The Floure and the Leafe* may signal that these poems were intended for a female audience, reflecting the tastes and concerns of aristocratic women. Both poems may have been written by aristocratic women who, normally denied access to a superior education, learned to read and write and may have read or heard romances, lyrics, and dream visions.

When we come across the rare poem possibly written by a woman, we must pay all the more attention to it, since well-bred aristocratic women were expected to be silent and acquiescent. In studying anonymous poetry, particularly Old English poetry presented from the perspective of a female narrator, Desmond has argued that the female narrator must observe the roles her society places upon women while trying to speak through the patriarchal world that would in actuality not approve of her “written” voice at all. *The Assembly of Ladies* then becomes a significant poem because it clearly announces

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4M. Desmond, “The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 583. “The gender of the author becomes insignificant [but] the gender of the speaker becomes all important,” since it signals to the reader that the poem is to be read as embodying the female perspective.
from the start that it is the property of a female narrator, unlike *The Floure and the Leafe* in which the narrator hides her sex for most of the poem.

Dream vision, more than any other form in the Middle Ages, presses the relationship between author and narrator, world and fiction. Dream vision departs from lyrics and epics, mirroring a real-life phenomenon—dreaming—experienced by every man and every woman; dream vision “is the impossible record of one whose life and whose dreams are just like ours, whose dream in the course of its narration becomes ours, a self-conscious fiction that announces and celebrates its fictionality, thereby attaining a higher ‘rhetorical’ truth.” In choosing to write dream vision, which begins with a waking frame that connects the narrator’s world to the author’s society and which announces that the material to follow (the dream proper) is a “fiction,” poets may have found a form that offered some protection from social censure.

While most dream poets choose to reinscribe social/religious values through their works—as in *The Floure and the Leafe*—a few may have seen the dream vision as one of the safest opportunities for offering veiled commentary on and criticism of the events, powers, and ideologies of the day—as is done in *The Assembly of Ladies*. The poet could bank on long-established philosophical and theological traditions dating back to Macrobius and Augustine that dictated that the audience had the right to judge whether to savor a dream vision as prophecy or oracle or to reject it as an insignificant nightmare or apparition: “if it were merely a fictive revelation (not somatic), it would then be simply a fictive pronouncement of truth; and if it were merely a somatic dream (not significant), then it would be self-admittedly irrelevant.” If, in fact, the dream vision poet felt to some degree unassailable, the form may have been particularly

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enticing to a marginalized, female writer, providing her with a rare venue to present the visions and concerns of women.

Like women-voiced poems of the Anglo-Saxon period,7 the female-narrated dream poems are subject to stronger censure than those of their male-narrated counterparts. The Assembly of Ladies has been the object of condemnation because of its seemingly weak structure and awkward verse. The Floure and the Leafe has fared better with critics, such as Pearsall, Stephens, and Barratt, winning praise as a poem that tries gracefully to imitate male dream poem tradition and that reinscribes a traditional patriarchal code of behavior for women. Yet The Assembly of Ladies, called by Pearsall “a low ebb in fifteenth century verse,”8 may have been misunderstood by critics, who have not recognized in it a woman’s veiled challenge of the dream vision form which typically embodies a masculine philosophical and cultural vision. It is not a highly conservative piece that “legitimates the elite social position of its members” as Evans and Johnson suggest.9 Rather, the poem invites us to ask whether the medieval woman dreamed the same dream as her masculine counterpart.

The narrator of The Assembly of Ladies announces at the very beginning of the poem that “she” is the dreamer, unlike the narrator of The Floure and the Leafe who seems to be ashamed of her gender, only letting it “slip” when she is addressed as “daughter” four hundred lines into the poem (462). By proclaiming her gender from the start, the narrator of The Assembly of Ladies invites the audience to read the poem as a portrayal of woman’s position in society, as “she” sees it. The poet has appropriated a patriarchal form to tell of her own experience. In fact, the poem is even richer than The Floure and the Leafe; within it we glimpse two different women’s voices: the

7Desmond discusses the critics’ “desire” to devalue Old English poems narrated by women (574).


authoritative voice of the influential woman of the royal court or manor, powerful and free to speak within the domestic sphere, and the almost silent voice of the powerless woman, made virtually voiceless in the public sector (presented in the poem as the legal court), who acquiesces and accepts her ineffectiveness.

