In Memoriam Paul Roger Thomas
30 November 1940—24 July 2021

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From the Editor

This volume is dedicated to Professor Paul Roger Thomas

Quidditas is a Latin legal term that originally meant “the essential nature of a thing.” In fourteenth-century French the word became “quiddite.” In the early modern period, the English adaptation, “quiddity,” meant “logical subtleties” or “a captious nicety in argument” (OED), and is so used in Hamlet (“Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?” (Act V, scene 1, lines 95–97). Thus, the original Latin meaning, together with the later implied notions of intense scrutiny, systematic reasoning, and witty wordplay, is well suited as the title of the journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association. Quidditas is hosted by Brigham Young University at http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra.

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Please send Articles and Notes to:

James H. Forse, Editor
quidditas_editor@yahoo.com

Please send submissions for Texts and Teaching to:

Ginger Smoak, Co-Editor
ginger.smoak@utah.edu

Steven Hrdlicka, Assistant Editor
steven.hrdlicka@gbcnv.edu

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In Memoriam: Paul Roger Thomas (1940-2021)

The Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association announces with great sadness the passing of Paul Thomas, a long-time member of the RMMRA and president ex officio whose unflagging organizational support, irrepressible good humor, unqualified collegiality, and thoughtful scholarship provided an important part of the RMMRA meetings for over three decades.

As is the case with many, Paul’s journey to academia was somewhat indirect. He worked for the Civil Service Commission for a brief time following his graduation from Brigham Young University, and then was offered a spot in the MA program at the University of Virginia. After taking a master’s degree in English, he taught at Brigham Young University—Hawaii in Laie for six years. Finding one kind of island life to be more insular and expensive than he liked (he had side-jobs as an HVAC installer, a maintenance staff at a sewage plant, and a speed-reading coach for military personnel), he traded it for island life in York, where he finished a D. Phil in English and Medieval Literature—and at which time he met and studied with Derek Pearsall, who was a life-long friend and mentor.

After the D. Phil was complete, including a short stint at the Virginia Military Institute to help fund his last year, Paul joined the faculty at Brigham Young University in Provo, UT. Paul was unwavering in his devotion to the study of literature, and similarly unwavering in being a friend and ally of students from every background. His welcome laugh and good will were his hallmarks among students, many of whom knew him as a friend when their circumstances were such that they did not believe there were any friendly faces around them. His advocacy of student causes was evidence of his generous spirit, and a major part of his legacy is the many admiring students who remember him as one who accepted and appreciated every student without regard to common stereotypes or prejudices.

While at BYU, Paul started the Chaucer Studio that produces sound recordings of medieval English. RMMRA has welcomed Paul and Sandy as conference participants and vendors since the Chaucer Studio began. He was also instrumental in providing finances and personnel to the Canterbury Tales Project, making BYU a full partner
in this important digitization and collation of Chaucer manuscripts for a number of years.

Our conference has always been a gathering of affable friends who research literature and history from contiguous periods and movements that abut and overlap one another. Conference presentations that might exhibit gaps in research or which might reveal the inexperience of the presenter are met with patience, suggestions for improvement, and even diplomatic correction. This kind of restraint and caring governed Paul’s interactions in general, and he helped to promote the productive, kind, and academically serious tenor of our meetings at every level, helping budding and experienced scholars alike to sharpen their ideas and increase their own knowledge while adding to the scholarly conversations of their various disciplines.

Paul was a fine scholar, an excellent teacher, a motivational and helpful mentor, a supportive colleague, and a dear friend to many graduate and undergraduate students over the course of his career. His legacy of service, benevolence, support, and commitment to his discipline live on in our shared memory of this friend, mentor, and colleague. We are grateful to have known him and for his contribution to the RMMRA, and we send our condolences to his wife, Sandy and their family.

Darin Merrill

Obituary Paul Roger Thomas
30 November 1940 – 24 July 2021

Paul Roger Thomas was born at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park, Maryland on Saturday, 30 November 1940, the youngest of three sons born to Dessie and Edwin Thomas. He died at Utah Valley Hospital on Saturday, 24 July 2021, of complications related to treatment for pancreatic cancer.

He enjoyed an active childhood and youth in Virginia and New Jersey, where he learned to work hard, live the gospel, develop his musical talents, and venture outdoors. He took up the cornet, sang, and handled a canoe with the skill of an Eagle Scout.
Life took a momentous turn when Paul moved with his parents to England in 1957. He attended London Central High School at Bushy Park, where he met another expatriate, Sandy Johnson. Cast together in a performance of Blithe Spirit, they began to fall in love. Along the way, Paul shared his faith with Sandy, and she was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints after returning to the US.

Paul attended Brigham Young University before another two years in England as a full-time missionary for the Church. After he and Sandy completed their missions, they were married in the Salt Lake Temple on 21 June 1963. The following year he graduated from BYU and took a job with the Civil Service Commission in Washington, DC. The first of four sons (John) was born while they lived in Arlington and the second (Geoffrey) arrived while Paul pursued a Master’s degree in English from the University of Virginia. The young family moved from Charlottesville to Laie, Hawaii, where Paul taught English at the Church College of Hawaii. Two more sons joined the family during six years in Hawaii (Jason and Justin). To support this growing family, the professor moonlighted in HVAC installation, sewage plant maintenance, and speed-reading classes for military personnel. Meanwhile he filled varied responsibilities at Church, ranging from temple worker to scoutmaster.

Once more England beckoned and the family moved to York, where Paul studied for a Doctoral degree in English, that focused on medieval literature. The family adapted well to Yorkshire ways, aided by a network of friends in the York ward and faithful devotions at home. Dwindling finances after four years necessitated a one-year return to the States, where Paul taught English and coached the debate team at Virginia Military Institute. The family then returned to York for two more years, before Paul was hired by the English Department at BYU.

Paul joined the faculty in Provo in 1980 and taught thousands of students over the next twenty-six years. He loved singing in the Ralph Woodward Chorale as well as ward and stake choirs. He founded the Chaucer Studio at BYU, which continues to uncover medieval literature and music for scholars and students around the world. Directing study abroad meant additional time overseas and summer
sojourns in England became so regular that eventually Paul and Sandy purchased a flat in Oxford. Both served faithfully in the Church, whether in the Pleasant View 3rd ward, where Paul was a bishop, or in the Oxford wards that they adopted for part of the year for more than two decades.

Paul was a diligent, gregarious, and sympathetic son, brother, husband, father, teacher, colleague, mentor, and minister of the gospel. Above all he was and is a faithful disciple of Christ, who departed this life firm in the hope of a glorious resurrection. He leaves behind his soul mate, four sons, their spouses, and eight grandchildren, as well as a brother Gordon, (his oldest brother, Grant, died in 2001), several brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces, nephews, and countless neighbors on both sides of the Atlantic whose lives he touched for good. Paul donated his body to the University of Utah Medical School for the furtherance of medical research.
ALLEN D. BRECK
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The Allen D. Breck Award is given in honor of Professor Allen D. Breck (1914-2000), a founder of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association. As Professor of History at the University of Denver, he also served for 20 years as department chair. As Professor Emeritus he became the historian of the University of Denver, writing *From the Rockies to the World—The History of the University of Denver*. His specialties included medieval and church history, particularly John Wyclif. He also taught Anglican studies at the Hiff School of Theology, and wrote, edited, or contributed to histories of Jews, Methodists, and Episcopalians in Colorado and books on medieval philosophy, the lives of western leaders, and the relationships between science, history, and philosophy. In addition to his involvement with RMMRA, he was a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and belonged to the Medieval Academy of America, the Western History Association, and the Western Social Science Association.

The Breck Award recognizes the most distinguished paper given by a junior scholar at the annual conference.

Recipient of the Breck Award 2022

Katharine Davidson Bekker
Those Who Weep: Tears, Eyes, and Blood in the Boussu Hours

Katharine Davidson Bekker
Unaffiliated Scholar

Simon Marmion and the Master of Antoine Rolin’s Boussu Hours (ca. 1490-95) is resplendent with imagery of suffering in its unusual marginal decorations. Holy effluvia—blood and tears—flow from golden pages covered in wounds and weeping eyes. These decorations, surrounding the Hours of the Passion, pictorially enact a theological notion of tears as wounding agents, and spiritually prompt the reader’s contrition. Notable wear on the “bloody” page indicates a pattern of tactile interaction between book and reader; this physical engagement with the marginals represents a quasi-liturgical manifestation of guilt and efforts made to abate it. The gestural touching of the page also connects blood to visual representations of weeping, furthering the connections between bleeding, touching, crying, and repenting. As microcosms of Christ’s tormented face in Gethsemane and of Mary’s anguishing sorrow at the foot of the cross, the fluids on the pages catalyze a chain of imitation wherein the reader emulates Mary who emulates Christ himself. This paper suggests that the pictorial blood and tears mediate the relationship between sinner and sanctified Mother, and the shedding of tears brings them together as they both experience the agony of Christ, centralized in their dripping, reddened eyes.

Images of the Mater dolorosa, the weeping Mother of God mourning over her dead son, are plentiful in the art of Northern Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Some depict the sorrowful Virgin alone, but most show her with Christ, either in a scene from the Passion or paired like a double portrait in a diptych format with Christ depicted as the Man of Sorrows: crowned with thorns, blood and tears running down his face. The Man of Sorrows type, which emerged alongside the legend of the Mass of St. Gregory that featured an apparition of the dead and bleeding Christ on an altar, shows Christ in a transitional state between life and death, outside of any distinct scene from the Passion, and standing upright but bearing the marks of his Crucifixion.¹ This paper explores the visual themes of tears, blood, eyes, and wounds as vital actors in images that require close, meditative, and affective looking and engagement, most

¹ Kirkland-Ives, “The Suffering Christ,” 35.
specifically the book of hours and argues that, in the context of the co-suffering Christ and Virgin, tears act as agents of wounding and injury to the holy dyad and their viewers.

The shedding of tears was considered to be sacrificial and was even conceived as mirroring Christ’s sacrificial shedding of blood. Tears were a means and result of “injuring” one’s eyes and they, like Christ’s blood, were able to cleanse from sin. They were also part of the process of mystical stigmatization or visions of the stigmata for mystics like Catherine of Siena and Francis of Assisi. Tears and blood were both thought to issue, either literally or metaphorically, from the heart, and were connected to “feminine piety because of their associations with the suffering of the Virgin as Mater dolorosa as she beholds the wounds of Christ at the foot of the cross.”

Considering the widespread commonalities between holy blood and tears in visual and textual representations of the early modern Flemish devotional culture, this paper argues that certain marginalia in the Boussu Hours, ca. 1490-95, a book of hours produced for use in Cambrai by the Master of Antoine Rolin and Simon Marmion (National Library of France Ms-1185 reservé), speak to an important aspect of the comparison between weeping eyes and bleeding wounds: that tears act as agents of wounding and injury. The injurious power of tears is particularly salient in the relationship between the dying Christ and his compassionate mother as they cause both physical and spiritual pain. The decoration of the Boussu Hours’ Passion cycle supports this suggestion of tears as weapons both for the holy figures depicted in the book and for the contrite reader interacting with it.

The book of hours puts the reader in proximate and intimate conversation with the subjects who are face-to-face with each other on

2 Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 595 discusses tears as sacrifice: 595-6 for tears as “scour[ing] the eyes; see 599 for cleansing from sin. See Elkins, Pictures and Tears, 138 for discussion of Catherine of Siena, see Kalas, Margery Kempe, 49, who suggests that Margery’s tears allowed her access to visions of Christ’s wounds.

3 Kalas, Margery Kempe, 50, referencing Liz Herbert McAvoy, Medieval Anchoritisms, 35.
“leaves” of vellum instead of wood. Many books of hours contain representations of Christ suffering and his mother grieving, but there is generally less emphasis on blood and tears in these manuscripts than there is in panel painting. However, the Boussu Hours, foregrounds imagery those effluvia. This long and luxuriously illuminated manuscript features unique marginals on several of the pages of the Office of the Passion; the decoration on folios 187r and 196r (figs. 1, 2) draws particular attention to the interface between blood, eyes, and tears. The prayer cycle is preceded by a full-page miniature of Christ in Gethsemane (folio 186v, fig. 2); folio 187v opens the text of Matins with the typical incipit “Domine labia m[ea] aperies,” accompanied by the scene of Christ before Pilate.


4 Jacobs, Opening Doors, 3-4 discusses 15th-century usage of “leaves” (feuilles) as the terminology for panels in triptychs and how this term links “the experience of the triptych conceptually with that of reading and more particularly the page-turning that necessarily accompanies the act of reading.” Jacobs also discusses the terms “doors” and “wings” for the panels of triptychs.
Surrounding the text is a gold background dripping with sparkling, translucent water drops and thick drops of blood. Among the drops is an image of the pelican using her beak to prick her breast and feed her hungry brood in imitation of the suffering Christ opposite her. A few pages later, as the book’s miniatures follow the course of Christ’s Passion, a full-page image of Christ on the *Via Dolorosa* (folio 195v, fig. 3) faces the beginning of the hour of Sext surrounded with similarly unusual marginal decoration. Folio 196r also features a sprinkling of glistening liquid, but now as tears, falling from reddened, squinting eyes that dot the gold background behind. Here, the initial shows the Elevation of the Cross, and the weeping eyes are accompanied by the heavy nails and hammer that would have been used by Christ’s executioners in the miniature.
Weaponizing Tears

Perhaps the most direct cultural example of tears as wounding agents comes from the practice of episcopal weeping. Bishops were often recorded weeping during services, from important festivals to common celebrations of the Mass.\(^5\) Their tears were multipurpose, with such functions as mourning for sin or death, giving proof of divine absolution, and signifying the bishop’s unity with Christ’s suffering.\(^6\) A bishop’s tears were also conceptualized as weapons “in defense of the Christian faith” as they protected against the devil’s temptations and aided the bishop in his ongoing battle for control of

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\(^5\) Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 592.

\(^6\) Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 593-4.
his physical body. Bishops shed tears as a form of self-flagellation, made effective by the belief that weeping—particularly “excessive weeping”—was detrimental to one’s health. The eyes were thought to be a source of temptation, and tears could be used to “scourge” them in response to sin, with blindness occurring as a literal consequence of such penitent weeping and helping the bishop to “turn away [his] eyes from beholding vanity” and to “see the evil things [he] must flee and the healthful things [he] must preserve.” Such clarifying tears are enacted by St. Francis of Assisi, who, as recorded in his vita, wept “regardless of the danger to his bodily health” and recommended that all men “cleanse their conscience daily with an abundance of tears.”

Devotional weeping also occurred outside of the realm of physical penance. St. Jerome, speaking about the tears that accompany his most heartfelt prayer, says:

O humble tear, yours is the power, yours is the kingdom; you do not fear the tribunal, you impose silence on your wicked accusers. No one can forbid you access, and when you have entered in you will not depart empty. You inflict more torments on the devil than can hell itself. What more can I say? You conquer the Unconquerable, and in a certain way you bind and force the All Powerful. Prayer bends God, a tear—if I may say so—forces Him; a prayer soothes and delights him, a tear pierces Him.

8 Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 595. Harvey discusses at length the practice of episcopal weeping as part of the bishop’s efforts to master and control his sexual urges: weeping was thought to be a proper and healthy expelling and cooling of his male “hot” humors in lieu of sexual expulsions for the same purpose.
9 Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 595-6. Kalas, Margery Kempe. 38 also mentioned that weeping was thought to “cause, or to create, physiological change.” Psalm 119:37. St. Birgitta, The Revelations, Vol. 2, 272. This revelation consists of a set of questions and answers between God and a monk. The monk asks God if he cannot do whatever he likes with the eyes he was given; God replies with the quoted text as the purpose of his giving the monk eyes.
10 Saint Bonaventure, St. Francis, 62.
11 Denis the Carthusian, Spiritual Writing, 224. This idea from St. Jerome is cited by Denis the Carthusian, himself a great proponent of devotional weeping for all devout.
In this excerpt, tears not only have the injurious power to “pierce” and “torment” God, but they are themselves likened to a prayer, specifically the *Pater Noster*, for “theirs,” like God’s, “is the power and kingdom.”

This idea of tears as prayers, weapons, and actors of injury is pertinent to the *Boussu* margin decoration and to the notion of Mary’s eyes being the locus of her co-suffering with Christ. Visually, both pages connect tears to sharp instruments used to wound: on folio 187r, the blood and water surround the piercing bill of the pelican, almost as if the gold margin were an expanded microcosm of the bird’s broken breast. Folio 196r pairs the tears with the nails and hammer used to affix Christ to the cross. It bears noting at this point that the water drops on folio 187r may not be exclusively tears: because they immediately follow the Gethsemane miniature that begins the office, the drops could certainly represent Christ’s agonized sweat like “great drops of blood falling down to the ground,” as if soaking through to the page opposite the miniature when the book is closed.\(^\text{12}\) Blood and water together also evoke the fountain from Christ’s side wound.\(^\text{13}\) However, neither of these interpretations negate the possibility of the drops of water being tears, as Christ also produced “strong crying and tears” during his prayer in the Garden.\(^\text{14}\) Additionally, as mentioned, bodily fluids were conflated during this period such that all or most of them were considered to be some form of blood, even to the point that, as Caroline Walker Bynum states, “all human exudings…were seen as bleedings; and all bleedings were taken to be analogous.”\(^\text{15}\) Tears, then, were essentially no different in substance from blood or sweat, and the water that ac-

\(^{12}\) Luke 22:55  
\(^{13}\) John 19:34  
\(^{14}\) Hebrews 5:7  
\(^{15}\) Ossa-Richardson, “Cry Me a Relic,” 311 suggests that tears were “only a kind of sweat or saliva, a superfluity of the humors.” Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 602. See also Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 109, 114.
companies the blood on folio 187r could be any of the mentioned holy fluids individually or simultaneously. However, because of their visual and compositional similarity to the tears on folio 196r, these drops likely function as tears.

It is important to address the question of what makes tears the wounders and not simply the result of having been wounded. While they certainly are the latter, they have the dual purpose of also causing injury themselves. Christ’s sacrificial tears in Gethsemane exemplify this idea. In direct divergence from St. Jerome’s claim that a prayerful tear “forces God” to hear an individual’s supplication, Christ’s prayer, mirrored in the words of the *incipit* for Matins that beg, “God, come to my assistance / Lord, make haste to help me,” falls on unyielding divine ears. His tears, though, do “pierce” the divine listener as Jerome suggests—but because he *is* God, his tears pierce himself. This paradoxical action of Christ’s tears as seemingly ineffective but actually efficacious and self-reflexive prayer imitates the widespread visual and theological notion of Christ as both priest and sacrifice—divinity vested in flesh and simultaneously ransom and officiant. Thus, Christ in the Garden weeps and suffers both despite and because of his tears. The piercing action of the tear is also demonstrated by the resulting fluids on the facing page: as mentioned, when the book is closed, the marginal decoration would close over and adhere to Christ’s body in the Gethsemane miniature, allowing his holy blood, tears, and sweat to mystically transfer onto the *incipit* page. His tears wept in Gethsemane seem to produce the blood speckling the gold background on the facing page, with Christ’s injurious, pleading tears puncturing the precious golden “skin” of the book. The resulting mingling of tears and blood—pictorial and imagined—embodies one of the central mysteries of the Savior’s Agony in the Garden: that the water of his sweat mingled with and became “great drops of blood.”

16 St. Bonaventure, *Our Lord and Savior*, 280 prompts the reader to ponder how, in this moment of most desperate “profound humility,” Christ forgets his “co-eternal and co-equal” status with God the Father and prays, like a man, for himself.

17 Denis the Carthusian, *Spiritual Writings*, 224.
In the case of folio 196r, the connection between tears and weapons of injury is more visually explicit: here, the droplets of water are accompanied by the nails used to affix Christ to the cross in the page’s historiated initial. The tears, like the three heavy nails—their broadened heads making them almost cruciform—have a strong downward action as they fall toward the bottom of the page. The sharp tips of the nails taper in precisely the same direction, so they appear themselves like tears fashioned from iron. Other marginal decoration from the Boussu office of the Passion contain different weapons used to injure or humiliate Christ: many-tailed whips and bundles of sticks to beat his body (folio 190r, fig. 5) and the reeds and crown of thorns used to mock his holy status (folio 193r, fig. 6).  

