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Errata for Vol. 14, 1993
(authors' corrections)

“Spenser the Borderer”
page 108: ‘Savage Nation’ should read ‘Salvage Nation’

“The Myth of the Persecuted Female Healer”
page 117 n 5 para. 2: ‘There are a large number of different groups of Wiccans not all of whom are satanists’ should read ‘none of whom are satanists’

“Inventing the Middle Ages”
page 131 n 1: ‘p 8587’ should read ‘pp 85–87’
page 132 line 17: ‘see’ should read ‘nee’
page 135 line 25: add ‘[sic]’ after ‘Bloch’s’
page 138 lines 33–34: replace ‘existed for such an extended period of time.’ with ‘still exists(!)’
page 141 n 22: ‘Mentalite’ should read ‘Mentalité’
page 142 n 27: ‘Past’ should read ‘Fast’
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Boethius and Lady Philosophy
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The title “Boethius among the Navajo” may require some explaining. This essay comes from my teaching of “The Healing Journey,” a cross-disciplinary course on suffering and healing. Taking a page from Viktor Frankl,¹ the course centers on the role of meaning in responding to illness and grief and in promoting recovery. Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*² has represented the classical tradition in the course, and the social science readings included, among others, an essay entitled “Navaho Medicine” by Donald Sandner,³ a Jungian analyst. In addition, Sandner’s book, *Navaho Symbols of Healing*,⁴ provides a detailed, careful study of Navajo medicine men and healing ceremonies. Reading these

²Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. V. E. Watts (New York: Penguin, 1969); James J. O’Donnell’s *Commentary on Boethius’s De consolatione philosophiae* (Bryn Mawr, Penn.: Bryn Mawr Commentaries, 1990) reproduces Winthrop Weinberger’s Latin text from *CSEL*, vol. 67. The *Consolation* will generally be cited between parentheses within the essay’s text by Book and prose (pr.) or metrum (m.) number—e.g., III, m. 9, for Book III, metrum 9.
works in conjunction has led me to view the *Consolation* in a Navajo context.

Navajo healing ceremonies include elaborate chants, prayers, and sand paintings. Into lives stricken with disease, misfortune, and sorcery, the rites seek to bring a sense of control, order, and harmony with broader social and divine powers. I suggest that these ceremonies also provide a concrete and dramatic approach to the following questions: What is comforting in the *Consolation of Philosophy*? More specifically, how do traditional texts, arguments, and myths "console" Boethius? Literary and historical studies survey the work's sources, structure, and influence, but rarely address these questions directly. And precisely here a Navajo perspective may help. The chants and sand paintings "define and give meaning to the Navaho universe, and they transfer that meaning—and its secret power—to the patient."5 Similarly, as Boethius recalls patterns of meaning from classical mythology and Neoplatonic metaphysics, he is transformed from dispirited victim to integrated God-seer. In addition, the *Consolation* and Navajo ceremonies both promote similar states of mind. The Navajo rites may or may not cure a patient of disease, but they always aim at the symbolic healing that Boethius calls "consolation." As Sandner remarks, "The true purpose of the chants is to put the patient in a calm and peaceful state, free from evil of all kinds, so that he may accept with equanimity whatever may befall him."6 Boethius and the Navajo patient both attain points of view that transform their attitudes toward misfortune and illness. They find peace of mind as initially chaotic, isolating experiences of loss and pain become integrated into an ordered whole of traditional meanings.7

In this paper I investigate three aspects of the *Consolation*: Lady Philosophy's appearance and liberation of Boethius from Fortune's wheel; the cosmological poem (III, m. 9); and the myths of Orpheus, Ulysses, and Hercules as models for Boethius's progressive healing. In each case, comparison with Navajo ceremonies will highlight the mythic and performative features of the *Consolation*.

**Navajo Healers and Lady Philosophy**

The Navajo tradition recognizes three classes of healers: (1) herbalists who claim no special knowledge of the sacred; (2) diagnosticians or diviners, often women, who display shamanic gifts of trance experience and hand-trembling; and (3) chanters, generally male—also known as "medicine men"—who specialize in rites that involve singing and sand painting. In analyzing the *Consolation*, I focus on the chanters and their practices. Unlike shamans, the chanters derive power not from any capacity for ecstasy, but from knowledge. They are intellectuals and ritual masters who, through long apprenticeship, have learned the chants that bear the Navajo symbolism and mythology. They sing about heroic travels beneath the earth and into the sky, about conflicts and monster slaying, but make no claim to experience such voyages or conflicts themselves. Rather, they use traditional symbols, narratives, and rites to manipulate sacred powers on behalf of their patients.

We are not likely to confuse Lady Philosophy with a Navajo chanter. Not only is there a difference in gender, but she looks more like a mythic figure from the chants themselves. As the *Consolation* opens, Boethius laments his ruin at Fortune's hands, and Lady Philosophy appears with burning eyes and apparently shamanic powers. She combines great age and youthful vigor, and her height varies between

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8On these categories, see Sandner, *Navaho Symbols*, 26–33, 72; and Reicht, *Navaho Religion*, 99–103. While most chanters are male, Reicht comments that there have been female chanters, although she never knew one (xlv–xlv). Reicht herself learned the Shooting Chant and encountered no objections on the grounds of her sex.
“average human size” and a sky-piercing elevation that lifts her above human sight (I, pr. 1). This latter trait suggests a shamanic element closer to Navajo diviners than to the chanters. Further, her work as physician combines the functions of diagnosis and healing that the Navajo separate.

Yet Lady Philosophy and the chanters still share common features. Both make house calls, and their therapies include extensive talk and song. Specifically, the chanters’ mastery of traditional knowledge suggests a parallel to Philosophy’s use of poetic and mythological traditions, as well as speculative ones, to heal Boethius. Since both sing their patients to health, I shall concentrate on the Consolation’s poetry.

Philosophy’s first poem contrasts Boethius the astronomer “who once was free / To climb the sky” with his present state as prisoner:

His neck bends low in shackles thrust,
And he is forced beneath the weight
To contemplate - the lowly dust.

(I, m. 2)

This contrast becomes basic to the Consolation’s progress, as Philosophy redirects the prisoner’s gaze from earth to the heavens. Boethius’s grief indicates how deeply he had been attached to worldly things, such as his positions in the Roman aristocracy and in Theodoric’s court. Philosophy notes how this attachment has clouded his vision and led him to forget his identity or true nature, the end or purpose of things, and how the world is governed (I, pr. 6). With this diagnosis completed, the Consolation becomes a process of healing recollection in two stages: first, Boethius’s purifying detachment from Fortune and her goods; and, second, a renewed vision of his place in a divinely ordered universe.

The first stage resembles the purification rites that begin Navajo healing ceremonies. Evil forces must be expelled before the good can be assimilated. Like the medicine man’s evil-chasing prayers and rites, Lady Philosophy’s early songs and arguments free Boethius from
Boethius among the Navajo

sacred: four mountains mark the corners of the Navajo world and another its center. Other paintings map the heavens. Blessing Way portrays Father Sky, complete with constellations and central figures of the moon and sun. Similarly, the Hail Chant includes a portrait of the night sky, along whose northern and southern borders appear “the masked heads of the Cyclone and Storm People, who make the heavens move.”

A completed painting “becomes a holy altar upon which ‘the gods come and go.’” For Sandner, following Eliade and Jung, these paintings are images of the primordial and ever-present beginnings. With the chants that narrate the deeds of the gods and heroes, the paintings form a complex ritual in which the patient “is carried ‘back’ to the origin of the World and is present at the cosmogony.” This movement to the origins heals and restores meaning.

In the rituals, the patient enters the hogan and sits facing east on the painting. The medicine man resumes his chant and prayers, and with moistened hands he touches the sand figures and presses the sand onto the patient’s body. He touches the figure’s feet and then the patient’s feet and continues similarly for “the knees, hands, shoulders, breast, back and head of the figure and the patient, praying for the restoration of each member.” Two related events occur here: sitting on the painting reorients the patient to the Navajo world, and the medicine man pressing the sand figures to the patient ritually identifies the patient with the sand figures’ sacred powers.

The Consolation contains similar elements. The cosmological poem (III, m. 9) acts like a sand painting that orients Boethius toward the heavens and his origins, and three mythological poems

13Sandner, Navaho Symbols, 214.
14Sandner, Navaho Symbols, 71.
provide exemplary narratives for his developing identification with the highest, divine good.

Lady Philosophy's cosmological poem marks the Consolation's exact center: her critique of Fortune's false goods ends, and she begins to direct Boethius's attention toward the one, divine good that is the source and goal of all things. Like the sand paintings—especially those of the night sky—the poem offers the prisoner a vision of world order that consoles and heals. With Philosophy's help, Boethius struggles to place himself within this world order and thereby to see his situation from a renewed, coherent perspective. From this point on, he seeks to become God "by participation" (III, pr. 10).

Let us look at this poem more closely. Drawing on Plato's Timaeus and its Neoplatonic commentators, Lady Philosophy prays to the sator, the sower or father, of heaven and earth, who "rules by everlasting reason." Compelled by no outside causes, but only by the form of "highest good" within, the creator brings forth all things. This procession occurs in stages. First, the divine mind (mens) contains within itself a world of exemplary beauty, and by shaping "unstable matter" in its likeness confers lawful order on the whole, so that the competing elements of hot and cold, wet and dry, remain in harmony. Spreading through the limbs of this organized whole, the world-soul (anima) then takes on two circular motions: one that returns to itself and encircles the divine mind and another that "turns in pattern similar the firmament." The circling heavens thus reflect the soul's own motion. In a final creative procession, "souls and lesser lives" emerge, "Which from above in chariots swift Thou dost disperse / Through sky and earth." Human souls thus find themselves scattered through the heavens down to earth, where they are embodied and occasionally—like Boethius—imprisoned. Having sketched the

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origins and patterns of the world order, the poem immediately states these souls’ goal: “by Thy law benign they turn / And back to Thee they come through fire that brings them home.” The process here reverses, as our minds begin an odyssey homeward toward contemplation of the divine. Lady Philosophy therefore urgently asks the following:

Grant, Father, that our minds Thy august seat may scan,
Grant us the sight of true good’s source, and grant us light
That we may fix on Thee our mind’s unblinded eye.
Disperse the clouds of earthly matter’s cloying weight;
Shine out in all Thy glory; for Thou art rest and peace
To those who worship Thee; to see Thee is our end
Who art our source and maker, lord and path and goal.

(III, m. 9, lines 22–28)

THE CONSOLATIONS OF MYTHOLOGY

While the cosmological poem maps the cosmic order and directs Boethius’s attention toward the divine, it remains very much a philosopher’s prayer. It lacks the personal, narrative features of Navajo sand paintings and chants, where vivid tales of the Holy People, such as Changing Woman, Monster Slayer, and Rain Boy, call Navajo patients to identify with specific sacred powers. Boethius’s healing also requires similar mythic role models if he is to participate fully in his divine “source and maker.” As Seth Lerer has noted, Philosophy’s poems about three classical heroes—Orpheus, Ulysses, and Hercules—reflect Boethius’s own situation and moral growth. In Sandner’s

19 Reichard, Navaho Religion, 112.
terms, they indicate Boethius’s “identification” with mythic heroes and thereby carry his healing forward.

The first narrative poem offers the questionable role model of Orpheus. Like Boethius at the work’s opening, the grief-stricken Orpheus sings “tearful melodies,” lamenting his wife’s death. These songs subdue the animals, “But his passions unpressed / Burned more fiercely in his breast” (III, m. 12). “Complaining of the gods above,” he travels down to hell, where his songs again conquer everyone but himself. The lord of the underworld allows Eurydice to return with Orpheus, on one condition:

“But let him, too, this law obey,
Look not on her by the way
Until from night she reaches day.”
But who to love can give a law?
Love unto itself is law.
Alas, close to the bounds of night
Orpheus backwards turned his sight
And, looking, lost and killed her there.

(III, m. 12, lines 44-51)

The moral of Orpheus’s story is to cut passionate attachments and not look back to Fortune’s goods. To emphasize her point, Lady Philosophy frames the story between praise for abandoning “earthly chains” and a summons to the “upward way” of heavenly contemplation. She thus directs Boethius’s gaze toward the heavens and reminds him of where he has been. Looking back to his earlier state, he recognizes how his own grief had blinded him to the divine order and provoked his complaints against Fortune. Yet Winthrop Wetherbee has noted an ambivalence in this poem which “gives eloquent expression to the very impulse it is intended to curb, the attachment to earthly things.”

undertow that threatens Boethius’s progress up to this point; it risks his continuing to identify with Orpheus, rather than his learning Philosophy’s lesson and moving on.

Ulysses, the second hero, does move on. In Book IV Lady Philosophy contrasts the virtuous who become gods and the wicked who become beasts (IV, pr. 3). In this scheme, unstable human nature hovers between the divine and the animal. Philosophy illustrates the lower boundary with a poem about Ulysses. Her tale would be equally at home in Navajo witchcraft lore or in Kafka. Adrift at sea, Ulysses and his men are blown ashore on the island of Circe, “daughter of the sun” (IV, m. 3). At once herbalist and sorceress, she gives them “Cups she has touched with a spell.” The island soon becomes a zoo, as Ulysses’ men drink and change into beasts: a boar, African lion, wolf, and Indian tiger. Bewitched, they are also bothered and much bewildered because their transformation is incomplete: they can neither weep nor speak, while “Only the mind remains / To mourn their monstrous plight.” But Ulysses, long considered a figure of virtue and the soul exiled in matter, retains his integrity. At this point, the poem abruptly cuts off the Homeric narrative and leaves Ulysses and his still bestial crew in Circe’s domain. Seth Lerer describes this as “a profoundly unsettling poem precisely because it offers no fixed center and no firm ending.” Yet this irresolution marks the tale as a parable of the human soul’s instability and directionless wandering in a perilous world. Here classical myth would assume a postmodern face were it not for Lady Philosophy’s concluding commentary. She notes that, like Dame Fortune’s, Circe’s power is finally ineffective since it can neither penetrate nor transform the mind. Philosophy then cautions against the stronger, more insidious poisons of delusion and wickedness, which

Dethrone a man’s true self:
They do not harm the body,
But cruelly wound the mind.

(IV, m. 3, lines 37–39)

22Lerer, Boethius and Dialogue, 190.
Hercules, the third hero, does more than retain his integrity amid winds and charms. He triumphs, and alone among the classical heroes attains divine, immortal life. He thus embodies the *Consolation*’s highest ambition: to become gods by participation. Philosophy catalogs Hercules’ labors, which parallel Boethius’s own “bitter but spirited struggle against fortune of every kind.” Lerer highlights the Boethian implications of two Herculean triumphs. First, the chaining of Cerebrus, the guard dog of hell, signals Boethius’s own liberation. For the prisoner, who had been chained both literally and to Fortune’s wheel, now identifies with the hero who places monsters in chains. Second, “when Hercules can bear up the world with unbended neck, he signifies the dramatic change in the prisoner from a man whose heavy chains about his neck had forced him to look only at the dull earth.” Moreover, as Philosophy tells it, precisely this labor earned Hercules “a place in heaven as his reward” (IV, m. 7, line 31). The poem thus carries a double message: by both bearing the burdens of the world and looking to the heavens, Hercules becomes divine. Philosophy then challenges Boethius,

Go now, ye strong, where the exalted way
Of great example leads. Why hang you back?
Why turn away? Once earth has been surpassed
It gives the stars.

(IV, m. 7, lines 32–35)

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23 On Hercules’ divinization, see Frederick M. Schroeder, “The Self in Ancient Religious Experience,” in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 343, 354; Pindar describes Hercules as both hero and god; and to Plotinus, *Odyssey II.601–04* suggest that “the lower soul is Heracles the historical figure, and the higher, rational soul is Heracles himself,” who “has been translated to the Plotinian Nous.”

24 See *Consolation* III, pr. 10; and IV, pr. 3.

25 *Consolation* IV, pr. 7. Boethius introduces Hercules with two other exempla: Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter and Ulysses’ blinding of the Cyclops. O’Daly (*Poetry of Boethius*, 231) views all three as exemplars of “resourceful confrontation with adverse fortune”; and some medieval commentators agree (Drake, *Mythography*, 355–56).

26 Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 195; see *Consolation* I, m. 2.
The Hercules poem reaffirms the call to contemplation of the heavens that concluded the Orpheus poem, but with the exemplary force of Hercules’ triumph. Lerer also notes that the poem “completes the cycle of mythological metra, as the prisoner passes from Hell through an earthly beastliness, to Heaven.” These poems trace a mythic itinerary that shapes Boethius’s own progress toward consolation and health. Comparison with Navajo ceremonies suggests how important these figures and their narratives are in guiding Boethius to identity with the highest, divine good. For they provide him with exemplars in an imitative, experiential sense as well as a literary one. Where the cosmological poem orients him toward his divine goal, the mythological poems provoke a progressive identification with that goal. With Hercules, he too shall ascend the heavens and become divine. 