Evoking the well-known symbol of the maze, the poet invites the reader to interpret the dream allegorically; however, the allegory is thin at best. There is simply no comparison to the well-developed allegory of *The Floure and the Leafe*. Yet it is the very thinness of the allegory and the attention to domestic detail that reveal *The Assembly of Ladies* to be a poem by a woman of the time. The workings of allegory traditionally belonged to a male written literary convention, whereas dialogue incorporated an oral form more suited to medieval woman's domestic sphere.

The narrator's feminine voice resounds throughout the poem; yet it is not only gender but also station that the narrator considers essential to her identity. She distinguishes between the "ladyes" and "gentil wymmen" present (in lines 5–8 and again in line 396), as well as between "knyghtes and s quyers" (14). She herself is a member of the group of "ladyes walking" (5–7) and not one of the "gentil wymmen" (who are not mentioned until the next stanza in line 8). Clearly, "lady" here is not simply used to denote the courtly lady of romance, but rather to draw attention to the distinctions between stations. Such attention to station carries over into the dream proper.

The dream itself is devoid of the usual paradisal landscape we often see in dream vision. Little description of setting is given; instead the dreamer awakes to a domestic and matriarchal world and

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11 C. S. Lewis remarked in *The Allegory of Love* that while the narrator presents details of everyday court life, the allegory and realism collide in an unsuccessful whole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 250.
is greeted by a “gentil womman of grete worship” (79–80). Though some of the allegorical figures mentioned, identified by occupation, can be found in the legal courts, all are found in royal households. In describing Perseveraunce, the first woman she encounters, the narrator notes not only her worthiness, but also her station. Perseveraunce, as a gentlewoman, is actually of slightly lower social status than the narrator, who, as Perseveraunce’s superior, orders her to “‘abide . . . ye may not go so soone’” (140). The lady dreamer asks forthright questions that are recorded in direct discourse and that bear none of the tags of politeness which would reflect deference to a superior. The lady asks Perseveraunce of “what office [and] what degre” (99) she is, to which she replies she is only a messenger: “unworthy though I be, / Of hir chamber hir ussher . . . charged [with] hir commaundement / To warne yow” (101–02). Her only power over the lady is by proxy.

Perseveraunce is followed by Diligence, who, like the other allegorical figures, is a gentlewoman sent to serve the dreamer. (Only Loiaulte is identified as a lady.) Diligence clearly recognizes the dreamer as her superior: “Comaunde me” (203), she says, and does not leave until she is dismissed by the lady dreamer (291). In addition, the dreamer is not ordered by Diligence to “obey” Contenaunce but is merely advised (“rede,” 182) to listen to her. Such role reversal is unusual in dream poems, where dreamers are generally presented as subservient to their allegorical teachers. In contrast to that tradition, the allegorical personages of this poem are not teachers but attendants, employed in Loiaulte’s household and court of justice.

If the narrator is to speak of her own limited sphere, the dream world must be unencumbered by the presence of men, since to have a man speak within the dream proper presents the risk of overriding woman’s speech or simply silencing her. The ideal woman of courtly literature such as romance, as presented by male writers, generally knows her place, is silent, and acquiesces to patriarchal demands. When the narrator asks whether men may come along on the pilgrimage with them, Perseveraunce replies no. When asked what they have done, Perseveraunce avoids directly answering the question and speaks in guarded language. Her sudden unwillingness to answer the
question, when she was so willing to answer all questions put to her before, seems strange. Her guardedness may prefigure the conventionality and summary nature of the plaints at the end of the poem, reflecting that which we will later hear from the narrator and the company when broaching the subject of men's infidelities. Should women be allowed to complain about men? Do they dare put these complaints in writing? What would be the consequences? A poem written from a woman's point of view, breaking woman's silence and voicing her views of man's inadequacies in love, would certainly be guarded, since the poet would no doubt fear the possible censure that would fall upon her when men read her poem.

