Linguistic Failure and the “Trembling Parole” in Alain Chartier’s *Belle Dame sans mercy*

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At first blush, Alain Chartier’s late medieval poem, the Belle Dame sans mercy seems to recount a story that is quite similar to narrations of other frustrated affairs in the courtly love tradition, as it tells of a devoted lover who relentlessly, yet unsuccessfully, begs for the euphemistic “mercy” of his lady. Plying the lady with compliments, assailing her with threats, and attempting to verbally manipulate her, the lover endeavors to force the lady to love him through various unsuccessful linguistic strategies. Although he commits to the lady and presents her with countless arguments about why she should cede to his advances, and the consequences that will arise if she does not, his pleas and threats are voiced without any success, and the lady remains unpersuaded. Modified only slightly, this frustrated relationship is also reflected in the frame narrative, where a mournful narrator has likewise lost the opportunity to communicate with his beloved. Since the Belle Dame sans mercy has often been understood as a rather ludic or even frivolous work, the acerbic points of critique that Chartier offers are frequently overlooked. A key issue that the Belle Dame explores through its study of language are the degraded courtly values that bleed over to the linguistic failure and problematic speech acts of Chartier’s protagonists. This causes his characters to communicate poorly when they are able to communicate at all, and regularly leaves them to grapple in vain with fragile, “trembling” words that highlight their vulnerable state.

From complaints regarding love and its infelicities, to debates on the ideal behavior, and merit, integrity, and worth of lovers, courtiers, and women, the rich tradition of medieval love poetry is frequently lauded for the intricate ways in which it plumbs the depths of authorial, subjectival, and amorous identity. The Belle Dame sans mercy provides one such example, with its vivid representation of amorous tensions, conflicts surrounding identity, and a troubled

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1 In an article on the relationship between suffering and love in Diego de San Pedro’s Cárce de amor, Sandra Munjic, “Leriano’s Suffering,” 204-05, proposes the term “suffering subjectivity” as a way to assess the highly performative pleasure, in suffering that the frustrated lover experiments, which ultimately blurs the division between victim and aggressor, and between “subjetividad masculina y femenina” (male and female subjectivity,” my translation). Both the terminological concept of “suffering subjectivity,” and the attention to gender, performativity, and desire as articulated through lyric poetry are helpful points of reference for Chartier’s text as well. On gender, performativity, and malleable, iterative constructions of the self, see Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology and Butler, “Performative Acts,” especially 520-28.
political backdrop that combine to besiege the subjects of Alain Chartier’s late medieval poem. Composed around 1424, and written at the struggling court of “the beleaguered King Charles VII,” after the troubled reign of Charles VI had come to an abrupt end, the Belle Dame is set in a period rife with plays for loyalty and “a seemingly endless series of cultural and political upheavals.”

Spurring a literary querelle no less heated than that of the Roman de la Rose, the Belle Dame couches a scathing critique of extant social and gender-related norms in what initially seems to be a ludic valuation of courtly love. Yet the instability created by the Hundred Years War and the sociopolitical troubles that the Belle Dame features are reflected in the amorous and linguistic struggles that confound all of the text’s characters, as issues like will, force, loyalty, and obligation are debated against the backdrop of longstanding political, amorous, and literary contentions. Indeed, at the crux of numerous disputes itself, since it brings key topics deliberated over in the querelle des femmes to the fore, Chartier’s poem offers a particularly nuanced vision of the intersection of gender and language. For instance, the Belle Dame explores what constitutes: the praiseworthy or problematic behavior of women; appropriate pliability or amorous reciprocity; and how the “suffering subjectivity” of both lovers and author(s) can either be angled to obtain the desired reciprocal relationship, or are left destined for failure.

In addition to focusing on gendered relationships, linguistic codes and courtly rhetoric, which subsequently inform the rules of social


3 See Delogu, McRae, and Cayley “Introduction” to A Companion to Alain Chartier (c.1385-1430): Father of French Eloquence, 1.

4 Delogu, “A Fair Lady,” 472; see also Grenier-Winther, xiv-xv.

5 Serchuk, The Illuminated Manuscripts of the Works of Alain Chartier,” 114.

6 In Medieval Communities Aleksandra Pfau draws attention to language as a hotly contested matter of debate—and language’s intersection with gender—during the time of the Hundred Years War, particularly given the invocation of Salic Law and Charles VI’s creation of a law “making blasphemy a crime punishable by death.” As Pfau asseverates: “Language mattered, and the questions of who was speaking in a text, the author or a character, and of whether a word could be morally bad of itself or whether words were naturally good and only the object could be morally bad, held philosophical weight,” 51-52.
and private identity at stake throughout the text, the reactions of Chartier’s contemporaries and much of the critical discourse surrounding the Belle Dame and its ensuing Cycle center on the somewhat stunning comportment of the title character. Showing a controversial diffidence, the Belle Dame manages to spur every advance of her would-be lover by resisting him through language. In contrast to her codified lover and standard representations of the traditional beloved lady, the Belle Dame is “anything but conventional.” Unlike the countless female characters who are silent or silenced in the medieval lyric tradition, she speaks assertively and well. She is also presented as a character with a solid mastery of her emotions, and with the ability to articulate her thoughts clearly. Given the singularity of her speech, her remarkable communicative dexterity, and the brio with which she defends herself linguistically, both the Belle Dame’s words and how she uses language stand as helpful hermeneutic keys to the text.

The Belle Dame received immediately enthusiastic yet polarized attention during the medieval period as evidenced in the

7 Kinch, “A Naked Roos,” 418.

8 See, in particular Marder, in “Disarticulated Voices,” and Gaunt, Gender and Genre. With a focus on troubadour poetry, which is thematically and structurally evoked throughout the Belle Dame, in Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry, Sarah Kay, Subjectivity, gives an insightful breakdown of the tensions that govern and divide the amorous poetic voice—tensions that initially arise internally within the loving subject and become further exacerbated and exteriorized through dialogic exchange (see especially 69-80). Vickers insists upon the violent silencing of the female beloved’s body and voice in the Ovidian and lyric traditions in “Diana Described.” Burns and Krueger’s “Introduction” to their Special Edition of Romance Notes, is also helpful for understanding the “range of possibilities regarding women’s place in medieval French literature,” and in “a predominantly male world order” represented in courtly contexts, more broadly. Underscoring how “the system that valorizes male individuality and social bonds also tends to appropriate woman’s potential power and influence” by “dress[ing] up the tensions of male/female relationships in the guise of love” (214-15), Burns and Krueger, “Introduction,” emphasize the ’ambivalent’ and contradictory ways in which women are simultaneously exalted and vilified, empowered and silenced, centered and marginalized. Although Callahan, “Lyric Discourse,” 124, also acknowledges the “ambivalence” and various “contradictions regarding woman’s place in the masculine world of loving and singing,” he offers a more positive reading of women’s access to speech and lyric expression.

9 In “Performance and Polemic,” 128, Delogu emphasizes the emotional distance between Chartier’s Belle Dame and her female literary precedents: “Whereas the latter emote abundantly, in gesture and in word, the Belle Dame calmly affirms her indifference to her interlocutor, a rather persistent suitor. The lover leaves her neither hot nor cold she says, and she refuses to accept either the ‘gift’ of his service, or the blame for his suffering.
numerous manuscripts that have transmitted the text. In recent years, however, Chartier’s work has received somewhat less consideration, notwithstanding the fact that the work of the “père de l’éloquence françoyse” dexterously explores performativity, gender, sociopolitical autonomy, consent, to name just a few of the themes that remain just as pertinent to contemporary priorities as they were to medieval ones. Certainly, brilliantly staging a fragmented selfhood, the hyperbolic emotive vacillations, authorial concerns and linguistic confusion that have caught the attention of scholars and students of many of the texts that accompany Chartier in ‘canonical’ literary histories, the Belle Dame sans mercy and the Cycle that Chartier’s work actuates are deeply anchored in complex discussions of late medieval poetic and amorous identity.