**Conclusion**

Boethius’s *Consolation* mixes genres to produce a subtle and powerful reversal of perspective, as we follow the prisoner’s journey from Fortune’s self-pitying victim to his Herculean participation in the divine. By placing the *Consolation* in a Navajo context, I have highlighted only the poetic and mythic features of the text and have omitted its rich ethical and dialectical arguments. Nevertheless, this selective focus may sharpen our appreciation for the cultural dynamics of consolation and healing. For in both cases it is memory

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27 Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue*, 190; and see 185.
28 Anna Crabbe says, “In effect the ‘cure’ is over by the start of the book [V] and Philosophy views the investigation of providence and free will as something of a sidetrack” (“Literary Design in De Consolatione Philosophiae,” in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981], 274). I would suggest that while Hercules is the last mythic exemplar, Book V’s questions cause Boethius to “hang back” (IV, m. 7, line 33). He can share Hercules’ vision only after Philosophy marks out a series of perspectives leading into the divine intellect and shifting from time to eternity (V, pr. 5–6; Duclow, “Perspective and Therapy,” 337–39).
of tradition that heals. Navajo rites are acts of social recollection. By reminding patients of traditional patterns of meaning, Navajo medicine men orient them and lead them to identify with mythic figures. Similarly, Lady Philosophy first reminds Boethius of his place in a world order through the cosmological poem, then tracks his entry into that order through the mythological poems.

Here a basic difference between Navajo healing and the *Consolation* also becomes suggestive. Whereas Navajo medicine men and patients play distinct roles in a social ceremony, the *Consolation* presents an interior dialogue between the suffering prisoner Boethius and his physician Lady Philosophy, both of whom are symbolic facets of the author Boethius. A healing integration occurs when the roles of patient and physician converge, as Boethius's prisoner comes to share Philosophy's point of view. The *Consolation* thus becomes an introspective, do-it-yourself ritual, where Boethius reappropriates the traditional images and arguments embodied in Lady Philosophy.

One final note: a colleague has suggested that Boethius would not be happy among the Navajo. This Roman aristocrat would indeed cut a strange figure on the reservation. Yet there remains an intriguing historical parallel between Boethius and the Navajo medicine man. Both are acutely aware of their precarious position under alien, occupying powers, and both see themselves as among the last communicators of a fading tradition. Boethius's *Consolation* distills and reworks classical philosophy and poetry, giving them new life to endure and to shape the medieval world. While performing chants and sand paintings for the benefit of their own people, Navajo healers have also shared their knowledge with white anthropologists, doctors, and Jungian analysts. Might they also teach us to read and experience our texts and traditions anew?

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29 Crabbe ("Literary Design," 258) highlights memory's role in the *Consolation* in comparison with Augustine's *Confessions*. Sandner (Navaho Symbols, 17 and 24-25) notes the "culture-bound" and social character of Navajo symbolic healing.

30 Duclow, "Perspective and Therapy," 141.
References


Woodcut from *Lancelot du Lac*, Paris 1513
Courtesy of Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University
Cover illustrations are also from this source
One of the most remarkable monuments of medieval literature in any language is the thirteenth-century French Lancelot-Grail Cycle (also called the Prose Lancelot, the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian Romance, or the Pseudo-Map Cycle—the last because the texts identify the author as Walter Map, who complicated matters, however, by dying well before the cycle was written). Before turning to the subject indicated in my title, I'll situate the cycle and offer a few details about its phenomenal importance.

Following the French verse Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes in the late twelfth century, and several other important Arthurian creations, the Lancelot-Grail Cycle was composed between about 1215 and 1235. As we have it now, the cycle consists of five distinct but intricately interconnected romances. Most scholars agree that the original plan was for three, not five, romances, and those are...
the three that now stand as nos. 3, 4, and 5 in the cycle. The first of those three is the Prose Lancelot (also called the Lancelot Proper, to distinguish it from the entire cycle), which tells the story of Lancelot’s youth, his chivalric adventures, and his love affair with the queen. The subjects of the other two, The Quest for the Holy Grail and The Death of Arthur, are indicated clearly enough by their titles.

But someone soon composed two other related romances and tacked them onto the beginning of the original set, thus creating, as Jean Frappier said, a “retrospective sequel” that provides a portico for the Vulgate edifice. The first of the five, in the order in which they now stand, is The History of the Holy Grail, actually a prehistory of the Grail, foreshadowing events to come. The second is Merlin, the story of the prophet and magician’s role in establishing the Arthurian regime and in helping to bring about the events in the following romances.

The Lancelot–Grail is the Middle Ages’ most remarkable synthesis of the Lancelot–Guinevere story, the Grail quest, and Arthurian prehistory and history. The cycle’s dimensions are as impressive as its influence. For example, the central romance (Lancelot), which occupies about half of the entire cycle, was edited about a decade ago by Alexandre Micha in nine volumes. Not only were these original texts the principal of Malory’s several sources (thereby influencing everything Arthurian done in English since), but the cycle or parts of it were translated or adapted into a number of medieval languages.

If this description makes the cycle sound daunting (or even depressing), that is by no means a purely modern reaction. The seventeenth-century French writer Jean Chapelain pulled no punches: the cycle, he said, “lacks focus, rambles, gives you a headache, and puts you to sleep.” Some modern scholars have not helped much. William

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3Quoted in E. Jane Burns’s introduction (I, xv) to Norris J. Lacy, ed. (The latter is the designation for the translation, still in progress, of the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate. The portions of that work cited herein include Burns’s introduction, Rupert T. Pickens for Merlin, Carleton W. Carroll for the passages drawn from the final pages of the Lancelot Proper, Norris J. Lacy for The Death of Arthur, and Martha Asher for the Post-Vulgate.)
Matthews, in an essay entitled “Inherited Impediments in Medieval Literary History,” assures us—without comforting us much—that the Prose Lancelot clearly was not “so deadly” for medieval readers as it is for modern ones, “even to specialists in medieval romance.” More recently, having discovered many of its fascinating intricacies, scholars have looked with considerably more favor on the cycle and have shown appreciation for the power and effect of many of its parts, while most often remaining overwhelmed by its length.

And in all that length, which is to say some two million words, the particular subject of this article, Guinevere’s kidneys, plays a role in only a single episode. But that episode, I believe, is of stunning significance, far out of proportion to the textual space it occupies.

But to explain, we need to return for a minute to Chrétien de Troyes, the greatest practitioner of Arthurian romance (at least in France and perhaps anywhere). He created a literary form that inspired large numbers of authors after him, and his importance is inestimable. But of most interest for our purposes is a feature of his literary characters: they, like the protagonists of the classic western film, appear to possess few if any internal organs. There is for example no indication, during the wanderings of Lancelot or those of Perceval (which lasted over five years), that they or anyone else ever had kidneys or bladders that may need relieving. We know, of course, that the queen had various organs—Lancelot’s interest in her was not purely intellectual—but they are never mentioned; nor are those of her lover. In general, the knights, on the other hand, seem to have had, as did cowboys, a single organ: the heart, the seat of courage, generosity, and love.

But this organic unity (as it were) could not last, and that brings us back to the Lancelot–Grail Cycle. In the Merlin, the second romance of the cycle (Lacy, ed., I, 338), we read of the queen’s abduction and of the plot to replace her by her nearly identical half-sister, known as the False Guinevere. This is a crucial event in the cycle, and there is a reprise of the False Guinevere episode in the following romance, the Prose Lancelot Proper. (More precisely, given the order

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of composition previously mentioned, it was presented first in the *Lancelot* and then recast, but as foreshadowing, in the *Merlin*.) For our immediate purposes, though, the only significant fact about this abduction is that the plot hinges on the ability of Guinevere’s servant or nurse to get the queen out of her room so she can be kidnapped.

This, it turns out, requires no special skill or stratagem: she simply takes the queen outside at night to relieve herself before bedtime. (That, admittedly, is a sanitized summary: the Old French narrator tells us instead that she goes outside “pour pisser,” thus, to the best of my knowledge, using that word for the first time ever in a courtly romance.) Whatever the language, the Prose *Lancelot* cycle, unlike Chrétien’s romances, presents characters who urinate.

This is not a physiological presentation, however, and the main thing of interest about Guinevere’s kidneys is that she has some—but that is itself a shocking innovation, unprepared by anything in the cycle’s major inspiration, Chrétien de Troyes’s *Lancelot*. But now, in the thirteenth century, she has to get up at night. On the face of it, this surely sounds trivial, but it is not: Guinevere’s bodily functions signal a major change in the basic nature and conception of the literary text.

Although our emphasis is on the regal bladder, we could have found other examples, including an occasional servant who urinates or characters who give evidence of other bodily functions. Whatever illustration is chosen—and kidney activity is merely a convenient if slightly unrefined index—the point is that as we move from twelfth-century to thirteenth-century romance, we begin to encounter characters who are more complete, in ways that are both physical and psychological, both beneficial and sometimes tragic. This is not a claim that either kind of romance is better, of course, only that we are moving from one fundamental conception of the literary universe to another. We are in fact seeing the beginnings, in subtle (or perhaps unsubtle) ways, of a literary realism unknown in the twelfth century.

It is apparent that realism is a dangerous term that must be used scrupulously and cautiously. We certainly must not confuse it with a Balzacian conception of realism. For one thing, the medieval romance always seems to have assumed that it was talking about a distant,
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if not nonexistent, past; the reality described in the stories is not contemporary reality (even though medieval writers updated details of dress, architecture, and custom), and it makes no pretense of being that. Moreover, Arthurian romance, until much later, retains a strong element of the marvelous and of what we could reasonably call "unrealism."

Thus, by the word realism, I am suggesting merely that, just as literary characters begin to behave more nearly as human beings do, so does Arthurian society begin to assume the more complex contours that a real society might present. As a result, problems lose their clarity. Specifically, the thirteenth century begins to embrace and cultivate the complexity and richness, and often the predicaments, of human experience. And that is a good part of what I mean by the rise of medieval literary realism. But those statements require clarification.

Literary art in the twelfth century was by its nature focused and selective. Out of the constellation of effects that might theoretically spring from a single cause, Chretien and his contemporaries chose the one that fit their plan and intent, and otherwise they simply swept away the literary "clutter" of a full and realistic range of possible effects. Literary life is simpler because a convention of early romance preselects the results of actions.

In such a system (which I am admittedly painting with a very broad brush), duties and loyalties are comparatively straightforward. It is true that Chretien's romances are constructed around crises and sometimes around the unexpected effects of one's actions. But in his texts the crisis is most often the result simply of a character's deficient understanding and not of a fundamentally complex functioning of his or her world. Only in Chretien's Lancelot does there appear to be a genuine and intrinsic conflict between, for example, love and chivalry, and it is surely no accident that this is the romance that is extensively recycled and reworked in the central part of the Lancelot-Grail.

Romances in the thirteenth century begin to show us that actions have consequences and that those consequences may not always be predictable or simple. Of course, the change to prose and the far greater length of the Vulgate Cycle both permit and, in a way, require narrative complications. (Or, on the other hand, we might
argue that those complications require the lengthening of romance—and perhaps the vehicle of prose as well.\(^5\)

One of the clearest examples of the change I am describing is economic in nature. It is the practice—and an entirely proper and noble practice within the courtly context—for one literally to “purchase” admiration, affection, and loyalty. Repeatedly, in early romances, we hear of a prince or knight who (and this is a composite but not inaccu­rate quote) “gave away so much wealth that he eventually won the love of everyone at the court.”

Let me offer a specific instance. It was Chrétien de Troyes who told us that generosity is the queen of virtues. In Chrétien’s second romance, \textit{Cligés}, the emperor’s instructions to his son Alexandre (before the latter leaves his own land for Arthur’s court) are to take a lot of money with him and give it all away:

\begin{quote}
Largesse alone makes one a worthy man, not high birth, courtesy, wisdom, gentility, riches, strength, chivalry, boldness, power, beauty, or any other gift. But just as the rose, when it buds fresh and new, is more beautiful than any other flower, so largesse, wherever it appears, surpasses all other virtues.\(^6\)
\end{quote}

Alexandre follows the advice: he “devoted his efforts . . . to giving and spending liberally.” Soon he had given away so much money that “the king held him in great affection, as did the barons and the queen” (128).

\(^5\)I am persuaded, in fact, that the birth of literary realism coincides in a general sense with the change from verse to prose. It is not entirely clear which is cause and which is effect—it may well be reciprocal—but the adoption of prose as the appropriate vehicle for fictional discourse appears to be closely related to other fundamental changes in the very conception of romance. By its nature, medieval French prose, in an effect reinforced by the change from a synthetic to an analytic structure (that is, by the progressive weakening and eventual loss of a case system), becomes far more dependent on syntactic order, on what we tend to think of as “normal” grammatical and temporal sequence. It thus may be the natural vehicle for the communication of a narrative art that rests on realistic sequence and, with the \textit{Death of Arthur} especially, on a rigorous notion of literary causality.

\(^6\)William W. Kibler, trans., \textit{Arthurian Romances}, 125.
Those who say you can’t buy love must never have read Chrétien’s works, or a good many other romances.

But the effort requires, of course, a phenomenal amount of purchasing power. One might occasionally be tempted to ask just how it is that those who want to buy fame and affection never seem to lack the wealth required to do it. The seemingly perverse but perfectly correct answer is that this is a question we are not supposed to ask. Early romance functioned selectively, in accord with what Laurence de Looze, drawing on Erich Köhler, calls a “wish-fulfillment economics.”

The primary tenet of this economics was the fundamental inextinguishability of wealth. Knights always had enough wealth simply because the thematics of earlier romance precluded its dissipation, while also precluding questions about such matters; in other words, the authors simply posited this plenitude, and because they never asked whether the characters might ever be impoverished, we are not supposed to do so, either.

But in the thirteenth-century movement toward literary realism, such questions become legitimate. And there, we may not only ask whether wealth might be exhausted but learn the answer in dramatic fashion. In romances such as the fascinating Joufroi de Poitiers (I am moving away from Arthurian texts for a moment simply because the illustration is particularly dramatic), the hero and his rival compete in spending money, on the correct assumption that the one who gives away the most money will be most respected and loved. Thus, they

8Chrétien may be the originator of this convention. At least it appears to develop at the same time he began to write; that is, it belongs to the first courtly generation. Before the courtly spirit asserted itself fully, there is one twelfth-century example of a king who impoverishes himself by giving away money. That is the young King Arthur in Geoffrey’s Historia (Hammer 152); there he needs money and thus—Geoffrey says almost in passing—attacks the Saxons anew in order to plunder their cities. It may be that Geoffrey is writing when the romance tradition was first forming and the conventions of generosity were not yet set. In any event, his brief passage on the subject appears to be an isolated early instance of the motif; I know of no other examples.
gave away their money, and then they “pawned their horses, hauberks, jewels, and fine clothes, palfreys, packhorses, and saddles, so that nothing remained of all the fine equipment” that each possessed and that permitted him to win friendships and respect. “When each had nothing more to spend, he could not meet his obligations” (see lines 3361–3407; here 3394–3404).

Undeterred, Joufroi “reflected and meditated for a long time about ways to spend more” (3405–07). He finally falls upon a time-honored solution: as the text puts it, “he was the guest of a very rich man who had a beautiful unmarried daughter” (see vv. 3408–11). Need more be said?

The point—of his poverty, not his marriage—is that now actions have consequences that they never had before. Questions can now be asked that were not legitimate before. Characters inhabit a pragmatic world, a realistic universe. In ways that cannot be traced in detail here, the notion of causality is radically remade. This is in no way a casual change; it is a transformation of the very notion and nature of literature, with far-reaching consequences.

Literature and the lives depicted therein suddenly become far more complicated. To return to Chrétien: with the possible exception of his Lancelot romance, he never presented genuine conflicts between loyalty to one’s lord and loyalty to one’s relatives or lady, for example, or between the personal and the public functions of chivalry, or between its personal and altruistic dimensions. Frequently, as I suggested, his characters assume that such a conflict exists, only to be proved wrong. For the most part, Chrétien’s dramas thus deal less with contradictions inherent in chivalry than with characters’ erroneous perceptions. (In his last romance, Perceval, Chrétien goes further in providing a critique of chivalry, but even there he is not really concerned with investigating internal conflicts. His project, which prefigures that of the author of The Quest for the Holy Grail, is far more sweeping: he is illustrating the fundamental inadequacy of Arthurian chivalry as a concept.)

But strange and sometimes tragic things occur as we move toward greater realism. A good many of these tragedies, and numerous near-tragedies, are due to the interplay of conflicting loyalties, a theme
that, as I have said, had been largely foreign to Chrétien. The closest Chrétien came to it was at the end of Yvain, where Yvain and his friend Gawain fight each other (without recognizing each other). But that episode illustrates primarily Gawain’s taking the unethical side of an argument, and, in any case, the two knights are reconciled as soon as they identify themselves.

But in the new literary environment, some of the most reasonable tenets of chivalry produce unexpected results, including battles undertaken against one’s colleagues, friends, and kinsmen. For example, we repeatedly hear that it would be cowardly for a knight to enter a tournament on the side with more combatants. Reasonable enough. But in the Vulgate and elsewhere, it very often happens that the opposite side includes other knights of the Round Table, and one is unwittingly—or sometimes wittingly—led to do battle with one’s own friends and relatives. Chivalry may still be founded on an ideal, but the world of thirteenth-century romance is a much more complex and pragmatic world in which ideals often do not produce ideal results.