The poet is in a precarious position; clearly, both men and women can accuse one another of being unsatisfactory lovers. By her hedging, Perseveraunce suggests that the men should be suspect, preparing and forshadowing the court scene where we will learn men are not as faithful as women. The poet must carefully choose her method of elevating and potentially redressing women's complaints within a patriarchal society, and this exchange between the dreamer and Perseveraunce works to detour the reader's expectations that both ladies and gentleman would be proper petitioners. Here, the poet cleverly narrows the field of plaintiffs. The poet successfully avoids the inclusion of a male voice or male plaint in the poem, thus creating a secure world in which women speak. Furthermore, the poet avoids any direct condemnation of men early in the poem, which may have invited censure.

Once the topic of conversation shifts from the issue of men, Perseveraunce returns to her open manner of offering information. The strain in conversation that occurs at this point prepares us for the change in voice that will come later when the women make their

12Barratt reads the narrator's oath as expressing her distress over the announcement that men will not be allowed to accompany the women, since as a woman she feels she must depend upon them (16). Indeed the passage is crucial, but it need not demonstrate the narrator's dependency on men, but rather the delicacy of the problem the poet faces.
complaints against men. At that time, a distant voice that uses abstract language replaces the frank conversation that characterizes the exchanges between the dreamer and the women she encounters early on. This strained language, marked by a shift in tone or voice, signals that the poet is treading on dangerous ground.

The lady and her company are invited to present petitions to Loiaulte; however, the poem does not follow the typical development of a spiritual dream poem in which earthly pursuits are abandoned and the allegorical personages teach the dreamer to turn all thoughts to God and be consoled (in the manner of Boethius) and saved. Nor does the poem develop like secular love visions in which the poet creates dramatic suspense—where we are invited to read on to see if the dreamer will win his lady, or we watch with the dreamer as two suitors fight to determine who is more worthy of the lady’s hand. The only education that the dreamer in this poem receives is from Countenance, who explains how to observe proper etiquette in Lady Loiaulte’s presence: “how ye shal yow best advaunce / And how to come to thi ladyes presence” (180–81). Our attention is not drawn to the process of gaining love, spiritual consolation, or Loiaulte’s favor; rather our attention is drawn to protocol, the observance of customs associated with running a royal household or manorial estate—to the behavior and interactions of women within the matriarchal, domestic sphere.

Little description is given of Loiaulte’s palace, nor is any one allegorical figure well-defined or developed. The characters’ allegorical significances are virtually taken for granted. None is really distinguished by her particular virtue; together they function, attending and serving. Most of the allegorical figures in fact are in positions that would be found in a major household (manorial or royal): usher of the chamber, porter, purveyor, “herbegyer,” steward, marshal of the hall, chamberlain, secretary, and chancellor. The narrator is at least as concerned with presenting a well-ordered household as presenting virtue; more likely, virtue is to be measured in this world by how well one performs her domestic duties. Thus, we respond not to how these personages exhibit their virtues but to the way in which they act according to the guest–host code. The allegorical figures are not
primarily concerned with educating the dreamer, for example to
the virtues of good lovers, but rather in showing her hospitality—
clothing her and offering her a bed—and preparing her for her audi­
ence with Loiaulte.

Interestingly, the unexpected emphasis on domestic duty as virtue
foreshadows the manner in which the women’s petitions will be
handled. In the court of Loiaulte, loyalty in love is presented as a
social issue rather than a moral one: the complaints are of breaches
of contracts and agreements, inequitable exchanges, and improper
etiquette.