![Image of folios 190r and 193r from the Boussu Hours]

Like the tears, these weapons are scattered over the same gold margins, drawing visual parallels between all four pages. The association of tears as nails on folio 196r also relates to the full-page miniature that faces the marginalia page: the scene of Christ carrying his

18 Mark 15:15; Matthew 27:29
Cross on the *Via dolorosa*. St. Veronica has just offered up her veil to Christ’s exhausted, dirty face; it is at this same moment that Mary sees her son from afar and, overcome with grief, weeps.\(^\text{19}\) Also in this moment, Christ tells the daughters of Jerusalem to “weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children.”\(^\text{20}\)

The weeping Virgin and women are depicted in the background of the *Boussu* miniature, barely noticeable behind the main scene. Their distance from the front of the picture plane leaves only their gestures—heads down and hands clasped or, in the case of Mary, crossed over her heart—to indicate their distressed state, but the eyes on the facing page abundantly fill in for the absent weeping in the miniature.\(^\text{21}\) Here, the cascading tears indicate not only Mary’s grief, but also the incipient hardship and sorrow predicted for the women and their children following Christ’s death. Thus, the tears become weapons rather than consolers for the weeping women; in a kind of inversion of the apotropaic weeping of a bishop, their crying promises suffering and spiritual destitution rather than protection with Christ’s statement that “the days are coming, in the which they shall say, blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.”\(^\text{22}\)

The visual relationship between the tears and nails further supports the notion of injurious tears: like the nails into the wood of the cross, the tears are imaginatively driven back into the eye. With every drop shed, the tears paradoxically “pierce” back into the eye—in the words of Arsenius the Great (d. 450 CE), “carving a whole into [the] chest from continuous weeping.”\(^\text{23}\) Mary’s Compassion also relates to the piercing action of the tears. Her encounter with Christ on the road to Calvary is the fourth of her Seven Sorrows, often depicted by literal swords entering into her heart, as in the opening miniature to the Hours of the

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21 Barasch, “The Crying Face,” 125 discuss the use of gesture rather than (or in addition to) facial expressions and literal tears to indicate weeping.


Compassion of the Virgin in the *Da Costa Hours*, ca. 1515, which, notably, also shows Mary’s eyes injured, bright red and swollen into welts over her sockets (folio 92v, Morgan Library MS M.399, fig. 7). Tears and nails on folio 196r become the weapons to pierce Mary’s heart by means of her red and swollen, wound-like eyes, injured, like Christ’s own body, by pictorial nails and imagined sword.

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 7: Workshop of Simon Bening, Da Costa Hours, c. 1515. Fol.92v. MS M.399. Morgan Library and Museum, New York, NY**

**Weeping and Penitence in the Book of Hours Medium**

A second level of wounding exists in the context of the book of hours medium as the readers of the book, engaged in an intimate conversation with the painted blood, sweat, and tears of the Mary and Christ, are wounded by their guilt for participating in the suffering of the Lamb. Devotion to and visual representation of the sorrowing Christ and his mother—the *Vir doloris* and *Mater dolorosa*—were so ubiquitous during this period that the reader confronted
with the emotional, visceral fluid prompts in the book would likely have turned their thoughts to the holy dyad. Christianity during the late medieval period was also particularly preoccupied with penance and compunction: worshippers were encouraged to consider how their past and ongoing sins caused Christ’s pain, bleeding, and death. The book of hours, with its format that requires close physical engagement in its use, is an effective vehicle for implicating oneself in the suffering of Jesus. In the case of the Boussu Hours, those subjects are the travelling Christ, the sorrowful Virgin, and the fluid symptoms of their suffering. The wounding aspect of tears in this book, then, breaks into two categories or modes. I have already discussed the first, injurious tears as referential to the Passion. The second mode addresses injurious tears as pertaining to one’s own sinfulness, guilt, and compunction. In this second type, as in the first, the weaponizing of tears pertains to their effects on the body, their imitation of Christ’s weeping, and the relationship between blood and tears, both pictorially and theologically.

As mentioned in the context of bishops, “excessive weeping” was thought to cause blindness in the weeper. Such blindness, though, was not a punishment or undesirable consequence of crying: the subsequent blindness after weeping for one’s sins was considered to be a divine gift, a sign of sufficient penitence after engaging in the “self-flagellation” of shedding many tears. Weeping as an accompaniment to devotion is particularly suited to the Boussu pages because the blood and tear margins adorn the Hours of the Passion, the part of the book where the readers would have been most likely to weep over the suffering of Christ, both out of grief—like Mary—and out of penitent guilt for their contributions to the Savior’s pain. An unusual rubric for the hour of Sext, decorated with its painted eyes, calls readers’ attention to Jesus’s crucifixion between

24 Decker, *Technology of Salvation*, 68-88; Bynum, *Fragmentation*, 180, 184. 184 also addresses the discrepancies between the theological idea discussed here that an individual’s ongoing sins pained Christ anew continually and during transubstantiation, and the scriptural reference in Hebrews 9:28 that Christ was just “once offered” as a bloody sacrifice.

25 Harvey, “Episcopal emotions,” 595-6. A bishop’s self-flagellating activities and personal devotion made up for the fact that he had to be in the world surrounded by fineries. Weeping counted as a penitent action because contemporary medicine claimed that “excessive weeping was potentially detrimental to health.”
two thieves, inviting them to ponder the injustice of his execution and the debasement of his holy status and tender body. The pansy flower in the margin, the name of which references the French penser (“to think”), further encourages the reader to think deeply about the images on the page. Tears feature on one more page in the book: on folio 347r, columbine flowers and gold monograms join tears and gold-and-scarlet cordiform flowers to embellish the Miserere mei penitential psalm, further emphasizing the connection between tears, the reader’s need for mercy, and the psalmist’s plea to “have mercy upon me, O God” (fig. 8).26

![Image of Miserere mei page](image)

**Fig. 8: Simon Marmion & the Master of Antoine Rolin, The Boussu Hours, c. 1490-95. Fol. 347r, Ms-1185, National Library of France, Paris**

Penitential weeping has a long tradition in Christian devotion, beginning with patristic theologians such as Origen, who claimed that...

26 The gold monograms on this page likely pertain somehow to the book’s patrons (listed in the online catalogue entry as Jacques and Isabelle de Lalaing), but further exploration of this motif, which is seen throughout the book, is beyond the scope of this paper. Columbine flowers are sometimes a reference to the Holy Spirit. Psalm 51:1.
“prolonged prayer and intensity of tears incline God to mercy.”

Crying for sin and guilt continued into the late medieval period with figures such as Margery of Kempe who wept for “compunction, devotion, and compassion” and Catherine of Siena, who suggested that tears may be shed for fear of punishment for one’s sins and in recognition of God as judge over man.

Weeping readers of the Boussu Hours, as they viewed Christ’s journey through his Passion, were prompted and mirrored by the eyes on folio 196r. The pictorial eyes also weep “excessively,” with fountains of tears spilling from their lids. They appear to have been physically wounded as a result of their sorrowing: they are red and bloodshot as if bleeding themselves and are swollen almost shut in a kind of mechanical blindness that imitates the blindness catalyzed from within the eye via weeping. One of the notable fourteenth-century Swedish mystic Saint Birgitta’s visions supports this potential blinding function of the eyelid as she sees Christ tell Mary that “everyone with a good conscience understands well that God is more lovable than anything else, and such a person puts this into practice. However, not everyone sees this even if they have healthy pupils, because eyelids cover the eyes of most people. What does this eyelid signify if not the neglect of the life to come?” As ocular “wounds,” the eyes in the margins are “blinded” by their eyelids model to the reader what devout eyes should look like, as if embodying the words of Gregory of Nyssa who described tears of compunction as “the blood in the wounds of the soul.”

Blindness as a consequence of crying is also significant for readers who, during and after of their book-based devotion, could use tearful “spiritual blindness,” wounding to the eyes though it is, as a kind of clarifying baptism, washing the dirt from their soul’s wounds and allowing them spiritual sight. The vita of St. Francis supports


28 Gutgsell, “Gift of Tears,” 251; 244 quotes Catherine of Siena discussing God as an “external authority” over man.

29 Kalas, Margery Kempe, 50.

this idea on both levels. Weeping “brought on a grievous malady in [Francis’] eyes,” but the saint still would “choose rather to lose the light of the body than to repress those tears by which the interior eyes are purified.”  
Once again, this aspect of weeping is reflected in the Boussu eyes, as they, too are washed by tears on folio 196r and by Christ’s salvific blood and water—the materials requisite for complete spiritual cleansing—on folio 187r. Thus, the reader, with the swelling shut of their corporeal eyes and subsequent opening of their spiritual ones, may “weep with tears that flow from a will made perfectly one with God.”

**Physical Penitence in the Boussu Hours**

The penitent reader-viewer of the Boussu Hours maybe have attempted to create a kind of physical connection to the wounded body of Christ via the blood and water on folio 196r. The paint on bottom left corner of this page appears to be worn away more than on any of the other pages with similarly placed margin decoration, suggesting that the owner of the book touched or kissed this page more than any other. Abundant evidence exists of physical interaction with books of hours for multiple purposes, from healing sickness to helping secure the soul’s place in heaven. It may be, then, that the repeated touching of this page to the point of effacing the painted blood reflects another aspect of experiencing—and hoping to expunge—guilt. The act of interacting with this page, I suggest, has two sides to it: a tactile litany of repeated, supplicative touching to abate the suffering of Christ, and a bodily form of active, efficacious weeping and *imitatio Mariae*.

Images of Christ as the Man of Sorrows have been considered particularly potent in their ability to provoke contrition in the late medieval viewer due to their affective, detailed, and often graphic

31 Saint Bonaventure, *St. Francis*, 62.

32 Fatula, *Catherine of Siena*, 103; Gutgsell, “Gift of Tears,” 244.

33 Rudy, “Eating the Face of Christ,” 175 discusses Philip the Good’s amuletic, comestible, consumptive relationship with images of the Veronica in one of his books of hours; Wieck, “Death Desired,” 440 discusses the effacement of demons trying to steal away the soul of the recently deceased in funerary images in books of hours (in the Hours of the Dead).
condensations of all the suffering of the Passion into a single image of the tormented Savior. John Decker suggests that such images “confront[ Christians with the harm their sins do to Christ” by making Christ’s grief and suffering so apparent. In Decker’s book, which uses Geertgen tot sint Jans’s Man of Sorrows as the example for this confrontation, the author cites the painting’s “direct stare” out to the viewer and “the hundreds of smaller marks on [Christ’s] body” as important aspects of the image’s devotional and affective purpose. Although the Boussu Hours do not feature an image of the Man of Sorrows as such, the combined depictions from the Hours of the Passion of Christ in Gethsemane, at various points of his torment, and hanging on the cross—all supported and accompanied by the magnified eyes and effluvia in the margins—function similarly to the Geertgen Man of Sorrows as a catalyst for contrition. The indications of reader interaction with the Boussu margin illustrations support this idea that the book fostered a strong penitential response.

Books of hours not only personalized devotion, but also personalized liturgy. As such, readers’ tactile engagement with the book may have functioned eschatologically both for their own souls and for the sufferings of Christ. That is, their repeated touching could have become an almost priestly act to “bind on earth [what] shall be bound in heaven.” Readers may have thought about the drops of blood and tears in several ways as they manually interacted with them. The paint behaves very much like shed blood as it begins as bright, flowing liquid, then dries and then darkens over time—from oxidization or the touch of oils from skin—and ultimately flakes.

34 Decker, Technology of Salvation, 68-89 is devoted to the contrition for sin engendered by Geertgen tot sint Jans’ Man of Sorrows panel. Although his example is a panel, Decker emphasizes the small size of the painting and suggests that it may have originally been part of a diptych and meant to be displayed at a 45-degree angle, making the Geertgen image function very similarly to a book.

35 Decker, Technology of Salvation, 70.

36 Bennett, “Commemoration of Saints,” 55.

37 Matthew 18:18
In touching these painted drops on folio 187r that act so much like arterial ones, the reader may imagine that, like St. Veronica offering Christ her cloth, they are wiping away Christ’s blood, offering him some kind of respite, or even reducing the number of drops he must shed—retroactively removing some of their sin that caused his blood to fall like sweat from his pores. Hoping to decrease the number of drops shed—or at least drops depicted—is certainly in line with contemporary devotional interests, as medieval Christians tended to place particular emphasis on quantifying religious phenomena, including the drops of blood that Christ shed during the Passion, usually enumerated as 547,500. Thus, by literally erasing drops of the painted blood with their fingers, they may have imagined themselves to be decreasing that painful number.

The desire to reduce Christ’s suffering also relates to the notion of contrition and guilt characteristic of devotion from this period. Several writings produced around the same time as the book of hours illustrate the extent and context of such devotional guilt. An anonymous confession in a fifteenth-century Netherlandish prayer book cries that “I am the cause of your pain, I am to blame for your innocent death…Oh lord I have gravely sinned and you are wounded for it,” showing the causal relationship between a sinner’s actions and Christ’s wounds. Robert Mannyng’s (Robert de Brunne, d. ca. 1338) fourteenth-century tract, Handlyng Synne, reflects this popular mode of piety in an account of a vision that showed the interaction between a sinner and a woman, obviously representing the Virgin, carrying a disfigured and bloody child in her arms:

38 Cicero’s Ad Herennium posits that images stick in the memory more than words, and that images “stained with blood or soiled with mud or smeared with red paint” are “more striking” and thus are more readily remembered; the “blood” and paint on this page certainly fits that description, see page 222; Decker, Technology of Salvation, 71-72.

39 Bynum, Fragmentation, 176 mentions, as well as drops of blood, metrics such as “virtues, merits, and credits towards salvation” among those being quantified; Brown, Religious Lyrics, 323; Areford, “The Passion Measured,” 217. This number is also written above the wounded heart on folio 24r of British Library MS ADD 37049.

40 Decker, Technology of Salvation, 88, 95, citing an anonymous fifteenth-century Flemish prayer book, quoted in M. Meertens, De Godsverurt in der Nederlanden [n. 51], 119-121: “O here, ic bin ein scolt dijnre bittere pinen, ic bin die sake dijnre ontschuldinger doet…O mijn god, ic hebbe seer misdaen ende ghi sijt daer voer ghepijnt.”
[Rising, the man spoke, saying]... who has made your child so bloody? You have made him so, she said. You have rent and drawn my dear child with your wicked and wild oaths...they harmed him once and then no more, you harm him every day. You undo all the pain he suffered for you on the cross and tear his flesh every time you swear falsely on his name.  

The imagery of Christ as a child being wounded and tormented reaches an even greater affective height. While no Christ child is shown in the Boussu Hours of the Passion, the interactions between Mary and Christ—in miniature in the Via dolorosa scene and magnified with the weeping eyes in the margins—evoke the same tender and poignant relationship of mother and child foregrounded in the vision and alluded to in Christ’s threatening prophecy to the daughters of Jerusalem.

Additionally, the illuminators of the hours, the Master of Antoine Rolin and Simon Marmion and his workshop, treated the subject of the Virgin holding and grieving over her dead or dying son several times in other books and in panel form, in a tender recall of when, as a young mother, “your bodily hands touched my humanity, and I rested in your arms with my divinity.”  

The workshop even depicted the mournful pair opposite the text of the Stabat Mater, which speaks so evocatively of Mary who “mourned and grieved and trembled” as she “saw her own sweet offspring dying, forsaken” (figs. 9, 10). This apparent interest in the Mater dolorosa type indicates that the artist may have been using the implicit connection between eyes, blood, and tears here as a reference to the sorrowful relationship between Mother and Son. The readers of the Boussu book, erasing the blood and weeping with Mary over their lethal sins, would hope to minimize the suffering of both holy and tormented figures.

41 Robert of Brunne, Handlyng Synne, 25-8; Decker, Technology of Salvation, 87.
42 St. Birgitta, The Revelations 2, 289. In this vision, Christ speaks to his mother.
Fig. 9: Simon Marmion, Pietà, late 15th century. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
Touching the page in a ritualistic or even quasi-liturgical way connects the act of touching to the act of weeping via the nexus of one of the oldest methods for representing crying in works of art. Several scholars have written on the use of gesture—in addition to or in place of depicted tears—to demonstrate weeping: wiping eyes, clutching hands, and clasping faces.\(^4^4\) Such gestures are shown in their great variety in the angels surrounding the four main figures in Claus Sluter’s 1395-1405 *Well of Moses* (fig. 11).\(^4^5\)


\(^{4^5}\) The Well of Moses also combines dripping blood and dripping tears: the crucified Christ (no longer extant *in situ*) bleeds from above the well, prompting the angels to weep.
An example more specifically related to the iconography of the Boussu book is the Cummer Mother of Sorrows. In this deeply emotive image of the weeping, mourning Virgin, she extends her hands—covered by her veil, with which she has been blotting her streaming eyes—apparently toward Christ, despite being depicted alone. David Areford suggests that Mary’s clutched veil in this image “becomes an extension of her body and a vehicle for the act of touching.”\textsuperscript{46} The Boussu Hours becomes a similar vehicle for contact with Christ, both allowing the reader-viewer to touch him and acting as the necessary boundary between his sacred flesh and the reader’s profane. The animal hide of the vellum page, covered with drops of blood that have no specific wound from which they fall, mimics Christ’s flesh and acts as magnified portion of his suffering skin in the miniature opposite. The dermal nature of the page’s material compresses the space between the reader’s touch and Christ’s flesh even further. The Cummer Mary’s implied gesture of wiping her tears, supported by the glistening drops on her cheeks, is also recapitulated in the reader’s touching of the page: whether or not

\textsuperscript{46} Areford, The Art of Empathy, 43.
they shed their own literal tears, they mimic the motion of wiping away tears and the gestural weeping of Mary that appears in the background of the Gethsemane miniature on folio 195v.

The naturalism of the blood makes the reader’s gestural effacing of it even more Marian, as the Virgin is often depicted in tender contact with Christ’s scarlet cruor. Such a scene is present in the center panel of Rogier van der Weyden’s Vienna Crucifixion Triptych ca. 1445, wherein Mary’s desperate clinging to the cross mingles her tears with Christ’s blood (fig. 12).

![Fig. 12: Roger van der Weyden, detail from the Crucifixion Triptych, c. 1443. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna](image)

The blood in this image is painted with such viscosity and weight that it is almost raised in relief from the picture plane. An English psalter (ca. 1480-1525) in the British Library features similar sanguine marginalia and devotional wear to that in the Boussu Hours; here, though, the painted blood appears to be literally raised from the page, perhaps to encourage the very tactile interaction that re-
sulted in the Boussu Hours’ devotional effacement (folios 1v-2r, 6v-7r, British Library MS Egerton 1821, fig. 13). The act of touching a bleeding book, then, is not isolated to folio 187r in the Boussu Hours, but the visual connections between blood and tears unique to this page fosters the bodily connection between devotional touching of the page and gestures of weeping.

Fig. 13: English Psalter and Rosary of the Virgin, c. 1480-1525. Fols. 1v-2r. MS Egerton 1821. British Library, London

Considering the tactile and Marian quality of these other images alongside the Boussu pages, readers of the Boussu book could, like
Rogier’s Mary, imagine themselves mingling their own tears with Christ’s blood in the way that tears and blood run together on folio 196r. Such mingling would also remind the reader of the public liturgical experience of the Offertory prayer, immediately before the Canon of the Mass, wherein the priest pours water and wine into the Eucharistic chalice and pronounces, “by the Mystery of this water and wine, we may be made partakers of His divine nature.” Thus, the devotional touching becomes not only a tactile, gestural mimicry of weeping and of liturgy but also a reciprocal shedding of effluvia with Mary and with Christ, touching his blood to heal him as he touched those who were blind, who wept, and who bled.