A case in point, among many, occurs not long before the end of the Lancelot Proper and illustrates the consequences of a strict adherence to chivalric principles. In this instance Lancelot actually knows that the other side includes Arthurian knights: “When Lancelot heard of his companions from King Arthur’s household, he was sure they were those of the [Grail] quest . . . , but he did not let that keep him from helping the [other side], as he said, because they were fewer in number.”

A complicated sequence of jousts and battles follows, and if the summary is confusing, that is because the events are confused. Lancelot is not bearing familiar arms and is thus unrecognized. Mordred is at his side, and although this happens at a time when the text is beginning to predict Mordred’s later treason, he is not yet a full-blown villain; indeed, he is praised as an excellent knight. Nevertheless, readers will doubtless think it odd, in the sequence to

9Lacy, ed., III, 264; Carroll translation. Later references to this romance are given by page number only, with vol. III understood.
come, to find Lancelot as the ally of Mordred against the best knights Arthur’s court has to offer.

The tournament starts, and Lancelot attacks Kay (Arthur’s seneschal) and eventually many others, including Yvain. Then Mordred is captured by Gawain (his own half-brother) and by Hector (Lancelot’s brother). Then Lancelot

raised his sword and struck Sir Gawain [his best friend] on the helmet so violently that he was stunned and shaken. . . . Then Lancelot charged full speed at Hector [his brother!] and struck him such a blow on the arm with his sword that he forced him to release Mordred; then he recovered and with all his strength dealt another blow, so violently that he split the helmet and the iron coif. . . . This mighty blow came flying at Hector, who was so stunned that he fell senseless to the ground. (265)

Now, it is perfectly logical, given Lancelot’s incognito and his determination to fight on the side of those who are outnumbered, that he might be found doing battle with friend and kin—but that is just my point: such things can occur naturally, without enmity or intent, in the Vulgate. That is the nature of this text and of this conception of the “real” world. Moreover, it is typical of this text that Lancelot would acknowledge the possibility of fighting against his companions, but equally typical that he does not consider the consequences, the risk to life and limb.

Another possible objection: this is only a tournament. It is not warfare, just sport. But the descriptions (those I have cited and a great many others) of the encounters, the injuries, the violence, make it impossible to take this as a mere chivalric exercise or as harmless pastime. This may be sport, but it is very serious and injurious, potentially fatal, sport. If there is any doubt, consider the following.

The fight continues, and Lancelot sees that Mordred has been captured—again. The captors are Gawain—again—and two of his brothers (Gaheriet and Guerrehet; henceforth their English names,
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Gareth and Gaheris, will be used); they “had captured [Mordred] and so beaten him with their swords and trampled him beneath their horses’ feet that Mordred thought he could not escape with his life” (266). This near-fratricidal scene is explainable: Gawain was unable to rip the helmet from Mordred’s head and so did not recognize him. But this explanation, far from justifying the attack, has the primary effect of emphasizing the senselessness of violence.

When they eventually learn, after the tournament, that their victim was their half-brother, they apologize (after a fashion): “If we had recognized you, you would never have suffered any harm from us.”

Lancelot eventually (279) offers the same explanation to Kay: “I didn’t recognize you: in such a place one knows neither friend nor kinsman.” He goes on to inquire about Mordred, and when he learns that Mordred’s half-brothers had beaten him so badly that he had to be returned to court in a litter, “he [begins] to laugh” and says, “That’s what he gets for refusing [to stick with me].” Defeat, humiliation, and serious injury at the hands of one’s brothers are now the stuff comedy is made of. Knights explain to one another why they attacked their friends but rarely or never acknowledge the senselessness of a system that leads them to do so or the harm that can result.

Soon after, Lancelot is attacked by, and defeats, Gawain, Yvain, Sagremor, and Hector (280–81). And battles and mistaken identities proliferate. One battle in particular stands out, though, because identities are not mistaken (286–87).

This is one of the most peculiar and puzzling of such episodes. Gawain sees Lancelot approaching; he recognizes him and calls out, “Sir Lancelot, be on your guard against me”; after which he viciously knocks his friend to the ground beneath his horse’s hooves. The only explanation given is that Gawain did not know that his lance was as strong as it was—scarcely an adequate explanation for attacking his friend.

Then the text says, “It goes without saying that Sir Gawain was sad and upset about what he had done,” and he asks Lancelot’s forgiveness: “Don’t be offended . . . for I did not act deliberately.” But of course, he did act deliberately; he simply thought, apparently, that his
lance would break before doing such serious injury to his friend. In other words, he did not intend to hurt him \textit{quite that badly}. It might be objected, correctly, that this is a tournament and that one is \textit{supposed} to attack others, even friends. But the fact that, when people repeatedly do what they are supposed to do, the results are near fatal gives to the text a chilling quality further emphasized by the narrator's neutral tone; in other words, what is most wrong with all this is that narrator and characters alike appear to see \textit{nothing} wrong with it.

Interestingly, all these events described here come within a few unusually frantic pages of one another and are interrupted only by Bors' visit to the Grail Castle. In fact, when these incidents occur, we are approaching the Grail quest, in which chivalry as it has been practiced at Arthur's court will be shown to be inadequate and largely irrelevant, if not actually destructive. These episodes are obviously preparing for that, and the escalation of such incidents emphasizes the futility, destructiveness, and even absurdity of traditional chivalry. We are witnessing what can be described only as a kind of chivalric entropy.

Let me offer now one of the most dramatic examples of conflicting loyalties, this one taken from the Post-Vulgate rather than the Vulgate.\textsuperscript{10} At one point Gareth finds his mother the queen sleeping with Lamorat. We doubtless find his reaction curious: he does not blame Lamorat, because she is so beautiful and so noble that, in his view, it is only natural that a man should want to sleep with her. On the other hand, the queen enjoys no such extenuation: having disgraced her family, she deserves to die, and the dutiful son Gareth kills her.

It is notable that, despite our possible reaction to this reasoning, there is no indication that the narrator considers it defective. The

\textsuperscript{10}The Post-Vulgate is fundamentally a reworking of the Vulgate Cycle, done just a few years later and with much of the Lancelot and Guinevere material deleted and the Grail material enhanced. The passage in question is in vol. V of Lacy, ed. (translated by Martha Asher). Because that volume is awaiting publication, it can be cited only by chapter number: 60.
critical point here is that even sound reasoning, as this curiously appears to be, can lead one to commit a despicable act. As if that were not enough, his matricide brings Gareth into serious conflict with his brother Gawain. The latter swears that he will avenge the killing, and his actions too appear to have the approbation of the narrator: in other words, they are simultaneously an appropriate and a destructive chivalric response. Consequently, when two knights—brothers—respond to crises exactly as they should do (insofar as the narrator allows us to draw a conclusion), they find themselves on opposite sides in an impending battle, potentially to the death.

Others are then drawn into the situation. Gareth and Gawain’s brother Agravain and their half-brother Mordred side with Gawain because they dislike Gareth. The other brother Gaheris loves Gareth dearly and takes his side even though he is distraught over their mother’s death. As a result, Agravain and the others proclaim their enmity for Gaheris as well as Gareth and then for Lancelot’s brother Hector, because he had demonstrated his concern and friendship for Gareth. Finally, Lamorat (their mother’s lover) arrives and, surprisingly, takes the killer’s—Gareth’s—side in the battle, further confusing lines of allegiance. The situation is spinning out of control and drawing characters into the conflict for a variety of reasons, some of them having little or nothing to do with the crime itself.

With these ridiculous battle lines drawn, a fierce fight takes place, and all the brothers are seriously injured. This battle is due primarily to divided loyalties, but also to other causes such as complications inherent in the chivalric code. Indeed, when Gareth wishes at one point that he could avoid war with his brothers, he is told that it would be cowardly to do so; thus, even notions of chivalric honor and courage contribute to the strife.

Two observations are important here. First, as I said, even actions and reactions considered proper for knights can be the provocation for disrupted friendships, alliances, and loyalties. It is no longer true, as it had once been, that there is a reasonably clear link between the appropriateness of a knight’s chivalric instincts and his contribution to the social good. Second, the Post-Vulgate goes well beyond the Vulgate in
these regards. In the earlier cycle, the cataclysm is set in motion when Lancelot rescues the condemned Guinevere and accidentally kills Gawain's brothers, thus incurring his enmity. But since the Post-Vulgate does not make the adulterous love of Lancelot and Guinevere serve as the impetus for catastrophic developments, the crisis is purely a crisis of chivalry, and a crisis of literary realism, not a punishment for sin or treason.

But the Post-Vulgate is not alone in taking realism to a new level: even the last romance of the Vulgate Cycle, the Death of Arthur, does the same, for it focuses starkly on the tragic effects of accidents, of conflicting loyalties, and of the weakening of Arthur, a king who is now largely indecisive, ineffective, and increasingly desperate in his attempts to hold his court and his system together. We have been told that the knights who return to Arthur's court after the Grail quest are those who had accomplished nothing; in other words, the court is now, to put it bluntly, a refuge for failures, and Arthur is a distinctly marginalized monarch.

Chivalric adventures had been brought to an end by Galahad's accomplishment of the quest, and in order to maintain his knights' fighting fitness, as well as to bolster morale, Arthur fills the void with tournament after tournament. The practice may maintain his knights' skills, but it is a bloody and costly way to do so. Knights had always been injured in tourneys, so that is nothing new. What is new in the Death of Arthur is the persistent impression that tourneys and chivalric activity have been cut off from any useful function. They are largely meaningless exercises; they are simple (but destructive) pastimes. And they are, as I suggested, a desperate ploy on Arthur's part to preserve and perhaps reassemble the remnants of a once-glorious system of social organization and moral action.

But of course it cannot work, because the Arthurian world is decaying from within, and that decay is both conceived and portrayed through a new literary realism. The king's death is predicted at the beginning of the Death of Arthur and accomplished at the end. There are frequent predictions concerning what is called, by narrator and characters alike, the "war that will have no end." Bors first predicts it, and Lancelot soon echoes his prediction: "Now we can be sure that we'll never have peace with King Arthur or with Gawain... for this
is the beginning of the war that will have no end” (Lacy, ed., 125). And although the ultimate cause of this cataclysm is the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, the immediate cause is another conflict of chivalric loyalties.

Since Lancelot had killed Gawain's brothers, albeit accidentally, family honor required Gawain to take up arms against his closest friend Lancelot. And Arthur, fully aware of the tragedy being prepared, is curiously powerless to do anything about it; indeed he seems almost resigned or indifferent, and so he too finds himself the enemy of Lancelot, his best knight and best friend. The few decisions that are being made now are made by other knights, but not the king. And for the most part, the characters are being carried along by the current of events in which decisions are ineffective or impossible.

As we approach the end of the Vulgate Cycle, we are also moving closer to the modern notion of realism—or perhaps even of naturalism—as emphasis settles on the real and often brutal effects of a world animated by forces beyond the control of reason or even of human will. It also makes reading the final romance of the cycle a decidedly depressing experience.

With sufficient time, we could trace this movement further, and, by the end of the Middle Ages, find romances in which the knights of the Round Table go around merrily killing one another in the absurd expectation that their martial skills will win Arthur's admiration and gratitude, whoever the victim may be. Their attitude appears to be: "See how many of your [Arthur's] knights I've killed? How will you reward me?" And sometimes, with equal absurdity, Arthur responds just as they expect him to.

Even though Chrétien de Troyes dramatized misconceptions about the nature of chivalry and, in his *Perceval*, began to emphasize the marginalization of the Arthurian ethos, his romance world is far from what it would become at the hands of later authors. But the differences are by no means limited to thematic matters or the conception of Arthur; I think there can be little doubt a fundamental change is taking place in narrative fiction itself.

The narrative universe of the Vulgate bears little resemblance to that of Chrétien's romances, though only thirty years separate them. The cycle borrows and reworks numerous themes and motifs from
Chrétien, but the texture, the meaning, the presuppositions of the two are entirely different. And the difference, which deserves far greater attention than I have given it here, is that the thirteenth century, the Vulgate Cycle in particular, has recourse to a literary realism unknown to the previous century. Literary life is now far more complex—and different in such a way that never again can Arthurian fiction have the same resonances and the same character it had at the hands of Chrétien de Troyes.

Finally, I would suggest that the development of realism, as I have defined it here, is not simply the creature of the cycle’s author or authors, but is primarily a function of the period. I believe we could easily enough trace it through other romances and through artistic creations in other media and even through the thinkers of the time. But we may seem by now to have forgotten the queen’s kidneys. As I said at the outset, the main thing interesting about them is that they exist. But once an author gives Guinevere kidneys, she will never be the same again. Nor will be the very notion of the literary text. If she has kidneys, they will function; when they do, she will go outside; then she can be kidnapped; and then any number of things can happen. From a single cause can stem multiple effects, not all of them predictable, and this is the most tangible index of the rise of literary realism. Hereafter, although he may still make his presence strongly felt, the author will now be a less conspicuous and controlling architect of literary drama than he once was. The medium in which he is now working precludes the kind of selectivity Chrétien was able to exercise. And once King Arthur enters the age of realism, his court, incarnating an ideal that belonged to another time, can never be the same.

References


From *The Children's King Arthur Stories from Tennyson and Malory*
(London: Henry Frowde and Hodder & Stoughton, 1900)
Courtesy of Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library,
Brigham Young University
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 deprecative 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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4 M. 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 voice­
less 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 work­nings 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 essen­
tial 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 squyres” (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

10 Ann McMillan, “‘Fayre Sisters Al’: *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Assembly of
which represents becoming lost and confused, as “represent[ing] women's experiences
in a life of restricting social conventions” and “serv[ing] well to exemplify the beauty
and great difficulty of life for a medieval lady” (38).

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
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 ques-
tions 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 degree” (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 alle-
gorical figures, is a gentlewoman sent to serve the dreamer. (Only
Loialyte 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 atten-
dants, employed in Loialyte’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 pilgrim-
age 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

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12 Barratt 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 audience 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 surroundings. When Perseverance returns later to aid the company with their petitions, she singles out the dreamer as “‘of myn old acqueyntaunce’” (402) and “‘enquire[s] the bolder dare I be’” (403). Together, past acquaintanceship and prior service (which Perseverance graciously proffered) are presented as sufficient cause for a shift to less formal, more intimate dialogue. Reversing the prior model of discourse between them, Perseverance now asks the questions; most significantly, 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 otherwise 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 activity 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.13 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.

13 John 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 youre matier for to sewe,
With more, whiche I pray yow thynk upon
Yowre wordes on yowre slevis everichon.

(II6-19)

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, thi i trewe” (312), she announces she

14Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance Wright, and Joan Bechtold, eds., *Equally in God’s Image: Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 8.

15McMillan says the significance of the refusal is not clear (39), while Stephens claims it is self-satisfied stubbornness (137).
The Medieval Lady Dreams in The Assembly of Ladies

does have a "bille" (325). Unlike "wordes," "billes" are written, and therefore a masculine mode of expression is appropriated.

Pearsall notes that mottos 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). 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 mottos are traditionally treated as mere symbolic tokens, by the time the petitioners make their appeals to Loiaulte, their mottos become their "billes"; their "wordes" become the same as their "billes" (e.g., "sans 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 employs the humility *topos*; clearly this stands in contrast to the candor and boldness of her earlier speech:

To folowe yow when 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. 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

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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. 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,

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

(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.

\footnote{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. 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. 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

19 Judith Bennett, "Public Power and Authority in the Medieval English Countryside," in 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.

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 deflating 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

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21 As 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*.

22 Many 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).
24McMillan, “‘Fayre Sisters Al,’” 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. Suprisingly, some feminist scholars prefer the depiction of woman in The Floure and the Leafe,26 a depiction that re-inscribes 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 Leafe, 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**


28 McMillan, “‘Fayre Sisters Al,’” 36.


Act 2, Scene 5: Malvolio with Maria's letter
An engraving by J. Quarterly after the painting by William Ralston
From *The Pictorial Works of Shakespeare*, compiled by W. C. Prescott in 100 volumes, n.d.
That it should all depend on there being an indistinguishable twin brother always troubles me when I think about it, though never when I watch the play. Can it be that we enjoy the play so much simply because it is a wish fulfillment so skillfully presented that we do not notice that our hearts are duping our heads?¹

C. L. Barber’s observation touches on a characteristic of Twelfth Night that divides the play’s commentary. On one hand is the desire to privilege our experience of the play in performance, to see Twelfth Night reaching back to the earlier festive comedies in which closure is less problematic. On the other hand is the need to pause, reexamine the text, and notice how we may be duped into seeing the play as essentially festive. The first impulse encourages us to give ourselves over to the flow of events and identify with the characters; the second makes us question both the characters’ behavior as well as the festive atmosphere of the play and seek to “prove,” as Feste might say, the foolishness of the first view (1.4.52).²

The first view has been less prevalent in the thirty or so years since Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedies*, but it still has advocates. For example, William Carroll, who like Barber situates the play among the other comedies, recognizes some problems but sees Viola's role as unproblematic and the play itself as essentially festive. Conversely, Terry Eagleton and Alexander Leggatt offer especially negative evaluations of Olivia, Orsino, and Viola through analysis of the characters' language, with special attention paid to Orsino's opening remarks. More recently, a similar darker perspective has been developed by a psychoanalytic reading and, as we could expect, by a historicist reading.