While social decorum seems to rule in the poem, there is a shift
in the manner in which the women relate to each other: social
strictures are relaxed among old acquaintances in more intimate sur­
roundings. When Perseveraunce returns later to aid the company with
their petitions, she singles out the dreamer as “‘of myn old acqueyn­
taunce’” (402) and “‘enquare[s] the bolder dare I be’” (403). Together,
past acquaintanceship and prior service (which Perseveraunce gra­
ciously proffered) are presented as sufficient cause for a shift to less
formal, more intimate dialogue. Reversing the prior model of dis­
course between them, Perseveraunce now asks the questions; most s ig­
nificantly, she asks to be taken as a confidante: “‘telle it me in secrete
wise / And I shal kepe it close on warantise’” (405–6), implying that
through such confidence she will be able to serve the ladies better.
Service becomes the catalyst for changing the parameters of discourse
and paves the way for intimacy that differences in rank would other­
wise prevent, if the subordinate is judged a worthy confidante.

Intimate exchanges and confidences do not pass between women
in public halls; rather, they occur in private chambers. The verbal
exchange in the inner chamber has a kind of familiarity that bespeaks
the intimacy a lady has with those she trusts to help her with her
toilet and other personal needs. A lady will value most the judgments
of the gentlewomen who attend her; these are the women she will
choose to become her confidantes. It is only during the intimate activ­
ity of dressing the lady that Diligence calls the lady dreamer “suster”
(259). “The allegorical persons address her and the other women
as ‘sisters,’ not ‘daughters’ as in The Flower and the Leaf,” observes McMillan (39), and this form of address is used only in private chambers and/or while their personal needs are being attended to (370, 450). Once the door opens and the company steps upon the paved floor (451) that leads directly to the court of Loiaulte, that familiar address is dropped. This suggests a relaxing of propriety and formality of address in the privacy of the boudoir. “Sister,” in this case, betokens intimacy; an intimacy created by place—private chambers—and circumstance—personal service by trusted servants. One attendant even speaks differently to the narrator, showing less deference and hurrying her along: “‘Com of, and hie yow soone . . . Make ye redy and tarye ye no more’” (244, 251). In a more public arena the attendant’s manner could be construed as impudent, but here it is not, suggesting that strictures against speaking familiarly to one’s superiors are relaxed in such a setting.

Having requested that Diligence and another woman help her dress, the narrator asks them how she looks. It is hard to believe that a male poet would have let such talk pass without condemning women for their vanity. Yet, the narrator’s comment that “wageoours among us there we layde / Which of us atired was goodeliest” (383–84) passes without reproof from anyone in the company or any of the allegorical figures. Rather than indicating that the narrator is vain, these lines reveal the private world of the aristocratic women as we are privy to the confidential, intimate conversations that take place between women in their inner chambers.

13John Stephens, in “The Questioning of Love in ‘The Assembly of Ladies,’” RES, n.s., 24 (1973), reproaches her for exhibiting such vanity, calling her “participation in the trivial wageoours over anticipated praise for appearance demeaning” (137). According to Diane Bornstein, The Lady in the Tower: Medieval Courtesy Literature for Women (Hamden: Archon, 1983), if we look to the works that women often read—courtesy books—we find that ladies were directed how to dress as well as how to act (66, 108). While Christine de Pizan’s works may not have been read in England at this time, certainly her works reflect the customs of the times: in The Three Virtues she advised the lady of the manor on her dress and on being the model hostess. Evans and Johnson argue that Christine’s works do inform The Assembly of Ladies (189).
As part of the recommended dress, the petitioners are advised to wear their “wordes” upon their sleeve. In the Middle Ages, women’s stories were often “woven at the loom and embroidered with the needle” whereas men “inscribed with quills upon parchment and with chisels upon the stone” (Holloway, Wright, and Bechtold). The poet calls attention to the difference between male and female modes of expression by punning on the word “sewe,” which can mean either “to pursue” or “to sew”:

Al youre felawes and ye must com in blewe,
    Everiche yowre matier for to sewe,
    With more, whiche I pray yow thynk upon
    Yowre wordes on yowre slevis everichon.