10 Almost four dozen manuscripts from the 15th and 16th centuries are thought to include Chartier’s text (Grenier-Winther, xiv). For the work’s manuscript history, and Chartier’s successes more broadly, see Serchuk, “Illuminated Manuscripts;” Laidlaw, “The Manuscripts of Alain Chartier;” Cayley, “Collaborative Communities,” and her Debate and Dialogue, 110-12; Taylor, Chivalry, 31-35.

11 In his “Foreword” to Cayley and Kinch’s Chartier in Europe Laidlaw drily laments the disattention with which Chartier’s works are met by associating Chartier and Chartier Studies with Lucan’s mournful “Stat magni nominis umbra” (Only the shadow of the great name remains” [vii]). See also Cayley, Debate and Dialogue, v. 9-11.

12 This is Pierre Fabri’s proclamation in his Grant et vray art de pleine rhetorique, as reported by Cayley and Kinch 1; see also Delogu, McRae, and Cayley who likewise cite Chartier’s “éloquence,” and call attention to his “commitment to the politically-engaged poet,” which informed the Rhétoriqueur notion of the poet as the voice of “public eloquence,” while his dialogism could be adapted to suit a wide range of circumstances,” 10.

13 While it is imperative to recognize the inherent violence of linguistic coercion, particularly when it is embedded within hierarchical systems such as courtly love, for example, broader questions of personal volition, obligation, and consent come up numerous times throughout the Belle Dame, as various characters are left to grapple with the coercive strategies of others. Cohesion and force are experienced in manifold ways, ranging from the wiles of petulant and conniving lovers to indomitable allegorical forces. Moreover, all of the main characters unequivocally insist that they do not consent to particular types of behavior, thus broaching the discussion of agency, blame, and personal responsibility that will be taken up in the frame narrative and in the ensuing and very intense cycle of literary debates evaluating Chartier’s work. On blame and gender, see Solterer, The Master and Minerva. On medieval sexual violence, particularly as regards contemporary theorizations of gender and consent, see Gravdal, Ravishing Maidens; see also Rape Culture and Female Resistance edited by Baechle et al., and Representing Rape, edited by Robertson and Rose.

14 On the relevance of medieval literature to contemporary lives, see Dinshaw, How Soon is Now? and Hsy, Antiracist Medievalisms.
Addressing the Belle Dame’s overarching structure, Daisy Delogu explains that “[t]he poem is a verse dialogue consisting of one hundred stanzas, of which the debate of a lady and her persistent would-be lover occupy seventy-two, framed and transmitted by an eavesdropping poet-narrator.” The twenty-eight stanzas that describe the “eavesdropping poet-narrator’s” situation recount a woeful tale of frustration in love, which is the source of the narrator’s melancholy. Likewise, the alternating stanzas providing both the voice of the aspiring lover as well as that of the resistant lady, depict a similarly frustrated relationship, at least from the lover’s perspective, as he is unable to obtain what he desires.

Initially, the Belle Dame might seem to tell a story like any other frustrated affair as it tells of a devoted lover who relentlessly, albeit unsuccessfully, begs for the euphemistic “mercy” of his lady. The lover attempts to flatter, cajole, threaten, and persuade the lady through various linguistic and affective stratagems. Above all, he attempts to impel her to love him by insisting, firstly, that his love for her will never falter, and secondly, that the terrible suffering he is made to endure can only be lifted if she treats him with favor. Although he pursues the lady doggedly, presenting her with countless arguments about why she should cede to his advances, and what will happen if she does not, his pleas and threats are voiced without any success. The lady remains unpersuaded.

Parenthetically enclosing the story of the Belle Dame, the larger frame narrative in which this story is set features a mournful narrator who laments that his love and desires have been irremediably frustrated by the death of his beloved. Suffering and anguished due to her passing, he attempts to take his retreat from courtly life and the inhabited world, until a group of friends convince him to attend a party. It is at this party where he recognizes himself in the mournful habits of another suffering lover. The sad soul intrigues him, and he spies on the lover enough to understand that they are both contending with similar routs in love. That is, both of the male characters aspire towards fully reciprocal relationships with their

15 Delogu, “A Fair Lady,” 471.
respective ladies—yet they cannot obtain the results they desire. Even when they articulate their expectations firmly and unwaveringly, and insist upon their affective constancy, their various promises of love are ineffectual. While the narrator’s lady cannot return his passion because she has died, the lover’s lady will not reciprocate his feelings because she has no interest in him. She refuses to offer the lover “mercy” purely for the sake of “mercy,” or because of tradition, pressure, or any imposed notions of obligation; instead, she prefers to protect herself instead by engaging with him as little as possible. With its dialogic structure, two sets of couples, and two amorous relationships so frustrated they both end in death, Chartier’s poem thus offers an incisive evaluation of fraught courtly dynamics and the frail linguistic currency of amorous discourse. By repeatedly staging linguistic failure, from efforts at communication that falter, to messages that are not understood, and purposeful attempts to manipulate others through ineffective speech, Chartier critiques the lyric tradition’s dependence upon stereotyped words. To this end, he dramatizes the propensity of stylized words to flounder, and the general preponderance of communicative problems that complicate all linguistic exchanges—particularly heated, emotional ones.

Since the title character’s barbed language and the male protagonist’s emotional extremes are comical at times, and since the exchanges between both are set within an ostensibly playful frame that sets an exaggerated voyeurism as the condition that facilitates the plot, much can, and has been said about the apparently playful, or even

16 Delogu’s keen discussion of “pity” in “Performance and Polemic” is particularly helpful here: “Pity” for the lover (and within in the system of courtly love) is a term that signifies female acquiescence to male desire. As we shall see, the lady tries to shift the word’s semantic field such that “pity” means something like “self-regard.” It makes no sense to her to exhibit a pity that would be self-destructive. As for the lover, he believes pity to be integral to femininity […] 132.

See also Hult on the “danger” perceived by men “dans la fiction d’une femme qui ne montre pas de ‘merci’ (253; in the fiction of a woman who shows no ‘pity’) in “La courtoisie en decadence.” Particularly given the critical stance that manifests itself across Chartier’s texts, consider Kilgour’s discussion of “pity” as relates to the devastating battle of Agincourt and mournful dénouement of Le Livre des quatre dames in Decline of Chivalry, especially 196-98.
“frivolous” nature of the Belle Dame. Nevertheless, contrary to what these critics have suggested—particularly those who refuse to see any point of contact between Chartier’s grave Latin works and what has often been taken for his inferior, lighthearted literary exercises in the vernacular—the structural complexity of the Belle Dame sans mercy alone should prove that it is neither a trivial dialogue, nor does it merit being regarded as such.

The Belle Dame initially seems far more jocund than Chartier’s solemn Latin oeuvre, for instance. Its story also appears less somber than the “plea for peace” at the crux the Livre des quatre dames (1415), a work that comments mournfully on the devastating Battle of Agincourt by which its tragic plot is activated. Similarly, the Belle Dame is much less vitriolic than Chartier’s scathing Quadrilogue invectif (1422), a work “written when France was near the nadir of

17 W. B. Kay, in “La Belle Dame sans mercy,” 69 follows scholars like Edward Hoffman and Arthur Piaget, insisting upon the importance of the work, and calling it “the most important single French poem since Le Roman de la Rose of two centuries earlier.” Nonetheless, much like Piaget and Hoffman, W. B. Kay very much downplays the sociopolitical struggles during which Chartier was writing, reducing his critiques to triter reflections on patronage and nobility. Giannasi’s “Chartier’s Deceptive Narrator” also discusses this issue as relates to Piaget, Hoffman, and W.B. Kay. Calin, in “Intertextual Play, 32,” summarizes many of the negative valuations of the work. It was deemed “‘light,’ ‘arti’ficial,’ ‘superfi- cial,’ ‘conventional,’ ‘vapid,’ ‘shallow,’ ‘frivolous,’ ‘insinere,’ and ‘unoriginal.’”

18 That is, the meticulous investigation of questions of identity and subjectivity, which the text performs as a function of its dialogic structure.

19 Cayley and Wijsman in “The Bilingual Chartier” offer a detailed study of the linguistic expanse of Chartier’s corpus.

20 I am borrowing here from the title of Tania Van Hemelryck’s 2006 article in Romania, “Le ‘Livre des quatre dames’ d’Alain Chartier: Un plaidoyer pacifique.”