How much should we privilege in interpretation a positive response to a performance of *Twelfth Night*, declaring certain textual proofs an enemy to the play's comic life, or how much heed those proofs that seem to illustrate Shakespeare's restless awareness of unresolved difficulties? Through the fool's part, I will offer a reading of the last scenes that complicates our perception of Viola and then consider how seriously we can take such a reading in a play where reading itself, the characters' uses of evidence and proof, and the willfulness of interpretation are at issue. *Twelfth Night* at once encourages us to seek conceptual antinomies, like text against performance or the festive transcendence of theater versus the historical determinism of society, through which to evaluate the play, but it also makes us inevitably self-conscious about the limits of such approaches. *Twelfth Night*, I will argue, shows the limits of such binary logic, and works to

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triangulate these oppositions, complicating our efforts to divide and conquer the play. The fool, though usually at the heart of these interpretive conceptual antinomies, both exposes their limitations and suggests alternatives. Indeed, it is often what an interpreter decides to make of the fool that betrays the limitations and biases inherent in many arguments about *Twelfth Night*.

A problem for some interpreters that, I would argue, rarely occurs to an audience or C. L. Barber is Viola’s disguise and deception of others. On the one hand, she can be self-consciously ironic concerning the disguise. Viola asserts to Orsino that women “are as true of heart as we” (2.4.106) while deceiving him and with Olivia remarks, “I am not that I play” (1.5.176), winking at the audience about her disguise. But later, in a moment of passion, she swears “by innocence” to have “one heart, one bosom, and one truth” (3.1.154–55), unaware now that the disguise implies otherwise. Even more odd is her “if I do feign you witnesses above / Punish my life for tainting my love” (5.1.131–32) in the last scene, when her feigning in disguise is causing so much confusion. It seems she would rather die than reveal herself. How can she one moment be highly conscious of her appearance as a man, playfully joking about it, and the next, seemingly unaware that she is “feigning”? At first she thinks that Antonio has been misled by the disguise because she imitates Sebastian (3.4.359–63), yet in the last scene she remarks that Antonio “put strange speech upon me. / I know not ’twas but distraction” (5.1.61–62), ignoring his potential to “prove true” that Sebastian is alive. Since she could reveal herself and clear at least part of the confusion when Antonio is first arrested, and has the chance to do so again early in the last scene, Viola not only subtracts proof needed by the characters to communicate, but also seems to ignore potential proof that Sebastian is alive.

Though Viola does not have Malvolio’s desire to control others, her disguise in the last scenes, as the play moves toward farce, gives her an unexpected advantage for brief moments over the devoted emotions of Antonio, Orsino, and Olivia. There is something analogous between Feste’s disguise as Sir Topas, which misleads Malvolio in jail, and Viola’s misleading disguise, which helps to jail Antonio and also,
perhaps, incarcerate another loyal servant, the helpful captain from the second scene. While it is clear that farcical confusion followed by a reconciliation is part of Shakespeare's motive for the disguise, it is clear too that the dramatist presents proof that complicates our perception of Viola. We don't know clearly her "intent" with the disguise. When requesting the captain's help she does not indicate whether the disguise is self-protective, or formed out of a nascent attraction to Orsino, or is for some other motive (1.2.55). She quickly finds herself in the difficult position of mediating between the man she loves and another woman, requiring that she smother her desires in accordance with her disguise; something Viola did not initially anticipate.⁶

Viola's difficulties are reflected in Sebastian, her apparently indistinguishable twin. After Malvolio struggles in a dark prison to prove he is not mad, Sebastian, noting the "glorious sun" and a pearl given to him by Olivia, wonders about what sorts of proof his senses provide. He is

\[
\ldots \text{ready to distrust mine eyes} \\
\text{And wrangle with my reason that persuades me} \\
\text{To any other trust but that I am mad,} \\
\text{Or else the lady's mad.}
\]

(4.3.13-16)

Sebastian sees his senses as untrustworthy mediators, but his "flood of fortune" is, finally, reason enough to fetter the reason of those senses. As Viola did in the last scene when she calls Antonio's remarks "distraction," Sebastian ignores the madness of others and "having sworn truth ever will be true" to Olivia in marriage (4.3.33). But while we do not see the marriage, we can assume that in the ceremony Sebastian permits Olivia and the priest to use the name "Cesario." Thus, like Viola when she swears her love before Olivia and to Orsino,

⁶See also Nancy K. Hayles, "Sexual Disguise in As You Like It and Twelfth Night," *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1979): 63-72. Hayles argues that ambiguities implied by Viola's disguise "will nevertheless lead to good rather than evil" (71-72).
Sebastian's swearing in marriage is odd; both swear to love by calling attention to truth in a manner that recalls their false identities, swearing “by that that is not,” as Touchstone might suspiciously remark (1.2.78). Especially in moments when characters swear to the truth and singleness of their love in Twelfth Night, they must simultaneously forget or ignore something that their very swearing unconsciously seems to point to, as, for example, Orsino's declarations of love indicate his egotism (2.4.92–102). The final scene is approached through a marriage off stage that an audience might gratefully welcome, but that also implies some degree of deception.

In the final scene Shakespeare seems to be clearing the waters in one way to allow the reunion while simultaneously clouding them in another. Orsino either ignores or misses the point of the fool's remarks about profiting in the knowledge of oneself from a foe and pays Feste a compliment in return, dismissing him with money (5.1.8–44). The Duke's initial compliments to Olivia, “My soul the faithfull'st offerings breathed out / That e'er devotion tendered,” echo Antonio's remarks moments earlier to Cesario, “My love, without retention or restraint, / All his in dedication. For his sake / Did I expose myself pure for his love” (5.1.109–10, 75–77). Orsino's desires mirror those of his captured foe, Antonio. Both he and Antonio have done homage to “images” and both feel that the pains they suffer for their “pure” love are not recompensed. Though one cannot expect the changeable Orsino to identify with his captive, repeatedly in the last scene characters who reflect each other “make no compare” between themselves (2.4.100). Viola, as noted, is unable or refuses to see that Antonio sees her as indistinguishable from Sebastian, forgetting her previous hope that Antonio's words will “prove true” even when confronted by more proof that Sebastian is possibly alive.

7 Orsino calls himself “unstaid and skittish in all motions else, / Save in the constant image of the creature / That is beloved” (2.4.17–19); Antonio remarks, “And to this image, which methought did promise / Most venerable worth, did I devotion” (3.4.342–43). They both serve the appearance of a person and not the substance. For both, like Malvolio, “when the image of it leaves him, he must run mad” (2.5.180).
To reveal herself to Antonio and the others before Sebastian’s entrance would, in effect, break Shakespeare’s plotted reunion. Yet much seems designed to make us uncomfortable with Viola here. Moments after Antonio is silenced by Orsino, Viola remarks, “My lord would speak; my duty hushes me” (5.1.101); yet what sort of duty is it that allows her to conceal proof while Antonio remains deceived and Orsino proceeds to make a fool of himself? Olivia’s question to Viola—“Hast thou forgot thyself?”—is unknowingly to the point (5.1.135). Viola seems to have forgotten who she is, that is, who she looks like, not just when Antonio describes Sebastian’s rescue (5.1.71–73) but also when she “most jocund, apt, and willingly, / To do your rest a thousand deaths would die” (5.1.126–27). Perhaps she fears admitting her deception and also fears possible rejection by Orsino, willing to pay the price of death and willing to lose a chance to find Sebastian rather than reveal herself.

The priest provides verbal proof of Olivia’s marriage to Cesario, mentioning an ocular proof, the wedding rings. But like Antonio’s forgotten purse, such proof is ignored.⑧ Until Sebastian enters, all the characters are paying with “pain,” as Feste might remark, for their deceptions or their ability to ignore or forget possible proofs (2.4.66–69). By reuniting Sebastian and Viola these problems are forgotten, at least momentarily. Each first expresses disbelief and seeks proof to confirm the evidence of eyesight. But even this effort to “make compare” between two people, like the other missed instances for identification, is strange. Viola asks about a mole upon their father’s brow and his date of death. Proof is not so much arrived at

⑧Perhaps neither Olivia nor Sebastian would wear rings because of an agreement “To keep in darkness what occasion now / Reveals before ’tis ripe” (5.1.47–48). Shakespeare mentions and then forgoes the chance to use a device that could push the play towards more farcical confusion, similar to the chain in *The Comedy of Errors*, or to emphasize the eventual reconciliation, as the rings, arguably, do in *The Merchant of Venice* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*. Antonio’s purse, whose return could perhaps replace the rings during the reunion, would uncomfortably imply the self-regarding nature of so much of the behavior in the last scene, as Feste’s begging for money suggests.
through a reciprocal exchange between two people (as rings might imply) but lies in a deceased third person.

Additionally, in *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare seems to ask us to ignore that the evidence which resolves the main characters’ problems can only “prove true” in “imagination”: twins of different sexes cannot be identical (3.4.55). It is “a natural perspective that is and is not,” a phrase that joins Feste’s two earlier contrasting parodies concerning the solipsistic and subjective creation of proof, “nothing that is so is so” (4.1.8) and “that is” (4.2.14). In other words, the circular and solipsistic reasoning Feste mocked earlier now seems to unite into a solution, giving the wish fulfillment of this moment a strange tone. A “trick of singularity,” “one face, one voice, one habit, and two persons,” is unknowingly (or is it? How can Viola not sense Sebastian is near?) caused by two people. A comparison between two people, and thus reunion, is finally achieved. While the supposed singularity of Cesario leads to the farcical confusion, it is also a “trick of singularity” that releases the characters (2.5.139). Viola’s behavior in the last scene recalls Malvolio and the others (Andrew, for instance) throughout; she ignores (or forgets?) proofs that seem to demand attention. Yet the antifestive idea of singularity epitomized by Malvolio’s antifestive behavior is now transformed and unites the characters, and in a typically Shakespearean fashion something that could make us uncomfortable is reversed into a seeming strength. Tricks of singularity complicate the action and then simplify and resolve it, calling attention to the ending as fiction and wish fulfillment as many have remarked, but also, perhaps, reminding us of the characters’ inordinate willfulness, or at least strange behavior when it comes to ignoring proofs.

The problem is whether or not this final trick of singularity and problems with Viola’s disguise and swearing are meant to have negative connotations, and thus whether the presentation of this particular wish fulfillment (in contrast to, for example, the ending of *As You Like It*) clearly supports the darker interpretations of *Twelfth Night* that have become almost automatic in criticism. If the trick recalls Malvolio’s singular willfulness and desire for control, it also seems to put
the conclusion beyond problems of individual will, momentarily patching up difficulties like Feste’s “botcher” (1.4.40–44). Though blood, anger, and ill will have burst forth so far in the final scene, the action is reduced to farce, perhaps reason enough for an audience to ignore, or miss, proofs of other difficulties. As Barber remarks, he has a problem only when he thinks about the resolution, never when watching the play.

And yet Viola puts off embracing Sebastian until,

\[\ldots\text{each circumstance}\]

\[\text{Of place, time, fortune do cohere and jump}\]

\[\text{That I am Viola—which to confirm,}\]

\[\text{I’ll bring you to a captain in this town.}\]

(5.1.243–46)

Until, it seems, she can show him proof that she is herself. Thus also, as Olivia was married to someone by the wrong name (Sebastian as Cesario), so Orsino proposes to Viola without using her name, referring to her once as “boy” and once more as “Cesario.” Though Orsino offers Viola his hand, to become fully “your master’s mistress” or “his fancy’s queen,” Viola must prove that she is a woman. In addition, Olivia’s and Orsino’s indulgent self-conceptions are allowed to remain intact. In Feste’s phrase, God gives those wisdom that have it—willful ignorance of proof combined with a singular trick of chance or wishful biology has confirmed the wisdom of Olivia’s and Orsino’s attractions (1.4.13). There seems little reason to be uncomfortable here, though there is also little chance for the characters to profit in knowledge of themselves as they are released from nearly all proofs of their folly.

All are released, that is, except Malvolio. In contrast to the others, God, or rather the revelers have sent Malvolio a speedy infirmity that the other characters, the interpreters, and the audience cannot ignore. Malvolio is given the chance to admit his folly and so profit in the knowledge of himself from his foes. The fool, when delivering Malvolio’s letter, reads as though he were a madman:
Clown: Look then to be well edified when the fool delivers
the madman. [Reads loudly] By the lord, madam—

Olivia: How now, art thou mad?

Feste: No madam, I do but read madness. An your ladyship
will have it as it ought to be, you must allow vox.

(5.1.282-87)

Feste’s “vox” suggests that those who permit their own willful madness must also accommodate that of others. The fool’s names for Olivia, “Madam” and “Madonna,” nearly echo his name for Malvolio, “madman,” hinting that the steward’s madness is not so singular. But Feste’s and the madman’s vox is, like the fool’s former observations to Orsino, ignored.

Malvolio is the one character who does bring concrete proof—the letter—into the last scene, but it is false proof and is dismissed. To put him aside, as Olivia does when she calls him a “poor fool,” is in part to put aside the willful interpretation characterized by the steward’s earlier self-regarding reading of the letter, and in part to relax our reason and give ourselves over to events as Malvolio cannot, to join the festive community and ignore proofs of problems with singular individuals. But when confronted with Malvolio’s folly, Olivia and Orsino, as Feste implies, make no compare; they fail to distinguish their own image in Malvolio’s portraiture of self-regarding singularity. Malvolio is the “foe” from which the others possibly could, but do not, profit in the knowledge of themselves. Yet Malvolio is not just the “third” who must “pay for all,” a scapegoat left out of the various love triangles resolved here as Feste’s earlier remark hints, he is also the third party through which the final proof in the play, Viola’s maiden weeds, must be sought. Malvolio has imprisoned the captain who holds Viola’s clothes, reiterating the earlier suggestion of proof residing in a missing third party (the dead father). Both marriages and Viola’s need to prove “that I am Viola” are partially at the mercy of Malvolio’s revenge.

9Feste’s association of “madonna,” “madam,” and “madman” occurs repeatedly in his first scene (1.4.38-131).
With the exception of Sebastian’s entrance, in the last scene and throughout the play a third person who could help bring two characters together and enable a fuller recognition of themselves and their limits is ignored, missing, misled, or misleads others. The fool, like Malvolio, is a third person dismissed here; Toby’s surgeon, Maria, along with the dead father and imprisoned captain are third persons missing; the priest is a third person misled and, like the fool, is ignored after his speech. Toby himself, Maria, and Viola have been third person mediators who have misled others, sometimes for their own profit. If “Primo, secundo, tertio, is a good play,” as Feste observes, the “tertio” desired, a third element to mediate honestly a combination of the first two, is insufficient. Like the characters on stage, to be comforted by Orsino’s closing lines the audience and interpreters must either ignore or remain ignorant of uncomfortable proofs, ourselves excluded third persons, like the “ass” of Feste’s “We Three” (2.3.16). The absent third party implies something Shakespeare’s plays and poems repeatedly reflect about romantic love: without a three-way correspondence, a community generously mediating between the two lovers, such love is temporary. Shakespeare’s rarest expression of this is “The Phoenix and the Turtle.”

Yet some of the most useful criticism of Twelfth Night, including that of C. L. Barber, is influenced by performance and ignores the problems noted, as audiences can. Feste’s final song, though, seems

10 In All’s Well That Ends Well the third party is Helena’s (and Bertram’s?) child. Typically Shakespearean and similar to Twelfth Night, proof is deferred, residing now in a child who is both there and not there.

11 Ralph Berry, in contrast to Barber, argues that Malvolio’s desired revenge leaves an audience ashamed and unable to escape the dark origins of “bloodsport,” the bear-baiting inferred from the word “pack” (5.1.367). Even in performances gauged to make the most of Malvolio’s last line (for example the New York Shakespeare Festival’s outdoor production in 1989 that had Jeff Goldbloom, as Malvolio, shout the line over thunder blasting from the audio system), the ill will seems balanced by Orsino’s final speech, rather than overwhelming the play’s end. See “Twelfth Night: The Experience of the Audience,” Shakespeare Survey 34 (1981): 111–20. Stephen Dickey has written persuasively on bear-baiting in Twelfth Night. See “Shakespeare’s Mastiff Comedy,” Shakespeare Quarterly 42 (1991): 255–75.
to offer a choice between these competing experiences of the play that arise from the difference between performance and reading. The steady build up of difficulties throughout the song, where time is linear and excess brings decline, leads to a final line that alters the stark refrain to please us. The last stanza suggests we can leave Orsino’s golden time unblemished, ignoring uncomfortable proofs, saying “that’s all one our play is done,” accepting the topsy-turvy world of farce and a trick of singularity that leads to reunion. To do so, though, is also to let various proofs “slip” and to align ourselves, perhaps, with Shakespeare’s fading past more than with the dramatist’s near future. The final verse partially undercuts a grim song that makes it hard to ignore proofs of Twelfth Night’s incomplete fulfillment, but at the same moment the last stanza reinforces what the fool has suggested all along—the temporary nature of comic delight.