(116–19)

The company is told how to “pursue” its cause. Yet, the word would certainly suggest “sew” to its contemporary audience and thereby call attention to the difference between the forms of expression allowed men and women. While the dreamer in the *The Temple of Glass*, an important source for this poem, wears her word embroidered on her dress (308–10), the narrator of *The Assembly of Ladies* by presenting only in the male mode—the bill—clearly refuses to participate in this female mode of presentation. In like manner, the poet has herself, perhaps somewhat uncomfortably, taken up the pen rather than the needle. Certainly, other members of the company fear appearing insolent; later, the third petitioner is said to be “loth to put [her complaint] in writyng” (664). By her refusal to wear the word embroidered on her dress, the lady is preparing to usurp the male mode of discourse. For though she refuses to wear these embroidered ornaments, saying “and for my word, I have none, this is trewe” (312), she announces she

14 Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance Wright, and Joan Bechtold, eds., *Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 8.
15 McMillan says the significance of the refusal is not clear (39), while Stephens claims it is self-satisfied stubbornness (137).
does have a “bille” (325). Unlike “wordes,” “billes” are written, and therefore a masculine mode of expression is appropriated.

Pearsall notes that mottoes are traditional, symbolic devices—generally amatory and cryptic messages—or in some cases they identified one’s family (since a family would adopt a specific motto).¹⁶ The lady deliberately refuses to participate in creating this kind of fiction and perhaps also refuses to announce the family to which she belongs. Her refusal to wear a motto can be seen as an attempt to protect her anonymity—to prevent any recourse against her, as well as against her family—and to draw attention to that very anonymity that the female poet must practice if she is to write a poem that is critical of men. Such anonymity also allows her to speak for her class and gender as an “everywoman,” rather than making her sound self-serving or tying her to one particular motto or complaint and thereby weakening the universality of her voice and dream.

While mottoes are traditionally treated as mere symbolic tokens, by the time the petitioners make their appeals to Loiaulté, their mottoes become their “billes”; their “wordes” become the same as their “billes” (e.g., “sanz que jamais” [583] and “une sans chaungier” [590]). They are the embodiment of their complaints; their lives dictated the very labels they wear. By refusing to be labelled by wearing a motto upon her sleeve, the narrator, for a time, stands alone, a woman who is more than a pretty piece of thread (the motto) and more than the martyr her lover has made her (the complaint). She is a woman with a voice, who wields the power of the written word and who, in the end, produces a book (740). I doubt that the ambiguity of coming without “wordes” would have escaped the poet herself. By calling attention to coming to the court without words, the poet presents the case of the voiceless women of society who find limited venues for their complaints, particularly those against men. Once in the court, the quagmire that results when a woman tries to speak against man and seeks redress from the court, as well as the anxiety that a poet must experience when she pens woman’s plight, are both exposed.

¹⁶Pearsall, Assembly of Ladies, 157.
The dream continues as the company passes through a chamber decorated with the piteous stories of lady lovers who came to untimely ends because of disloyal men. This chamber separates the domestic sphere of woman from the public sphere of the court which she is about to enter. More important, the long narrative passage describing the “piteous” women divides the early dialogue between the dreamer and the allegorical attendants from the strained, indirect court discourse, which is yet to come.

The poet marks the important fact that the narrator is moving into a different social climate, one in which women are expected to exhibit a different style of speech in other ways. For the first time in the poem, the narrator employ the humility topos; clearly this stands in contrast to the candor and boldness of her earlier speech:

To folowe yow whan ever yow list, certeyne.
We have none eloquence, to telle yow pleyne,
Besechyng yow we may be so excused
Oure triewe meanyng that it be nat refused.