21 While the tally of fatalities differs depending on the source, in the battle lasting just a few short hours, France suffered enormous losses. Hibbert estimates that there were between 7,000 and 10,000 casualties, while Given-Wilson and Bériac suggest that that “at least 6,000 French nobles died at Agincourt. Thus the ratio of slain to captured was probably 4:1 or 5:1,” 805-7. Somewhat paradoxically given its subject, the Livre des quatre dames begins by promoting a sweet oblivion as a remedy for lost happiness: “Pour oublier me-lencolie” and “Fai[re] cesser ennui & soucy” (vv.1, 6; “to forget sadness and make troubles and worries come to an end”; translation mine). See Kussman, Beiträge zur Überlieferung, 1-3, and his “Textprobe und Varianten-Apparat,” 594. See also Delogu, “Performance and Polemic,” 124-8; and Solterer, “The Freedoms of Fiction for Gender.”
her fortunes in the Hundred Years War.”

22 Serving as a telling point of reference for the pervasive political trouble, in the Quadrilogue, Agincourt is described as “la maleureuse bataille d’Agincourt, dont nous avons chier comparé et encore plaignons la douloureuse infortune et emportons sur nous toute celle malle mescheance” (“the unfortunate battle of Agincourt, in which we suffered so greatly and still regret the grievous calamity and burden ourselves with the plentitude of this terrible misfortune.”

23 Summarizing the Hundred Years War’s dramatic impact on the French, Josette Wisman explains the chaotic period thusly: “the English invaded France in 1415; a civil war broke out between the Houses of Orléans and Burgundy while Charles VI went mad; there were peasant and bourgeois revolts; the Church was divided by the Great Schism; and finally there were recurring epidemics and famines.”

24 Kibler adds that “The population of France had been halved in the previous seventy-five years [since 1418 when Paris “had been opened to the English”], towns had been levelled, churches burned, the countryside ravaged.”

25 Despite its seemingly blither orientation in a courtly love story, the Belle Dame shares much of the gravitas of these other works. Along with opening with a “lonely and grieving man; as in [Chartier’s] Lay de plaisance and the LQD [Livre des quatre dames], sadness is indissociable from the voice telling the tale.”

26 Given the “two irreconcilable positions,” of the Belle Dame and the lover, and their inability to “progress towards a common understanding,”

27 the Belle Dame proves to be both highly critical and explicitly pessimistic,

22 A “debat entre espoir et desesperance,” (“a debate between hope and despair” translation mine). As Chartier explains in his “Prologue,” the Quadrilogue is a text that excoriates nobility, and “paints an unforgettable picture of the debasement and debauchery of each of the traditional three estates.” Kibler, “The Narrator as Key,” 714; see also Taylor, Chivalry, 144-46.

23 Le Quadrilogue invectif, 31.

24 Wisman, xiv. See also Singer, in Representing Mental Illness, 87 and Delogu, Theorizing the Ideal Sovereign, 153 on Charles VI’s (in)efficacy as a ruler.

25 Kibler, “The Narrator as Key,” 714. Translation is mine.

26 Tarnowski, “Alain Chartier’s Singularity,” 44.

27 Angelo, “The Testimony of the Belle dame sans mercy,” 140.
proffering a “moral indictment as devastating as the *Quatre Dames* or the *Quadrilogue*.”

Marked by the thorny political challenges of the Hundred Years War, and by the downfall of chivalric codes and disordered language betraying courtly, amorous, and poetical instability, the *Belle Dame* thwarts its characters’ intentions by largely rendering their words inconsequential. The *Belle Dame* can thus compellingly be read as an acerbic commentary on the pervasiveness of linguistic failure. In many ways the text gestures nostalgically to what should have been a felicitous courtly context, propitious both to love and to poetic composition, but is not. In her work on the *Livre des quatre dames*, Tania Van Hemelryck notes that “[à] côté d’œuvres rédigées dans la pure tradition courtoise, la critique reconnaît que bon nombre de productions de l’homme de lettres sont traversées par une réflexion morale et politique” (“Alongside works written in the true courtly tradition, criticism recognizes that much of the author’s output is informed by moral and political reflection”).

Certainly, Chartier’s staunch political engagement can also be observed in the various affective impasses and linguistic aporia he stages in his courtly poetry. For example, even the narrative framework of the *Belle Dame* offers a clear parody of the customary oneiric moorings of traditional stories of burgeoning love. By discarding the traditional illuminating, edifying dream and replacing it with a scene of unfortunate recognition through espionage, Chartier distorts the usual model. His imbalanced narrator struggles with a melancholy that remains unresolved, and both the narrator’s questionable acts of surveillance and his desired retreat from the

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30 While Delogu’s focus in “Performance and Polemics,” 122-24, falls on how “gender impacts the expression and reception of emotion,” particularly as these shape affective response, performance, and communication (and especially in courtly contexts), it is very useful to understanding the various ways in which language is performed and mediated in the *Belle dame*.

31 Van Hemelryck, 520; translation mine.

32 Delogu, McRae, and Cayley, *Companion to Alain Chartier*, 9-10.
world become elements of critical distance that facilitate a dynamic exploration of the lyric tradition’s hyperbolic, contradictory extremes.

Additionally, not only does the main action of the *Belle Dame* take place liminally, as the majority of the story occurs at some distance from court,\(^{33}\) the blithe court is no more, and any sense of a collective, exultant community is put into opposition with the individual’s isolation and sadness. The spying narrator accentuates the affective and physical separation that his own voyeurism facilitates, while subtly introducing the questions of sin, exclusion, and deviation that are often used to justify marginalization.\(^ {34}\) Additionally, his inclination to spy on courtly festivities and private conversations founds an evaluative detachment from the court and from others that is at once suggestive of a certain critical distance, and of the characters in the *Belle Dame*’s fraught orientation and alignment to and around courtly matters.\(^ {35}\) Mired in its increasing degradation, as Raymond Kilgour, David Hult, Dietmar Rieger, and William Calin have argued, the courtly love tradition comes to represent the false and painful vestiges of an inaccessible past.\(^ {36}\) Given its own murky and inherently violent origins,\(^ {37}\) the nostalgic allure

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33 The sole exception being a few scenes of suspiciously harmonious dancing that parenthetically enclose the narrative.


35 On orientation more broadly, see Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

36 On which, see especially Hult’s “La courtoisie” 251-60; see also Kilgour’s chapter “Alain Chartier—The Patriot,” in *Decline of Chivalry*, 195-225; Cayley, *Debate and Dialogue*, 107-10, 121-22; Calin, “Intertextual Play,” 31-32.

37 In this, I follow Ahmed’s vital commentary in *Living a Feminist Life* regarding the various forms of silence that hide and protect violence: “So much violence does not become visible or knowable or tangible. We have to fight to bring that violence to attention” (208). See also Gravdal’s *Ravishing Maidens*, which seeks to adjust the idealized appreciations of courtly love held by many medievalists, and, aside from their occasional and somewhat summary mentions of antifeminist attitudes or gender violence, the long lack of rigorous critical engagement with sexual violence:

What was left unsaid was that courtly love literature is not only obsessed with an idea called ‘Woman,’ it is also obsessed with an idea called ‘Ravishment.’ Medieval literature ceaselessly repeats the moment in which an act of violence makes sexual difference into subordination (2).

See also Burns, *Bodytalk*; Robertson and Rose, “Introduction,” 3-8; and Baechle et al. *Rape Culture*, 1-14.
of courtly love further undermines the unfortunate subjects who chase an ephemeral lie, bound as they are by an inadequate code prescribing outmoded courtly behavior.

Though failure is perceptible in nearly every detail of Chartier’s *Belle dame*, on the most basic level it is exemplified by comments regarding the insufficiency, impotence, mistrust and misuse of language. As Joan McRae, Daisy Delogu, David Hult, and Emma Cayley have persuasively noted, a titular character such as the Belle Dame who is so attuned to the problematic nuances of courtly discourse, provides a clear opportunity for critique: “Charter rejects a self-serving and limited courtly discourse, a ‘fol parler,’ and so doing makes a move in the long-running Querelle des Femmes.” In fact, language is first presented in the poem through a process of distancing and rejection that impedes the grieving narrator’s communication with others by separating him from the very words he writes. In the opening verses of the text, the narrator mourns his beloved with a vocabulary recalling the typical types of amorous discourse that commonly describe more felicitous moments of *innamoramento*. However, where Amor, Venus, or Cupid predominate in traditional literary descriptions of falling in love, the narrator is confronted with a far trickier situation of impossibility and failure.