Twelfth Night shows evidence of problems that will later dominate Shakespeare’s tragedies. The play’s delimited world, and the smaller worlds of solipsism, farce, festivity, and love created within that world, parody problems which will explode in the tragedies: the desire to cross social boundaries, the corruption of language and service by mediators influenced by willful self-indulgence, the blindness to oneself and others. These problems are not new to Shakespearean comedy or his previous plays, but here the effort to control them focuses on strategies that enable the characters to ignore proofs of these difficulties yet also allow us, often through the fool, to trace their development.

Yet, though no “exquisite” reasons exist, is the possibility of harmony announced by Orsino still reason enough to argue that Shakespeare was more interested in defusing through farce the corruptions of language and human behavior than highlighting those problems? In line with these two competing experiences of Twelfth Night, there are, at least at first, two answers to this question. The play does manage to keep its problems within the modest bounds of festive disorder and farcical confusion. We see violence and revenge threatened but not carried out and a promise of “a solemn combination.” These things are comforting to the extent that, as
Shakespearean comedy often encourages, we relax our need to interpret, and we treat the play as the characters on stage treat the fool—as entertainment. In effect, the audience interprets the play as a communal experience, to make the competing singular “ones” into a paradoxical union of “all one” that both is and is not, to trust the imaginative ocular proof of identical twins of different sexes over our literal eyesight and over textual proofs. A satisfied audience, like the characters, is joined together by the reunion and potential marriages, seeing the portraiture of their desire for community and love in the image of community on stage. In contrast, the singular reader pores over the page, pursuing the problems of characters who, to that reader, seem separated. How we see *Twelfth Night* depends in part on our social context, on where we are when viewing the play. It is almost as though Shakespeare knew, and hinted to us through Malvolio, that those who read the play in isolation make interpretations that may be set against the responses of an audience, whose disposition, because of its location, is more communal.

Yet those considering this essay are, most likely, more often isolated readers of *Twelfth Night* than playgoers. For those whose experience of the play makes them pause and interpret, Orsino’s “golden time” is temporary, something underscored by the knowledge that what has been brought about takes place not because of the characters’ better qualities, but rather, to a degree difficult to define, through a combination of chance and the ability through their weaknesses to ignore uncomfortable proofs. As singular readers, we could argue that the final song raises a problem then quickly patches it in an uncomfortable manner. It offers us relentless evidence of a man’s decline and disappointed hopes, in distinctly linear fashion, before circling back to the world’s beginning and making these problems “all one,” ignoring the proofs in the rest of the song as the characters ignore the implications of their behavior in the last scene. The song’s last lines are exquisitely balanced: we are at once exiled from the play world, and presumably the “golden time” it promises, since the “play is done,” but leave knowing we can return to be pleased every day. When we read *Twelfth Night* and then turn to the plays that follow,
it is hard not to feel that the force of Shakespeare's development is carrying his creative energy towards tragedy and that the linear, irrecoverable time of tragic drama beckons. The dramatist's progress could be described as the search for flexible strategies to solve progressively greater human differences, to make them "all one," but to do so by ignoring as few proofs as possible of human limitations. Here, the trick that resolves the comedy is questioned in a manner that is unnoticed by any character except the fool. With Feste, readers can be compelled to feel a discomfort that pays for the pleasures we also feel when experiencing *Twelfth Night*.

And yet, proposing such a conclusion based on manipulating textual proof can make us as interpreters hesitate, sensing ourselves too like that reader Malvolio with his letter, in a position that offers immense invitations to distort or make what we will of Shakespeare's words and to slide a bit too comfortably into a darker interpretation. Viola's "Prove true imagination, O, prove true" also seems a warning to interpreters (3.4.355). It is fairly easy both to seek and to create the conceptual antinomy between text and performance (as well as to find audiences, from the interpreter's experience, idealized to fit the interpretation), and then use the play's richly suggestive details to argue, but not really "prove," that a particular conflict crucial for interpretation exists, crushing things here and there. In productions I've attended, darker proofs marshalled from the text seem hardly to register with an audience and may be as narrow as Malvolio's proof, though the argument also assumes that Shakespeare intended this split and left it up to us to choose which experience of the play we prefer. An act of reading by Malvolio helps to separate him from the community, and so reading also helps the interpreter find and develop problems less available to an audience that does not question the play's community. Maria's letter is designed to encourage Malvolio's dreams of control and his separation from others, and likewise the written text of the play encourages the dreams of singular interpreters. An "indistinguishable twin" emerges, but the twin may also be an image of the interpreter who cannot distinguish his or her own folly acted out in Malvolio. As remarked at the outset, it seems many interpreters split
the play into various oppositions and, according to their perspective, find evidence to push the play either more toward festive release and the possibility of love or more toward dark tragedy and determinism, though both camps usually also qualify their arguments. But if this binary logic is not so, what can we know, or prove, at this point about *Twelfth Night’s* conclusion?

Perhaps Feste’s “Nothing that is so is so,” followed closely by Olivia’s “Say so and so be,” and then Feste again with “That that is is,” though also courting highly subjective interpretations, can be of further use. Olivia’s “say so and so be,” falling between the fool’s remarks, is a third suggestion that triangulates, and perhaps mediates, between the antinomy of the other two remarks. It implies that an interpreter can create a solution simply by saying it is so: as the characters create their own terms to reconcile their desires with others and marry, so the interpreter creates contrasting terms to describe and perhaps reconcile difficulties that interpreter both sees and seeks in the text. And if “that that is is,” then perhaps some measure of objectivity is possible with the text. Yet the fool’s parody of a priest, Sir Topas, at this moment implies one cannot be so sure. Indeed, Feste’s sarcastic “Nothing that is so is so” tosses us back into the world of stage and text, realizing how easy it is to create conceptual antinomies more for our own sake to impose order than to interpret reliably the play’s evidence. If Olivia’s phrase offers a way out between conceptual antinomies, Feste’s parody of antinomies can still make an interpreter doubt his or her own.

Yet the doubt caused by these three related phrases, remarks which invite us to impose our willfulness on the text while offering a parody of such interpretative willfulness, can instruct. The phrases clearly keep before us the uncertainty of our position as

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*12* Freedman writes, “By leaving itself unfinished, by holding back what it will, the play derives depth and individuality, emphasizes its separateness from us, and questions our need to find completion in it” (206). The problem of Viola’s deferred unveiling, for example, should be left alone, since it invites us to impose our will on the play in search of an answer.
interpreters and mediators. Even in the process of trying to consider
my own subjective manipulation of proof, I am still manipulating
proof, corrupting words, to create an interpretation that satisfies
my willful desires, generated as much by time and place (our late
twentieth-century critical and historical milieu and my desire to see
the text as about interpretation) as attempts to treat *Twelfth Night*
more objectively. Yet the play shows that the third term to consider
is the social milieu and thus the interpreter’s perspective, and the
problems that come when one tries to erase this. Before he reads
the letter, Malvolio dreams of rising out of his social class “to be
Count Malvolio” (2.4.32). Maria knows this dream directs, both
enabling and blinding, his interpretation of the letter and the steward’s understanding of his relationship to Olivia. Indeed, she uses his
presumption about class to step into a higher class herself, since
her marriage to Sir Toby, anticipating Helena’s skillful intelligence
and marriage in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, is based on this “device.”
Feste’s phrase “the third pays for all,” a monetary image, is particu-
larly apt for defining how this third influence works, since it implies
that self-interest colors our interpretations of the first two terms.
How much do we, in our efforts to suit our ideas to Shakespeare’s
words, more often tend to suit his words to our ideas for various self-
regarding reasons?

The link between willfulness, especially regarding social class, and
the difficulty of simultaneously interpreting both a text and oneself
is clear in the play. *Twelfth Night*, while about Shakespeare’s habitual
comic problems of constructing a community and learning one’s limita-
tions, is also about how we do not so much interpret proof as isolated
individuals, but rather as communities. Like Malvolio, perhaps the
more one tries to rise above a community when interpreting proof,

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13 Freedman writes, “In question is whether . . . we can continually displace and
defer the fulfillment of our own desire” when interpreting the play (233). Frank
Kermode writes, “What we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our
method of questioning.” See *Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne: Renaissance Essays* (London:
Routledge, 1971), 158.
the more the interpreter will inevitably be dragged rather painfully back into that community, especially when dealing with Shakespeare's comedy. Shakespeare's fascination with the tension between the play world and the social world encompassing the theater argues for his own awareness of the dramatist as less a third-person objective creator and more a socially and financially ambitious servant of society. Bradley sees Feste, whom critics often idealize (as I do), as Shakespeare himself commenting on the play.\footnote{A. C. Bradley, "Feste the Jester," in \textit{Shakespeare: Twelfth Night}, ed. D. J. Palmer (London: MacMillan, 1972), 64. Karen Grief's study of Feste in the twentieth-century productions of \textit{Twelfth Night} does much to explain modern criticism's attraction to this fool. See "A Star Is Born: Feste on the Modern Stage," \textit{Shakespeare Quarterly} 39 (1988): 61–78.} And one of Feste's chief concerns is payment.

The play provides other guides to interpreters. Viola's uncertain mediation between Olivia and Orsino offers a more complex example than Malvolio. As remarked, she seems to forget twice in the last scene that she "imitate[s]" Sebastian, thus offering an image for interpretative difficulties that is more subtle and thus difficult to check in ourselves. She forgets (it seems) how she looks to others in her disguise and, like Malvolio, in the heat of emotion ignores various proofs. But her seeming forgetfulness and ambivalence about her mediation between Olivia and Orsino suggest a triangle that mirrors our own position as interpreters. How can she sue honestly to another woman for the man she loves? To do so she must forget herself. As interpreters, we are yet living in this glass: in the process of trying to marry others to Shakespeare, striving for objectivity, we can forget ourselves and the self-interest that can influence our attempts to mediate this marriage, even in the process of trying to rise above such self-interests. Attempts to be more objective that lead to removing consideration of our individual perspective and desires as readers and interpreters lead to paradoxical results, as with Viola, whose attempt at patient pure love seems also (unconsciously?) involved with self-regarding control of the emotions of others, to the extent her disguise
offers such control. It is not odd that careerism seems an increasing part of our academic lives, for both selfish and unselfish reasons, at the same moment the plays themselves are most about the tensions of social class and power struggles. Just as Shakespeare's art is in many respects inseparable from the materiality of Renaissance culture, so our comment about that art is inseparable from our modern culture and institutional milieu. The conflict between class struggle and festive transcendence is echoed in our own day-to-day concerns with our careers, which condition such readings.

This is not to argue that readings concerned with historical determinism in the Renaissance are themselves simply determined by our present enthusiasm for this subject and its relationship to contemporary institutional conditions. These readings are useful, yet what interpreters make of Feste indicates the limitations of this and many other approaches to Twelfth Night. The fool mocks authority, including the authority of the critic who writes about the fool. With Feste this mockery takes the form of the fool becoming the indistinguishable twin of the critic and the critic's perspective. Viola unconsciously makes Feste into an image that describes her own behavior earlier with Olivia, a wise observer of the moods and quality of others (3.1.58–66). Bradley also makes Feste into an image of himself, since the fool has "an insight into character and into practical situations so swift and sure that he seems to supply... the poet's own comment on the story," which is, of course, Bradley's aim also. For the historicizing critic, Feste "signifies a resonant deconstruction of the boundaries between festivity and history," complicating the relationship between theater and history exactly as the interpreter desires to do. For C. L. Barber, Feste knows "too much," a remark that echoes Barber's own worries of thinking too much about the indistinguishable twin. 15 This essay itself is included in the process of critical projection, as I reconstruct the fool, with what could be termed a kind of

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15 Bradley, 64. Coddon, 323. Barber, 259. Eagleton also unconsciously seems to make the fool into an image of a powerfully self-conscious critic, whose "ironic self-awareness, his insight into the confusion, is a negative mode of sanity" (228).
critical narcissism, to suit my own willful desires. A difference here, though, is that my desire is to see the limitations of my methods as much as to see Twelfth Night. The truth one tries to tell about literature is not any different, often enough, than the truth one tries to tell, or unconsciously reflects, about oneself.

The point, then, is this: Proofs that argue for or assume various "pure" conceptual antimonies when interpreting the plays, such as text versus performance or festive transcendence versus historical determinism, are often polluted by a third force, our own desires—though our own beautiful writing doth oft close in attempts to ignore or disguise proofs of this pollution. Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, showing us this, anticipates difficulties with its own interpreters and interpretation. To quote Feste again:

Primo, secundo, tertio is a good play; and the old saying is that third pays for all. The triplex, sir, is a good tripping measure; or the bells of Saint Benedict, sir, may put you in mind—one, two, three.

(5.1.32–35)

Feste is endearing because, unlike the other characters who often imagine their own selfish behavior as sacrifice, he is utterly open about his self-serving desires, knowing they color his gestures, revealing bits of his own folly and willfulness even as he tries to show others their


own selfishness. If interpreters invariably tend to idealize Feste and make the fool unconsciously into an image of themselves, he self-consciously resists idealizing himself and thus strengthens his critique of others. Orsino, at the opening of the last scene, misses the point; the fool's selfishness is not all the sin of covetousness since it mocks the Duke's own fault, provoking Orsino to see himself in the fool's mirror. Looking myself into that mirror, I wonder how much these concluding paragraphs are more a parody of a preacher/interpreter, like Sir Topas, than honest preaching about the word of Shakespeare. Who can clearly separate beliefs and desires from reasoned argument, or the dancer from the dance, the fool asks?

My desire to idealize Feste, admittedly, may have less to do with interpreting the play than with voicing my own metadramatic concerns and other anxieties about how Shakespeare's words and characters both invite interpretation but often confound those who wrestle with the text, especially when that wrestling ignores the current assumption that the most useful interpretations see the works embedded in the historical tensions of Shakespeare's age (future generations of interpreters will see our most desired myth, to be sure, as the need to demythologize). It is both pleasurable and disconcerting to return to the Erasmian realization that the moment one becomes confident enough in his or her proofs to preach them is also the moment one is most vulnerable to blindness, standing naked before the tempting but often beautiful inscrutability of Shakespeare's playful language and comic drama. It is not new to say, regardless of our methodology, that Shakespeare's text is always too rich to contain. But perhaps the avoidance of openly confronting counterarguments suggested by the text, an avoidance that characterizes so much recent criticism, is simply a tacit admission that Shakespeare's art is not, for example, as embedded in history as many recently have argued. Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* always will, at some point, undo our arguments. And just as the characters in *Twelfth Night* are brought together not because of their potentially good qualities but in spite of their willful love, joined by mutual weaknesses, so are the play's interpreters, who likewise cannot resist the urge to prove their imaginations true, to
make our beliefs, in the disguise of interpretation that gives us some brief though not altogether false control, into Shakespeare’s truth.

If we assume that the dramatist himself cared about proving true his own belief in art and theater (a risky comic “if,” since now essentialist notions of truth, and the use of the word itself, are often dismissed out of hand), then the mirror that art holds up, showing us the forms and pressures of our own age and interpretive limitations, becomes a clearer window into the play itself. The problems Twelfth Night suggests about the act of making proofs can usher us to better proofs about the play. Leslie Fiedler, writing of Hamlet, remarks that “Shakespeare inherited a genre and a tradition which defined the artist as Patcher, • mender of the recalcitrant given.” Feste’s enthusiasm for this image, “Anything that is mended is but patched; virtue that transgresses is but patched with sin” (1.5.42-43) supplies not only another connection (that Bradley would appreciate) between this fool and Shakespeare as a self-conscious dramatist, but also offers another metaphor for the interpreter’s task: stripped of our various methodological motlies and the virtues and sins of these methods, we mostly patch things together, ever aware of the paradox that such patches may partly mend even as they call greater attention to the very flaws they set out to repair. Regardless of whether or not the plays support essentialist values (as I argue here, one value encouraged by Twelfth Night is a method that is willing to acknowledge its own limitations), we surely can say that Shakespeare’s plays are dramatic because they both entertain and are skeptical of such values, just as the plays both entertain and are skeptical of historical determinism. Our task as critics is not to prove true one or the other of these conflicting assumptions but self-consciously to mediate between such extremes, realizing the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches. This is notably true in a play where proof itself, especially regarding reading, is posited as


a willful creation of the reader's desires as much as anything else, compelling us to examine those desires.

The unknown conflict between the sea captain and Malvolio offers a final antinomy that invites interpretation and also willful mediation by an interpreter. Why should the captain, with Viola's clothes, be in jail at Malvolio's "suit"? (5.1.268). What can or should we make of the playful pun on "suit" here, since Viola's suit is the issue? The almost anonymous captain, holder of the play's final proof, Viola's maiden weeds, silently waits at the suit of a killjoy who, in contrast, writes from a dark prison compelled by both selfishness and love to prove himself. Malvolio needs to prove himself to the community; the "mute" captain (1.2.62) appears to accept the community's judgment. Admittedly, by idealizing the captain's "gentle help" and seeming patience, perhaps we can see in him a circular and comic generosity in opposition to Malvolio's battle with the determinism of class and impulse toward stratification and revenge. The captain's gentle help offers an invitation silently beckoning the impasse which could "taint the condition of this present hour." What would it take in place, time, and fortune to make these opposing impulses cohere and jump, to find Feste/Sir Topas' "Peace in this prison"? Since the answer, and the proof, lies only in part within the play, imprisoned and obscured in the opposition between the enabling comic captain who begins the play and the disabled determined steward who ends it, perhaps the rest of the answer lies in a third party, the interpreter and the perspective he or she brings to Twelfth Night.