(424–27)

Second, the dreamer does not speak for herself alone here, but she speaks, humbly, for the whole company. Pearsall draws our attention to the passage’s similarity to Lydgate’s *The Temple of Glass* wherein the lady kneels with a petition to Venus—as the male narrator watches.17 The contrast, however, is more significant than the comparison: in solidarity, the company genuflects as a group (546) and all stand while each makes her complaint. Our attention will no longer be drawn to the dreamer’s personal, verbal inquiries or on providing for her and the others’ personal needs; rather it will be on the public petitions of all the ladies present. These become the complaints of all women, both ladies and gentlewomen; their suffering is universal and not dependent on their station. Now, the dreamer no longer meets with gentlewomen sent to attend her; she finds herself one among

17 Pearsall, *Assembly of Ladies*, 56.
the company before a great lady. Humble deference is the expected posture for petitioners in this “court of law.”

At this point, the lady becomes a reporter, much more the typical observer of dream poetry: there is much less direct discourse and dialogue, and the petitions of the women who go before her are reported in third person indirect discourse, thus sounding like flat summaries. Yet, such a generalized presentation may have seemed an advantage to the poet—women speaking without individualization preserve their anonymity.\(^{18}\) Moreover, since they do not condemn any single, identifiable man in their complaints, they do not invite recrimination.

The poet appears greatly concerned with procedure and process in the court of Loiaulte. For example,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{The chambrelayne dide hir comandement} \\
&\text{And com ageyn as she was bode to doo;} \\
&\text{The secretarie there beyng present} \\
&\text{The billes were delyvered til hir also.}
\end{align*}
\]

(554–57)

This is very different from its sources, such as *The House of Fame* and *The Temple of Glass*, where petitioners simply appear before the “judge” rather than wade through a team of officers. This suggests that, just as she had been in the first half of the poem, the poet of *The Assembly of Ladies* is more interested in verisimilitude than in allegory as she explores woman’s position as plaintiff in the court. Curiously, however, one aspect of verisimilitude is deliberately repudiated: no men act as officials—all offices in this court are assumed by women. The issue of woman’s place in the legal court is an important one. While single women and widows could present their own cases in a court of law, the authority of the court was clearly restricted

\(^{18}\)There are no distinct nine voices as R. H. Robbins suggests in “The Structure of Longer Middle English Court Poems,” in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives*, ed. E. Vasta and Z. Thundy (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1979), 253.
to men who alone could be judges, jurors, reeves, etc.\textsuperscript{19} Since this is a court presided over by a lady, women seem to be empowered in the dream, but by the very act of staffing the court with women, the court is rendered powerless and has no authority in the real world. The poet underscores this by having the petitioners lodge their complaints while delaying the judgment. While perhaps lacking in aesthetic elegance, the court scene thereby becomes a poignant statement of the precarious legal rights of women at this time.

Critics have noticed that the complaints of the women are rather flat, but to evaluate these lines aesthetically may result in our missing the very point the poet is making about the limits placed on women's speech in the public sector. The flatness of the complaints draws our attention to their conventionality.\textsuperscript{20} We have seen such accusations many times before: lovers are inconstant or they don't return love in kind. Yet, these complaints also mimic vehement ones male lovers more commonly level at women. In judging these complaints as flat coming from women, are we also being asked to reassess the plaints as they were originally uttered or penned by men? The accusations are delivered as if the poet were saying, "You've heard all this before," and she needs only to invoke and remind the reader of the convention. Perhaps when it comes to presenting suits against men, the poet draws back into the protection of convention, to a "lifeless" style that "plagiarizes" a long tradition, to escape the censure she may invite by a direct attack on men.

The poem is likely, at least in part, to be a vindication of women. Obviously, women are allowed to present petitions and to show that they are in fact loyal lovers. Yet, the force and power of the complaints

\textsuperscript{19}Judith Bennett, "Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside," in \textit{Women and Power in the Middle Ages}, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1988), 22, 23. In addition, once married, woman lost her right to present her own case in court; that became her husband's right and responsibility.