In a stark departure from the aforementioned scenarios, the *Belle Dame*’s narrator explains that instead of the “blows” of more commonly cited figures like Amors (Love) or Doux Regard (Sweet Gaze), from whom he could have expected greater clemency, the ravages that he is made to feel are ultimately due to Death’s arrow. Unlike Death, of course, whose force is irreversible and all-consuming, Love would have had the potential to heal the lover’s suffering. Likewise, Doux Regard, who often represents the beautiful eyes of the beloved lady and thus metonymically gestures towards productive visual exchange, would have facilitated the possibility for reciprocity and mercy. Instead, rather than any kind, allegorical

38 Cayley, “Debating Communities,” 193; Poirion, “Lectures de la *Belle dame sans mercy*,” 691-92. Marder, “Disarticulated Voices,” 148-50, offers a helpful discussion of women’s relationship to silence, particularly as it relates to violence. Marder’s insistence upon the patriarchal structures that condition language and make it even more difficult for women to speak up against the harm done to them, recalls the seminal argument of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar concerning the external limitations that are placed upon women’s authorial voice in *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

community, the lover has only Death and Sadness as company:

Naguieres, chevauchant, pensoye,
Com homme triste et douloureux,
Au deuil ou il fault que je soye
Le plus doulent des amoureux,
Puis que par son dart rigureux,
La Mort m’a tollu ma maistresse
Et me laisse seul, langoureux
En la conduite de Tristesse.

(I.1-8)

Not so long ago, while out riding, I was thinking,
as a man sad and grieving does,
of the woeful state I was in,
being the saddest of lovers
for, by his cruel sword,
Death has taken my mistress from me
and left me alone and languishing,
guided only by Sadness.

(45, I, 1-8)

By perversely recodifying the typical aftermath of being pricked by Love’s arrows, the arrow of Death is directed towards the narrator’s beloved. Not only does it end her life, it harms the narrator by proxy. Once she has died, he is isolated, and left “seul,” “langoureux,” and “[e]n la conduite de Tristesse”—that is, “alone,” and “languishing,” with only Sadness for “guide.” In a compelling stance of self-negation that overrides his amorous identity and replaces it with that of a man who is “triste et douloureux, the lover describes his “deuil” and paints himself as mortally wounded by “La Mort,” “Tristesse,” and his frustrated desires. In juxtaposition to felicitous troubadouric reverdies that begin in the Spring, and to love stories portraying a lover who yearns to be within visual proximity to the lady he loves, the lover has lost all access—and more importantly, all hope of access—to his lady.

Similarly, in contrast to lovers who are able to reach their beloved, who are successful in recounting the story of their innamoramento or

40 All citations of the original are taken from Hult and McRae’s 2003 edition of the Cycle. The English translations which follow the original are from McRae’s 2014 edition and translation, Alain Chartier: The Quarrel of the Belle dame sans mercy.
nourishing their relationship by singing and sending songs directly to their beloveds, the Belle Dame begins with resistance, cessation, and the sorrow resulting from impossible communication. Chartier emphasizes the lover’s waning communicative abilities instead of the traditional blossoming of new love. As the “le plus doulent des amoureux” (the “saddest of lovers”), in addition to grappling with his suffering in loving, the narrator must contend with authorial suffering as well. Not only is he so tormented by grief that he has lost his identity as a lover, he mournfully complains that what causes him even more distress is his forced divestment from his identity as a writer:

Si disoye: ‘Il faut que je cesse
De dicter et de rimoyer,
Et que j’abandonne et delaisse
Le rire pour le lermoyer.
La me fault mon temps employer,
Car plus n’ay sentement né aise,
Soit descrire, soit d’envoyer
Chose qu’a moy n’a aultry plaise.

Qui vouldroit mon vouloir contriandre
A joyeuses choses ecire,
Ma plume n’y saroit actaindre,
Non feroit ma langue a les dire.

(vv. 9-20)

So I said: I must stop
the writing and rhyming of happy verses;
Now I must trade
laughter for tears.
This is how I will spend my time,
for I no longer find delight
in writing or sharing with others
something that pleases neither me nor anyone else.
No matter who might wish to change my mind,
insisting that I write joyful things,
neither my pen nor my tongue
would be able to produce them.

(45.11,1-8; 111,1-4)

As his suffering in love causes him to lose the will to write the very words of his text, his sorrow further distances him from a happier
community. Writing pleasant trifles contravenes his wishes, and his aggrieved pen and distressed tongue are similarly unable and unwilling to allow him to form any words. More gravely still, the narrator’s difficulties with language do not just affect him alone—the same linguistic challenges that he encounters are replicated in the lover’s embedded story.

Even in the first few lines the lover speaks, he emphasizes the gravity of his situation. In his descriptions of the Belle Dame, he makes multiple references to “frontier[es],” “estandart[es],” and “Dangier” comprising the obstacles that block his way while emphasizing the regrettable separation and affective distance between himself and the lady he loves. Echoing the *Roman de la Rose*’s figuration of the allegorical Dangier (Resistance) and the various emotional and physical barriers that separate the lover and the rose, these references to liminality, burdens, and imposed distance can be understood as intertextual harbingers of failure and difficulty in love.

Evoking his struggle and unenviable position in love, the lover frequently uses military metaphors to associate his inner turmoil with the external hardships of war in order to better aggrandize his suffering:

-Nully n’y pourroit la paiz mettre
Fors vous qui la guerre y meïstes.

(vv. 225-28, p. 34)

-No one can bring peace to my heart
but you, who wage the war within it.

(59, XXIX, 1-2)

Even more explicitly, he cites the bad, violent day he first saw the Belle Dame: “Mal jour fu pour moy adjourné, / Ma dame, quant je vous vy onques” (191-92; “A bad day dawned for me / my lady, when I first laid eyes on you” 55, XXIV, 7-8). He also directly blames the lady for having “declaré la guerre,” by waging war against him.

41 Root, “Marvelous Crystals,” 65-67; see also Guynn, “Authorship and Sexual/Allegorical Violence.”

42 As Delogu reminds readers in “Performance and Polemic,” 129, the *Roman de la Rose*’s Dangier (Resistance) is the allegorical figure “who most forcefully opposed the Lover’s efforts to take possession of the rose. The lady’s resistance to love is thus clearly established before she even opens her mouth.”

Il a grant fain de vivre en deul
Et fait de son cuer lache garde,
Qui, contre ung tout seul regart d’eul,
Sa paix et sa joye ne garde.

(vv.231-34)

He must really wish to live in misery
who keeps such a loose hold on his heart
and, for the sake of one quick glance,
would lose his peace and joy.

(59, XXX, vv.1-4)

Recalling the Narrator’s funereal ties, the lover claims that he, too, lives in a constant state of mourning. Even more tellingly, he obliquely admits that he desires his misery (“Il a grant fain de vivre en deul”), since what he could possibly obtain in return for all of his suffering is the mere chance of receiving even just one glance from the Belle Dame.