References


*On the Demon-Mania of Witches* is the first translation into English of *De la demonomanie des sorciers* by the French lawyer Jean Bodin (1530–1596), originally published in 1580 in Paris. The work reflects the Zeitgeist of the sixteenth century, which was permeated by fear of witches and their subsequent persecution in virtually every Western society. The book contained twenty-six chapters (the translation omits five), ranging from “The Definition of a Witch,” “On the Association of Spirits with Men,” and “On Formal Invocations of Evil Spirits” to more legal aspects as in “Lawful Means to Prevent Spells and Witchcraft,” “On the Investigation of Witches,” and “On the Punishment That Witches Merit.” The titles alone reveal Bodin’s belief in the reality of witches. Formally a Catholic, but favoring Protestantism, Bodin endorsed every facet of the witch mania of his time and became a fervent advocate of prosecuting and executing witches. His opinion differed little from the notorious *Malleus maleficarum*, which he quotes copiously. Scholars of political and legal studies familiar with Bodin’s book think that it probably even fueled that
mania and find the book amazing, for they primarily know Bodin for his writings on political and legal matters. In fact, many modern lecturers in law schools and departments of political science are oblivious to Bodin’s interest in witchcraft and know him only from his still­esteemed contributions to political science, such as his *Les six livres de la republique* (1576).

Some critics consider Bodin’s impassioned involvement in the witch-hunt a personal aberration explicable only by his private reflections on the matter. That Bodin had a very intimate involvement with the occult can be exemplified by his belief that a spiritual entity (guardian angel?) was his constant companion and was monitoring all his decisions, identifying them as good or bad by tweaking either his right or left earlobe, thus endowing him with a sort of infallibility. (Strange that Bodin does not mention his spirit guide in *Demonomanie.*) His treatise on the witches played a major role in the controversy between the ideas of Johann Weyer, medicus at the court of the Duke of Cleve, who believed the witch phenomenon to be a medical problem, and the witch-hunters, who believed it to be a satanic problem. Bodin takes the side of the hunters and attacks Weyer’s thesis in a specific part of the original edition (excluded from Scott’s translation).

It is surprising that *Demonomanie* has not been translated into English earlier, for the witch-hunt was nearly as fervent in English-speaking societies in 1580 as in other countries and continued for at least another hundred years after the book’s appearance. *Demonomanie* was speedily translated into German (Strassburg, 1581), with a number of subsequent editions—Italian (1589, 1592), Latin (1581, 1590, 1603, 1690), and Dutch.

Professor Scott is to be congratulated for presenting a long­delayed translation of an ominous book and for extensive footnoting that clarifies and adds information.

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Cultural historian Peter Burke sets out to chronicle how readers over the years have responded to Castiglione's guidebook to contemporary conduct. Though often read today in a historicist manner as an embodiment of the spirit of the High Renaissance, the *Courtier* in its own day was read as a practical guide to contemporary conduct, rather than as a representative of the values of a past age. It is the distance between these two kinds of reading—the historicist and the pragmatic—that fascinates Burke and that compels him to try to close the gap. The emphasis lies not on the mass of commentary that sometimes buries the work but on the work's readers; consequently, this is a study of context, not content.

Following an introductory chapter on “Tradition and Reception” (in which Burke looks briefly at the reception of the Renaissance, the history of the book, and the history of systems of values—the broad topics that this case-study seeks to explore) and two chapters on the *Courtier* in its own time and in Italy, the author concentrates on how the *Courtier* has been translated, imitated, criticized, and revived in European culture over the centuries. Though the emphasis falls on Castiglione's reception in England, Burke's goal, in effect, is to contribute to an understanding of what he calls the “Europeanization of Europe” (2).

Given the broad international range of this study, the author is forced to limit himself to a very few of the *Courtier*’s themes and thus wisely selects for emphasis those elements of the text traditionally of the greatest appeal to readers, most notably the discussions of grace and *sprezzatura*. By way of preparation, the rapidly drawn yet lucid history of fundamental values (*Grundbegriffe*) that run from Homer to Erasmus (9–18) is particularly useful. The principles of urbanity, chivalry, and courtesy (ideals of the city, the battlefield, and the court) are traced from the Greek world's predilection for excellence (Homeric *arete*), magnanimity (Aristotelian *megalopsychia*), modesty
and decorum (Xenophon's *aidos* and *eukosmia*); through the Roman world's interest in self-control (Ciceronian *decorum*, a midpath between Senecan *constantia* or *tanquillitas animi* and Ovidian spontaneity and negligence); to the medieval emphasis on modesty in every gesture (Ambrose's *verecundia*) and discipline that is both religious (Petrus Alfonsi, Hugh of St. Victor) and secular (the laws of chivalry, as formulated in the *chansons de geste*, and of courtesy, measure, and courtly love, as developed in the courts and by the troubadours). The appeal of these ideals to the nobility of Renaissance Europe is also excellently scanned.

Most of what follows in chapter two (dealing with the *Courtier* in its own time) consists of summary (the antecedents and permutations of the dialogue form, the author's life, background material concerning the text itself, particularly its setting and characters), which, while developed with admirable clarity, will be useful mostly to those unacquainted with Castiglione. Longtime readers of the *Courtier*, instead, will probably find the discussion of traditional and innovative terms for behavior (29–32) and of the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of the text (33–38) to be more stimulating. *Courtier's* fate in Italy, discussed in chapter three (with a full list of editions in Appendix I), is equally useful.

The Fortunes of the *Courtier's* final five chapters analyze the European reception of the *Courtier*. One of the dangers of this type of bibliographical survey is that it turns into a list of names, with little to be said about any one individual. In defense of the technique, however, one might point out that a list does at least reveal patterns of dissemination, and the act of compilation itself saves less assiduous observers from carrying out an onerous task, the results of which do provide countless intriguing detail. Elements that come in for more extensive treatment include the translations of key words (*cortegiania*, *grazia* and *sprezzatura*) into various languages, four texts (each from a different culture) that adapt Castiglione to local conditions, expurgation of the text during and after the Catholic Reformation, the moral critique of dissimulation and external show, reasons for the book's fall from favor in the seventeenth century and its subsequent rival,
and the appeal of the work to more modern aesthetes. Whatever the subject, however brief the treatment, the work as a whole is remarkable for the lucidity of its presentation, its detail (Appendix II, for example, lists 328 readers of the text prior to 1700), and the thoroughness of the investigator.

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It is a paradox worthy of high romance that the most influential of Arthurian romances, Caxton’s book of “noble chivalrye, curtosye, humanyte,” was likely written by a persistent felon charged with extortion, rape, church-robbery, cattle-raiding, horse-stealing, and lying in ambush to murder his ducal patron. For over a hundred years, since Oscar Sommer and G. L. Kittredge first named Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, his criminal record has seemed so incompatible with the chivalric idealism of the *Morte Darthur* that critics have persistently looked elsewhere for the author. There was no shortage of alternatives: at least nine Thomas Malorys are recorded in the relevant period. But a century, two book-length studies, and a host of articles later the same man emerges as the only one of the name known to have been a knight and in prison when the *Morte Darthur* was completed by a “knight-prisoner” in the ninth year of Edward IV (1469–1470). That is the core conclusion of this new investigation by Peter Field, incorporating the results of various studies published by him in recent years.

This new biography, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory*, sketches the Malory ancestry, the four hundred or so recorded members, most of them descended from one of eight branches of a twelfth-century ancestor of French stock. The cadet branch to which Thomas Malory belonged held lands in the Midlands from the early
thirteenth century, including Newbold Revel, acquired by marriage in the midfourteenth, inherited from his father, John, after John's death in 1433/34. It seems likely that Thomas was then still a minor since the estate continued to be administered by his mother, Philippa, until at least 1437. If so, he will have been born about 1416, contradicting the tradition that he served under Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, in the French campaigns of Henry V. He entered adult life as a member of a Warwickshire society of a dozen peerage families and some 120 gentry families like his own, loosely linked in the constantly changing affinities of "bastard feudalism," shifting their allegiance from one magnate to another in pursuit of patronage, power, office, and land, each as a means to the others. Family connections might have made Malory a member of various affinities: that of his paternal uncle (or possibly cousin) Sir Robert Malory, Prior of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, from 1432 to 1439/40, and one of the greatest magnates in the kingdom; that of the lords Ferrers of Chartley through his maternal cousin Sir Philip Chetwynd, under whom he may have served in Gascony; of Henry Beauchamp, Earl, later Duke, of Warwick, to whose influence Malory may have owed his election as an M.P. for Warwickshire in 1445; or of his rival for influence in the county, Humphrey Stafford, Duke of Buckingham. Whoever his patron may have been—no doubt he changed affinities from time to time—there is evidence of Malory's standing in his society: his service in Parliament (once certainly, possibly three times); his assumption of knighthood (unlike his father), despite the limited income his estates are likely to have yielded; the various documents that testify to his involvement in national and domestic affairs. The art of the book lies in the interpretation of documents, a complex process further complicated by uncertainties of identification (amongst them the extensive Malory kin and occasional missing pieces in the jigsaw), enhanced by increasing availability of records, by modern techniques of interpretation, and by Peter Field's skill and experience as editor and biographer of Malory. Uncertainties persist on individual issues; these are frankly admitted, but the outline of a career emerges convincingly.
One aspect of that career, long familiar, remains intractable—the catalogue of criminal charges against Malory: the October 1443 charge of assaulting, imprisoning, and robbing Thomas Smythe; of driving off cattle from Lady Peyto's estate at Sibbertoft, probably in 1453, of lying in ambush with twenty-six armed men to murder the Duke of Buckingham (4 January 1450); of breaking into the house of Hugh Smith and raping his wife, Joan (23 May 1450); of extorting money by threats (31 May); repeating both crimes in August, again raping Joan Smith and carrying off her husband's goods to the value of £40 on the sixth, and on the thirty-first extorting money by threats. On 4 June 1451, Malory and others raided stock from his neighbors at Newbold Revel, and on 20 July, while Buckingham was leading a posse to arrest him, he carried off deer from Buckingham's park at Caludon and did damage to the value of £500. Arrested by Buckingham on 25 July, Malory broke out of prison two days later and the next night broke into Combe Abbey with ten accomplices to steal ornament and money, returning the next day to repeat the offense. Noting how the timing and even, in some cases, the location of Malory's crimes interrelates with the Parliaments in which he may have served, possibly under the patronage first of Buckingham, later of the Duke of York, Field suggests that, in an age of endemic violence, his acts may have been politically motivated, the Buckingham ambush presumably signaling the change of allegiance.

Buckingham presided at Malory's arraignment at Nuneaton on 23 August. There followed eight years of imprisonment in various London prisons, broken by occasional periods of release on bail, during which it proved impossible to impanel a jury of his fellowmen of Warwickshire—with the effect, perhaps intentional, of holding him in London. The implication is that Buckingham contrived the prolonged imprisonment of a disaffected adherent as an example to others. The fact that Malory was bailed on various occasions by senior members of the affinity of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, a leading Yorkist, and that his ultimate release apparently followed the Yorkist victory at Northampton, the capture of King Henry, and the death of Buckingham on 16 July 1460 suggests a change of patron.
The Thomas Malory who, freed from all charges against him by the first general pardon of Edward IV, served the king in the siege of three northern castles held by Lancastrians certainly looks like a committed Yorkist. But he was specifically excluded from the second general pardon of 1468 and the third of 1470. When the *Morte Darthur* was finished in the ninth regnal year of Edward IV (1469–1470), Malory was in prison, and had apparently been so throughout its composition, without known charge or trial. As for his crime, Field assumes something arising from Malory’s association with Warwick, whose gradual estrangement from Edward brought him to open rebellion in July 1469 (when he imprisoned the king until forced by a Lancastrian rising to restore Edward to power) and to eventual self-exile in France—possibly resulting from involvement in a Lancastrian conspiracy discovered by Edward in June 1468. Only when Warwick returned in reluctant alliance with the invading Lancastrians and drove Edward into exile in October 1470 was Malory likely to be released. Malory died, according to his epitaph in the fashionable Newgate church, Greyfriars—a testimony to his status—on 14 March 1471, the day Edward landed again on his way to victory at Tewkesbury.

The enigma of the life and work remains. Field, though warning of the risks of the process, suggests some possible thematic reflections of the author’s personal and political experience in the *Morte Darthur*: the influence of Sir Robert Malory’s Order of Hospitallers as reflected in the political seriousness and sporadic crusading references of the *Morte*; awareness of the restraints which financial insecurity imposed on a poor knight in courtly society mark the need for him to find a “good lord” to serve; the virtue of loyalty and the shame of breach of faith, expressed in the *Morte* by a lament for the political fickleness of the English, which perhaps reflects Malory’s own guilt at deserting the Lancastrian cause. But the relationship of life experience to literary expression, Field recognizes, would require another book. The most valuable aspect of this present study is its demonstration of how much Malory was a man of his age, an ambivalent age when civil war had undermined the chivalric values that Caxton
identified in the *Morte Darthur* with the “cowardyse, murdre, hate” that he also noted there.

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The Columbus-Quincentenary has produced a number of studies both on the great explorer and on the general historical aspects of his discovery. Some have glorified Columbus’s achievements; others have pointed out his gross misunderstandings and failures. From a philosophical point of view, however, it does not matter what he accomplished in concrete terms, but what consequences his journey had for the development of the modern world. We also know that Columbus approached the American continent with largely false concepts, since he was deeply steeped in medieval ideology about the Exotic, its countries, people, fauna, and flora. One of the best monographs dedicated to this aspect recently published is Mary B. Campbell’s *The Witness and the Other World* (1988; not consulted here). Valerie Flint’s approach in *The Imaginative Landscape of Christopher Columbus* does not deviate remarkably from this traditional avenue of research, but she adds much color to the canvas of Columbus’s mind, retelling and analyzing a large number of contemporary chronicles, travel accounts, geographical records, and other types of texts concerned with the Exotic.

Flint does not unfold a broad array of novel research but builds a puzzle picture from a diverse range of sources. These include not only Columbus's own writings but also the works by Roger Bacon, Pierre d’Ailly, Marco Polo, and John Mandeville. Other types of texts are accounts written by people such as Pliny, Ovid, Plutarch, St. Augustine,
then some Saints’ lives, and St. Brendan’s Journey versions from the early to the late Middle Ages.

Flint’s intentions are to follow the boundaries of Columbus’s frame of mind and to trace the influences that shaped his perceptions of the New World. Six groups of sources form the basic skeleton of her investigation: (1) medieval maps, known as mappemondes; (2) Columbus’s personal library; (3) sea stories from antiquity such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*, and the Legend of St. Ursula. The chapter on marvels of the East deals with texts such as (4) Marco Polo’s and John Mandeville’s travel accounts, which both deeply influenced Columbus the reader. In the fifth chapter Flint highlights (5) the traveler’s impression that he had come upon paradise and points out the various sources that provided him with the relevant material for his false perception (Pierre d’Ailly’s *Imago Mundi*, Mandeville’s account, and the Bible). In the final chapter Flint explores Columbus’s Christian attitude and the religious inspiration that gave him the necessary momentum to continue with his discoveries. Here she relies heavily on (6) Columbus’s own writing and succeeds in discovering some of the most important elements of his mental structure.

If Flint carries out any independent analysis with resulting original findings, then the last chapter proves her ability as interpreter. All other chapters offer barely more than a summary of the now available research literature on Columbus and do not shed new light on his personality or writing. Flint is a good writer and manages skillfully to weave together a complex patchwork of information, but she must have been aware that her work was outdated from the beginning and could strive to become only a pleasant and instructive monograph on Columbus. Her bibliography does not contain any of the relevant studies published between 1988 and 1991 (her work was completed in 1991), but even works printed between 1980 and 1981 are represented here only selectively. This book might serve well as an introduction to this topic but disappoints overall in terms of its analytic approach and lack of originality. The three color illustrations of maps and a number of black and white reproductions of charts and other maps
compensate somewhat for these shortcomings, but their format is too small to allow for a close examination of the geographical details.

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Horace’s “Ars Poetica” exerted a tremendous influence not only throughout antiquity but also in the Middle Ages and far into the modern times. In fact, the Horatian tradition has never really come to an end, although modern writers might no longer refer to him specifically and would rather practice his teachings than discuss them explicitly. Proverbial sayings such as “*delectare et prodesse*” have had their impact on all ages since antiquity. Recognizing the need both to provide the modern reader with an English translation and to trace the continuous afterlife of Horace’s treatise, again in English translation, O. B. Hardison, Jr., and Leon Golden here offer an anthology of the relevant texts. After a general introduction follows the “Ars Poetica” itself, then the “Poetria Nova” by Geoffrey of Vinsauf as the most important medieval representative of Horatian thinking. In chapter 3 we discover the theoretical discussion by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, in chapter 4 the “Essay on Criticism” by Alexander Pope, in chapter 5 Lord Byron’s “The British Bards: A Satire,” and finally in chapter 6 Wallace Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”

We can certainly agree with this selection as being representative insofar as it reflects the major steps in the reception process of Horace’s treatise far into the twentieth century. In terms of translation, the individual texts would not really have required an additional treatment because they all have appeared before in separate printing or within other anthologies. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s “Poetria Nova,” for
instance, appeared in O. B. Hardison's own anthology *Medieval Literary Criticism* (1985), and the same applies more or less to the other texts as well. The unique feature of this volume is, however, the combination of all of these important texts which document the far-reaching influence exerted by Horace throughout time. Moreover, the individual texts are accompanied by extensive commentaries. The remarks on Geoffrey, to focus on the one important medieval voice, are highly readable, place the writer within its adequate context, and examine the text as a typical art-theoretical statement from the Middle Ages. The same can be observed in the case of the subsequent treatises.