The *Boussu Hours* of the Passion are resplendent with imagery of suffering and wounding: Christ’s blood, sweat, and tears and Mary’s weeping, bloodshot eyes. These decorations pictorially enact the theological notion of tears as wounding agents and spiritually prompts the reader’s contrition. As microcosms of Christ’s tormented face in Gethsemane and of Mary’s anguish on the *Via dolorosa* and as models for the external and internal eyes of the book’s owner, the holy effluvia—blood and tears—on the pages catalyze a chain of imitation wherein the reader emulates Mary who, of course, emulates Christ himself. The reader’s guilt, contrition, and efforts to minimize Christ’s suffering through effortful touch and Marian lamentation are, essentially, practices of *imitatio Mariae*. The pictorial blood and tears mediate the relationship between sinner and sanctified Mother, and the shedding of tears brings them together as they both experience the agony of Christ, centralized in their dripping, reddened eyes.

*Katharine Davidson Bekker holds a master’s degree in Comparative Studies and Art History from Brigham Young University. Her research interests lie in fifteenth-century Northern European devotional art, with particular emphases on Marian and Christological imagery, gendered and mystical devotion, materiality, and visual exegesis.

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The Case for Hildeburg: *Beowulf* and Ethical Subjectivity

Wendolyn Weber  
*Metropolitan State University of Denver*

This essay argues for a reading of *Beowulf*, and the female peaceweaver figures therein, in contemporary philosophical terms of Levinasian ethical subjectivity. Such a reading illuminates the peaceweaver, often caught between action and passivity and viewed as a victim of death-driven masculinist heroic culture, as an exemplar rather of the radical destabilization experienced through ethical subjection and an important key to the complexities of the heroic ethos. It illustrates the enduring value of texts such as *Beowulf* to inform our understanding of often oversimplified concepts like that of the “warrior ethos” in contemporary culture.

The heroic war-band ethos is surprisingly ubiquitous in modern culture. We consume its fictional film and print articulations as entertainment and partake of its virtual versions on any number of gaming platforms. There is something of the war band in any competitive team sports league. In the modern military, small-unit cohesion remains extremely important to the success of troops on the ground. We respect the war band tenets of bravery and loyalty, of self-sacrifice and stoicism. We create fantasies of its gritty effectiveness in response to life’s frightening complexities. We have allowed it to inform an appreciation for strongman-types in public life and government. The warrior mode seems to offer a bracing tonic against flabby liberal elitism in a dangerous world. It injects itself in volatile ways into social movements and peaceful protest. But what does the ‘warrior ethos’ truly mean? The fierce loyalty of us-versus-them and the resolve to do-or-die may be essential in combat. It may be relatively harmless in the contexts of larping, tailgate parties, and the bowling league. It may seem useful and reassuring in the face of complex and abstract threats. But if we mean to embrace the steely perceived positives of warrior culture in contemporary contexts, then perhaps we should take more time to consider what that ethos fully entails.

The Old English epic *Beowulf* provides a useful model for such an inquiry. However, it is not necessarily the hero himself, but rather
the peripheral and referential figures populating the poem who ultimately offer the fullest picture of *Beowulf*’s complex ethics of heroism. In this essay I propose Hildeburg, the tragic queen from the Finnsburg poem-within-the-poem, as an important case study in this regard. Hildeburg belongs to the vexed category of the peacemaker in the heroic mode, and more specifically that category of the failed peacemaker; as a character in one of the many contemplative tale-telling digressions throughout the epic poem, she also serves as a narrative counterpoint to the primary action in the text. The poem’s representation of Hildeburg the failed peacemaker is not simply that of a character playing a role within the primary heroic plot but that of an aesthetic object: an aesthetic object that serves as such to trace the contours (paradoxical, inaccessible) of ethical experience. The embedded literary function of Hildeburg modulates *Beowulf*’s personal do-or-die heroic ethos, grounding the hero-in-isolation in a broader ethical meditation. In contrast to *Beowulf*’s heroic aesthetics of glory in combat, Hildeburg opens a melancholy heroic that dwells on and is conveyed through an aesthetics of failure.

Notably, Hildeburg makes her appearance in the poem following *Beowulf*’s first great success. At the banquet celebrating *Beowulf*’s defeat of Grendel, but also shortly before Grendel’s mother attacks, Hrothgar’s *scop* relates the story of the battle at Finnsburg: Hildeburg is wife of Finn, a Frisian, and sister of Hnæf, a Dane. Finn treacherously attacks Hnæf and his men while they are visiting, and Hildeburg’s brother and son, fighting on opposite sides, are both killed. Following an uneasy truce for the remainder of the winter, Hnæf’s men kill Finn and take Hildeburg back to Denmark. While the violent action is perpetrated by the men, Hildeburg meanwhile stands both at the edges and in the center of that action. Socially speaking, Hildeburg is the tie that binds, through marriage, these two groups, yet her centrality as the noble wife is negated, and she is pushed to the periphery as a non-participant, when violence erupts. Formally speaking, we also see her occupying both the edges (front and rear) and the center of the narrative: the *scop* begins from her vantage point, returns to her in between battle episodes as she
oversees the funeral of her brother and son, and ends with her return to her people.

With these marital misfortunes, Hildeburg has been considered a prime example of the paralyzing nature of a peaceweaver’s position in a heroic mode that tends more often toward violence than calm. Jane Chance has pointed to the queer mix of action and passivity, the passiveness apparently inherent in the act of peaceweaving, in the peaceweaver’s role: as the symbolic knot that ties two groups, she is herself bound by her role, thus necessarily incapable of action, should the alliance fail. Chance notes that Hildeburg exemplifies this bind, and adds that in the face of such failure, she faces the obliteration of her very identity, as well.\footnote{Chance, Woman as Hero in Old English Literature, 100.}

Hildeburg’s apparent powerlessness and voicelessness in the episode has intrigued Gillian Overing to the extent that she has taken Hildeburg rather than Wealhtheow as the paradigmatic peaceweaver in the text. Hildeburg, Overing argues in her book Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf, is “a victim par excellence” whose role in the account emphasizes “the utter nonsignification” of woman as peaceweaver and serves to expose the “paradoxical demands” of a system “that ostensibly champions her as its cause” but in fact ensures her failure.\footnote{Overing, Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf, 81, 85.}

Drawing from Derrida and Lacan, among others, Overing employs the hysteric, as defined by Cixous and Clement in The Newly Born Woman, as an appropriate model for the women in Beowulf. She argues, “women have no place in the death-centered, masculine economy of Beowulf; they have no place to occupy, to speak from.”\footnote{Overing, Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf, xxiii.}

Cixous and Clement offer hysteria as a psychological model for a linguistic space that defies and disintegrates the rationality of masculine, phallic, discourse. It is the disorder that rises up within and against the symbolic system’s oppressive order. Yet Overing also reads Beowulf as “an already deconstructed, even a continually
self-deconstructing, text.” And if the text itself is a continually self-deconstructing one, then the hysterical mode might extend beyond the women and throughout the text to include male and female alike. This would be the first point in my case for Hildeburg: that we might read her exemplarity and her role within the heroic ethos in terms other than those of patriarchal foreclosures. In doing so, we might benefit from thinking of her not as a victim (of patriarchy, of a masculine death-drive), but rather as a hostage, in Levinasian terms of ethical subjectivity.

The heroic culture is a potentially fraught staging ground for Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of subjecthood as defined by an absolute responsibility borne by the self to an external Other. Levinas’s notion of the subject as hostage to this responsibility, particularly with its foundational reference to the directive, “you shall not kill” (the experience of which demand constitutes, in Simon Critchley’s view, “the basic operation of Levinas’s entire work”), does not necessarily seem to jibe well with a heroic culture in which killing is a matter of course. The model whereby I kill the other before me seems rather a rejection of that ethical responsibility. But in the heroic culture, the responsibility borne to the immediate, face-to-face other is often complicated by a responsibility to another other, either living or dead. For all the focus on personal glory, service plays a large role in the heroic ethos. We might read heroic violence as the quintessential repetition compulsion, the death drive fully realized and woefully unsublimated, but we might also bring into consideration Levinas’s thoughts on the third party, the other other: “The third party introduces a contradiction” in the relation between self and other that was until then unidirectional. “It [the third party] is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice?” Levinas also suggests that it is the entry of the third that creates consciousness, systems,

4 Overing, Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf, xiii.
5 Critchley, Infinitely Demanding, 57.
6 Levinas, Otherwise Than Being, 157.
and the intelligibility thereof: “In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness.”

This perception of and obsession with “all the others than the other,” crying out for justice, demanding measure and knowing, fosters a distinctly uncomfortable consciousness. Tom Sparrow, considering the “excessive strangeness” of the face of the Levinasian Other in terms of Timothy Morton’s ecologically-oriented work, offers the following:

> When I realize that my freedom, action, and responsibility are intimately connected to the freedom and vulnerability of countless other humans and nonhumans, and that these others not only exceed my ability to cognize their plurality, but even exceed my ability to grasp their singularity, I realize that I am caught up in what Morton calls “the mesh.” The mesh is another name for the coexistence and codependence that marks life on Earth. The mesh refers us to how, when we try to conceive the vastness of ecological life — and the way in which everything whatsoever is connected to everything else — we discern that there is neither center nor edge of the environment.

The messy justice system of the heroic mode does not necessarily include recognition of this un-cognizable coexistence. But the failures of heroic peace-keeping illustrate what we might characterize as an overflow of justice that enacts the problem of violence-as-justice within the mesh of plural responsibilities. The peaceweaver, who is both central and peripheral to her particular instance of peace-in-dissolution, who according to Overing has no place to occupy or to speak from in the death-driven heroic economy, perhaps exemplifies the radical destabilization that is ethical subjection.

Overing emphasizes Hildeburg’s passivity and silence in the face of such peace-keeping failures in order to make an argument about women within what has historically been read as an exclusively masculine discourse. She argues that women must carve out their fleeting moments of alterity by forcing ambiguity, leveraging with

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7 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158.

paradox, and it is thus Hildeburg’s very silence and effacement that reveals her “trace” – an image delineated by her absence that allows her to declare the paradox of her position. It is in this trace that Overing sees the most positive and active attributes of her character: “The silence she creates affronts, forces a confrontation with unresolvable ambiguity, declares paradox. […] Her silence is actively experienced as an other desire that momentarily collapses the ever-forward momentum toward death of dominant desire; she serves other forms of movement and potential as she embodies and enacts the web of difference.”

This is an interesting and powerful idea that I would like to extend beyond the parameters of gender difference and consider in terms of action and responsibility, duty (heroic and otherwise) and the sometimes impossible weight thereof. Stacy S. Klein also argues that the women in Beowulf “do not simply introduce ambiguity and disorder into this world and then abandon it in a kind of chaotic state of choric confusion;” rather, they “gesture toward the possibility of a new model of heroism that redefines, and incorporates the energies of, preconversion Germanic heroism so as to bring it more closely in line with the Christian worldview of the poem’s readers.”

Klein characterizes this Christian influence as prescribing “a new model of heroism premised on turning the violent energies of heroic self-assertion inward and waging battles against one’s inner vices rather than against human foes.” Klein’s arguments are compelling, but somewhere in between her suggestions and Overing’s, and in between the pagan heroic and its Christian reconfiguration, we might see Hildeburg gesturing toward a different internalization, focused not so much on conquering personal, inner vices as on accepting the intimate, boundary-blurring interrelation of self and other. As Sparrow puts it, “the Other is present in me as the source

9 Overing, Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf, 87.
10 Klein, Ruling Women, 88-89.
11 Klein, Ruling Women, 89.
of my freedom to respond to the Other’s needs.” Or Critchley: “At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of hetero-affectivity. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness.” Or Levinas: “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself [...] of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am.”

Drawing both from Levinas and from Løgstrup’s idea of a one-sided, unfulfillable ethical demand, Critchley proposes an “ethics of discomfort, a hyperbolic ethics based on the internalization of an unfulfillable ethical demand.” As Critchley posits it, ethical subjectivity is founded on a demand that is profoundly paradoxical in that it is unfulfillable and asymmetrical. Ethics, Critchley argues, should be infinitely demanding: “There is a curvature of intersubjective space that makes my relation to the other asymmetrical. Furthermore, this curvature shapes the inner space of subjectivity itself, where the subject is defined in terms of a division between itself and an exorbitant demand that it can never meet, the demand to be infinitely responsible. The ethical subject shapes itself in relation to a demand that splits it open.” It is that splitting-open, both in regard to the exorbitant demand in the face of the other and also in the multiple faces of the plurality of other others, the question of justice within the ungraspable mesh of coexistence, that emerges repeatedly in the expressions of heroic ethos and failure portrayed in *Beowulf*.

In the regular outbreaks of kinstrife and the apparent failure of women (and men) to maintain peace we might therefore see the ultimate futility of the peaceweaver role. Hildeburg must stand by

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14 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 112.
powerless at the deaths of her brother, son and husband, waiting to be carried back to her relatives once all is lost. Yet she is not completely inactive in this passage, nor does failure necessarily equate with futility. The *scop’s* opening designates her as a grim surveyor of the battlefield, bemoaning the work of destiny; she also takes control of the funeral preparations, commanding “that her own son be given over to the fire, that his body be burnt on Hnæf’s funeral pyre, and to place [him] on the pyre at the shoulder of [his] uncle” (“Het ða Hildeburg / æt Hnæfes ade / hire selfre sunu / sweolode befæstan, / banfatu bærnan / ond on bæl don / eame on eaxle” (1114-1117a). Hildeburg’s gesture continues her peaceweaving function as it emphasizes the breakdown that has occurred. She reestablishes the bond between her brother and son by placing them together for cremation, shoulder to shoulder – another reference to the relationship they should have maintained in battle. The two burning bodies now join in one trail of smoke winding upward to the sky. If the peace her marriage was supposed to create has been broken, she will at least remind everyone that such a breach should not have happened. She foregrounds the splitting of loyalties that has torn apart her family. In the end, she will return to Denmark and her kin, as the entire marriage is dissolved with the death of Finn.

The Finnsburg episode is thus a cautionary tale – a reminder that peace has a tendency to erupt into violence, that joy can be replaced by the slaughter of kinsmen. In a period of revelry, the *scop* takes the time to remind us – and his listeners in Heorot – that it cannot last. While we are told that the poem is received with good humor in the mead hall, the emphasis in this tale is notably on the tragedy of peaceful ties broken, not on the glory of warfare. The first half of the episode focuses on Hildeburg’s loss, her transition from the greatest of worldly joy to loss of everyone dearest to her. The second half of the episode is concerned primarily with Hengest’s revenge dilemma, but here, too, we find no exuberant savagery. There is the swearing of oaths, intended to seal the truce, and the long winter Hengest spends stranded at his enemy’s court. With the green of spring, he is swiftly persuaded to exact vengeance despite all oaths to the contrary. From
here, everything moves quickly. Finn’s death occupies just one incidental half-line, “swilce Fin slægen,” “and Finn was also slain” (1152b). This vengeance is a denouement, if a necessary one, to the original treachery and painful truce, and it is treated as such. More lines are devoted to the winter weather prohibiting Hengest’s travel than to the battle when the Danes return for revenge. The swiftness with which Finn’s hall is reddened, the king slain, and spoils and queen alike packed – furtively, almost – back to Denmark reflects the inherent sense of grim, not glorious, necessity. The *scop* himself references the wastefulness of such bloodshed with the remark, at the burning of Hnaef and his nephew, “wæs hira blæd scacen,” “their glory was passed away” (1124b). If Hildeburg’s losses are the focal point in this instance, Hrothgar has similarly bemoaned his fallen condition after Grendel’s unexpected attacks. Once young, strong, and successful, joyful and prosperous, he has become old and feeble, his brilliant hall falling into ruin. Though Beowulf has rid Heorot of Grendel, the tale of Finnsburg also underscores what the poet has already told us at the beginning of the poem: Heorot is destined to burn, and Hrothgar’s line to fail.

Hildeburg also creates a bridge to Wealhtheow at this point, who enters following the *scop*’s recitation and offers some peaceweaving and political reminders of her own. Wealhtheow exemplifies the peaceweaver at work in the hall. In bearing cups to guests and retainers, weaving bonds between the drinkers, and giving advice, the peaceweaver is at her most politically active. While we do not see Hildeburg in this active function, the tale of her fate arguably motivates and informs Wealhtheow’s actions on a number of levels. She tempers Hrothgar’s enthusiastic adoption of Beowulf (1171-1174), reminds him of his duties to their children (1178-1180), and reminds her nephew Hrothulf of his debt to his uncle – and thus also of his duty to behave well toward her sons, should Hrothgar die before they are fully grown (1180-1187).

Wealhtheow is referred to by Beowulf himself as “frīðusibb folcā” (2017a), “peace-bond of people” – a very similar term
to “freoðuwebbe,” “peaceweaver.” She seems to exemplify the characteristics that go along with the designation. As John Sklute has noted, the word in fact only appears three times in extant Old English poetry: once in Widsith, once in Elene, and once in Beowulf. In Elene, “fælre freoðuwebban” (dative), “faithful peaceweaver,” refers to the angel who appears to Constantine. The angel serves as messenger, a diplomat between God and man, thus weaving bonds of peace between heaven and earth. In Widsith, it refers to a certain queen Ealhild, the historical wife of Eormanric, king of the Ostrogoths, who gains praise for herself and her husband’s court through her nobility and munificence – giving a precious ring to the poet. Combined then with Wealththeow as “friðusibb,” Sklute concludes that the term “peaceweaver” must specifically refer to an individual performing distinct and active functions. The word is “a poetic metaphor referring to the person whose function it seems to be to perform openly the action of making peace by weaving to the best of her art a tapestry of friendship and amnesty. The warp of her weaving is treasure and the woof is composed of words of good will.”

Given the specific peace-promoting connotations of “peaceweaver,” the irony behind the use of the word in Beowulf in the story of Modthryth is all the more apparent. Modthryth is the foul-tempered young lady who demands the death of any suitor or retainer who gazes at her, daring to meet her eye. “Terrible outrages” (“firen ondrysne” (1932b)) are attributed to her:

\begin{verbatim}
Nænig þæt dorste deor geneþan
wæsra gesiða, nefne sin-frea,
æt hire an dæges eagum starede
ac him wæl-bende weotode tealde,
hand-gewriþene; hraþe seoþdan wæs
æfter mund-gripe mece géþinged,
þæt hit sceaden-mæl sceyran moste,
cwealm-bealu cyðan. Ne bið swylc cwelic þeaw
ideste to eþnanne, þeah de hio ænlicu sy,
þætte freoðu-webbe feores onsece
æfter lige-torne leofne mannan. (1933-1943)
\end{verbatim}

17 Sklute, “‘Freoðuwebbe’ in Old English Poetry,” 208.
(None of the gentle [possibly ‘her own‘] retainers dared boldly approach her, unless he were an over-lord. Whoever looked her in the eyes by daylight might consider hand-woven slaughter-bonds to be prescribed for him. Quickly thereafter was it settled with a blade, the damascened-sword must strike, make known the death-bale. That is not a queenly custom for a lady to follow, although she be beautiful, that a peace-weaver should deprive a beloved man of life after a fancied insult.)

The unpleasant Modthryth is mentioned as a contrast with Hygelac’s generous young queen, Hygd, but we also learn that the legend includes her reform. Conceding to her father’s wishes, Modthryth allows herself to be wedded and mends her ways once married to the admirable king Offa. He teaches her to give up her slaughter-bonds and turn to the more acceptable pursuits of peace-weaving proper. Her noble love for the great chieftain inspires her to good deeds, and she becomes a model queen. We might see here an allegory for the death drive as unbridled pursuit of desire, manifested in the maiden’s effort to assert autonomy against heteronomous responsibility by completely negating the face of the other, and successfully sublimated through the aesthetic experience and social/symbolic contract of wedded bliss.