Nevertheless, the fact that the lover defines himself and his interest in the Belle Dame through references to war that enclose the aspersions he casts upon her betrays an internal and intratextual struggle. That is, the pessimism he divulges by immediately conceiving of his “relationship” in bellicose terms serves to reinforce the narrator’s initial description of him as a melancholic, uncertain man, who has internalized war to the extent that he constantly carries it with him—“Si n’a pas poy de mal empraint / Qui porte en son cuer telle guerre” (vv. 183-84; “He whose heart is in such a war / can do little to conceal its effects” [55, XXIII, vv.7-8]). This insistence upon being characterized by war allows the lover to maximize his assertion of subjection to love and devotion to the Belle Dame. It also enables Chartier to critique the destabilized sociopolitical context through his evocation of the turmoil that takes place in the world around both lover and narrator, which provides the fraught, unstable background against which the work is set.44

Yet the lover describes his burning love as not just a war that causes him harm and makes him risk his life. Rather, directly anticipating his demise, he preemptively defines his ardor as explicitly fatal: “Je

44 See notes 7, 15, and 23-27, above.
seuffre mal ardant et chault / Dont je muir pour vous bien vouloir” (v.193-4); “I suffer from a pain that burns and enflames me / and is killing me, for want of you.” [57, XXV, vv.1-2]). Recalling the literary motif of burning because of love, and referencing key literary intertexts where lovers before him have “fallen,” the narrator uses the metaphor of the fall to symbolize his amorous perdition:

Maiz Amours m’a si bien chasse
Que je suis en vos lacz cheü,
Et puis qu’ainsy m’est escheü
D’estre en mercy entre vos mains,
S’il m’est au chëoir mescheü,
Qui plus tost meurt en languist mains.

(v.259-264)

But Love has given such hard chase
that I am now entangled in your trap.
And since it has thus befallen
to have fallen into your hands,
if this proves a fatal fall
then at least I shall die quickly, and languish less.

(61, XXXIII, vv.3-8)

While the mention of venery suggests both that he is hunted and flagged by his sexual desires, the rhyme scheme uniting “cheü” and “escheü,” and enclosed by “si bien chasse” and “au chëoir mescheü,” further links his activity (what he does) with passivity (what happens to him). With falling suggesting both his lack of control and the lady’s desired yielding to his wishes, the lover attempts to use this combination of rhetorical attack and passivity to manipulate the lady. With an oblique threat that emphasizes her culpability while underscoring the risks directly threatening his own life, he hopes his strategy of persuasion and accusation will induce her to act according to his desires.

45 Consider, for example, Petrarch’s frequent references throughout the Canzoniere to the destabilizing pull of his beloved, which often trigger falling—both of his body and of his hopes: “però ch’ad ora ad ora / s’erge la speme, et poi non sa star ferma, / ma ricadendo afferma / di mai non veder lei che’l ciel honora” (vv. 107-110; “whereby from hour to hour hope stands tall, and then knows not how to hold itself up, and falling back again affirms that it will never see she whom heaven honors”). In the Celestina, Fernando de Rojas also represents falling—accidental, intentional, and metaphorical (“de muy alto grandes caý-das” 3.3.491; “huge falls from very high,” translations mine)—as an always devastating extreme that symbolizes frustration in love and is often fatal.
In contrast to the lover’s desperation, however, the Belle Dame wants nothing to do with him and unfailingly repudiates his advances. She rejects the expectations he has projected onto her through deft linguistic maneuverings, and extricates herself from an entirely invented, hypothetical situation in which she does not wish to belong:

De rien a moy ne vous prenés
Je ne vous suis aspre ne dure,
Et n’est droit que vous me tenés
Envers vous ne douce ne sure.
Qui se quiet le mal, si l’endure!
Aultre confort donner n’y sçay
Ne de l’aprendre n’ay je cure:
Qui en vault en face l’essay
(vv. 521-28)
You have nothing to reproach me for,
I am not bitter or harsh with you,
and it is not fair that you should judge me
either sweet or sour toward you:
he who seeks evil can always find it.
I do not know how to give you comfort,
nor do I wish to learn how.
Let one who wishes try to give her best effort.
(77, LXVI, vv.1-8)

Staunch in her severity, even the lover’s conviction that he will die if his passion is not reciprocated neither mollifies the lady nor weakens her resolve. In fact, in response to his manipulative insistence that his own death approaches, the lady counters his macabre fatalism in a calm and dispassionate manner. She explains that his emotions have nothing to do with hers; moreover, it is much better that he suffer alone, than for both of them to be inconvenienced: “Et s’Amours grefve tant, au fort, / Mieulx en vault ung dolent que deulx” (v.27-38); “but if Love doles out such affliction, / better for one to suffer than two!” [61, XXXIV, 7-8]). The lady thus attempts to bring an end to conversation and extricate herself from his imagined relationship by reminding him that she bears absolutely no responsibility for his lamentable situation. Only he has control over his emotions, and
as such, his unhappiness is uniquely his burden and responsibility, rather than hers:

Contre vous desdaing n’actaïnne  
N’eux onques ne ne veul avoir,  
Ne trop grant amour ne haïnne,  
Ne vostre priveté savoir.  
Se Cuider vous fait percevoir  
Que poy de chose doibt trop plaire,  
Et que vous vous voulés decepvoir,  
Ce ne veul je pas pour tant faire.  

(vv.249-56)

I have no disdain for you,  
ever did, nor ever will have;  
neither too much love nor too much hate,  
nor do I wish to know your personal intimacies.  
If Presumption has made you believe  
that a small thing should please so much,  
and you wish to deceive yourself so,  
well this is something I do not wish to do.  

(59, XXXII, vv.1-8)

The strategy by which the lover attempts to catch the lady’s attention while entrapping her in conversation, however, is complex. The closest thing he can get to any sort of affective reciprocity is the conversation effectuated by the dialogic structure of the debate, which somewhat obligates the lady to respond to him even though she fully disagrees with what he says. Indeed, it becomes apparent that he attempts to use the very process of interpellation as a means by which to force her into communication.46 The lover is purposefully attempting to entangle her in discourse and elicit a response by assailing her with pleas, complaints, threats, and blame.

Despite his aspirations towards linguistic dominance, however, and even prior to his attempts to coerce the lady with his words, the lover falters linguistically, as the narrator’s observations reveal. Along

46 Althusser’s theory of “Ideological State Apparatuses” and the acts of interpellation or “hailing” that force a subject’s coming into being offers a strikingly compelling framework through which to consider the power-play that comprises the Belle Dame’s primary dialogue—that is, the lover’s continual interpellation of the Belle Dame to force her subjugation, and the various strategies she attempts to ward off being hailed against her wishes. See Althusser, “Ideology,” 110-16, especially.
with noticing the lover’s poor aspect, his nervousness, weakness, and his melancholic sartorial choices that proleptically align him with despondency and mourning, the narrator immediately recognizes his linguistic difficulty. That is, he observes the lover’s communicative challenges and the trouble he has expressing himself. The narrator then attributes the linguistic defeat of the melancholic man to his physical and sentimental isolation:

Maiz celui trop bien me sembloit
Ennuyé, mesgre, blesme et pale,
Et la parole luy trembloit.
Guere aux aultres n’assembloit.
Le noir portoit sans devise,
Et trop bien home ressembloit
Qui n’a pas on cœur en francise.

(vv. 98-104)

but this one seemed to be
so thin, distressed and pale
that his words trembled,
and he would not mingle with the others.
He was dressed all in black, with no crest to identify him,
and appeared to me to be a man
whose heart was no longer free.

(51, XIII, vv.1-8)

Febrile emotionally, insalubrious, and faltering, the lover’s nervous speech further reflects his emotional state: “la parole luy trembloit.” Although he is eventually able to muster the courage to approach the Belle Dame, his “trembling voice” becomes a determinative sign of his impending failure and augurs poorly for his success in love. Particularly given the grave epistemological, spiritual, and moral consequences of hesitation and lack of conviction, the lover’s

47 Exemplary scenes of hesitation are those found in Chrétien de Troyes’s Lancelot ou le chevalier de la charrette and canto III of Dante’s Inferno, for example. In the Chevalier de la charrette Lancelot’s early shame during the famous cart scene comes about precisely because he hesitates before deciding to assist Guenevere, whom he claims to love. The message of course—as Guenevere insists while upbraiding Lancelot for delaying “deus pas” (two steps) before deciding to come to her—is that his love, if true, should have prevented any delay:

Comant? Don n’eüstes vos honte
de la charette, et si dotastes?
Molt a grant enviz i montastes
Quant vos demorastes deus pas.

(R 4484-87; “What? So were you not ashamed of the cart, and thus afraid to get in? You were very reluctant to get in when you dallyed for two steps,’ translation mine).