\textsuperscript{20}Stephens also observes that this flatness calls attention to "lack of personal reminiscence or individualization" (138).
have been destroyed by their shallowness and lackluster delivery. If the convention of the lover's complaint sounds weak here, then perhaps a reexamination of earlier similar poems is called for. This poet has discovered nothing new. A century earlier, Chaucer popularized satirizing the lover's complaint in works such as "The Knight's Tale," "The Miller's Tale," and The Parliament of Fowls; however, this poem is unique in deflecting the convention by having the complaints come from women and framing them within a dream vision, particularly a dream vision that may have been written by a woman. Moreover, the men's failings in the poem are not due to immoral acts, rather they are best summed up as improprieties, as flagrant disregard for the etiquette of love. The men's behavior, as depicted in the petitions, stands in direct contrast to the women's, which, within the poem, strictly adheres to social conventions. The bills do not castigate any man for his vices because the third-person report style destroys the power of any condemnation. Rather, they invoke a set of expectations that prescribe the proper behavior for a lover and then dash those conventions by suggesting men simply don't measure up. The second half of the poem, which takes place in the court of Loiaulte, actually calls into question social conventions and literary tradition. Love is a world of conventions; it is the conventions, like those of the love-plaint tradition, that are shattered.

Finally, the dreamer is asked to present her bill. Her approach is confusing. Although she says, "abide a while, it is not yet my will" (690), she gives her petition only four lines later. Or does she? Her statement that she is not ready to offer her petition may be intended to signal that her complaint should be read as differing from the ones that came before. Indeed, it is different in form from

21As Evans and Johnson say, "The Assembly of Ladies indicates some sense of genteel women's dissatisfaction with the straightened terms of their symbolic/literary worlds," and by deferring the court's verdict it also indicates "their lack of official power" (190). But the poet is not nostalgic about old literary and social values nor does she simply reinscribe elite society, as does the poet of The Floure and the Leafe.

22Many critics, such as Stephens (137), see her as rude or aloof; McMillan is kinder in saying that she is "obviously reluctant, almost rude" (39).
the others: only her bill is presented in direct discourse. Although spoken in first person, her complaint is actually more generic than the rest. Her "I" becomes the "I" of Everywoman. Her bill includes the complaints of all women. Hers is tied to no one single complaint or motto and registers the fact that all women have suffered more than they would like to endure. Again, we must remember the dreamer's refusal to sew her heart upon her sleeve, her refusal to visually present her complaint in a feminine way. At this point, she alone has a personal voice, but one that speaks for all her gender. Moreover, she will take up the pen rather than the needle to record her experience and make a book, thereby adopting for female uses a normally masculine mode of expression.

Still, one is faced with the question, what have the dreamer and the company gained? The dreamer asks for "my desert deservith of justice" (707), voicing the request of the whole assembly. Then they await both judgment and recompense. The ending is certainly pessimistic.23 These ladies do not die like the women tormented by love who are portrayed on the chamber walls, but neither do they prosper. One suspects that they continue to languish as they have in the past. What justice, what restitution, does our dreamer and the other members of the company expect? Or is the poet actually calling our attention to the irony of asking for justice in this situation by the fact that no "remedy" (723) is actually given? Perhaps the most the women can hope for is a catharsis by being given the chance to lodge their complaints. "The water [that] sprang anone / In [her] visage" (736–37), which McMillan identifies as tears,24 may signify this catharsis as well as the dreamer's sorrowful realization that the plaints will come to naught. Moreover, the deferment of judgment and lack of any immediate or determined compensation is the most appropriate ending to the poem, dramatically demonstrating the inefficacy of both the female petitioners and the female court, thus suggesting the true powerlessness of women in the public sector.