An extensive name index and a list of foreign terms conclude this pleasant volume. It does not contain much new material for scholarship but encourages all readers, whatever their research interests might be, to comprehend the long tradition of Horatian thinking. In this sense Geoffrey of Vinsauf was not the only critic who constructively adapted this famous treatise for the examination of the poetic arts of his own times. But his "Poetria Nova" clearly constitutes a bridgehead connecting antiquity with the modern age.

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In five brief but extremely interesting chapters, John Kleiner investigates the minor imperfections of an author who has traditionally been considered a master of order and consistency—a theomimetic cosmographer—poet driven by the idea of perfection. Through an analysis of a mismeasured giant, an inaccurate translation, a flawed experiment, and much more, Kleiner points out both the place of
error in the moral and aesthetic system of Dante’s *Comedy* and the imperfections and false assumptions of earlier critics who have dealt with an assortment of “apparently trivial discrepancies” (2).

The two chapters framing the central sequence look at Dante’s sense of poetic form and his tolerance for imperfection, asymmetry, and monstrosity. Rather than dealing with all the *Comedy*’s anomalies, Kleiner focuses only on those that he feels are deliberately designed. In chapter one, he discloses the inconsistencies of Singleton’s reading of the central canzone (“Donna pietosa”), questioning first the accuracy of the term *central* and then noting that the canzone does not deal with Beatrice’s real death but with a prophetic vision of her death. The real death occurs five chapters and four poems later. Kleiner’s question is “Why should a prophetic dream occupy the formal center of the work instead of the crucial event foreshadowed in that dream?” One might respond that to the medieval mind, the vision itself, as a literary form, is more significant and thus more dramatically rendered than the moment of death itself.

Kleiner’s approach in the second half of chapter one is more convincing, namely that Dante (after promising a full canzone) deliberately employs a fragment, followed by a passage in Latin from Jeremiah, to create a sense of disorientation, thus emphasizing how disruptive Beatrice’s death has been—both on his art and his life. What might be perceived as a failure (the incompleted canzone) is actually “a cool-headed virtuosity in manipulating literary conventions” (15).

Chapter five, the other framing chapter, considers Geryon, a monster whose shape can be attributed to Dante’s imagination rather than to a specific literary source, and whose extended depiction carries us across the mathematical center of the first canticle. Kleiner’s points are that Dante slows the narrative pace by means of “indirections and diversions” in order to build suspense, depict terror, and create a sense of adventure and high fantasy; the episode’s centrality is intentional, given the symmetrical pattern involving the canticle’s three symbols of fraud. The author’s presentation of this rigorously symmetrical pattern (Lonza—17 cantos—Flight on Geryon—17 cantos—Satan) and his contention that Geryon’s centrality might be a sign of the poet’s
anxiety regarding the “beautiful lies” of fiction are convincingly argued. Dante’s delight in danger, his staging of the anxiety of transgression, clearly results in an imaginative tour de force.

In the three central chapters, Kleiner analyzes patterns of disorder, looking first at early attempts to map the *Inferno*. Dante’s own quantitative discussion of hell’s dimensions occurs only in the canticle’s final six cantos, in which reference is made to at least eight exacting measurements. Following the historical presentation (in which Kleiner notes that extrapolations upward through the ten circles of hell were made easy by Dante’s use of the Archimedean value of $\frac{22}{7}$ for $\pi$) the author emphasizes the change from the descriptive confusion of the first circles to the clarity of deepest hell (an inversion of Virgil’s description of Aeneas’s descent). But the simple explanation for this (it is only at the end of *Inferno* that the pilgrim understands the true order of hell) does not take into account the ambiguous trajectory of this canticle. Nor is it enough to say that precise numbers are cited simply to add a note of realism. In several measurements, Dante either “inadvertently miscalculated” or deliberately “toyed with our expectations” (46). It is this latter possibility that interests Kleiner. Infernal terrain is a disordered landscape: mismeasurement has theological implications. The discussion of what those implications are is one of the book’s highlights.

Dante’s blunders in citing classical authors occupy Kleiner in chapter three, particularly the “shocking” instances of miscalitation in *Inferno* 20 and *Purgatorio* 22 and the rich critical literature that has resulted. Rather than accepting traditional readings that place the blame for errors on Dante’s textual sources (manuscripts as yet undiscovered), Kleiner, following more recent critics who interpret mis-citations as polemical deformations, finds meaning in what are only “apparent” errors, noting that Dante is “out to alter and subdue the great classical tradition rather that merely to derive his authority from it” (67). Kleiner’s contribution to the discussion comes when he points out the difficulty of accepting the notion of a Dantean “corrective misreading” (77–84); he favors instead a notion of “comic exuberance” —erudite jokes on erudition itself.
In chapter four, Kleiner approaches the problem of Dante's science with an emphasis on surprise and play. His point is that the particularly intimidating technical passages in the Paradiso betray Dante's attachment to contradiction and anomaly, his tendency to be "willfully erratic" (86). Close readings of dense scientific passages result in an awareness of what Kleiner calls extremely subtle "vanishing acts"—Dante's efforts to lure us, with a show of scientific precision, into trying to visualize the invisible (107). Frustration, blindness, and surprise are not casual occurrences but a structural method guiding the pilgrim's ascent to God.

On the whole, Mismatching the Underworld is a study developed with remarkable insight and subtlety of thought. The message seems to come down to this: to err is human, to do so on purpose is divine—and not only divine, but fun as well.

Ronnie H. Terpening
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Although the papers collected in Diesseits- und Jenseitsreisen im Mittelalter were presented at a conference in Bad Honnef, Germany, as far back as 17–20 June 1987, the proceedings did not appear in print until recently because of financial difficulties. The articles are written either in German or in French, reflecting the cooperation between the Universities Paris-Sorbonne IV and Bonn in Bad Honnep.

The theme is of great interest to a wide range of medievalists and is not limited to travels in concrete, physical terms, but rather also includes travel descriptions of literary, spiritual, and theological nature.

Marianne Barrucan analyzes the pictorial representation of the foreign world in Islamic miniatures in the travel account of Abû Zayd
from the beginning of the fourteenth century. She concludes that for him the various countries following the Islamic belief on the Asian continent formed one geographical unity. Anne Berthelot examines the touristic adventures of Alexander in the *Roman de Perceforest* from the early fourteenth century, which assumes the dimensions of a museum of adventures, thereby re-creating and merging the narrative patterns of the *roman antique* and the *roman breton*. A similar observation could have been made for fourteenth-century German romances such as *Diu Crône* or *Wigalois*, confirming Berthelot's observation.

Régis Boyer studies travel accounts in the Nordic literature by Snorri (*Edda*) and Saxo Grammaticus (*Gesta*) with their characteristic references to giants and dwarfs. André Crépin pursues a similar line of argument in his article on the Other in the Old English *Beowulf*, interpreting the monsters as literary expressions for the metaphysical dimension of the Other (see also my study on the Other in *Canon and Canon Transgression in Medieval German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen [Goppingen: Kummerle, 1993]). Christiane Deluz attempts to reconstruct the projection of the foreign worlds in Mandeville's fantastic travel account, not discarding it as a product of his lively imagination and extensive reading, but as an effort to comprehend the entire world as an inhabited, livable place in the universe. Rainer Lengeler directs his attention towards the quotations from the Bible in the same text and toward Mandeville's technique in selecting his sources.

Christoph Dröge moves into the age of the Renaissance, focusing on Petrarch, Poggio Bracciolini, and, above all, Giannozzo Manetti, who was the first Renaissance writer to discuss the explorations of the African coast by the Portuguese in his *De Dignitate et Excellentia Hominis*. Claude Lecouteux returns to the High Middle Ages in German literature and its representation of the foreign worlds in travel accounts such as in *Wigalois*, *Wigamur*, or Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Melius*. He correctly observes that, for medieval readers, the foreign worlds described in literary texts were as real as the actual world, which also applies to one's travel after death.
Mireille Mentré examines medieval iconography dealing with travel in the world of the Grail and analyzes the literary sources. Michel Stanesco offers a paper on chivalric travels in courtly literature. Alain Michel discusses spiritual travel in literature, whereas Francine Mora follows the reemergence of images of the Vergilian hell in twelfth-century texts such as by Bernard Silvestris and Chrétien de Troyes. For the object of his paper, Karl August Neuhausen chooses Cyriacus von Ancona, a fifteenth-century traveler journeying extensively through the world of the Eastern Mediterranean, exploring the architectural remnants of classical antiquity and reflecting on them in his prayers written between 1444 and 1447. Margarete Newels examines unpublished pastoral, didactic fourteenth-century texts regarding their perception of the other world which people enter after their death. Similarly, Erich Trapp discusses journeys to Hades in twelfth-century Byzantine literature, using specific texts as historical documents.

Claude Thomasset looks from a medical point of view at the practical aspect of traveling and analyzes relevant treatises by medieval writers such as Adam de Cremona and Arnaud de Villeneuve. At the end, Heinz Jürgen Wolf explores the possible meanings of the term “Wenelande” in Wace and similar expressions for a Nordic country in twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts as faint but possible reflections of the Viking discovery of America.

This volume offers a wide spectrum of discussions on a variety of aspects relating to travel. Both medieval and Renaissance texts are considered. Obviously the distinction between projected and real travels did not play a major role in medieval literature, and in this sense one might argue that those of the medieval period had a much better holistic perception of existence than we today. The papers are well researched and offer intriguing reading material. Despite the disparity of the themes, they all manage to complement one another and thus to create a homogeneous image of “travel” and the Other in the Middle Ages.

Albrecht Classen
University of Arizona

Bartolomé de Las Casas's critical account of the impact that the Spaniards had on the new continent has long been recognized as one of the major sources for the study on the interaction between whites and American Indians during the sixteenth century. The present translation of *The Devastation of the Indies* is based on the 1965 edition and appeared for the first time in 1974. The reprint is now accompanied by a penetrating introduction by Bill M. Donovan. He provides a brief biographical sketch of Bartolomé de Las Casas and contextualizes his ideological crusade on behalf of the Indians in historical, anthropological, and political terms. He is particularly interested in Las Casas's motivation to write his treatise and in its reception back in Europe. Donovan assumes a rather critical stance against the Bishop and questions the validity of some of his statements.

It is disturbing, however, that for Donovan the question regarding Spanish cruelty hinges upon the actual number of Indians who died at their hands (r8ff.). Moreover, Donovan points to the many allies the conquistadores found among some Indian tribes and emphasizes that European diseases might have had a much larger effect in decimating the native population than did their actual, and undeniable, mass murder. Donovan makes a valiant attempt at introducing a more balanced view in the interpretation of Las Casas's account but opens, in the process, a Pandora's box with a host of uncertainties regarding the moral legitimization of the conquest in the first place. Donovan is of course correct in attacking the "Black Legend," considering the innumerable crimes committed by English, French, German, Portuguese, and Italian colonists, emphasizing that only in Spain were the problems discussed publicly and were laws issued to prevent further crimes. And finally, Las Casas was certainly influenced by a black-and-white image in his criticism of the Spanish activities in the New World.
All this makes the introduction to a provocative and stimulating essay, preparing the reader for the actual text by Las Casas. I observed one major mistake. The Spaniards did not migrate to the Indies at the beginning of the fifteenth, but of the sixteenth century (13).

Albrecht Classen
University of Arizona


The title, *Inventing America: Spanish Historiography and the Formation of Eurocentrism*, itself indicates clearly the direction of Rabasa's theoretical thrust in his investigation of how Europeans discovered and perceived the New World. After the significant anniversary of Columbus's achievement (1492/1992) with its flood of historical, literary, anthropological, and ethnographic studies, Rabasa's claim does not really come as a surprise. Mary B. Campbell (1988), Urs Bitterli (1991), Anthony Grafton (1992), and Valerie I. J. Flint (1992), among others, have repeatedly and convincingly argued that America was not discovered in the proper sense of the word, but was rather reappropriated from past texts dealing with the exotic Orient, the imagery of which then was projected onto the new continent.

Rabasa, in his Ph.D. thesis submitted at the University of Santa Cruz and revised for printing, tackles his theme from a different angle, however, since he aims for a semiotic, text-critical perspective. In other words, he suggests we read the discovery as a textual phenomenon, as a reading and writing process, in which even allegedly scientific, objective approaches to the New World in the form of an atlas, a map, and icons reveal their rhetorical function of making a case to "effect the real" (in Barthes's terms). Rabasa believes,
according to Roy Wagner, that the invention of America through the
textual products also implies the invention of our own, European his­
tory (12). A good example for this theoretical position can be found on
page 27. We read: “The naturalness of America is a mere mirage of
European culture and its exploits. The emergence of America marks its
loss of identity. It becomes merely a ‘naked body’ for the inscriptions
and longings of a European imagination.” This is a brilliant observa-
tion, yet also fraught with a host of interpretive problems extending far
beyond the simple scholarly arguments. It amounts to a declaration of
faith if we would accept this statement, yet it sounds appealing because
of the skillful combination of historiographical, literary, and poststruc­
turalist rhetoric. Simply put, did Columbus not see anything? Did all
those explorers do nothing else but dream up the New World? Further,
How is human perception possible without an anchoring in personal
experience? Without the analogy no understanding of new objects is
possible, which pertains, mututis mutandi, to the travel accounts as
well. Of course, Rabasa has a point in that human observations are
subjective, and thus fallible, if not deliberately misconstrued. But does
he not stretch his argument too far when he claims that, in the final
analysis, even the pictorial presentations of America and its discoverers
were the result of deliberate spatial illusions (35)?

Of course, Rabasa is heavily indebted to thinkers such as Edward
Said (Orientalism, 1978) and thus puts a disclaimer on anything the
explorers and discoverers postulated, because they neither explored
nor discovered, but instead created and projected (39). This leads us
further into a fundamental discussion about epistemological valence
and forces us either to reject Rabasa’s analysis entirely or to follow his
path as dedicated disciples caught in an ideological net.

This binary opposition is the unfortunate result of an overly
anxious subscription to poststructuralist theory and undermines the
otherwise fascinating discussions in the following chapters. First,
Rabasa examines Columbus’s various texts from his journey, which
here emerge as documents of a new intellectual era in which the cre­
ative writing process has replaced the medieval veneration of the writ­
ten word and the reading process. With Columbus, moderns no longer
follow the textual authorities from the past, but begin to inscribe
themselves into the world. Chapter 3 analyzes the correspondence between Cortés and Emperor Charles V, focusing on the equation “knowledge is power” (85) and on the writings by Cortés as a means to transform Mesoamerica into a New Spain. Chapter 4 deals with encyclopedias and their new approaches to the American world, such as by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, by the Franciscan missionaries such as Fray Toridio de Benavente (Montolinía), Fray Gerónimo do Mendieta, and Fray Andrés de Olmos, and finally by Bartolomé de Las Casas. Their attempts at deciphering the New World according to the remaining semiotic signals after the ravishment of the first explorers reversed the traditional course and reintroduced a decapitated older cultural discourse (164). Yet, the traditional ethnographic and anthropological sources from antiquity and the Middle Ages continued to exert their influence, even on Las Casas, despite his attempts at protecting the native population from the Hispanic tyranny.

Moreover, the religious orientation of these encyclopedists and missionaries reconnected the New World with the Old, made the former the colony of the latter, and thus basically left the European perspectives unchanged.

In chapter 5, Rabasa examines the genre of the atlas in which America was included from very early on. Not surprisingly, European colonialism left its indelible mark on those atlases as well, which the author calls, quite interestingly, “palimpsests” because they collect old and new information and create a bricolage of geographical data (186). The ongoing appearance of monsters thus does not reflect an egregious ignorance, but rather “sedimented symbolic associations of topographical regions with the fantastic and the demonic” (199). Why this would lead to a rewriting if not reinvention of Europe, and why the atlas invites the spectator to converse in a “non-European idiom” (208), remains a theoretical postulate, if not a non sequitur.

This is a fascinating book, highly intelligent in its theoretical approaches, but lamentably weakened because of its speculative, purely ideological theses.

Albrecht Classen
University of Arizona

*Mittelalter* is the first part of a comparative history of the European university in four volumes—*Geschichte der Universität in Europa*. This project was planned and carried out by Walter Rüegg, the chair of an international committee constituted under the auspices of the European Assembly of Rectors (CRE). The scholars who contributed to this volume adopted a pragmatic approach: their goal was to investigate the development of the university as an institution in Europe from its medieval inception to the present time and to provide a comparative summary of the present state of research according to institutional, intellectual, sociological, and material criteria.