Modthryth is rather hyperbolic as a character, like a poetic encapsulation of what it is to exist within a system situated right on the threshold between chaotic violence and non-violent order, where justice also balances precariously between the two. The story of Modthryth offers a happy ideal where unbridled violence transforms into peace, but we might also keep in mind the presence of her husband, whose own exemplarity as a king is likely based in no small part on his capacity for military might.

Grendel’s mother offers the unhappy version of the balancing act, rising up just when everyone thinks peace has been restored. But it is also important to note that unlike Modthryth’s violent rejection of the gaze of the other, Grendel’s mother works within the system of blood vengeance. The question is merely whether her pursuit of justice is justifiable. Eileen Joy has characterized
Grendel as a “terroristic figure” whose violence “challenges the code of hospitality that founds Hrothgar’s great hall […] while it simultaneously expresses a kind of excess of the very same violence that helped build that hall,” thus inviting us to explore questions about what she suggests are the “vexed connections between ethics, violence, and sovereignty […] both in the early Middle Ages and in our own time.”

Grendel the terrorist guest literally brings home the abjected violence underpinning social order. Grendel’s mother functions in a similar vein. And if Grendel and his mother represent disruptions-from-without that eerily reflect the structures of within, then Finnsburg and the ultimate fall of Heorot epitomize disruption-from-within that unsettlingly illustrates just how internal the abjected outside really is.

Hildeburg’s single action within the Finnsburg episode is her belated peaceweaving gesture at the funeral pyre. It is indeed no more than a gesture – a trace, as it were, of what should have been through what should not have happened, but did – epitomized by the trail of smoke, the trace of burning bodies, curling into the clouds. Hildeburg weaves a tapestry not of amnesty forged through verbal and material exchange, but of regret marked by the wafting ashes of her kin. If Wealhtheow models the active behavior and Modthryth offers an ironic reversal, Hildeburg’s is, here, the negative reflection of peaceweaving. While the smoke is the trace of the warriors’ glory that has passed, Hildeburg’s funeral placements form the trace of that peaceweaving we never saw, and that failed at any rate, and it is this absence that informs Wealhtheow’s active presence in Hrothgar’s hall (which will also ultimately fail). The Finnsburg episode creates a moment of collapse in the momentum of renewed peace and glory created by Beowulf’s destruction of Grendel, and a collapsing-down of the entire narrative into a single episode that encapsulates one of the most vexed relationships of the heroic mode, that between war and peace.

18 Joy, ““In his eyes stood a light, not beautiful”: Levinas, Hospitality, Beowulf,” 61, 60.
Finnsburg likely entertains its listeners for two somewhat contradictory reasons. On the one hand, it presents an instance of inexplicably failed diplomatic ties, and thus a collapse in the regular systems of order. Such breakdowns were apparently popular to their medieval audiences (and remain so to this day), for reasons that might include a thirst for disaster but probably also relate to that second of the entertainment factors, that the worst and most dire circumstances always seem to give rise to the most heroic deeds by those caught up in them. Finnsburg contains the vengeance dilemma as well, philosophical food for thought as Hengest negotiates the relative values of two imperatives in conflict: the oaths he has sworn to Finn versus the duty to avenge his dead friend and lord. Hengest cannot but fail in the face of two conflicting responsibilities: to honor one is to betray the other.

The Finnsburg episode, particularly as portrayed through the eyes of Hildeburg, is thus an example of a melancholic heroic, an aesthetics driven by failure and emphasizing transience and loss. It offers a critical key to the rest of the text, as *Beowulf* itself slips back and forth between glory and melancholy, brilliance and decline. *Beowulf* as a continuously self-deconstructing text, a text constantly shifting in reference to itself, oscillates between hope and disaster, splitting open the structures of social and heroic order to reveal the unresolvable ambiguities and paradoxes within. For those of us who know that Heorot will ultimately burn (and we all do, because the poet has told us so), Finnsburg pricks the balloon of triumph over Grendel. That the audience within the text does not apparently recognize this fact only adds to the poignancy of the reference. Yet it is also Hildeburg who propels us forward again, who, even in the midst of her own failure – in fact, as a result of her failure, or of the narrative of her failure – provides her cue to Wealthoeow, who offers yet another swing of the pendulum. Grendel’s mother completes the trio of symbolically significant women appearing in quick succession, reintroducing trauma into the mead hall with her insistence on blood vengeance for her son. The poem does not want us to get too comfortable.
Discomfort and trauma play important roles in heroic melancholy. Critchley also underlines the important element of trauma in the formation and function of ethical subjectivity, that for Levinas the ethical demand is a traumatic demand: “The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart […] it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject.”

But this trauma is not a bad thing. It is a necessary thing:

The Levinasian subject is a traumatized self, a subject that is constituted through a self-relation that is experienced as a lack, where the self is experienced as the inassumable source of what is lacking from the ego — a subject of melancholia, then. But, this is a good thing. It is only because the subject is consciously constituted through the trauma of contact with the real that we might have the audacity to speak of goodness, transcendence, compassion, etc.; and moreover to speak of these terms in relation to the topology of desire and not simply in terms of some pious, reactionary and ultimately nihilistic wish-fulfillment.

That this trauma is good and right does not, of course, make it any easier to endure. Critchley further notes that the Levinasian ethics, its subject effectively a traumatic neurotic, also therefore risks being “disastrously self-destructive to the subject.” Sublimation therefore plays an essential role in this scheme. He asks, “How can I respond in infinite responsibility to the other without extinguishing myself as a subject? Doesn’t traumatic ethical separation require aesthetic reparation?”

Drawing from Lacan (who draws from others, as well, for this formulation), Critchley posits the importance of artistic creative production for the work of sublimation. Sublimation is creative artistic activity that “takes the human being to the limit of a


21 Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 68.

desire which cannot be fully represented. The work of sublimation traces the outline of something sublime, the aesthetic object describes the contour of the Thing, _la Chose, das Ding_, at the heart of ethical experience.”23 And this is where we should recall that _Beowulf_ is itself an aesthetic object. With its stories within stories and shifting frames, it reminds us of that fact. Hildeburg meanwhile is an aesthetic object within an aesthetic object. Sparrow, explaining Levinas’s description of art as “the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow,” suggests that “Art […] enables us to catch sight of a mode of experience that necessarily unfolds between the conscious and the unconscious. It evinces a liminal experience that lies somewhere between the potential and the actual, the latent and the explicit, the transparent and the obscure.”24 This would be Hildeburg’s and the Finnsburg episode’s function, for its layered audiences, both within the poem and outside of it, viewing the episode within the context of its telling. The aesthetic object is not a mirror but a re-presentation, here a negotiation and working-through of the heroic ethos in all the forms it takes and the failures that it entails. It is the poem that traces the outline of the impossible and ungraspable, but that also offers sublimation, aesthetic reparation, in the face of infinite demand.

In the failed peaceweavings of the heroic mode, we often see the contradiction of the third, the question of justice, the responsibility, in the face of the other, to an other other and the interwoven-ness of intersubjectivity, all in perilously close proximity to the ultimate limit and end of desire: death. But we should not read these failures as foreclosures of the role, or of the women who play it; the peaceweaver epitomizes the tangled, impossible web of ethical intersubjectivity. Hildeburg’s position as peaceweaver, caught in a middle state between action and passivity, bound by a role that in defining her identity also threatens to obliterate it in the face of failure,

23 Critchley, _Infinitely Demanding_, 73.

24 Sparrow, _Levinas Unhinged_, 28.
also embodies the impossible position of the subject-as-hostage. Hildeburg and Hengest, both bound and split by the overwhelming weight of their duties, are two sides of the same coin, two instances of the same self-deconstruction of a heroic ethos constantly working through the dual imperatives of duty and violence.

When we embrace the “warrior ethos,” particularly when we attempt to carry and apply it beyond the narrow boundaries of the battlefield, this then is what we should keep in mind: the peaceweavers and their failures, the oath-swearers and duty-upholders who find themselves caught in a mesh of conflicting responsibilities. Beowulf himself is ultimately a failure: for all his heroic feats, and though he may die gloriously after subduing a dragon, he also leaves his people without an heir to the throne, plunged into political instability, with enemies at the borders. These portraits of failure ultimately serve us far better than delusions of heroic invincibility and false ethical simplicity. Failure, Critchley argues, is essential to ethics: “But far from failure being a reason for dejection or disaffection, I think it should be viewed as the condition for courage in ethical action.”

Hence the case for our attention to Hildeburg.

Wendolyn Weber is a Professor of English at the Metropolitan State University of Denver. She specializes in medieval Germanic languages and literatures, comparative literature, and literary theory.

25 Critchley, Infinitely Demanding, 55.
Bibliography


*Beowulf: Nowell Codex, 11th century*
There are many possible and useful approaches to the study of literature. One very effective way proves to be to study literary texts as platforms to explore the meaning, relevance, and workings of human communication, or the very opposite, miscommunication. Such an approach proves to be rather productive both for medieval and modern texts, from the western and the eastern tradition, whether we are reflecting on entertaining, moral, didactic, religious, or political texts. The literary work consists of words exchanged, and thus here we encounter the perfect example of a theoretical platform to discuss human interactions in many different contexts and under countless conditions. This study first theorizes this communicative approach and then elucidates it through a discussion of the fables by the Swiss Dominican poet Ulrich Bonerius (der Edelstein, ca. 1350). The implications gained here promise to re-establish the relevance of pre-modern literature for the current generation, but the concept also works well for the analysis of modern literature.

Theoretical Reflections

At the risk of stating the obvious, it still deserves to be emphasized that one of the major reasons why we study and teach (the history of) literature consists of the realization that it offers us unique opportunities to explore the nature and properties of social interactions and the meaning of communication both in the present and in the past. Of course, literary texts are mostly characterized by their fictional character, but they provide us with unique narrative platforms to investigate the meaning of human existence, to identify specific conditions in certain social contexts, to identify extreme forms of behavior and hence dangers to individuals and society at large, and they also, by the same token, offer valuable models of good or bad communication, sociability, coordination, and compromise (and the lack thereof), which all make human existence (im)possible in the first place, at least in (de)constructive terms, within a working or dysfunctional community. The more popular a certain text from
the past has been throughout time, the more it offers an opportunity for us to reflect upon the reasons for this popularity and what it might tell us about its effectiveness among the readership (history of reception; for the theoretical foundations, see the famous concept developed by Jauss).¹

Here disregarding the obvious factor that certain narratives simply appealed to the audiences because they contain exciting, stirring, or uplifting messages and content, we can investigate the phenomenon further and identify the text’s effectiveness and relevance – here not yet differentiating between genres, historical periods, or styles – by focusing on its potentials to teach lessons, to explore certain social conditions, or to convey spiritual, ethical, moral, and religious ideas, not to forget political, economic, or military concepts. One of the most important features of all literary texts might well be communication as illustrated by the protagonists’ interaction with their social environment, or miscommunication, which then leads to a crisis, if not catastrophe (e.g., Nibelungenlied; and for a positive contrast within the same genre, see Kudrun). In modern terms, relevant literary works reflect the operations of communal networks in the past and signal why those functioned well or broke down.²

If we accept this fairly straightforward premise, we will suddenly find ourselves in the opportune situation of no longer having to worry about chronological barriers between the various literary periods or differences in genres because then – e.g., in the history of German literature – both Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival (ca. 1205) and Sebastian Brant’s Narrenschiff (1494), both Grimmelshausen’s Simplicissimus (1668) and Lessing’s Nathan der Weise (1779), and so forth carry meaning and invite their critical scrutiny not only by the respective scholars invested in those specific literary-historical time frames, but by all readers. Drawing from such a theoretical platform allows us intriguingly to bring to the same conversations

¹ Jauss, Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik.

² See, for instance, the contributions to Bérat, Hardie, and Dumitrescu, ed., Relations of Power.
the works by Herta Müller (b. 1953) or Felicitas Hoppe (b. 1960) and those by medieval authors such as Hartmann von Aue, The Stricker, Mechthild of Magdeburg, or Konrad von Würzburg. Vice versa, this would then also apply to literatures in other languages.

Of course, there are many philological and historical challenges to be considered because language is always in a constant process of change, and even if we know well how to translate Old or Middle High German (e.g., “Hildebrandslied,” ca. 820, Heinrich Wittenwiler’s Ring, ca. 1400, or the letters by Argula von Grumbach, ca. 1520–1530) into New High German, we would still not have easily or fully grasped the meaning of the words or the content. Undoubtedly, we also would have to keep in mind the social-historical conditions of each literary work before we could successfully proceed to interpret the text today and draw from it for our own intellectual enrichment.3

Nevertheless, by emphasizing communication as a key element in literary works, we will suddenly discover innovative and powerful arguments with which to convince the new generation of readers to accept the challenges also of older texts for us today, if not primarily those because the issue of communication appears to have been of a rather critical nature in pre-modern texts.4 This does not mean that we would necessarily be able to identify specific moments in a narrative where the very nature of communication is addressed from a linguistic and philosophical perspective, although there are certainly specific cases such as Andreas Capellanus with is De amore, ca. 1180, or Juan Ruiz with his Libro de buen amor, ca. 1330. Instead, as I suggest here, the presentation of the events in a narrative, often dialogic context enables us to recognize communicative situations that either succeed or fail (Thüring von Ringoltingen’s Melusine,

3 Still pertinent and rather relevant today, see Auerbach, Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages, 5; cf. also Ziolkowski’s excellent introduction, xx–xxi; cf. also the approach pursued by Wellbery and Ryan, ed., A New History of German Literature.

4 Classen, Verzweiflung und Hoffnung.
1456; or Jörg Wickram, *Rollwagenbüchlein*, 1555). By raising the issue of who is talking when and how, why someone does not make his/her voice heard, or what specific comments addressed to an individual might mean and entail, the poets regularly invite the audience to reflect with them on their own attempts to reach out to their social environment by means of words, gestures, mimicry, etc. Communication is hence practiced both within and outside of the text, when the narrator addresses his/her audience and illustrates the messages conveyed through the poem or romance.

Such an approach to both premodern and modern literature together would not be anachronistic because all human societies have struggled with the fundamental question of how its individuals can cooperate with each other effectively, either in the public sphere (the community of the court, the community of the monastery, or the community of the family) or in the private sphere (friendship, lovers, marriage partners), not to forget the world of mysticism where the religious authors report of their communication with a saint, the Holy Spirit, or the Godhead and yet cannot be understood by the ordinary people, such as in the case of the Flemish mystic Hadewijch (thirteenth century). Courtly love, for example, perhaps best illustrated by Gottfried von Straßburg’s *Tristan* (ca. 1210), was always predicated on the ideal of the two lovers being able to engage in their own secret language, or communication, using words, gestures, signals, etc., which no one else could fully understand. The entire treatise *De amore* by the Parisian cleric Andreas Capellanus (ca. 1180), a critical witness for our argument, is predicated mostly on dialogues, hence on men’s efforts to reach out to the admired

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5 As to this problem, see Schnell, “Vom Nicht- und Missverstehen im Mittelalter,” 580-81; cf. also for more global perspectives, Keller, *Communication avec l’ultime*; see further Raymond, *Conversations with Angels*.

lady communicatively and to convince them to accept them as their lovers, which virtually does not succeed, however. Wolfram von Eschenbach specifically focuses on the communicative gesture by his protagonist Parzival in the eponymous romance (ca. 1205) who needs to learn the basics of empathy and compassion in the presence of suffering, which in turn needs to be expressed with a question. Of course, no community is possible without language, whether verbal, deictic, haptic, mimicry, or audio. In fact, as I suggested twenty years ago, much medieval literature is predicated on the fundamental concern with communication, an issue that challenges each generation anew and needs to be worked through over and over again.

The entire world of medieval and also modern preaching, i.e., sermons, depends on persuasion, a rhetorical, intellectual, and communicative process, but we discover communicative strategies virtually everywhere in the literary documents, whether in the form of verbal exchanges, as gestures, or iconic symbols. Most of the conflicts dealt with by pre-modern poets can be reduced to communicative issues that need to be worked out before society at large could address its larger issues, whether we think of the anonymous Gesta Romanorum, the lais by Marie de France, the mären by The Stricker, the large corpus of fabliaux, late medieval verse narratives (e.g., Heinrich Kaufringer), the Decameron by Boccaccio, The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, or the vast corpus of early modern Schwänke (e.g., Hans Wilhelm Kirchoff). After all, the entire history of humankind is deeply impacted by

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7 Knapp, trans., annotations, and epilogue. Andreas aulae regiae capellanus.

8 Bumke, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Urscheler, Kommunikation in Wolframs “Parzival.”

9 Classen, Verzweiflung und Hoffnung; cf. the contributions to Günthart and Jucker, ed., Kommunikation im Spätmittelalter.

10 Pansters, Franciscan Virtue; Muessig, Preacher, Sermon, and Audience in the Middle Ages.

11 Burrow, Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative.
social strife, misunderstanding, and a lack of mutual respect, which has regularly meant the inclusion and, much more commonly the relevance, of evil within the literary discourse.

We are, hence, best advised, following Emmelius’s suggestion, to consider many of the extant literary texts as media for community building, for the practicing of communication, and for educating the audience in moral and ethical issues. Pursuing these topics as fundamental in literature, we gain valuable categories for approaching both medieval and modern texts within the same interpretive framework, especially in those cases where a poet intensively interacts with his/her audience and toggles between the actually narrative determined by dialogues and the epilogue where s/he addresses the readers/listeners. True communication would thus be decided not only by verbal exchanges, which can so easily be determined by lies, deception, illusion, or pretenses, but much more critically with subsequent actions which lead to changes in the social interactions because moral and ethical criteria enter the linguistic community, as most famously theoretically elaborated by the Frankfurt sociologist Jürgen Habermas.

A Case Study: Ulrich Bonerius and His Fables

As obvious as all these observations might be, they help us to strengthen our understanding of the global literary discourse better, both in the past and in the present. To illustrate the strategy to be pursued, approaching literary analysis by means of a communicative lens, here I want to examine a highly influential corpus of didactic texts from the Middle Ages where this perspective is intricately developed in practical and theoretical terms. This corpus comprises the fables by the Bernese Dominican, Ulrich Bonerius, collected in his

12 Emmelius, *Gesellige Ordnung*; for more global perspectives, see the contributions to Evdokimova and Marchandisse, ed., *Le texte médiéval dans le processus de communication*; cf. also the studies assembled by Adamska and Marco Mostert, ed., *Oral and Written Communication in the Medieval Countryside*.

Edelstein (ca. 1350), which easily prove to be a crucial contribution to that genre and are ideally situated between the high Middle Ages and the early modern age.¹⁴ Bonerius (also: Boner) drew, of course, from the ancient Greek tradition established by Aesop via ancient early medieval translations by Phaedrus, Babrius, Avianus, and Romulus (= Anonymus Neveleti). He himself then exerted a huge influence well into the sixteenth century, when his fables were increasingly replaced by those composed by his successors, such as Heinrich Steinhöwel, Johannes Pauli, Philipp Melanchthon, Martin Luther, Hans Sachs, Hans Wilhelm Kirchhoff, and others. After a hiatus of ca. 200 years, the reception of Bonerius’s fables set in again fully at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when major writers and philologists including Jakob Bodmer, Johann Jacob Breitinger, Johann Joachim Eschenburg, Georg Friedrich Benecke, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Franz Pfeiffer, recognized their outstanding literary quality.¹⁵

There would not be any need to revisit the basic elements of the genre of fables, since scholarship has discussed it so extensively already.¹⁶ In fact, any significant encyclopedia, in print or online, includes useful articles on the fable, one of the most universally appreciated types of literary works enjoyed by readers/listeners all over the world and throughout time. Moreover, although Bonerius composed mostly fables, there are also a number of verse narratives that would not fall under the narrow category of the fable, irrespective of the highly didactic intentions shared by all contributions to that collection. But if the premise holds true that communication models constitute some of the critical elements in literature at large, then we can be certain that the Edelstein served that purpose par

¹⁴ Stange, ed., Ulrich Boner. Der Edelstein; for the English translation, see Classen, trans. The Fables of Ulrich Bonerius

¹⁵ Grubmüller, Meister Esopus; Classen, trans., Ulrich Bonerius, x-xi, xiv-xxii.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Blackham, The Fable as Literature; Elschenbroich, Die deutsche und lateinische Fabel in der Frühen Neuzeit; Grubmüller, Meister Esopus; Wright, ‘Hie lert uns der meister’; for a bibliography of older scholarship, see Carnes, Fable Scholarship.
excellence, especially because the poet favored to predicate his texts on dialogues.\textsuperscript{17}

Bonerius was a friar priest (Dominican) and must have listened to countless confessions throughout his professional career, so we can be certain that he drew inspiration for his stories both from the classical tradition and from what he had learned throughout his life in his engagement with people of all walks of life. Highly central, however, seems to be the poet’s concern with the question of how people communicate with each other and how this engagement could lead to a constructive form of community, unless, which is also often the case, deliberate lying, deception, or pretenses enter the picture. Of course, every human society relies fundamentally on verbal or written exchanges, whether we think of sermons, lectures, discussions, public talks, printed texts, manuscripts, etc., and as much hope there is that those channels can achieve their purpose, as much the opposite can be the case. We will also observe how much the poet was concerned with addressing his audience and to establish a communicative network with them, perhaps more than many other fable authors before or after him.