23See comments by McMillan (41) and Stephens (138–40).
The poem has presented two different spheres in which women may try to exert their influence. The first is an ordered, domestic world ruled by women, where proper respect for station and custom are observed. By creating a matriarchal court, the poet demonstrates woman’s attempt to empower herself in the public sphere. But through the deferment of the decision, the poet powerfully suggests that woman’s influence cannot extend into such public institutions as the court: a court that truly possesses power belongs to men. Moreover, the depiction of the two different spheres within the poem also suggests comparison of men and women in terms of respect for customs and conventions. As depicted in the poem, women seem to take such societal prescriptions to heart; women are bound by custom. Men’s transgressions against custom often go unpunished, since men may not put stock in the very conventions that women value most (i.e., fidelity), and since men wield the power in this society. No well-intentioned matriarchy, as depicted by Loiaulte’s court, can change that. Given the fact that the poet is showing women’s powerlessness in the public sector, the lifeless prose of their complaints seems fitting. While the poet has given voice to women in her poem, she has also acknowledged the limits of their power and voice.

Where the assembly failed to find the justice they sought, the poet, nevertheless, succeeds in navigating the maze, depicting the world of aristocratic women. She has communicated her message. But for whom is the message intended? While the poem appeals to the tastes and addresses the concerns of a female readership and would likely have been preferred by women, it is interesting to note that the narrator’s immediate audience within the poem is male. She first tells her dream to a squire and announces to him that she has made a book (740). The narrator has created a riddle for the squire that is not unlike the maze: can he, or any man, decipher her dream and gain an understanding of the position of women in medieval society?

The Assembly of Ladies cannot be fully appreciated if it is read as just another lover’s lament or as a conventional dream vision; its power lies in its embodiment of the struggle of woman to articulate
her experience, to find a voice. Taken as an example of women's writing in the Middle Ages, it exhibits

a quality of immediacy: [women] look at themselves more concretely and more searchingly than many of the highly accomplished men writers who were their contemporaries. This immediacy can lend women's writing qualities beside which all technical flawlessness is pallid.25

If, as Dronke suggests, we assess the power of a poem such as this not according to its technical merit, but according to its ability successfully to divulge the inner life of medieval women, then The Assembly of Ladies may fare better when compared to The Floure and the Leafe. As noted earlier, critics respond much more positively to the latter poem. The allegorical ties of plants, animals, colors, and birds are all drawn from a well-documented tradition, and the dreamer is a passive observer taught a lesson rather than a participant like the narrator of The Assembly of Ladies. The poem appears more polished and aesthetically pleasing than The Assembly of Ladies because it follows the conventions of the masculine tradition of dream vision. Yet, ironically, the very conventional strengths to which critics draw our attention diminish The Floure and the Leafe's ability to embody a feminine voice and depict woman's situation. Surprisingly, some feminist scholars prefer the depiction of woman in The Floure and the Leafe,26 a depiction that reinscribes the more conventional portrayal of woman as accepting and acquiescing to masculine tradition. The narrator of The Floure and the Leafe humbly and warmly embraces the lesson of the dream; she will join the service of the company of the Leafe. As Harrington aptly

25Peter Dronke, Women Writers of the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), x.
puts it, the poem fuses “idealistic behavior and traditional images embracing the best values remembered from the past.” In doing so, the narrator accepts tradition and upholds and embraces the customs and rituals of the patriarchal and patristic culture that encourages and rewards female chastity and presents those who observe the prescribed code with “comfortable, congratulatory images.” It is the discomfort with tradition, the struggle not to embrace a decidedly male code, that makes The Assembly of Ladies a poignant woman’s poem. Gender is almost tangential in The Floure and the Leaf, since it simply weaves together inscribed literary, philosophic, and theological standards. In contrast, The Assembly of Ladies poignantly pens a more complete and complex portrait of the sphere of a woman’s influence and of her position in society.

References


McMillan, “‘Fayre Sister Al,’” 36.