See Hull’s aptly titled article “Lancelot’s Shame,” on these lines, and Kelly, Sens and
trembling word and lack of linguistic dexterity suggest that his message is perhaps neither as honest nor as transparent as he claims. Furthermore, the courtly rhetoric he uses so ineffectively serves to reveal his inadequacy as a lover, with this inadequacy reinforcing the likelihood of his epistemological, spiritual, or moral deviance. Since the lover’s consistent linguistic struggles are prepared by the narrator’s own hesitancies about language, and since the narrator sees in the lover a reflection of himself, the perverse suggestion is that the lover’s inadequacies are shared by the narrator as well.

On the other side of the amorous divide, the Belle Dame understands that the trembling “parole” also represents the crux of the contention between herself and her lover. Indeed, it is the precise reason for which she refuses the lover’s advances.48 Anticipating J.L. Austin’s analysis of illocutionary acts in *How to Do Things with Words*, and being especially wary of the lover’s attempt to ensnare her with directives and commissives so as to force her to adhere to a certain course of action,49 the Belle Dame understands that words have a dangerous lack of fixity: they are easily degradable and mutable, she explains, and sign and meaning are likewise often incommensurate. These marks of dangerous linguistic inconstancy thus constitute the primary rationale informing her rejection and resistance of the lover’s advances. She knows that she can neither trust him, nor the “others who swear” as does he. Certainly, flighty men all make similar vows and promises that do not ring true, while they duplicitously insist upon the constancy of their emotions, their honesty, and the singularity of their love:

*Conjointure*, 148-50. In the “liminal” third canto of the *Inferno*, Dante-pilgrim shows great scorn for the “ignavi”—those “cowardly neutrals” who hesitate before making decisions, who are irresolute in their opinions, or who show too much “moral neutrality and pusillanimity,” as Barolini explains in *The Undivine Comedy*, 31-38; and in “Inferno 3: Crossings and Commitments.”

48 Ahmed’s discussion of the “history of willfulness” and “being willful,” in *Living a Feminist Life*, 72-81, offers a helpful lens through which to understand the lady’s legitimate ‘refusal’ of her entirely undesired lover, and the various ways in which this refusal is angled against her, while being connected to her dishonor, potential punishment, violence, and shame.

49 See Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5-8; 123-35; 157; and Searle, “A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts.”
The Lady’s savviness regarding the malleability of linguistic discourse, the weakness of words, and the fleeting ephemerality of what should be immutable promises, informs her stalwartness. So too does the preoccupying number of lovers she derides—(“Vous et aultre qui ainsy jurent”)—who, despite insisting that their love is singular and genuine, continually recycle the same tired language in their poor attempts at persuasion.

Even more concerning to the Belle Dame than the quantity of lovers who reuse the same tropes, is this particular lover’s manipulative, unoriginal speech. Given the superficiality of his pleas, the Belle Dame counters that she does not understand his message. She further supports her claims of incomprehension—an implicit insistence upon the intellectual distance that separates them—by proffering a relativistic and subjective understanding of terminology: “Ne sçay que vous apelés ‘bien’” (v. 425; I do not know what you call ‘goodness’” [71, LIV, v.1]). Hermeneutic arbitrariness notwithstanding, she knows that the meaning ascribed to words can contaminate as well, effectuating a sort of linguistic harm: “Mal enprunte bien aultry non!”(vv. 426; [evil goes by many names] [71, LIV, v.2]). Additionally, the Belle Dame’s purported
lack of knowledge reinforces the distance that she maintains between herself and the lover—she neither knows what he means by “bien” nor does she wish to. The Belle Dame’s ability to remain impervious to the lover’s words, makes a poem on language, and more specifically, a poem on the commissive potential of language, into a detailed performance of failed communication and language’s easily corruptible nature.

In order to relate the inadequacies of language to the fraught sociopolitical context, Chartier plants various contextual clues throughout the debate that reflect an unstable social reality. The court, for example, already destabilized by a conspicuous absence of men that obliquely gestures towards their participation in war, is described in vituperative terms by the Belle Dame who casts it as a pit of gossip:

Male Bouche tient bien grant court:
Chacun a mal dire estudie.
Faulx amoureux au temps qui court
Servent tous de goulїardie.
Le plus secret vault bien c’on die
Q’il est d’aucunes mescreüs,
Et pour rien que homme a femme die
Il ne doibt plus estre creüs.

(vv. 713-20).

Foul Mouth reigns over a large court,
each well studied at slander.
False lovers nowadays
serve everyone a share of their debauchery.
The most discreet really wants to be spoken of,
to let it be known that certain women suspect him,
And so, no matter what a man says to a woman,

50 On the “tumultuous events” informing the political context in which Chartier wrote, which “had gone from bad to worse” (Kibler, “The Narrator as Key,” 715), such as the ramifications of war; the Great Schism of 1378; various waves of plague that only further complicated issues related to women’s bodily autonomy; and the disorder caused by the instability of the ruling class. See Delogu et al. A Companion to Alain Chartier. See also McRae, “Introduction,” Alain Chartier, 2-6. Kelly, Christine de Pizan’s Changing Opinion, 115, situates the literary representation of defunct beloveds—an increasingly “credible commonplace”—in a cultural and political context shaped by the Hundred Years War, 115. On the connection between plague, land, and restrictions regarding women’s bodily autonomy (albeit in English contexts especially). Robertson, “Public Bodies” 198 writes that one reason why the status of female consent might be particularly at issue in late medieval, England is that the post-plague economy destabilized the association of a woman’s body with property,” 298. See also Ros, “Reading Chaucer Reading Rape,” 35.
I say, he should not be believed.
(89, XC, vv.1-8).

At court, Male Bouche, the epitome of defaming speech, is king. His poor governance fosters the similarly troubling conduct of his courtiers, since “chacun” applies himself to “mal dire.”

Although this insidious linguistic behavior and the degradation of social order would be problematic in any circumstances, the lady insists that it is especially inexcusable since it occurs within a courtly context where order, decency, and respect should prevail. Offering a laconic, albeit scathing critique, she explains quite simply that noble people must act nobly. When they fail to do so, they are abandoning their refined ethos and their shared lofty principles, which renders their fall from grace even more shameful:

-Quant meschans meschant parler usent,
Ce mischief seroit pardonnés;
Maiz ceuz qui mieulz faire deüssent
Et que Noblesse a ordonnés
D’estre bien condicionnés
Sont les plus avant en la fangue,
Et ont leurs cueurs habandonnés
A courte foy et longue langue.
(vv.729-736)

-When wretched men speak wretchedly their sin should be pardoned. But those who know better how to behave and whom Noblesse has taught well how to love are the worst of the lot: these have abandoned their noble hearts to flattering tongues and brief engagements.
(89, XCIi, vv.1-8)

The inability of the nobility to act as they should exemplifies “the debased erotic ethics at court.” Their insidious behavior evidences their degraded values—or rather, the values that they have let degrade by allowing themselves to be manipulated and persuaded, to their detriment, by the deceitful promises that “courte foy et longue langue” educe.

51 Kinch, “A Naked Roos,” 440-41.
While revealing her unease and her justifiable mistrust of her surroundings, the deep-seated deceit at an inimical court is blamed for ruining the lover’s life and for generating the issues—suspicions of infidelity, rumor, dishonest words—that make the Belle Dame refuse the lover’s advances and cause other ladies to be similarly resistant towards love. Thus, while pronouncing the moral to his story and warning other “men in love,” the narrator cautions that this type of courtly conduct—and thus, that this type of court and the language that courtiers use—must be avoided since it only creates more difficulty for those truly in love:

Si vous pry, amoureux, fuyés  
Ces vanteurs et ces mesdisans,  
Et comme infames les huyés,  
Car ilz sont a vos faiz nuysans.  
Pour non les faire voir disans,  
Reffus a ses chasteaux bastis,  
Car ilz ont trop mis puis diz ans  
Le pays d’Amours a pastis.  