\textbf{Manuscript Illuminations as a Key to Communication}

Significantly, the cover of the English translation by Classen (2020) illustrates this aspect dramatically, showing us a scene from fable no. 94 (fol. 97r, Heidelberg Universitätsbibliothek, Codex Pal. germ. 794, ca. 1410–1420). We see two people involved in a conversation, the one on the right apparently a monk – maybe a direct reference to Bonerius himself – and the other an ordinary person expressing considerable grief with his head bent down. The monk has both of his arms extended, with one finger of the right hand pointing to the other, obviously giving him a lesson about the danger of being deceived by false illusions and of hence mistreating or neglecting one’s own friends.\textsuperscript{18} Here, a bad situation proves to be fruitful for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Stange, ed., Ulrich Boner, 413-14.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Krieger, ed., \textit{Verwandtschaft, Freundschaft, Bruderschaft}.
\end{itemize}
a good lesson about the values of true friendship and mutual trust as explored through the conversation and discussion of those two people.

By contrast, the edition by Stange shows a very different scene, here fable no. 33, but from the same Heidelberg manuscript, depicting an angry-looking wolf standing outside of a castle tower talking to a well-protected goat, both being on very hostile terms. In that fable, a mother goat has left her child behind in the stable to go feeding in the pasture, warning the young goat to be on its guard against the wolf, above all, but even against all ‘people’ who might knock at the door to be let in. When the wolf then arrives, the kid immediately recognizes who he is because the voice betrays him. As it tells the wolf, he could use German or French, but nothing would help him to get into the stable: “dich hilfet weder tiutsch noch wälsch” (22; neither German nor French will help you), a statement which directly leads over to the epipmythium in which the narrator offers his interpretation of the implications contained in this fable.

Bonerius is deeply worried about people’s use of honey-sweet words to deceive others and to lie to them badly: “si triegent, liegent valscheklich” (38; they deceive and lie badly). While they express themselves in an appealing manner, their actions expose their evil intention, the very opposite of a true form of communication. The world is filled with untrustworthy characters, so the listener/reader addressed here is told to be on his/her guard against them and to engage with them in a careful, discriminating fashion: “guoter huot bedarf er wol, / der sich vor in hüeten sol” (41‒42). The narrator also adds that everyone, irrespective of his/her age, ought to observe closely what the instruction or commands say. We realize thus that Bonerius really addresses communication in this situation and offers concrete recommendations of how to carry it out to the best possible effect for both sides involved, leaving out the hopeless aggressor.

Bonerius did not publish sermons, as popular as those had become by the fourteenth century (Wenzel), but fables and similar verse
narratives of a didactic kind, and this for obvious reasons because they were easy to understand and also entertaining, hence already well established at his time (see the fables by The Stricker, e.g.). However, the author was not only content with reiterating the classical canon of fables, many of which would be recognizable also by modern readers without any significant difficulties. He added to almost every one of his texts an extensive epimythium (an elaborate epilogue) in which he offered his own reading of the events or verbal exchanges, so he combined the mostly literary dimension of his verse narratives with a strongly didactic one, providing more critical comments than many other authors of fables. However, insofar as he mostly composed fables, he found himself in the ideal situation of exploring the many different aspects relevant for human communication and community, fighting vices and evil and outlining ways to create a sense of goodness based on virtues.19

**Bonerius and Communication**

The argument that I want to develop further hence consists of examining Bonerius’s texts as a medium to practice communication, which quickly make them just as relevant for us today as they were in the late Middle Ages and beyond. Although we have them now available in a good critical edition and in modern German (Stange) and English (Classen) translation, they still fall almost under the category of “vergessene Texte” (forgotten texts), little discussed and hardly ever used in a university seminar.20 Moreover, recent scholarship has begun to pay more attention to the text-image relationship,21 and the fifteenth-century print versions by Albrecht Pfister (Bamberg, 1461),22 and Kropik has now pointed out how much

19 Reich and Schanze, “‘Wer die bíschaft merken wil, der setz sich ûf des endes zil’.”

20 Busch and Reich, ed., Vergessene Texte des Mittelalters; neither the editors nor the contributors themselves consider Bonerius but; see https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/97301365/leseliste_ba_adl_stand_april_2020.pdf).


22 Milde, “Zu den beiden Bonerdrucken Albrecht Pfisterers.”
the poet created a free space for interpretations, offering sometimes apparently deliberately contradictory comments from one fable to the next, especially regarding women. However, when we consider the overall structure of the Edelstein, we discover a unifying concept addressing fundamental concerns in human society, which I identify here as communication within a social context, the establishment of a network.

Let us begin with the same story that I mentioned earlier, no. 94, with the rather confusing title “Von einem der konde diu swarzen buoch” (About a person who was a master of necromancy). Despite the reference to necromancy (‘the black book’), there is nothing negative about the art commanded by a priest who employs his magical skills to test a friend. As Stange notes, the narrative is strongly determined by dialogues, which make up 66% of the entire text. There are no direct sources which Bonerius might have used, and since the protagonist is a priest who is positively portrayed as a highly learned person, knowing not only the seven liberal arts (artes liberales), but also necromancy, we might identify him with the poet himself.

The priest wants to test his friend’s true character and inner strength, so he creates an illusion for him that he is being appointed as the new king of Cyprus. But first he asks him whether he, the priest, could rely on his pledge of friendship in case of him suddenly receiving many riches and a powerful position. The friend affirms this immediately: “ich tæt iu ganzer triuwen schîn” (17), but soon as he is sitting on this imagined throne and is then asked by the priest for a small gift, the king refuses him anything since he does not know him any longer. The priest, frustrated with him, then destroys the illusion and brings his friend back to reality, having learned that

23 Kropik, “<mê denne wort ein bîschaft tuot!>.”


he would not be able to trust him: “nu ist sô arger iuwer leben, / daz ich iu genzlich rouben wil / des guotes, des ir hânt ze vil” (48–50).

As soon as the phantasm is gone, the poor man finds himself back on the meadow with his friend, but things have now changed since the priest knows more about his true character, which is weak and unreliable.

However, the actual teaching and outreach to the audience follows only next in response to the friend’s great disappointment about the sad feelings subsequent to his dream experience. The priest does not chide him personally, but turns the entire game of illusion into a lesson about the true nature of all existence. At closer inspection, the exterior aspects of this world would quickly dissipate since fortune rules, which would be a deeply Boethian reading not surprising for a clerical author, especially from the Middle Ages. He warns his friend about the danger of worldly honors which can easily transform or destroy a person’s inner qualities. Those in a power position quickly forget about their previous friends and the loyalty which they had sworn in the past. What really matters consists of “triuwe” (81; loyalty), that is, the memory of service previously rendered and acknowledging them as a moral obligation (82). The external conditions of this world tend to lead to false praise and painful suffering afterward: “si lobt wol, und git bœzes gelt” (88), just as the false belief in having been selected as a king over Cyprus has done, which left him in a sorrowful state, as the illustrator then also depicted dramatically.

The priest, also a necromancer, knew from the start that the entire scene with people arriving and hoisting the friend onto the Cypriot throne was nothing but an illusion he had created, but it worked virtually as he had expected it. As sad and downcast as the friend proves to be afterward, he only confirmed what the priest was fully aware of even before since his own education had probably familiarized him with the teachings of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* from ca. 524, which later became the most important schoolbook
for many centuries even far beyond the Middle Ages. While both individuals are engaged in an open and mutually respectful dialogue, there is a clear difference between them. Whereas the priest is deeply apprehensive about his friend’s character weakness, the other is immediately overcome by the fake impressions and demonstrates a harsh, unkind attitude toward the ‘stranger’ who asks for a donation, which clearly proves the priest’s point, so the latter destroys that illusion and explains to his friend what he has learned about him. The friend would be all people, and the narrative can thus be closely associated with a sermon, or at least with a strongly didacticizing approach within this literary framework.

Social Criticism as a Basis for the Exercise of Communication

In one of his last narratives, “Von unwirdigem ampte” (no. 98), the poet turns against the corruption within the Church and demonstrates the effectiveness of open communication when a wise person – perhaps once again standing in for Bonerius himself – speaks up and exposes the bishop’s moral failure, if not hypocrisy, in handling his administrative duties. The latter has a young relative serving at his court, and when one day the position of an archpriest becomes available due to a death, the bishop appoints his relative, whom he likes very much (8) because it is a lucrative job for the relative. As the narrator points out immediately following, this new archpriest is too young and not worthy for this position, which involves the highly responsible administration of numerous parishes: “doch er des amptes was unwert” (12; but he was unworthy of the office). The case rests with that for a while when someone sends as a gift to the bishop a basket full of pears. The latter wants to entrust those to someone for safekeeping, and again his young relative comes forward. This time, however, the bishop rejects this offer simply because he does not trust him in that matter, fearing that the pears would simply be eaten. And he states the plain truth: “‘mich dunkt, du sîst ze tump dar zuo” (28; I think you are too ignorant for that).

The appointment as an archpriest did not have any impact on the bishop’s own income or wealth, whereas the pears are given directly to him, and he wants to keep them for himself.

When a wise man at court hears all this, he bitterly complains to the bishop, pointing out the hypocrisy in his decisions. While the bishop did not hesitate to entrust to the young man the well-being of many Christian souls in his function as archpriest, although he knew too well of his lack of maturity and intelligence, he did not even believe that the relative would be trustworthy enough with such a simple task as guarding the pears. The narrator compares this with the theoretical decision to make the wolf to the shepherd of the sheep: “daz schâf, sô wolf ze hirte wirt” (47).

In the epimythium which then follows according to the poet’s pattern, Bonerius formulates in a paroemiac (proverbial) manner that he who would accept a blind man as his guide would certainly be misled off the road. When both then would stumble and fall down, they would have deserved that suffering. Similarly, picking up the wise man’s opinion, a herd of sheep would easily go astray if a child were to become the shepherd. Further on, the one person who would not be learned enough could not become a teacher. No one should be appointed to watch out for the spiritual well-being of the parishioners who would not care what would happen with the soul after death. The author concludes his ruminations by returning to the sample of the bishop and the pears, warning the audience about the danger of appointing someone to a high-ranking clerical position within the Church who does not enjoy people’s trust (72). God would ultimately avenge such an evil decision.

Granted, Bonerius does not necessarily discuss communication as such, but he presents various communicative situations and combines them to create a complex literary account of great appeal and meaning. There are several groups to be considered; first, the bishop and the young relative; second, the bishop and his court; third, the bishop and the wise man; and fourth, the narrator and the audience. All of them talk to each other, and yet the communication
does not work so well because individual decisions are made, advice is not being asked for, the wise man openly criticizes the bishop, and the narrator then addresses his listeners/readers and attempts to establish a community with them in the assumption that there can be agreement about the bad bishop’s hypocrisy. Bonerius, himself a member of the Church, explicitly lends words to the growing anticlerical sentiment in the late Middle Ages. What appears to go badly wrong intradiegetically, the author attempts to circumvent or prevent for the future, and this now extradiegetically, addressing his audience and providing teachings regarding the case presented here, and this especially with the help of the numerous proverbs with which he wants to illustrate the core problem in this story.

Communication, Ethics, and Spirituality

When we turn to “Von ansehunge des endes” (no. 100), the focus on communication becomes even clearer, although the narrative development proves to be rather complex with shifting roles and locations. First, a wise priest – maybe another self-reference by Bonerius – joins a bustling market where he also offers his wares. Those, however, are not any merchandise in material form; instead, he is selling wisdom. He only pretends to be a merchant, but he is, in reality, a teacher who wants to communicate with people about proper behavior and attitudes in life (13–14). He advertises his ‘goods’ by claiming that only those would achieve the salvation of their souls who would purchase wisdom from him (15–16). The news of this highly unusual offer quickly reaches the king who becomes so curious about it that he sends his servants to the market to make some purchase for him. He would not care about the price and would be willing to pay any amount demanded for wisdom.

The priest writes down a sentence in Latin and hands it over to them in return for the bag full of silver. The narrator then intervenes

27 Dykema and Oberman, ed., *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*; for a critical engagement with the term ‘anticlericalism, see Heß, “A Common Enemy.”

28 For an anthology of medieval statements on wisdom, see Classen, *Wisdom from Medieval Europe.*
and translates the words into German: “du solt daz end an sehen /
dînr werken, und waz dir beschehen / mag dar umbe kümfteklîch”
(35‒37; keep the outcome of your deeds in mind and consider what
might happen to you in the future). For the servants, the actual value
of this statement seems minimal and they are outraged about the
large price which the priest demands for them, so here the narrator
indicates a split in the larger court community (king versus servants)
without going into particular details, especially because the narrator
dismisses the servants quickly as irrelevant and focuses on the
king who appreciates the wisdom so much that he has it inscribed
above the door to his bedroom in golden letters. The narrator then
quickly emphasizes that everyone who wanted to enter could not
avoid reading the words, and then he adds that those very words
later saved the king’s life.

Thereafter we learn about a group of nobles at court secretly
planning a coup d’etat by bribing the king’s barber to commit the
assassination on their behalf. Whereas before we faced a group of
servants talking among each other, now we are confronted with a
group of nobles who plot the evil deed willing to betray all of their
loyalty to the king. They share the same idea and hope to achieve
their cleverly conceived plan, not knowing what might counteract
it – words of wisdom. The barber, perhaps feeling guilty before he
has even committed the dastardly deed, pauses at the door and reads
the inscription, which immediately terrifies him so much that he is
not able to control himself, trembling all over his body and turning
deadly pale, all of which betrays him badly. The king has him
arrested and beaten until he confesses what his intentions had been,
but he also adds that the words over the door had reminded him of
the actual consequences of this intended assassination. We are not
told what then happened with the barber, but all the evil nobles have
to flee the court (86‒87).

The truly crucial communication, however, then occurs in the
epimythium where the narrator explicates the meaning of the
inscription more in detail and thus opens up an exchange with his audience with whom he is actually engaged with all the time. We could call this the extradiegetical communication. First, the person able to reflect on the long-term outcome of his/her deeds would be considered to be a wise one (90) because there would not be any regret at the end. The result of one’s action would be the crowning achievement, whereas all the efforts until then would be nothing but struggles (93). A person able to look ahead and evaluate carefully what his/her work would bring about would earn the highest honors and be strong enough to chase away all sins. As Bonerius formulates it by means of a parallel sentence structure with an aa-rhyme pair, “ein guot end macht allez guot, / guot ende niemer übel tuot” (97–98; a good ending makes everything good; a good ending never causes harm). He also casts this in the image of a helmsman who stands at the back end of a ship and steers it safely; and finally, we are told, almost as a repetition, that the person who makes himself familiar with the end will not experience suffering (101–02).

Although we do not hear of any direct exchanges between the king and the wise priest in the market, the words written down and then inscribed over the doorway constitute a subtle communication between both men, which the poet then extends to the audience which is invited to read or listen to those words as well, especially because the narrator then interprets them in the epimythium from a variety of perspectives. The king’s servants remain outside of the internal communication and only carry out the order, although they consider the price demanded by the ‘merchant’ as exorbitant; they do not understand the true value of the words. We do not know for sure what the king really thinks about this statement of wisdom, but he certainly appreciates it sufficiently to have the words inscribed above his doorway, which later saves his life. Ironically, we could also claim that the barber was the one who probably understood the meaning of the inscription best because he became deeply afraid of the consequences of his intended murder for the well-being of his soul, hence for his afterlife. Bonerius thus projects a complex image of communicative groups which are opposed to each other.
But the only lasting group proves to be, across the written words, the one including the king, the wise man, the narrator, and the intended audience capable of understanding the lesson. While the narrative presents this short account in a rather curt fashion, the assumption must be that the listeners were then invited to converse about the message and discuss its meaning from many different perspectives. Bonerius hence projected himself, at least indirectly, as the initiator and leader of a whole communicative community probing a complex moral and religious issue.

**Laughing about Failed Communication**

Not every fable or narrative proves to be so ponderous as the last one in the *Edelstein*, but, as we will see, the poet consistently probed the fundamental nature of and need for communication. Bonerius was a skillful author who also had a good knack of changing the tone and the target of his literary accounts, inviting us to smile as well, especially when the communication between two people goes badly wrong. This finds a great expression in “Von üppekeit der stimme” (no. 82) where a young priest is very proud of his seemingly excellent voice which allows him, as he believes, to perform extraordinarily well when singing during the liturgy and at other times. In fact, he considers himself to be the best singer among the clergy, so he is practicing his art many times, although people demur at this painful performance (10–11). He is simply a fool (12), but does not realize how much he is bothering the parishioners who have to tolerate his poor singing. But he is finally told the truth when he observes a woman standing near the altar where he had been singing who is shedding tears. The young priest believes in his haughtiness that his wonderful voice had moved her to tears and inquires with her whether that might be true. He even goes so far as to suggest that he could sing even more for her, but he has then to learn that she began to cry because his singing had reminded her of her donkey which wolves had killed just three days ago. The priest’s voice sounded just like that of her dead animal which she had liked very much: “wenn ir singent sô gar hêrlîch, / sô ist iuwer stimme gelîch / der
stimme, die mîn esel hât” (33‒35; you sing so wonderfully; your voice is just like the one which my donkey had).

The narrator notes that this comment exposed the foolish priest, but he also adds that the priest did not even understand the implications and continued to believe in the absolute beauty of his voice. This then leads over to the epimythium where Bonerius emphasizes that the person who believes to be the best in some areas ought to watch out not to become a victim of foolishness: “dem wont ein gouch vil nâhen bî” (46; he is easily identified with a fool). He himself expresses his amazement that such fools do not recognize their own failure. If they could hear themselves singing through another person’s ears, they would quickly understand what little quality they produce. With a swipe against many of his contemporaries, Bonerius notes that those who sing badly simply compensate this shortcoming with quantity. The less they know how to sing, the more they tend to sing (59‒60).