Three seminal studies have prepared the ground for this enterprise: an account of the most important problems encountered by the universities of many different countries during their historical development (CRE-Information No. 69, 1st Quarter 1985); a historical compendium of the universities (ed. L. Jilek, Geneva, 1984); and an international conference on the change of the social role played by the university (CRE-Information No. 62, 2nd Quarter 1983). The first volume of this series investigates the origins and the historical development of the universities up to 1500. The second part will deal with the regional, denominational, and scientific diversification that took place between 1500 and 1800. The third will analyze the development of the university up to World War II. Finally, the fourth will investigate the unparalleled expansion of education and scientific research after 1945. The last three volumes are planned for 1994, 1995, and 1997 respectively.

All four volumes are organized according to the same scheme. The first chapter gives a thematic introduction as well as an overall view of the growth and geographical expansion of the universities during each period. The second chapter describes the institutional structures; that is, the sponsors, the internal financial and administrative organizations, the faculty, and (starting with the second volume)
the repercussions of the European models on the university and college systems in other continents. The third chapter deals with the students, including their social, financial, and intellectual qualifications as well as their daily academic professional careers and academic mobility. The last chapter analyzes the expansion of human knowledge: as far as the first volume is concerned, this means an analysis of the curricula and programs of each academic discipline.

In the first chapter, "Themen und Grundlagen," Rüegg (Themen, Probleme, Erkenntnisse, 24-48) gives a useful overview of the university: its historical and mythical origins, the interaction between the university and society, the demands of the powers who promoted institutions of higher learning (popes, emperors, dukes, and local administrations), the expectations of magistri and scholares, the connection between systems of education and the organization of the study in faculties, and the ethical values that form the basis of the reforms of the university. J. Verger (Grundlagen, 49-80) tries to give a definition of the concept of university as an autonomous community with a specific curriculum and a complex internal structure; in a brief outline he clarifies the foundations, characteristics, original conditions, chronology, geographical distribution (with maps) and stages of development. Some details are, however, incorrect: for example, the "resurrection" of Pepo as the first Bolognese jurist (59), an idea that is put to rest by Rüegg, who quotes the most recent research in his introduction.

In the second chapter, "Strukturen," P. Nardi (Die Hochschulträger, 83-108) describes the process that began in the twelfth century with the development of the universitas and studium generale and that continued with the intervention of Pope Innocent III and Pope Honorius III, who regulated the institutional reconstruction of the studia. This process went on with the university policy of Emperor Frederick II and of Pope Gregory IX and Pope Innocent IV. It proceeded with the support provided by the secular powers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as well as with the competitive granting of privileges given by the Popes during the Great Schism. And it came to an end in the fifteenth century when the
regional universities ushered in a new era. A. Gieysztor (Organisation und Ausstattung, 109–38) gives an account of different types of organizations, statutes, and colleges; moreover, he discusses the role played by university clerks and their authority, the control over teaching and rent, incomes and expenditures, buildings and insignia; in other words, he shows the development from a legal autonomy to a growing independence from the public power as well as the development from the privileges granted to *magistri* and *doctores* to the organization of a professoral caste. J. Verger (Die Universitätslehrer, 139–57) characterizes the professors’ professional practice, social position, and self-image; in addition to an analysis of their final examinations, hierarchies, salaries, teaching activity with its duties and conflicts in the context of their community, he also looks at the internal contradictions between their true social position and their self-image. According to Verger, these teachers of the elite underlined in their writings the intellectual and moral responsibility of their enterprise, although, in fact, they were at the margins of society and did not have a say in their teaching goals. In the view of the present writer, however, this scheme does not take into account the wealth and prestige enjoyed by the North Italian jurists of the Late Middle Ages; moreover, the meager bibliography at the end of the chapter does not cite new important contributions (inter alia, publications on the doctorate).

A comprehensive and extremely interesting chapter is dedicated to the students. R. C. Schwinges (Die Zulassung zur Universität, 161–80; Der Student in der Universität, 181–223) and P. Moraw (Der Lebensweg der Studenten, 227–54) give a resumé of the results achieved by their earlier investigations into the sociological aspects of education. Schwinges underlines the openness of the universities, which did not require special conditions of enrollment, but for enlisting with a *magister*. This situation changed in the fourteenth century when formal registrations were introduced: the students took the oath, paid tuition, and entered their names in the student register. The number of matriculations depended upon cyclical phases of high and low prices. The author identifies five categories
of students who form the basis for a discussion of regional origins and social stratification, associations, lodging and accommodations, lifestyle, and costs of learning. P. Moraw comments on the different career patterns of the students from their relationship with the church to the dominance of a specific “Verdichtungsprozess” based on the two entities of “Old Europe” (i.e., Italy, Spain, France, England) and “New Europe” (Central, North, and East Europe), and on three periods (origins, “universal period” 1200–1380, “national-regional period” 1380–1500). The university as an institution had stabilizing effects on the social and political systems, but graduation functioned only as an additional qualification for the traditional requirements of social status and property, and the competitive principle became effective only later. H. de Ridder-Symoen (Mobilität, 255–75) describes the conditions of the peregrinatio academica, which varied from land to land but was facilitated by the common usage of the Latin language.

In the last chapter, “Wissenschaft,” G. Leff and J. North (Die artes liberates, 279–320) analyze the trivium and the quadrivium. Based on the different development of the artes in Southern and Northern Europe, the content of the trivium, which already existed in the middle of the twelfth century, was transformed during the thirteenth century when new knowledge obtained through translations was assimilated. Finally, the controversy between via antiqua and via moderna had an impact on the artistic faculties. J. North describes the quadrivium’s disciplines and their significance for the university teaching. N. Siraisi (Die medizinische Fakultät, 321–42), A. García y García (Die Rechtsfakultäten, 343–58), and M. Asztalos (Die theologische Fakultät, 359–85) analyze the origins, development, organization, and social composition of the higher faculties as well as their curricula and teaching offers. W. Rüegg (Das Aufkommen des Humanismus, 387–408) describes humanism’s penetration of the faculties both inside and outside of Italy as a stimulus for a drastic reform of the university around 1500.

An appendix with an index of names, places, and subjects completes this seminal work: this collaborative effort was efficiently and
expertly coordinated; the essays cover many different topics and are rich in detail; last but not least, it is a pleasure to read the articles.

Ingrid Baumgärtner
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Gary Schmidt introduces his topic with brief passage from “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” by Flannery O’Connor. The reader must certainly become interested if only to ask what Flannery O’Connor might have to do with the iconography of the medieval hell mouth. Indeed, it is an interesting means by which to demonstrate the adaptability of the hell mouth to the time period in which it is used—the crux of Schmidt’s argument throughout The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell. Schmidt attempts to establish the origins of the medieval hell mouth with numerous examples and illustrations—origins that he states in his introduction have not been fully established or well documented by previous scholars such as Wildrige, Wall, Guldan, and Galpern.

Schmidt initially focuses his attention on establishing the point in time that the hell mouth first began to appear in the tenth century. Once this is established, he moves away from the question of time and focuses on usage of the hell mouth as a symbol that could convey a multitude of meanings to a diverse audience. The clerical audience of the monastic reform is shown to have relied upon the hell mouth to serve much the same purpose as illustrations in books today: they provide a visual link to the text. The hell mouth was also used in private devotional literature with the same purpose in mind, to serve as a visual illustration of the text itself, not to be a replacement for the text. Schmidt does, however, suggest that a correlation could be made
between the change in usage of the hell mouth and the size of the reading audience and the availability of texts to read. The significance of the hell mouth to the public audience would be seen as more than a visual link. It would serve as a reminder, a symbol that would instantly bring to mind a variety of religious teachings and the penalties for transgression.

However, it was not until the twelfth century that the hell mouth began to appear in the public domain, undergoing changes that would eventually lead to a “universally recognizable image” (84). In addition, Schmidt documents a shift from the original symbolism of the hell mouth as simply the entrance into hell to the hell mouth becoming one of the torments of hell itself. Schmidt also provides numerous examples of the many changes and artistic alterations that the hell mouth underwent between the twelfth and mid-fifteenth centuries which eventually led to the use of the hell mouth in stage dramas beginning in the fourteenth century. Schmidt provides sketches of elaborate scaffold designs of the hell mouth as well as stage records to substantiate the magnitude of the hell mouth’s importance.

Finally, Schmidt concludes with a brief overview of the origin and evolution of the medieval hell mouth, including its continued appearance over the centuries in modern dramas and texts. Thereby, he brings his readers full circle and leaves them with a sense of having made a complete journey from the present into the past and back again.

L. A. Doherty


Henry Staten’s broadly ranging, yet rigorously disciplined, book examines the phenomenon of mourning in the Western religious-philosophical tradition, or more specifically said, “the phenomena of the dialect of mourning” (8). The book contains three chapters that
will be of particular interest to scholars of the Middle Ages and Renaissance—one on Dante and Troubadour poetry, a brief chapter on *Hamlet* and *La Princesse de Cleves*, and one on *Paradise Lost*. Additionally, medieval and Renaissance scholars will find rewarding Staten’s readings of Augustine as he introduces his argument and his analysis of the Gospel of John. Yet the larger concerns of the book, and the way those concerns play themselves out in his readings of medieval and Renaissance texts, will be valuable not only for scholarship devoted particularly to those texts but also for scholarly endeavors that situate the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in “a field within which it would be possible to describe the migration of structures that are ‘grafted’ (in Derrida’s sense, with everything it implies concerning transformation by context) from the texts of one period to those of another” (17).

The basic assumption governing Staten’s study is that “mourning is the horizon of all desire” in the Western religious-philosophical tradition, for “as soon as desire is something felt by a mortal being for a mortal being, eros (as desire-in-general) will always be to some degree agitated by the anticipation of loss” of the object of desire and, more fundamentally, the loss of the desiring self (xi-xii). This dialectic initiates Western literature, configured so profoundly by Platonism and Platonizing Christianity, into profound anxieties that summon “strategies of deferral, avoidance, or transcendence that arise in response to the threat of loss” (xi). Augustine, even more than Plato, describes the soul as motivated at its profoundest level by eros, or desire, and therefore even more urgently denigrates the physical, present world in order to make more accessible the recuperation of self and other in transcendence.

Staten is interested in the way key texts in Western textual history employ those strategies, especially because they necessarily involve those texts in thinking the possibility of nontranscendence in order to “declare the unthinkability of nontranscendence” (xiii). Milton, for example, is deeply committed to framing desire within a doctrine of transcendence, yet “the doctrinal architecture at a certain point leaves open a wide space within which other forces can play themselves out”
(114), specifically, Adam's simultaneous erotic desire for Eve and death in Book 9. Staten is also interested in how criticism has read these texts in ways that reinforce the cultural imperative to transcend the body. When Staten reads the troubadours, especially Bernart de Ventadorn, he will also read carefully and critically "the prevailing critical tendency" to dissociate eros from "more 'real' forces"—for instance, Laura Kendrick's "attempt to make out the pure physicality of the sex urge, the 'desire of language,' and the pursuit of status as interlocking elements of a single thesis" (77-78).

Through all levels of his reading, Staten persistently probes for places in the texts that the West has produced where, at least momentarily, one might think the possibility "of love for what is mortal precisely as mortal and because it is mortal" (xii). In Eros in Mourning Staten adds to the theoretical acumen he also demonstrated in Derrida and Wittgenstein and in Nietzsche's Voice, a passion for his study that is moving to read. Moreover, he balances in his book an extremely precise critical vocabulary with an openness concerning his own biases. This study will foster and facilitate an important critical dialogue for many years to come.

Joseph D. Parry
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This collection of fifteen essays represents the published results of a conference on the title topic held in 1992 at the University of California, Davis, to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the event. In 1492 the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from their country, initiating a diaspora that scattered professed and many converted Jews to all points
of the compass but mostly to parts of eastern and northern Europe. The Spanish expulsion is significant not only because it ended an eight-hundred-year-old culturally and intellectually active Jewish community, but because it also set in motion a cultural penetration of European Christian communities which altered and reshaped the intellectual and spiritual direction of early modern Europe.

The volume arranges the essays geographically and chronologically, radiating outward from the events of 1492 in Spain. The first four essays investigate the circumstances in Spain that precipitated the forced exodus, and they provide a background against which the reader can view subsequent developments among European Jewry. E. William Monter’s essays on the Jews and the Moslems in Christian Spain reminds us of the intimate connection between the fall of Granada, which represented the end of Moslem government in Europe, and the expulsion of the Jews, while Jerome Friedman’s article describes the New Christian alternative for the Jews in Spain and explores the Christianization of many Jews and the subsequent contribution made by these New Christians to their adopted faith during the Renaissance and the Reformation. This topic is taken a step further in John H. Edwards’s study of the male and female religious experience among these New Christians. Renée Levine Melammed’s article on the encounter of the 16th-century Castilian midwife, Beatriz Rodriguez, with the Inquisition, particularizes the difficulties encountered by one conversa in newly cleansed Spain.

From Spain the focus of the essays shifts to various points of the diaspora. One point of exile was the island of São Tomé, off the west coast of Sub-Saharan Africa, which Robert Garfield terms a forgotten fragment of the diaspora in his article on the island’s Jewish community. Garfield’s study suggests that fragments of Jewish culture and religion, banished from Europe entirely, may have survived for a time in the most alien cultural environment imaginable. Raymond B. Waddington’s investigation of Jewish coin-images in northern Italy adds an innovative reading of medals to our understanding of the ever-shifting balance between cultural assimilation and resistance in
the European diaspora. In his article on levirate union, Howard Adelman examines the attitude of the Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Italy after the expulsion from Spain to the Jewish concepts of *yibbum* (the union of a widow with her husband's brother) and *halitza* (release by the widow of the brother-in-law from procreative obligation). Kenneth Krabbenhoft's article analyzes Abraham Cohen de Herrera's reconciliation of kabbalistic doctrine with the tenets of pagan Neoplatonism and Christian scholasticism, while Winfried Schleiner investigates the contributions of the writings of exiled Portuguese Jews to the seventeenth-century conception of medical ethics.

Commencing with the joint contribution of Zenon Guldon and Waldemar Kowalski on the Jews in sixteenth-century Poland, the essays move geographically further away from Spain and southern Europe. As Guldon and Kowalski indicate, Jews in Poland saw themselves as enjoying considerable freedom in the sixteenth-century, largely because the weakness of the monarch insured that an edict expelling the Jews could neither be proclaimed nor implemented. Susanna Akerman takes the investigation of life in the diaspora farther north to Sweden and explores the theoretical work of Johannes Bureus.

The next two essays deal with Jewish-Christian coexistence in Germany: Stephen G. Burnett looks closely at the practice of censorship against the Jewish printers of Hanau and concludes that they enjoyed a remarkable degree of freedom in what they were allowed to print, while R. Po-chia Hsia examines the parallel construction of evangelical and Jewish identities in his article on Christian ethnographies of Jews in early modern Germany. Because of the subsequent disturbing relationship between the Germans and the Jews, both essays offer a particularly relevant historical perspective.

The concluding two essays treat aspects of ethnic identity among the Jews in the British Isles: Arthur H. Williamson's essay deals with the Judaized identities and the enduring fascination with contemporary Jewry that informed Scottish political culture of the seventeenth century, and James C. Force's contribution describes how Isaac Newton's conception of a Judaized God provided Newton with hope beyond the grave.
The underlying focus of all the contributions in this volume is the creation of minority discourse and its interaction with the discourse of the dominant culture. Most importantly, these essays reflect the creation of secular modes of discourse in early modern Europe, which added an entirely new intellectual dimension to what had been a predominantly Christian continent.

The two neighboring institutions that sponsored the conference—the University of California, Davis, and California State University, Sacramento—deserve commendation for their recognition of the importance of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain for the cultural development of early modern Europe. The migration of the Jews runs parallel to Columbus's journey of discovery and changed the Old World just as he was uncovering a new one. The editors of the volume have achieved a cohesiveness of presentation altogether rare in published conference proceedings.

Paul F. Casey
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Articles and Notes:

T. Gualtieri: “Dante’s Cranes and the Pilgrimage of Poetic Inspiration”
G. Polizoes: “Myth and History in Foscolo’s Zacinto”
D. Stocchi-Perucchio: “Poetry and Thought in Leopardi’s L’infinito”
T. C. Riviello: “The Role of the Protagonists and the Women in Italo Svevo’s Una Vita and La Coscienze di Zeno”
M. McDonald Carolan: “The Missing Mother: Procreation vs. Creation in Morante’s Early Fiction”
S. Debenedetti Stow: “La teoria della (cor)relatività ovvero la crociata di Sherlock Eco”
M. Bregoli-Russo: “La Locandiera di Goldoni al cinema”
M. Pastore Passaro: “Torrismondo in the European Scene”
S. Spartà: Poesia, non-poesia, anti-poesia del ’900 italiano”
“R. Petrillo: “Per un’idea della prosa lirica cecchettiana”

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A. Alessio, C. Federici, R. Capozzi, C. Siani, G. Pugliese, and M. Vena.

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