(vv.785-92)

Thus I beseech you, men in love, flee these braggarts and scandalmongers, and call them traitors, because they will impede your progress. Refusal has built a fortress against them so that their words will not be taken as truth, for they have had too much control over the land of love in recent times.” (93, XCIX, vv.1-8)

Real lovers must be cautious; they must avoid the “vanteurs” and the “medisans” because not only do these dishonest courtiers put the sanctity of any relationship at risk, their slander, boasts, and gossip ultimately cause additional problems by increasing doubt. Indeed, “vanteurs” and “medisans” are two types of courtiers who abuse language. The former distort facts about themselves through exaggerated words, while the latter manipulate facts about others.
Thus, their linguistic dishonesty “impede[s]” amorous “progress” (93, XCIX, v.4), while further justifying the reasons for which the Belle Dame withholds her love and mistrusts those who make exaggerated claims of affection.

Trouble at court is a pervasive issue, as its population of “vanteurs” and “medisans” indicates, and even in the opening framework that introduces the narrator for the first time, the court is depicted as unstable, unbalanced, and linguistically lax. While complaining about his heartbreak and lost mistress, the narrator makes it clear that he prefers solitude, as the death of his lady has rendered him an exile. He shies away from the happy people from whom he feels expelled, given their gaiety. His involuntary and burdensome induction into a courtly world, then, is accompanied by his reticence and desire to avoid the cheerful social context. It also underscores the passivity and vulnerability that govern his movements before his “good friends” successfully manipulate him, by begging him to join their festive ranks:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Si me retraŷ voulentiers} \\
\text{En ung lieu tot coy et privé,} \\
\text{Maiz deulz mes bons amis entiers} \\
\text{Sceurent que je fus arrivé:} \\
\text{Ilz vindrent. Tant ont estrivé} \\
-\text{Moitié force, moitié requeste-} \\
\text{Que je n’ay onques eschivé} \\
\text{Qu’ilz ne me mainnent a la feste.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(vv.57-64)

So I withdrew myself willingly to a calm and isolated spot, but two of my good friends learned of my arrival. They came there, and with their prodding and pleadings, which I could not refuse, they succeeded in leading me to the feast.

(47, VII, vv.1-8)

Although the cajoling of friends might seem a simple act of amicable persuasion, the way in which the “bons amis” interrupt the narrator’s
solitude constitutes a subtle violence that offers a proleptic critique of the linguistic manipulation with which the Belle Dame must later contend. Not only do the friends discover the narrator after he has hidden himself away for his own emotional safety “en ung lieu tot coy et privé,” they desecrate the safe place that he chose “voulentiers” precisely because he needed to take refuge from the happiness of others.

Rather than being tendered a simple invitation, the narrator describes himself as being goaded and forced; indeed, “moitié force, moitié requeste” has both physical and linguistic implications. Since he “could not refuse” and ends up being dragged to the party, the notion of manipulation takes on additionally threatening implications in terms of the broader plot. Of course, verbal manipulation, supplication, and the attempt to force or impose one’s will to satisfy amorous, sexual aims are the primary tensions of the Belle Dame’s story as well.

Though the narrator yields to his friends, the moment of his persuasion ironically stages the importance of resistance by indicating that there are no viable outcomes, and that even refusal is somewhat paradoxical. For instance, by anticipating, through opposition, the statement of the Belle Dame that “M’onnour pour aultry ne herray, / Criënt, pleurent, rient ou chantent,”(vv. 701-2; I will not compromise my honor for others, / though they shout, cry, laugh, or sing” [87, LXXXVIII, vv.5-6]), when the narrator goes with his friends, their happiness takes precedence over his own wishes. Cruelly, the jovial nature of the party ends up further negating his desires and his identity by causing him more suffering and pain, until he is able to “escape” his captors: “De celle feste me lassay, / Car joye triste cueur traveille, / Et hors de la presse passay”(vv.153-54; “I grew tired of the party / for rejoicing torments a sad heart, / so I slipped away from the crowd” [53, XX, vv.1-2]). On the other hand, being forced to the fête does have certain advantages, since it leads him to the one similarly frustrated person he can truly understand, and with whom he is able to identify.
Notions of consent and resistance are fundamental to the lover and the Belle Dame’s “relationship,” and have an even more explicit function than that which affects the narrator alone. If the Belle Dame cedes to the lover’s coercion, she harms and contravenes her own wishes. However, by refusing him she precipitates and seals his fate, which is understood by both the lover and the narrator as a painful violence that she unfairly inflicts upon the lover.

While the Belle Dame’s barbed jabs convincingly expose the failures to which courtly love is so often prone, the argument on the commonality of linguistic failure is also quite telling since although her words resonate, her message is firstly; largely disregarded by the lover; and secondly; overheard by the spying narrator against what presumably would be her wishes. As demonstrated in the strategies of refusal that the lady implements so as to establish distance between herself and her suitor, the inadequacy of the courtly love rhetoric is perhaps the most salient example of failure’s preeminence in the Belle Dame. Although the Belle Dame’s language surely co-opts and undermines the lover’s discourse, Chartier’s idea of failure situates linguistic breakdown as a pervasive, overall structuring mechanism rather than a trope driven by actions, solely effectuated by language and speech acts, or solely impacting one or two of the text’s characters.

Chartier’s concept of failure is also showcased in the intercalated

52 To offer just a few examples of the Belle Dame’s explicit engagement with coercion and consent, we have: the declaration of a suffering narrator that he is “le plus dolent des amoureux” (v.4) and has been unjustly abused by both Love and Death, who have assailed him unawares. This mistreatment leaves him so despondent that he must be “entreated,” “obliged,” and “forced” to take any subsequent action, which he does only after being drawn away from his mourning by a group of eager friends. Curiously, while he decries his lack of physical agency, his words too are forced, and the complaints that he voices are hollow repetitions of a tried Petrarchan narrative. In addition, we also have the complaints of Chartier’s protagonist that he has “fallen against his will,” and that he is caught in the snares of his recalcitrant lady, who “refuses” to cede to his coercive tactics. Finally, we have the sagacious rhetorical strategies employed by the lady to deflect and circumvent the lover’s wily language, as she insists upon the importance of consent and deftly disentangles herself from even discursive reciprocity and engagement. She acerbically points out the double standards that limit women’s agency and voice, and the misogynistic treatment that women typically receive, both of which only serve to facilitate the coercive violence that trumps their true volition.

53 Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life, 74-75.
structure of his work. While much of the critical conversation around this work debates whether or not Chartier “sides” with one character over the other, and if so, with whom, sentimental preferences such as these overlook the structural significance of debate. Even though the Belle Dame would prefer not to be speaking to the lover at all, that the repartees they exchange are rather balanced, forges a certain unity between both parties nonetheless. Indeed, she and the lover seem to be rendered “equals,” at least in terms of the time and space granted to their “verbal” parity. Although the annoyance the Belle Dame experiences has none of the emotional anchoring from which the lover suffers, and although the obligation to reply in order to defend herself reiterates the compulsory, inevitable imbrication in a gendered dynamic from which she attempts to extricate herself but cannot completely evade, both characters are aligned in terms of their equal frustration with the other, whom they find either too rigid and cruel or too prone to making extravagant, false promises.

They are also aligned in terms of the similar verbal insufficiency that they both experience, which only serves to accentuate the pervasiveness of communicative failure. While the lover fails to communicate properly, at the very least, his death proves his devotion to be true, broaching various questions with which the narrator and readers are supposed to struggle. Given the sincerity of his emotions, why were the lover’s words ‘unheard’? And, reprising one of the major questions of the querelle surrounding the behavior of the Belle Dame, in what ways do the lover’s devotion and death implicate the unpliable, potentially “cruel” lady?

Although the narrator’s moral suggests that the Belle Dame is responsible for the lover’s death, she preemptively defends herself from accusations of wrong-doing. Yet her words are largely ‘unheard’ as well, and she too is set up textually to be understood as a figure who grapples with the meaning and fixity of words, and who, due to the stubbornness of her interlocutor, is similarly unable

54 Butler’s theorization of the performativity of gender and the performative moorings of any speech act, help elucidate the lady’s simultaneous awareness of and attempts to resist the “identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts”—that is, the identity foisted upon her by the lover’s leading discourse.” Butler, “Performative Acts,” 519.
to communicate effectively:

-On me dit que je suis amee:
Se bien croirre je le vouloye,
Me doibt il tenir pour blasme
S’a son vouloir je ne souplye?
(vv. 681-84)

I am told that I am dearly loved.
Even if I wished to believe this,
does he have the right to hold me up to reproach
because I do not do as he requests?
(87, LXXXVI, vv.1-4).