As is so often the case in literary texts, and especially in Bonerius’s narratives, here is a simple-minded person who cares little about the priest’s official rank and tells him in a straightforward fashion what a fool he is since his arrogance is founded not on some qualities he could be proud of, but on his wrong assumption that he commands a beautiful voice. This communicative situation leads to the priest’s exposure and encourages us to laugh about his dull-wittedness. The conversation between the woman and the priest begins with actions by each one of them, him singing, her crying. Both are connected, but not in the way how he believes it to be. By asking her for the reasons for her tears, he has to learn, if he ever does, the true reasons, that is, the miserable voice that resembles that of a donkey. Even though the priest listens to the woman’s words, it remains unclear whether he grasped their satire or whether he would even be able to recognize the unflattering comparison. We face thus an interesting communicative situation in which the exchange between both seems to work well at first, but which ultimately collapses because he has no idea what she really means, and hence there are no further comments about his reaction. Hence, the poet concludes the narrative.
Satire and Criticism Via Communication

In “Von sterki und von krankheit” (no. 83), the poet presents a highly unusual but profoundly meaningful exchange between an oak tree and a reed. This narrative which would not really fit into the genre of a fable but it fulfills the same purpose. The oak is identified as a strong and deeply rooted tree on the top of the mountain which has withstood many storms and bad weather, until one day the northwind (“aquilò,” 14) overpowers the tree after all and makes it come tumbling down into the valley where it ends up resting in a swamp next to a reed, which had not been affected by the violent wind. The oak inquires with the reed how this could have been possible considering the reed’s weakness (“doch vil krenker bist,” 23; you are much weaker). The reed readily responds, but the message is not one which either the oak or we as audience would have expected. As we learn, the reed knows exactly of its own weakness, but also of its flexibility, and hence is fully aware of its own limits: “daz ich nicht wider streben sol / dem, der sterker ist denne ich” (30‒31; that I am not to fight against the one who is stronger than I am). Since the wind was much too strong for the reed, it simply bent down and let it pass, which kept it alive. In response to the oak, the reed also points out that the tree had always insisted on fighting back, and eventually it was bound to lose out: “dîn kraft, dîn hôchvart was ze grôz, / des bist du worden sîgelôs” (41‒42; your strength, your arrogance had been too big; for that reason, you were defeated). The oak does not respond, especially since there is nothing to say for it, having lost out already, not being able ever to return to the top of the mountain.

As usual, the real communication sets in with the epimythium in which the poet addresses his audience, advising them that no one would ever be so strong that s/he might not eventually run into a stronger force. Without the willingness at times to give in, the fighter...
will certainly at the end have to experience his/her defeat (47–50). Again, the poet then resorts to some proverbs to indicate that the more someone would rely on his/her strength, the worse might be the fall. What would be necessary in a dangerous situation would be to recognize the conditions and to adjust so as to avoid fighting against a superior power which cannot be overcome. We recognize both here and elsewhere the basic strategy pursued by the poet, presenting a communicative exchange between two sides and then to allow us as audience to follow it and reach our own conclusions about the basic human interaction as presented here.

Crime and Communication

This can be observed many time as Bonerius’s fundamental approach in all of his verse narratives, presenting a verbal exchange that either fails or succeeds, and then using the outcome as a basis for the poet’s moral, ethical, and philosophical reflections. We discover this also in particularly clear form in the well-known fable “Von empfangener gâte” (no. 27) which the poet adapted, as is so often the case, from the fable collection by Anymous Neveleti (no. 29). Again, there is a verbal exchange between a thief and a guard dog which the former tries to calm down and bribe with a slice of bread, but the dog rebuffs that offer and rejects the thief’s evil strategy. Not only would its master become a victim of a bad burglary, but the dog itself would lose out in the long run because it rather prefers being fed on a daily basis than to receive an extra meal one time at night. So, the issue really rests on the problem with bribery and the danger with gifts which normally come with a hook, or hidden poison (37–38). The narrator does not reject gift-giving per se, but advises his audience to examine carefully who is giving what gift for what purpose; and then the gift would be profitable after all.

Many of the fables, if not virtually all of them, are determined by this moral thrust and communicative strategy, both here in the Edelstein and in many other fable collections (such as in Marie de France’s Fables, ca. 1190, or in The Stricker’s fables, ca. 1220). What makes

29 Thiele, ed., Der Lateinische Äsop des Romulus, 94-97.
Bonersius’s efforts stand out for us consists in his constant effort to highlight conversations and to illustrate how individuals talk with each other, leading to a variety of consequences. This is the case in the fable of a lamb and a wolf (no. 30), in the fable of the goat and a wolf (no. 33), or in the fable of the fox and a stork (no. 37). We would not need to belabor this point. Then, however, there are fables like the one of the sheep, the deer, and the wolf (no. 35), where we are confronted with a dangerous situation at court where the sheep has to defend itself against the false charge raised by the deer. The wolf serves as the judge and insists that the sheep is guilty at any cost despite the lack of evidence brought by the deer, so really contrary to the truth because the wolf would like to devour the sheep. In order to escape this dangerous situation, the sheep resorts to a rhetorical trick, admits that it actually owes the money, and swears an oath to pay back the loan in a short while (35–38).

Of course, there had not been any loan, and the sheep would not be required to pay back anything, but it deliberately resorts to a lie at court to escape from the wolf’s threat to kill it. When the day arrives at which the sheep is supposed to present the money, it refuses to do so and refers to the situation at court where its life had been at stake. The oath had not been uttered in honesty, but out of duress (51–55), and the sheep points out that God would not punish it for this false oath. The narrator thus presents first the public scene at court, then the private scene involving only the deer and the sheep, and each time the sheep resorts to a different rhetorical strategy which makes it possible to escape from the life-threatening situation at court. The narrator himself then comments on the legal implications, insisting that an enforced oath would not be worth anything, especially when it has been pledged out of an emergency (59–61).

**Humility, Patience, and Communication**

The fable of the mule and a gadfly (no. 40) underscores this particular feature well, although the situation is a very different one. The mule,
well-fed and taken care of by its master, pulls a heavy load when a gadfly arrives and threatens to make the animal life miserable. The mule, undeterred by the threat, dismisses the gadfly, points out that if it were not hard at work and tied to the cart, it would have easily killed the gadfly and thousand others (25–26). The mule has no chance to defend itself in that situation, but quickly sets the record straight as to who is to be blamed here and who is really in charge. The gadfly proves to be nothing but a braggart (“dîn kelzen,” 27) and a nasty character (28), which then takes us to the epimythium.

Bonerius uses this traditional account (Anonymus Neveleti, no. 36) for larger reflections on social conflicts since he laments the evil character of many people who are only bent on causing harm to others (35–36). When they are in a fortunate situation (wheel of Fortuna), they swarm around the innocent ones and cause them many wounds by means of words (41). At large, as the narrator emphasizes, those gadflies do much harm with their words: “ir wort diu snîdent als ein swert” (43; their words cut like swords), and much damage with their actions (44). Again, we are invited to reflect on the consequences of communicative strategies aimed at hurting the others, and not at reaching out and establishing mutual understanding. The fable serves Bonerius to identify a wide-spread problem within society: “ir schalkeit merkt man über al” (48; one notices their mischievousness everywhere). On the one hand, there are those who pursue intrigues, employ lies, and commit treason; on the other, there are the innocent victims, the mules of this world. In short, Bonerius outlines in a dramatic fashion the good and the bad uses of language and reflects through this fable on the problems when communication is turned into its opposite. Previous scholarship has mostly limited itself to the discussion of moral and ethical aspects addressed by that poet, which are certainly critically important, but adding the component of communication to our analysis makes it possible to gain better access to the deeper intentions pursued by the poet in his engagement with his audience.

30 Grubmüller, Meister Esopus, 332-49.
**Arrogance, Crime, and Communication**

In “Von übermuote” (no. 46), a frog and its son are engaged in an intensive conversation resulting from the father’s excessive desire to be as big as a great oxen. Envy fills his heart, and soon enough he begins to blow itself up, although his son immediately warns him of the danger and the uselessness of his effort. In fact, the son refers the father to his natural conditions which he cannot exceed (15‒16). Nature would be his limits, and he could not transgress those. For the father, however, there would be no higher goal in life but to gain the same size as the oxen (20‒23). Although the son repeatedly appeals to his father to abstain from this foolish effort which could cost him his life, the father does not listen to him, and the outcome is as expected, he eventually explodes. The narrator laconically comments that if he had been content with his life, all would have been good for him. The toxic arrogance, uncontrollable ambition, envy of the big oxen, and even hatred all contributed to the older frog’s death, which serves as a model for people at large, whom the author wants to warn about these common vices.

These remarks in the epimythium underscore global teachings on virtues, as to be expected from Bonerius as a priest. Interestingly, however, he structures the fable in parallel to his own personal comments at the end, addressing the audience and establishing thereby once again a social bond. While we follow the conversation between father and son within the narrative, on the outside there is the conversation, at least indirectly, between the poet and the listeners/readers. The narrator warns the audience not to follow the frog’s example and points out what catastrophic consequences would ensue if envy would fill a person’s mind: “dâ von er würde blâstes vol, / daz er zercklackte (daz wær wol!)” (54; he would become so much blown up that he would burst, a good outcome).

Undoubtedly, the same narrative strategy can be observed more or less in all fable literature, which is fundamentally concerned with using the animal figures as representatives of humans in their moral
and ethical shortcomings. However, Bonerius always makes sure to inject a heavy dose of dialogues into his texts which illuminate what kind of community is supposed to exist within the literary context. Moreover, while the figures/animals within the fable exchange their opinions or express, as is the case here, their worries about an evil outcome, the narrator engages with the audience outside of the fable, that is, in the epimythium. Even though we cannot hear any responses from the actual contemporaries, the poet’s address is explicit, and we find ourselves immediately drawn into the discussion implied here. Little wonder that Bonerius enjoyed such an enormous popularity well into the early sixteenth century (thirty-six manuscripts and two incunabula, the earliest ever printed).

This success was partly based on his skillful selection of traditional fables of great public appeal, but we also discover other narratives where animals assume either no role or only in the background and where the communication between people attracts the most attention. In “Von offenhunge des mordes” (no. 61), again borrowed from Anonymous Neveleti, the story focuses on a Jew who requests from the king safe passage through a dangerous forest where many criminals house. The king does not hesitate to provide him with this assistance and commands his royal cupbearer to take over this task. However, the latter is suddenly overcome by greed when he notices that the Jew carries a lot of money with him, so he murders and robs him. But the Jew warns him that birds flying around them would reveal that crime, but the cupbearer considers this to be just foolish and pulls out his sword. At that moment, a partridge flies out of the bush, and mockingly the cupbearer comments that that bird would later reveal the evil deed.

No one seems to have noticed the murder, but soon thereafter the cupbearer has to carry freshly baked partridges from the kitchen to the dinner table and bursts out laughing remembering what he had said to the Jew. For the king, that laughter appears suspicious, and he forces the cupbearer to reveal the reason for it. Having
incriminated himself, the cupbearer is apprehended and quickly executed because he broke the king’s command. We confront here several communicative settings, first with the Jew and the king, then with the cupbearer and the Jew, and at last the cupbearer and the king. Of course, Bonerius then concludes with his epimythium and thus involves the audience once again. As it has been pointed out recently, the poet approached the case of Jews quite objectively, insisting that no murder would ever be justified, and that Jews had to be treated like everyone else, enjoying the same privileges of all laws, and this at a time when pogroms actually took place almost every day all over the Holy Roman Empire, and also in Switzerland following or during the Black Death.\textsuperscript{31} For him, murder remains murder, and religious differences would not matter in the judgment of this crime: “Wer unrecht tuot dur gêtekeit, / wirt der erhangen, wem ist daz leit?” (69‒70; when someone commits a wrong out of greed and his then hanged, who would feel sorry about that?). He warns his audience to guard itself against an evil mind-set since it would ultimately lead to that person’s own demise (71‒72). The cupbearer committed murder, and thus God made him suffer the justified punishment, execution.

Best Practices of Human Behavior

For a final example illustrating the fundamental strategy by Bonerius to project communicative situations and to have individuals argue with each other to learn the truth, let’s examine briefly the narrative “Von sitten und von unstüemekeit” (no. 66), which again is not a fable in the narrow sense of the word. Here the sun and the wind argue against each other over who would wield more power. The origin of this fight is immediately identified: arrogance and vanity (3), and both are associated with the rudeness and raw violence (11), whereas the sun claims to be determined by moderation and self-control: “vil stolzer ist mîn meisterschaft / denn dîn grôz unstüemekeit” (12‒13; 31 Classen, “Ungewöhnliche Perspektiven auf Juden”; cf. the historical study of late medieval Jews in Switzerland by Gilomen, “Kooperation und Konfrontation.”)
my mastery is much more superior than your rambunctiousness). The wind gets so irritated that he demands that they both seek a judgment at a legal court, to which the sun agrees. Jupiter assumes that task and decides to use a test case to find out who would really be stronger and hence able to force a person to take off his coat. They use a pilgrim for this case, but the wind can blow as much as it wants, and cause more coldness, the pilgrim simply ties the coat more firmly around his body (35).

When it is the sun’s turn, she sends warmth to the pilgrim, so he happily unbuttons the coat, takes it off, sits down for a rest, and enjoys his time. The outcome of this experiment is evident, as Jupiter then decides. The sun with its softness has won the victory over the wind with its harshness and force (46–49), which closes the case. The wind is not given any room to argue against the judgment; instead, the narrator comes forward again and addresses the audience, underscoring the great importance of learning from this lesson that crude force can never achieve anything good (51), that it knows of no good manners, and that there cannot be any good outcome of it (53–55). Bonerius appeals to his listeners/readers to observe how much kindness, patience, and a soft approach can achieve in this world. His conclusion states clearly: “wer gestân wil und genesen, / der sol nicht ungevüe wesen” (59–60; he who wants to live a good life must not display a rude behavior).

Of course, this is, as usual, his final lesson drawn from this narrative account, and it seems to be as one-directional as a sermon. Nevertheless, it is an important speech act with which he reaches out to the audience and invites them into the larger discussion about proper behavior within civilized society. The simplicity of the ‘fable’ based on people’s common experience makes it immediately possible to enter into a discussion about the essential modes of behavior within any group setting. Bonerius is strongly promoting peacefulness, kindness, and tactfulness within all human relations because those tools would facilitate the establishment of a harmonious society.
Conclusion

We would give Bonerius too much credit if we singled him out as the only fable author to address communication as the central point within a social community. The purpose here was not at all to compare him to his sources, his predecessors (Marie de France, The Stricker, etc.), his contemporaries (e.g., Heinrich von Mügeln; anonymous, *Magdeburger Äsop*), or his successors (Heinrich Steinhöwel, etc.). I also did not intend to claim that fables were more specifically geared toward the exploration of communication compared to other texts since we find countless valiant examples in many different genres, including the religious legend, the *Kalendergeschichte* (calendar story), and in anecdotes. The central argument that I wanted to develop is that we can use literary texts from all historical periods and of all kinds of genres to explore the essence of communication and community. Those are universal values and can be studied particularly well through a literary lens.

Our analysis has, however, demonstrated that Bonerius’s fables illustrate this approach particularly well because he is constantly relying on dialogues within the texts and implies dialogues with his audience in the epimythia. Whether he drew on animals as model for human behavior, or developed his own narratives about people’s interactions with each other, these texts invite discussion, stimulate reflections, and engage the audience to learn something about what went wrong in the conversation, and what could be done in similar situations.

Since the plots presented here are quite simple, regularly drawn from everyday situations in urban or rural life with people and/or animals interacting with each other, both the narrator and the listeners/readers find themselves immediately involved and can thus explore the moral, ethical, religious, and also philosophical implications. Studying these fables facilitates the discovery of the fundamental necessity of pursuing a good communication (with communicative actions à la Habermas) in order to establish a functioning community, a central concern especially in fables, but then also in late medieval verse.
narratives, *Schwänke*, anecdotal narratives, and Shrovetide plays. These insights can be well applied to many other texts both from the Middle Ages and today and provide better answers as to why we teach literature, especially from the pre-modern age.\textsuperscript{32} Unfortunately, this fundamental question is no longer too abstract and irrelevant since the Humanities are precariously poised today and need to answer ever-more growing challenges in a world determined by academic corporatization and the politicization of the university.\textsuperscript{33}

Bonerius’s fables ultimately prove to be so meaningful in our context because they conveniently straddle the fence separating the Middle Ages from the early modern age and strongly appealed both to philologists and writers at the turn of the nineteenth century. Some of his fables entered the world of fairy tales (Brothers Grimm), others still await their rediscovery by scholars and general readers alike. I have focused on them not just for their own purpose and with the intention to reintroduce them to modern audiences. Instead, these fables and other verse narratives illustrate powerfully how much we can use literary texts to examine fundamental issues in all social life, consistently predicated on communication as the essential tool that holds us all together.

If these perspectives can be confirmed, we would have valuable epistemological instruments available to approach many other literary texts from throughout the ages and recognize them as narrative model cases to explore really the question of why they matter so much to us today. Medieval and modern plays, from fifteenth-century Shrovetide plays to Shakespeare’s tragedies, for instance, those by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing or by Bertolt Brecht, to mention just a few names, operate, of course, on a similar level, presenting communicative situations on the stage. In the case of Bonerius, in particular, we observe the poet’s deliberate strategy to address ethical and moral issues through dialogic narratives and

\textsuperscript{32} See, for instance, the contributions to Miedema and Sieber, ed., *Zurück zum Mittelalter*; Pugh and Aronstein, ed., *The United States of Medievalism.*

\textsuperscript{33} Kintzinger, Wagner, and Runde, ed., *Hochschule und Politik.*
then to engage with the audience by means of the epimythium.

We could also draw from Niklas Luhmann’s concept of language as a foundational social system, but we can content ourselves with a rather straightforward notion of literary language establishing communication, which in turn establishes community, and vice versa, with miscommunication destroying that very community. All this happens, of course, on a daily basis throughout our lives, but we can also approach this process by way of studying literary texts as model cases for the constructive formation or failure of communication. From this perspective, we can acknowledge, once again, the superior literary qualities of Bonerius’s fables, the distinct significance of fable literature at large, then also the relevance of pre-modern literature for us today, and, ultimately, the critical importance of literature per se as a medium for the exploration of good strategies of communication for the sake of the community.

To advocate for the value of literature is, of course, tantamount to carrying owls to Athens, at least for us academics, but the focus on the contributions by this Bernese Dominican poet illuminates these particular potentials of pre-modern verse narratives for the exploration of fundamental needs of all people to operate in a meaningful socializing manner very well. Regarding literature at large through the lens of communication provides us with a highly effective tool to restore the relevance of our field. Medieval literature is particularly challenged, of course, considering the differences in language and the social-cultural context. If, however, the critical examination of Bonerius’s fables in light of this approach succeeds in reaching out to the present generation of students, then there is good reason to conjecture that we can rejuvenate the academic standing of all literature studies effectively. It thus proves to be relevant and insightful for all of our explorations of human communication.

34 Luhmann, *Einführung in die Systemtheorie*.

35 See the contributions to von Moos, ed., *Zwischen Babel und Pfingsten*.
The further back we go in that process, the more challenging the fictional mirror becomes, as we all know, but this growing alterity represents also a unique opportunity to present unusual cases of (mis)communication and to explore the critical issues in a literary context far removed from us today. Medieval literature, and hence medieval fables, such as those by Ulrich Bonerius, thus proves to be an immensely important medium for social, ethical, moral, philosophical, religious, and spiritual investigations about the communicative interactions between people.

Dr. Albrecht Classen is University Distinguished Professor of German Studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson. He was born in Germany in 1956, emigrated to the United States in 1984, received his Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in 1986, and began his academic career at the University of Arizona in 1987. He gained tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in 1992, and promotion to Full Professor in 1994. He has published currently 117 scholarly books and ca. 810 articles on medieval and early modern literature, along with ca. 2700 book reviews. He is the editor of the journals Mediaevistik and Humanities Open Access. He has received numerous awards for teaching, research, and service, most significantly the Bundesverdienstkreuz am Band from the German government in 2004, the Five Star Faculty Award (student only nomination), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2012 Arizona Professor of the Year, the rank of a Grand Knight Commander of the Most Noble Order of the Three Lions (GKCL) in 2017, the German Academic Exchange Service Excellence Award in International Exchange in 2020, and the Chatfield Outstanding Tenured Researcher Award, COH, the University of Arizona, in 2021.

Bibliography


From Ulrich Bonerius, Der Edelstein. Bamberg: Albrecht Pfister, 1461
16.1 Eth.2 Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel
Luigi Pulci’s Fifteenth-Century Verse Parody of Moses:  
A Denunciation of Marsilio Ficino’s Neoplatonic Christianity

Michael J. Maher  
College of Charleston

In early 1470s Florence, popular poet Luigi Pulci, author of the celebrated epic poem Morgante, wrote a sonnet of religious parody. In Poi ch’io parti’ da voi, Pulci satirizes biblical miracles, immediately earning himself the label of heretic, still attached to his name to this day. A close examination of Pulci’s sonnet, with specific attention given to his treatment of Moses, reveals Pulci’s motivation and the circumstances surrounding composition. Pulci’s scandalous sonnet was in fact an attempt at underscoring the maltreatment of biblical miracles in a first-century Greek text by the Romano-Jewish historian Jospehus. Renowned philosopher Marsilio Ficino, with whom Pulci was embroiled in a bitter polemic, repeatedly cited Josephus’s Jewish Antiquities. Josephus’s Antiquities along with his depiction of Moses played no small role in Ficino’s fifteenth-century reconciliation of Platonism and Christianity. Pulci mocks the Antiquities to condemn Ficino’s employ of the text in his innovative religious philosophy. This specific case is telling of a larger cultural-philosophical contention between a vernacular culture rooted in medieval traditions and the innovative program of Renaissance Humanism.

Lorenzo de’ Medici was the personification of the Italian Renaissance’s Golden Age. The Magnificent was the first among equals as the de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic. The Medici family’s patronage of the arts and humanism rendered Florence a cultural center that became known as the cradle of the Renaissance. Grandson to Cosimo the Elder, Lorenzo grew into his role as Medici family patriarch while his mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni shouldered much of Florence’s affairs as Lorenzo’s father Piero’s health faltered.

Lorenzo’s cultural formation began as a youth studying popular vernacular traditions under the guidance of his mother Lucrezia and the tutelage of popular poet Luigi Pulci, author of the celebrated epic poem Morgante. Pulci’s teachings balanced Lorenzo’s humanistic studies promoted by Cosimo.
As Lorenzo matured, his interests shifted toward a philosophical program championed by esteemed philosopher Marsilio Ficino, founder of Florence’s Neoplatonic Academy. The biennium of 1473-’74 was vital to Lorenzo’s changing interests. James Hankins describes this period as the “Laurentian shift”; likewise, Riccardo Bruscaglì identifies Lorenzo’s “conversione ficiniana.” Neoplatonic philosophy increasingly informed official Medici cultural politics as Lorenzo moved toward Neoplatonic studies.

The changing cultural tide generated friction between proponents of the vernacular-popular and humanist-philosophical programs respectively. This cultural contention is the fundamental backdrop for this study that situates Luigi Pulci’s sonnet *Poi ch’io parti’ da voi*, a parody of biblical miracles with an emphasis on Moses, within the complex cultural landscape of Florence’s pivotal Laurentian era.

**Cultural-Philosophical Differences in Medicean Florence**

The cultural factions represented by Pulci and Ficino respectively had defined characteristics. Pulci embodied a vernacular culture that was a continuation of medieval traditions. The patrons of these writers were from the rooted Florentine nobility making up a large segment of Laurentian Florence’s oligarchy. This culture’s preferred form of expression was vernacular poetry. Chivalric epic *cantari* were sung in the piazza, reworked from Arthurian and Carolingian medieval literary cycles. This vernacular culture included other forms of poetic entertainment such as *canti carnascialeschi*. In many ways Pulci was a descendent of the anarchic and at times crass tradition of poetry *alla burchia*, originating in Burchiello’s barber shop in the first half of the Quattrocento.

Bernardo Bellincioni’s occasional verse is representative of vernacular poetry’s multifaceted employ. Even though religious parody was

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1 See Orvieto, *Pulci medievale*, 273.


3 Bruscaglì, *Il Quattrocento e il Cinquecento*, 34-35.
permitted in these circles, serious subversions of Christianity were far less tolerated. The underlying religious sentiment was conservative: literal interpretations of the Bible prevailed in Feo Belcaro’s *sacre rappresentazioni* along with Lucrezia Tornabuoni’s *storie sacre*.

Pulci became a mainstay in Medici circles as an active participant in a culturally rich atmosphere that included the most well-known artistic, philosophical, and political figures of the time. Pulci’s influence on Lorenzo’s literary production is evident in Lorenzo’s early works. Lorenzo’s *Caccia col falcone* describes a typical day of falconry by Lorenzo and his closest friends; verses from this poem evidence Pulci’s role as master of poetic ceremonies in Lorenzo’s *brigata*.

Pulci undoubtedly influenced Lorenzo’s *Nencia da Barberino*, one of Lorenzo’s most polished poems. The pastoral follows the amorous thoughts of the shepherd Vallera for his lovely Nencia. The *Nencia* gave way to a cycle of idyllic pastoral *Nenciali* texts, including Pulci’s *Beca da Dicomano*. Many *Nenciali* works are believed to be the product of collaboration between multiple authors.

In the 1460s Lorenzo was composing jocular poetry alongside Pulci, even versifying a parody of Ficino’s thought in his 1469 *Simposio*, mocking Ficino’s philosophy on love. In a *canzone a ballo* entitled *Ragionavasi di sodo*, Lorenzo employs an allegory equating the relationship between God and the soul to that of a husband sodomizing his wife. After Piero’s death in 1469 all eyes turned toward Lorenzo; the twenty-year-old was criticized for the damage he had done to his public image. Florentine political figures with Medici interests in mind, pleaded with Lorenzo to resume serious study and to leave behind empty past times.

4 “Luigi Pulci anco rimaso fia: / e’ se n’andò là oggi in un boschetto, / ch’aveva il capo pien di fantasia: / vorrà fantasticar qualche sonetto” (de’ Medici, *Tutte le opere*, 40.1-4). All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.


6 See Martelli, “Un caso di amphibolatio.”

7 See Gentile, “Ficino e il platonismo di Lorenzo,” 25.
The Neoplatonism championed by Ficino was revolutionary and defined the Renaissance. Ficino’s aim was an innovative union of Platonism and Christianity. Ficino’s religious mission intensified as he became a priest in late 1473 and, shortly thereafter, completed his *De Christiana religione* in the vernacular. Germaine discussions and lectures took place in Medici villas for the elite and erudite. Family name and history meant less in these circles than proficiency and formal training in Greek and Latin. Patrons to these activities were less rooted in nobility and included families that enjoyed newly found upward mobility.

The literary exploits of Lorenzo’s early *brigata* years gave way to a philosophical literature seen in his Ficinian *De summo bono* written between the second half of 1473 and the first half of 1474. This work takes the form of a philosophical debate between the protagonist Lauro and the shepherd Alfeo. The two encounter Marsilio who enlightens them with regard to the question of the Supreme Good. In addressing this question, Lauro, representative of Lorenzo, supports the Neoplatonic position.

Lorenzo was praised for his resumption of study by Florence’s elite. Lorenzo’s change in interests extended beyond the literary sphere. It was during this same time that new laws were enacted that maintained modesty in funerals and banquets, and imposed regulations on gambling.

The tension between vernacular-popular and humanist-philosophical programs is on full display in the well-documented polemic between Pulci and Ficino. The polemic comprised letters by Ficino lamenting Pulci’s irreverent sonnets and his aggressive nature. Pulci’s sonnets

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parodied topics fundamental to Ficino’s Neoplatonic Christian thought. In stark contrast to Pulci’s previous literary attacks on Bartolomeo Scala and Matteo Franco, those targeting Ficino surpassed personal insults and included a refined indictment of Ficino’s philosophy.

Pulci’s controversial sonnet *Poi ch’io parti’ da voi* rationalizes biblical miracles to mock the same operation found in one of Ficino’s primary sources: first century Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*.\(^{11}\) Pulci’s provocative sonnet contains more verses on Moses’s Crossing of the Red Sea than any of the other biblical miracles parodied. Moses’s prominent role in Ficino’s philosophy, explains the biblical protagonist’s beleaguered distinction in Pulci’s sonnetic slander.