While she has no reason to love against her wishes, the Belle Dame’s rejection of the lover is predicated upon her mistrust of the words with which he proclaims his devotion. Since she is cynical due to prior experiences, she has no inclination to believe him (“Se bien croirre je le vouloye”). She is emotionally unable—and certainly unwilling—to even try to “hear” his words properly:

-Dames ne sont mie si lourdes,
Si mal entandans, ne si folles,
Que, pour ung poy de plaisans bourdes
Confites en belles paroles,
Dont vous aultres tenes escoles
Pour leur faire croire mereilles,
Elles changent si tost leurs colles:
A beau parler closes oreilles.
(vv. 297-98)

-Ladies are not so naïve,
so stupid, or so foolish
that, for a few words of flattery
crafted of pretty words,
which you and yours have learned at school
to make them believe in miracles,
they will so easily change their minds:
to such sweet talkers, we close our ears.
(63, XXXVIII, vv.1-8)

At the end of the text, the Belle Dame has already forgotten the lover; her “negligence” demonstrates that she was ultimately unable to properly gauge what ended up being the lover’s genuine devotion
and truthful insistence that he would die without her. As a petulant response to her linguistic resistance and skeptical reading of his emotions, the lover’s promise that he will die without her love leads to the grandiose gesture he makes with suicide; he stakes his own death as a means by which to prove both his amorous commitment and his word. His objective in dying, is to prove that what the Belle Dame took for fickleness, was in actuality the very constancy he claimed that it was. That he does essentially die for love, and dies because love was withheld, exactly as he vowed that he would, corroborates the veracity of his words, albeit much too late.

Since the emotionally detached Belle Dame thwarts love by refusal and by her hermetic inviolability, and since the narrator’s irrevocably distant “maistresse,” achieves the same through the metaphorical distance suggested by her death, both female characters frustrate and “refuse” the male desire directed towards them. Be it voluntary or not, their refutation subsequently situates them both as aggressors and antagonists of male amorous identity, while unity through failure and insufficiency also forces them into a state of exile that verges on being punitive.55 Certainly, the narrator’s “maistresse” is removed from the scene because of d/Death, whereas the Belle Dame, due to her distance and mistrust of the courtly world is removed as well, as if in response to her independence and departure from the norm. Yet these examples of banishment and failure also subsequently unite the Belle Dame and her phantasmal predecessor with the wandering, exiled male characters as well.56 Consequently, even if readers consider solely the unity established among this group of characters whose only bond is linguistic failure, it should become immediately evident that a work so often understood as being intended for pure

55 Although Gravdal, in Ravishing Maidens, examines violence done to women in terms of physical and sexual violence in particular, many of the punitive, retributive actions taken against women physically and sexually in order to control their bodies are also latent in similar measures taken to control their speech. The propensity of physical and sexual violence to proliferate elsewhere is an issue that Vines studies in, “Invisible Woman,” 133-47, and in “The Many Wives,” 98, by drawing attention to how departures from “traditional gendered and sexual power structures” are often met with violence. See also Phillips, “Written on the Body,” 125-44, and Saunders, Rape and Ravishment.

56 Although the narrator and the lover express their scopophilic desires, and describe the magnetic, albeit frustrated force that pulls them towards the eyes of their beloved, they also regret the ramifications of looking, attributing to vision a great deal of blame for the violence that forces them to love.
divertissement, proffers a very real and pessimistic critique indeed.

Finally, the unity established between the tragic story of the narrator and his deceased beloved, and the Belle Dame’s emotional imperviousness, also explicitly align the narrator and the lover, by putting the lover’s amorous infelicities in connection with the homodiegetic narrator who observes, recounts, and ultimately recognizes himself in the very subject he narrates. The failed romance that motivates the story thus creates a certain unity through frustration, since failure, amorous resistance, and death link together the homodiegetic and heterodiegetic worlds. In addition to a necessary imbrication in a heteropatriarchal dynamic steeped in “notions of power and legitimacy and privilege” that reinforce toxic masculinity, this palimpsestic layering of the male character’s defeats in love are united due to the linguistic failure with which they both unsuccessfully struggle.

Linguistic failure likewise serves as a structuring element given that the narrator’s tragic romance weds his rejection of writing and narration, to the narration of the lover’s disastrous relationship with the Belle Dame. Although Hult reads the lover’s death as a sign of deviation—he is “aberrant, dans ce sens justement, parce qu’il meurt” (“aberrant, precisely in this sense, because he dies,” translation mine), since the lover does turn to death where most traditional lovers only threaten it with hyperbolic posturings that are not ever acted upon, he bolsters his final, tragic action with a rare instance of linguistic solidity that melds his words with his deeds, his voiced plans with the accomplishment of his fatal actions. Revealing the potential of Austinian exercitives long avant la lettre, the lover’s

57 See Halberstam’s overview of masculinity, domination, and power in “An Introduction to Female Masculinity,” 1-4. Sedgwick’s theorization of the power dynamics of the gaze in the early pages of Epistemology of the Closet is also helpful in drawing attention to the “oppressive ideological place always assigned to women in the construction of male sexuality” as Joseph Litvak, commenting on Sedgwick’s work in “Sedgewick’s Nerve” explains, 253.

58 Hult, “Courtoisie,” 258.

59 As Austin, How to Do Things, 155, specifies, “[e]xercitives commit us to the consequences of an act.”
uncertain, trembling word is thus concretized in his death; and, once carried out, his earlier promises to die if he is unable to have the Belle Dame grant a fixity to his “trembling,” tenuous words. Perversely, the realization of his verbal act and the suicide that he does indeed carry out help rectify the overall linguistic laxity and the febrile, trembling words with which every character in the Belle Dame is made to contend.

Though many critics have suggested that the Belle Dame sans mercy seems to side with the lover because of the male narrator, who, watching the lover watch the Belle Dame, immediately recognizes himself in the suffering lover—“Autel fumes comme vous etes” (v. 120; “I was once as you are now” [51, XV, v.8])—considering them both to be “dolent” due to their unrequited love, this unity is far more damaging to both of the male characters than may initially appear. Thus, the fundamental similarity revealed by their alignment opens the possibility that it is not solely the female voice that threatens male identity in the Belle Dame; rather, male identity is equally destabilized by the voice of the male characters themselves. As such, given the Belle Dame’s complaints about the unoriginal and therefore insincere collective language used by lovers—again, her “Vous et aultre qui ainsy jurent” (v.345; “You, and others who swear like this” [65, XLIV, v.1])—it is the layering of identity that ties together narrator and narrated, intercalated stories and their frame, and poet and lover. That the Belle Dame stands as an unassailable

60 While much could be said about the best translation of “Autel fumes comme vous etes”—is the singular “I was once...” preferable to “We were once...” for instance?—for the moment it suffices to highlight the ambiguity that the narrative itself facilitates. The context would suggest “I was once...” as McRae has beautifully rendered it; nevertheless, if the authorial parallel uniting lover and narrator were also to extend to the poet, then “We were once...” could embrace Chartier as well. Thus, Chartier as poet would be included as part of a trio of male lovers made to suffer in such a similarly painful way. W.B. Kay does not draw this connection based on “Autel fumes” precisely; however, he reminds readers that the eavesdropping narrator is a poet, “who, like Chartier himself ten years previously, has suffered the loss of his loved one [...].” 70. Consider also Tarnowski’s translation “So help me God, we were once as you are now,” and her brief discussion of manuscript variants as related to this line 45, n. 22; along with Laidlaw, The Poetical Works, 43-144 (also cited by Tarnowski). Giannasi in “Chartier’s Deceptive Narrator,” 383, understands the narrative structure connecting biography and fiction as a means by which Chartier “double[s] narrator and protagonist in an effort to deceive the reader and gain his sympathy.”
obstacle to her lover’s wishes situates her dialogue and rejection of
his speech as detrimental to the volition of the male protagonists who
seek dialogic reciprocity and affective exchange as both emblem and
proof of the requited amorous relationship they so ardently desire,
yet fail to obtain.

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