*Poi ch’io parti’ da voi* is addressed to a certain Bartolomeo, identified by Alessio Decaria as Bartolomeo dell’Avveduto.\(^ {12}\) Therefore, the death of Bartolomeo in August of 1473 serves as a *terminus ante quem* for Pulci’s sonnet, making it one of the earliest writings pertaining to the Ficino-Pulci polemic. The sonnet is more than likely the one referenced in Pulci’s *Sempre la pulcia muor*, another sonnet dated generally to 1473:

```italian
E’ ci è tanto romor per un sonetto,  
che pare ch’i’ abbia morto colla spada  
color che gridan sol per mie dispetto
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[This is too much noise for a sonnet,  
it appears I have died by the sword  
of those who yell just for my contempt]\(^ {13}\)

(48.9-11)

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\(^{11}\) This study supplements an earlier publication situating Pulci’s sonnet in the poet’s discord with Ficino (Maher, “Luigi Pulci’s Parody of Josephus”). The study at hand’s novelty is the focus on the Moses.

\(^{12}\) Decaria, ed., *Sonetti extravaganti*, 72.

\(^{13}\) The citation here indicates sonnet number from the collection and verse(s). Lines from Pulci’s sonnets are from Decaria’s edition: Pulci, *Sonetti extravaganti*.
Luigi Pulci’s *Poi ch’io parti’ da voi*

Poi ch’io parti’ da voi, Bartolomeo
de’ vostri buon’ precepti admaestrato,
un certo caso strano m’è incontrato
da ffar trascolare un gabbadeo:
i’trovo in su ’un libro d’un giudeo
che Pietro corse sopra il mar ghiacciato
e ch’egli spuntellò certo un frascato,
il mie Sanson, del popol Philisteo;
e Moysè passò con la suo tresca
dove teneva il collo una pescaia
d’un certo luogo là dove si pesca:
a Pharaon fu aperta la callaia,
si che, levata la saracinesca,
affogò forse venti, e non migliaia.
Dunque la Bibbia abbaia:
Lazero, e gli altri già risuscitati,
chi ebri, chi epilenti, e chi alloppiati,
degl’infermi sanati.
Del pan che n’avanzò le sporte piene
dicon non sanno la grandeza bene
e ’ pesci fur balene.
E’ si dicea così di fra Christofano
Sì che un quartuccio non ritorna il cofano.

[Since I left you, Bartolomeo,
of your good precepts they teach,
I encountered a strange case
that would fascinate a hypocrite:
I find in a book of a Jew,
that Peter ran across a frozen sea,
and that Samson pulled one of the twigs
in support of the tent over the Philistines;
and Moses’s affair passed
a weir near a river embankment
from which people fish.
For Pharaoh, a canal was opened,
so that, raising the portcullis,
twenty or so drowned, not thousands.
Therefore, the Bible barks:
Lazzarus, and others resurrected,
were drunkards, drugged, and sick]
all cured.
   Some bread became overflowing sacks
   They say they do not understand proportion
   and fish were whales.
   And as for brother Christopher
   a fourth of a bushel could never be a barrel.] (37)

Pulci parodies the most recognizable biblical miracles in his sonnet. Instead of walking on water, Peter followed Christ’s example by running across a frozen sea (6). Pulci’s sonnet declares that the Philistine temple of Dagon was actually a stick hut Samson razes by pulling a stick (7). Pulci’s version of the Raising of Lazarus details the mundane sobering up of drunkards and opium users. The sonnet’s closing lines ridicule the Feeding of the Multitude (23). Pulci’s treatment of biblical miracles, reducing the sacred to the mundane, falls squarely within the religious parody topoi of the vernacular tradition.

Fundamental to this study, as well as the sonnet itself, Pulci reserves six verses for the Moses miracles (9-14). According to Pulci’s sonnet, the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds actually occurred at a spot in the river where fishermen kept a weir (9-11). After having passed through, Moses raised the gate and water engulfed perhaps twenty and not thousands (13-14). Pulci dedicates considerably more verses to Moses than the other miracles. The verses in parody of Moses are central to Pulci’s sonnet thematically as well as their ordinal placement.

Pulci’s opponents decried him a heretic because of this sonnet. Pulci’s *Confessione*, written in *terza rima* in his final days, verifies the gravity of the scandal. In Pulci’s *Confessione*, the poet attempts to neutralize critics by affirming the veracity of the biblical miracles parodied a decade earlier. Pulci declares to have erred in excess:

   S’io ho della ragion passati segni,
   m’accordo colla Bibbia e col Vangelo

14 Henceforth, only verse(s) will be indicated internally when referencing Pulci’s *Poi ch’io parti’ da voi.*
[Even if I once exceeded reason, 
I agree with the Bible and the Gospel]15
(61-62)

Also in Pulci’s *Confessio*, he rewrites the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds:

\[
E \text{ come il mar pe’ sua meriti apri,} \\
\text{per salvar la sua gente e Faraone} \\
\text{annegassi e ‘l suo popol, fu così} \\
\text{come appunto la Bibbia scrive e pone}
\]

[And how the sea opened before him 
to save his people, and Pharaoh 
with his people drowned, it was 
exactly as the Bible suggests and states]
(88-91)

In the last canto of the *Morgante*, Pulci maintains an exculpable tone and calls his detractors hypocrites:

\[
\text{se pur vane cose un tempo scissi,} \\
\text{contra hypocritas tantum, pater, dissi}
\]

[if once I wrote vain things, 
*against hypocrites only, father, I wrote"]16
(28.43.7–8)

Those who took Pulci to task for religious irreverence were, in Pulci’s estimation, guilty of the same charge.

**Josephus in Pulci’s Verse**

In the opening to *Poi ch’io parti’ da voi*, Pulci attributes the content found in his sonnet to another: “i’ truovo in su ‘un libro d’un giudeo [I find in a book of a Jew]” (5). This seemingly simple verse is teeming with indicators of the content to follow, especially for a fifteenth-century reader. Pulci scholar Alessandro Polcri declares

15 These verses from Pulci’s *Confessio* and those that immediately follow are from Greco’s edition and are made internally by verse(s).

16 This quotation and any to follow from Pulci’s *Morgante* are from Greco’s edition and will be made internally by canto, stanza, and verse(s). Edoardo Lèbano notes: “Also in this particular instance, the use of Latin emphasizes the confessional tone of the poet’s words” (*Morgante: The Epic Adventures of Orlando and His Giant Friend Morgante*, 951).
that speaking as a Jew was the equivalent of misrepresenting the truth. Another renowned Pulci scholar Alessio Decaria states that the verb *trovare* is an indicator of parody rooted in the poetry *alla burchia*: an earlier Quattrocento popular poetic genre, predecessor and influence to Pulci. In the same opening verses, Pulci describes the content in his source to be so scandalous, it would seem other worldly even to religious hypocrites of sacrilegious disposition (4). Verse fifteen sarcastically reiterates the essence of the *libro d’un giudeo*: “Dunque la Bibbia abbaia [Furthermore, the Bible barks]” (15).

Scholars agree that Pulci is referring to Romano-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities* written in the first century CE. The Ancient Greek text was considered an historical account of the Jewish people from the Creation to the First Jewish-Roman War. The *Testimonium Flavianum* is a famous passage in the *Antiquities* considered extra-biblical evidence of Jesus Christ. Medieval and Renaissance readers read the *Antiquities* alongside the Bible as supplementary material.

### Josephus in Marsilio Ficino’s Philosophy

Ficino was ordained a priest in the autumn of 1473. Ficino completes the *De Christiana religione* in the spring of 1474, reaffirming

17 Polcri, *Luigi Pulci e la Chimera*, 63 n68.
18 Decaria, *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani*, 129.
19 The verse referenced is the following: “da ffar trasecolare un gabbadeo [that would fascinate a hypocrite]” (4). For more on *gabbanti* see Decaria, *Luigi Pulci e Matteo di Francesco Castellani*, 84; Orvieto, *Opere minori*, 198 n2. *Vocabolario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana di Ottorino Pianigiani* defines *trasecolare*: “intr. Meravigliarsi oltremodo, quasi uscendo dal secolo e trovandosi in un altro mondo; tran. Porre in grande confusione. [To amaze exceedingly, almost leaving current times and finding oneself in another world; tran. To cause great confusion].”
21 For Josephus’s writings in Renaissance Italy see Castelli, “Josephus in Renaissance Italy.”
his religious philosophical mission. Amos Edelheit describes Ficino’s religious treatise as, “a ‘manifesto’ on the new humanist theology.”

Ficino was aware of the perception of his religious-philosophical program that combined the seemingly incompatible. In chapter ten of Ficino’s religious exposition, he speaks directly to Lorenzo de’ Medici in admitting the unlikely union of philosophy and biblical miracles: “non ti meravigliare, Lorenzo, che Marsilio Ficino, amante della filosofia, parli di miracoli [don’t be surprised Lorenzo that Marsilio Ficino, lover of philosophy, speaks of miracles].”

In “The Josephan Renaissance,” Daniel Stein Kokin presents the first study of Josephus’s reception in Renaissance Italy. Stein Kokin’s research establishes the 1470s as the period in which humanists began to cite Josephus’s Testimonium. Ficino was the first Renaissance author to cite the Testimonium. Regarding Ficino’s De Christiana religione, Stein Kokin observes: “In fact, Ficino mentions Josephus repeatedly throughout the approximate first three-fifths of the work, more than any other Renaissance text of which I am aware up to this point.”

In chapter thirty of the De Christiana religione, titled “Conferma delle nostre credenze in base a quelle giudaiche [Confirmation of Our Beliefs Based on Jewish Ones],” Ficino speaks directly to the Jews while sustaining Josephus’s authority: “Infine ascoltate che cosa il vostro Giuseppe dice di Cristo nei libri sulle Antichità giudaiche ...

22 Upon completion of his religious treatise Ficino declares: “el tuo Marsilio Ficino . . . ha in questo anno composto coll’aiuto divino un libro in confirmatione et difensione della vera religione, quale è la cristiana [your Marsilio Ficino . . . completed in this year, with divine help, a book in confirmation and defense of the true religion, that is to say Christianity]” qtd. in Tanturli, “Marsilio Ficino e il volgare,” 190.


24 Ficino, De Christiana religione, 69.


[Finally, listen to that which your Josephus says about Christ in his books on the *Jewish Antiquities*].” Ficino’s erudite lectures in Florence’s intellectual circles undoubtedly included Josephus’s *Testimonium* and other material from the *Antiquities*. Josephus’s resurgence and prominence in 1470s Florence was in large part, if not entirely, thanks to Ficino.

**Josephus and Ficino’s Treatment of Miracles**

Miracles are central to Ficino’s religious philosophy. Cesare Vasoli speaks of the miracle’s fundamental role in Ficino’s *De Christiana religione*:

> si può quindi rivelare che, per lui, il cristianesimo è, in primo luogo, una religione la cui verità è indicata dalla profezia e dal miracolo, eventi sovrannaturali che sono il segno di un diretto intervento divino e del suo manifestarsi nell’ordine delle cose e nella mente umana. [one may suppose that, for him, Christianity is first and foremost a religion in which the truth is substantiated by prophecy and miracles, supernatural events that are the sign of a direct divine intervention and its manifestation in the order of things and the human mind.] 167.

Ficino titles chapter ten of the *De Christiana religione* “L’autorità di Cristo non vi fu senza i miracoli [The Authority of Christ Was Not Without Miracles].” Ficino unequivocally states:

> il fine santissimo di questa religione dimostra con chiarezza che Cristo e i suoi discepoli effettuarono i miracoli non per magia, ma per opera divina [the holy scope of this religion clearly demonstrates that Christ and his disciples enacted miracles not by magic, but by divine work].”

Josephus’s *Antiquities* was and is known for rationalizing biblical miracles, seemingly incompatible with Ficino’s program. Josephus knew what and for whom he was writing: a Jewish point of view for pagan readers. Josephus suppresses God’s role in the heroes’ achievements. In some instances, Josephus completely excludes miracles deemed inappropriate for his non-Jewish audience. Often,

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27 Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, 178.

28 Ficino, *De Christiana religione*, 177.

29 For more on Josephus’s point of view see Feldman, *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible*, 38-39.
Josephus’s miracle narratives lack details, resulting in rationalized occurrences. For example, Josephus’s Samson simply refrains from praying to God for strength prior to destroying the temple of Dagon. Pulci rationalized biblical miracles in his sonnet to derisively mock Josephus; ultimately, in order to underscore the irreconcilability of Ficino’s philosophy and one of Ficino’s fundamental fonts.

Moses in Josephus’s Jewish Antiquities

Pulci had a rudimentary knowledge of Latin and was even less competent in Greek. Pulci required vernacular translations to formally discuss classical texts. In 1459, Pulci borrowed a vernacular edition of Virgil from Francesco di Matteo Castellani, “scripta di lettera moderna,” in preparation for attending lectures by Bartolomeo Scala. Furthermore, Pulci’s sonnets and verses from the Morgante contain errors in Latin.

The Antiquities was a novel text in Ficino’s Academy, only accessible to those capable of reading the original Greek or Old Latin translations. Pulci was unable to read the Antiquities firsthand. Pulci’s Poi ch’io parti’ da voi was written no later than the summer of 1473. It is unlikely Pulci had access to the first Italian translation of the Antiquities, commissioned in Ferrara in late 1472.

If Pulci could have read Josephus firsthand, he may not have called attention to Josephus’s treatment of the Moses stories. Pulci must have been aware of Josephus’s overall avoidance of biblical miracles, but not familiar enough with the Antiquities’ nuances to realize that the Moses stories were an exception. In fact, instead of rationalizing

30 Notably, this was also one of the stories Pulci parodies in Poi ch’io parti’ da voi (7-8), aptly retracted in his Confessione (Morgante e opere minori, 97-99, 1434).
31 Carnesecchi, Per la biografia di Luigi Pulci, 378.
32 For Pulci’s errors in Latin see Orvieto, Pulci medievale, 213.
33 For the circulation of Old Latin translations see Whealey, Josephus on Jesus, 73-76.
34 Castelli, “Josephus in Renaissance Italy,” 403.
or avoiding the Moses miracles, Josephus heightens both Moses and God’s role, and dramatizes the circumstances surrounding the stories.\(^{35}\)

In the case of baby Moses on the Nile, the biblical account does not acknowledge the peril of the situation. Moses’s river voyage in the basket is quickly resolved when Pharaoh’s daughter finds the child among the reeds. Furthermore, God is not mentioned (Exod. 2.2-6).\(^{36}\) Josephus’s treatment of baby Moses on the Nile is much more dramatic. In Josephus’s rendition, Moses’s sister frantically runs alongside the basket as opposed to watching immobile from a distance: “The river received its charge and bore it on, while Mariam(e), the sister of the child, at her mother’s bidding, kept pace with it along the bank to see whither the basket would go” (2.221).\(^{37}\) Josephus emphasizes Moses’s family’s faith in God to protect the child: “they placed the young child within and, launching it on the river, committed his salvation to God” (2.222). Josephus’s narrative voice underscores God’s miraculous salvific powers in the case of baby Moses:

Then once again did God plainly show that human intelligence is nothing worth, but that all that He wills to accomplish reaches its perfect end, and that they who, to save themselves, condemn others to destruction utterly fail, whatever diligence they may employ, while those are saved by a miracle and attain success almost from the very jaws of disaster, who hazard all by divine decree. Even so did the fate that befell this child display the power of God. (2.223)

The biblical version of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds is almost

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\(^{35}\) Renowned Josephus scholar Louis H. Feldman’s tome *Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible* is authoritative in studying Josephus’s treatment of biblical narratives. Most relevant for this study is Feldman’s tenth chapter titled “Moses,” in which Feldman establishes, “what factors governed Josephus’s modification of the biblical narrative;” 377. Feldman states: “Josephus’s de-emphasis on G-d may be seen in a number of passages. And yet his treatment of the role of G-d vis-à-vis Moses would seem to contradict this tendency to de-emphasize the Divine,” 425.

\(^{36}\) The version of the Bible referenced here and moving forward is New Oxford Annotated Version, 4th edition. This and subsequent quotes are made internally by book, chapter, and verse.

\(^{37}\) This and subsequent quotes from *Josephus’s Antiquities* will be made internally by book and verse(s).
matter-of-fact when compared to Josephus’s account:

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. (Exod. 14.27-28)

Josephus’s version of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds emphasizes God’s role and increases the dramatic effect. Josephus’s description of the water’s return and drowning of Pharaoh’s soldiers is preternatural, especially when augmented by God’s wrath:

When, therefore, the entire army of the Egyptians was once within it, back poured the sea, enveloping and with swelling wind-swept billows descending upon the Egyptians: rain fell in torrents from heaven, crashing thunder accompanied the flash of lightning, aye and thunderbolts were hurled. In short, there was not one of those destructive forces which in token of God’s wrath combine to smite mankind that failed to assemble them; for withal a night of gloom and darkness overwhelmed them. (2.343-44)

In the Bible, God commands the parting of the Sea of Reeds: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground’” (Exod. 14.15-16). Feldman characterizes God’s voice as particularly pitiless to Moses.38

In Josephus’s account of the Crossing of the Sea of Reeds, God’s divine intervention is mentioned repeatedly. Moses addresses God through a supplication, including a declaration of faith, then the scene unfolds:

Moses, beholding this clear manifestation of God and the sea withdrawn from its own bed to give them place, set the first foot upon it and bade the Hebrews follow him and pursue their way by this God-sent road, rejoicing at the peril awaiting their advancing foes and rendering thanks to God for the salvation thus miraculously brought by Him to light. They, without more ado, sped forth with zest, destruction of the Egyptians assured of God’s attendant presence. (2.339)

During the Crossing at the Sea of Reeds, Josephus shifts God’s

38 Feldman, Josephus’s Interpretation of the Bible, 407.
participation in a way that heightens Moses’s role as intermediary between man and God.

A Theocratic Laurentian Florence

Josephus’s depiction of Moses as intercessor between the earthly and the divine was compatible with Ficino’s aims. By incorporating Moses in his *prisca theologia*, particularly Josephus’s Moses, Ficino was cultivating a direct link from Plato to God. This equation filled the lacuna between pre-Christian thought and Christianity.

Anthony Levi underscores Moses privileged role in Ficino’s “sacralizing neoplatonist forms of thought and expression.” In “Marsilio Ficino on power, on wisdom, on Moses” Allen explains Moses’s compatibility with Ficino’s thought:

One can wholly understand Ficino’s attraction to the ancient observation ascribed to the second century Pythagorean, Numenius of Apamea, that Plato ‘was nothing other than a second Moses speaking Attic Greek.’ Indeed, in a letter written towards the very end of his life to Jacopo Rondini, bishop of Rimini, Ficino boldly calls Plato a ‘follower’ (sectator) of Moses. And in a letter to Braccio Martelli, he writes that Plato’s thought was in derivative accord (concordia) with that of Moses.

Further along in Allen’s study, he affirms:

The spiritual account in Exodus of Moses’s ascent of Sinai and his encounter with God in a mystical darkness of unknowing, was for Ficino the model of all Platonic ascents to a One beyond being. And it was the more so for Ficino in that the events on Sinai were a prefiguring of the transfiguration of Jesus.

Moses was the glue that held Ficino’s religious-philosophical amalgam together.

An examination of the religious politics of Laurentian Florence reveals a deeper and complex motivation behind Pulci’s particular parody of Moses at the heart of the Ficinian mission. Ficino’s innovative religious-philosophical mission became the official


40 Allen, “Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses,” 298.

41 Allen, “Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses,” 310.
religious politics of Medici power. Orvieto contextualizes this new religious landscape:

a new religion was brought into being in Florence, de facto autochthonous and self-referential—one that excluded the mediation of the Roman Church and attributed to the city’s ruler the charisma of a high priest, indeed a pontifex of sorts, and apostle of a new cult.42

Orvieto precisely characterizes the cohesion of Ficinian philosophy and Medici rule: “above all, a theocracy, with Lorenzo as its high priest.”43 In 1473 Ficino wrote his De Christiana religione in the vernacular, modifying his formerly elitist religious philosophy to popularize and diffuse this religion to the masses. The Medici were increasingly depicted by biblical representations and often likened to the biblical Magi.44

Moses and Ficino’s Philosopher-Ruler Mission

Ficino sought to cast Lorenzo in the mold of the political philosophy that justified his rule while Medici power was beginning to eclipse the republicanism in place. Ficino guided Lorenzo along the path of philosopher-ruler, described in Plato’s Republic, emphasized in Ficino’s commentary of the work dedicated to Lorenzo. Ficino inserts Moses in his commentary persuading Lorenzo to achieve ultimate public authority through potentia augmented by sapientia. To cite Allen again: “Ficino was led to embrace Moses as the determinative example of the philosopher-ruler in his creation of a pre-Christian Christian Platonism.”45

In his commentary to the seventh book of Plato’s Republic, Ficino asserts: “But only after the philosopher has contemplated God, who

43 Orvieto, “Religion and literature,” 199.
44 See Orvieto, “Religion and literature,” 198.
45 Allen, “Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses,” 312. Allen believes that Moses is exclusive in this regard: “While Hercules and Moses are both icons of power and godliness, and arguably of apotheosis itself, nonetheless for a Renaissance Platonist only Moses could be fully accommodated, I would argue, to the Platonic notion of the philosopher-king, the guardian who unites wisdom with power, virtus with virtù,” 309.
rules the heavens, will he, and he alone, be able to rule the earth in god-like fashion” (7.31). Ficino lists leaders on earth who rule through divine directive. Ficino notes Minos who obtained laws from Jupiter through contemplation. Scipio Africanus who visited the temple of Jupiter and was rumored to be able to communicate with the gods. Next, Ficino mentions the second king of Rome Numa Pompilius, “who governed the State with religious laws” (7.31). Pompilius was thought to have personal relationships with deities transcribing their teachings in his sacred books. Ficino incorporates Moses to the discussion through a rhetorical question to his dedicatee: “And did not the Mosaic laws, by which the people of God were divinely governed, reach men through the instruction of God himself?” (7.31-32).

**Lorenzo’s *De summo bono***

In the second book of Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, Ficino reinforces a theme that repeatedly emerges as fundamental to the disconnect between the Neoplatonism and the vernacular ethos of the epoch:

Drunkenness is thus of two kinds. The first kind is under the influence of the Moon and is caused by drinking the waters of Lethe, so that the mind, being put outside itself and beneath itself, forgets things divine and staggers about in the trammels of earthly things. (2.9)

Later in his commentary Ficino opens book seven:

The wise, being endowed with divine qualities, make every effort to turn the whole focus of their mind from the earthly to the celestial, from the moving to the still, and from what is perceived through the senses to that which transcends the senses. (7.30)

James Hankins contextualizes the Ficino-Pulci polemic within Lorenzo’s Neoplatonic poem the *De summo bono*:

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46 Selections from Ficino’s commentary are from Farndell’s translation found in Plato, *When Philosophers Rule*. Henceforth, references to this work will be made internally by chapter and page number. Each of Ficino’s chapters corresponds with a book from Plato’s *Republic*.

47 In Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s *Laws*, Ficino inserts Moses as a lawgiver for Plato in the fourth book: “But because he says that these mysteries are made evident by words uttered long ago, we can understand him to mean the words of Moses.” *When Philosophers Rule*, 4.99.
(Ficino) would turn Lorenzo away from the earthy, realistic and satirical poetry that he had been composing under the influence of the Pulci brothers and . . . show Lorenzo the difference between “earthly” and “heavenly” poetry . . . the DSB is about conversion. As always in the Neoplatonic tradition, conversion implies purification, turning away from the external world of nature and the senses, turning within and upwards towards the source of Being.\footnote{Hankins, Humanism and Platonism, 325, 337.}

Lorenzo’s \textit{De summo bono} was not proof that Lorenzo had completed a ficinian conversion; it signaled a moment in which Lorenzo was drawing closer to Ficino encouraged by humanists in Florence and beyond.\footnote{In this regard I agree with Polcri, \textit{Luigi Pulci e la Chimera}, 10-11.} The two camps, represented by Pulci and Ficino respectively, jockeyed for Lorenzo’s favor.

Pulci’s reduction of the sacred to the mundane ran entirely counter to Ficino’s influence on display in Lorenzo’s \textit{De summo bono}. Pulci’s focus on Moses in \textit{Poi ch’io partii da voi} was a precise attack on Ficino’s tenets in which Moses assumed a fundamental role. As Lorenzo matured and his interests shifted, Pulci was trying to keep his \textit{cucco} from moving on to other, more philosophical studies.\footnote{Cucco and \textit{compagnuzzo} are some of the terms of endearment used by Pulci when referring to Lorenzo. See Villoresi, \textit{La letteratura cavalleresca}, 118.}

Ficino and another humanist Bartolomeo Scala immediately sent praise to Lorenzo for his \textit{De summo bono}. At the same time, Scala encouraged Lorenzo to pay close attention to the moral seriousness of Platina’s \textit{De optimo cive}, a work sent to Lorenzo from beyond Florence encouraging Lorenzo to continue along the path of philosopher-ruler, an itinerary begun by Cosimo the elder.\footnote{For more on Platina’s \textit{De optimo cive} see Brown, “Scala, Platina, and Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1474,” and more recently, Bausi, “The Medici Defenders.”} Interestingly, Alison Brown describes the novelty of Platina’s work: “it is original in subtly equating the Medici with rulers like Moses and David the king, along with republican heroes, great legislators like Lycurgus and Solon, and Caeser Augustus.”\footnote{Brown, \textit{The Medici in Florence}, 225.} Furthermore, Pulci
may fall under those “domestic tyrants” of whom Platina cautions Lorenzo.⁵³

Conclusion

Back to Ficino’s commentary on Plato’s Republic. Shortly after mentioning the drunkenness from drinking from the River Lethe, Ficino highlights Plato’s disdain for impious verse, undoubtedly with Pulci in mind: “He then expresses his abhorrence of poetical impiety, which fabricates disgraceful stories about the gods, and he forbids tales of this type to be heard” (2.11).

In the last five cantos of the Morgante, Pulci elevated his literary mission to prove the worth of the literary culture that he represented. Pulci continued to attack Ficino through a heightened allegory. In Canto 27 of the Morgante the narrator addresses the reader, accepting defeat in the polemic with Ficino and philosophy’s victory:

venuto è il tempo da filosofare;
non passerà la mia barchetta Lete,
che forse su Misen vi sentirete.

[the time for philosophy has come;
my boat will not pass Lethe,
instead on Misenus you’ll hear]
(27.40.6-8)

Even though Pulci concedes that philosophy’s time is here, he states that his boat will not pass the river Lethe, Ficino’s source for those intoxicated from excessively imbibing the terrestrial and engaging in maltreatment of the divine. Dante writes in Inferno 14: Letè vedrai, ma fuor di questa fossa / là dove vanno l’anime a lavarsi / quando la colpa pentuta è rimossa [Lethe you will see, but outside this ditch, there / where the souls go to be washed once their repented / guilt has been removed]” (14.136-38).⁵⁴ Pulci does not want his reader to mistake his change in style for an admission of previous guilt and

⁵⁴ This translation is from Durling’s edition of Dante Alighieri, Inferno.
wrongdoing, especially with regard to his treatment of the sacred.

Pulci likens his lost battle with Ficino to a scene from the *Aeneid*. Instead of the river Lethe, you may find Pulci’s boat near Cape Misenum. Misenum thought he was better than Triton and challenged him to a horn-blowing contest; he was defeated by way of his impertinence and killed (*Aen. 6.149-235*). Misenum’s fatal end is a fitting analogy for Pulci’s outcome in his polemic with Ficino. By way of Pulci’s insolence for Ficino’s philosophy and its ever-increasing function in medicean Florence, Pulci was pushed to the margins of a culture in which he had previously been at the center. For the boisterous popular versifier gripped by Medici favor, Pulci’s exclusion from Medici circles might as well have been death.

Michael Maher has a PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Italian Studies Program at the College of Charleston in South Carolina. Dr. Maher’s primary research interests focus on the vernacular culture of Renaissance Florence, particularly religious and Italian epic poetry.
Bibliography


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.¹ The Belle Dame sans mercy provides one such example, with its vivid representation of amorous tensions, conflicts surrounding identity, and a troubled

¹ In an article on the relationship between suffering and love in Diego de San Pedro’s Cár

cel 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 aggres

sor, 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 “pere 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 dialism 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.\footnote{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 quatres 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,” “artificial,” “superficial,” “conventional,” “vapid,” “shallow,” “frivolous,” “insincere,” 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 douloureux 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,” 6 (“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 quatres 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


29 See Hult, “La courteisie en decadence”; Kaeuper, Chivalry and Violence; Swift, “Alain Chartier”; and Rieger, “Alain Chartier’s Belle Dame sans Mercy.”

30 While Delogu’s focus in “Performance and Polemic,” 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, 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. 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. 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. Given its own murky and inherently violent origins, the nostalgic allure

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 faut que je soye
Le plus douent 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.

(1.1-8)

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 doulen 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:

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.

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[s],” “estandart[s],” 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.”

43 Hult and McRae, Le Cycle, xxxvii.
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.
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 languish 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 caýdas” 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 doulce ne sure.
Qui se quiert 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 haïmne,
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,
never 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. 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
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
Ennuvé, 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 cuer 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 charrette, 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 dallied for two steps,” translation mine).

See Hult’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.”
Voices and others who swear like this,
calling condemnation if you break your pledge,
do not believe your oaths to last any longer
than the brief second it takes to pronounce the words.
God and the saints mock your sport,
for no one takes such oaths seriously,
but the poor women who do trust in them
afterward shed many tears.

(vv. 345-52)

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 mescreїs,  
Et pour rien que homme a femme die  
Il ne doibt plus estre creїs.  

(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 déissent  
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:

\[
\begin{align*}
Si\text{ me retra}\tilde{y}\text{ voulentiers} \\
En\ ung\ lieu\ tot\ coy\ et\ priv\acute{e}, \\
Maiz\ deulz\ mes\ bons\ amis\ entiers \\
Sceurent\ que\ je\ fus\ arriv\acute{e}: \\
Ilz\ vindrent.\ Tant\ ont\ estriv\acute{e} \\
-Moiti\acute{e}\ force,\ moiti\acute{e}\ requeste- \\
Que\ je\ n'ay\ onques\ eschiv\acute{e} \\
Qu'ilz\ ne\ me\ mainnent\ a\ la\ feste. \\
\text{(vv.57-64)}
\end{align*}
\]

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

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,” “oblige,” 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.

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 unpliant, 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, “Performativ Acts,” 519.
to communicate effectively:

-On me dit que je suis amee:
Se bien croirre je le vouloye,
Me doibt il tenir pour blasmee
S’a son vouloir je ne souploye?
(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 entendans, ne si folles,
Que, pour ung poy de plaisans bourdes
Confites en belles paroles,
Dont vous aultres tenés escoles
Pour leur faire croirre 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. 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. 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

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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 “Sedgwick’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. 60

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.

Alani Hicks-Bartlett is an Assistant Professor at Brown University in the Departments of Comparative Literature and French and Francophone Studies, with affiliations in the Department of Hispanic Studies, the Program in Early Cultures, the Program in Medieval Studies, and the Center for the Study of the Early Modern World. Her research interests include gender and violence in Medieval and Early Modern texts, and classical exemplarity and intertextuality Medieval chansons de geste and Early Modern epic and lyric poetry. She has recently published articles on D’Annunzio and Catullus (Comparative Literature), Petrarch (Rivista di studi italiani, Quidditas, and Romance Notes), Cervantes (Hispanic Review), Montaigne (MLN), and Diamela Eltit (Hispanic Journal).

Bibliography


First page of Oeuvres diverses d’Alain Chartier et pièces anonymes, c. 1450, said to depict the author at his desk
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Elizabethan Technology: Thomas Watson’s Steam Bath for the Relief of Gout

James Alsop
McMaster University Emeritus

Thomas Watson (1513-84), Doctor of Divinity and deprived Marian bishop of Lincoln, developed an expertise in the treatment of gout. In his practice of experiential medicine in East Anglia, he used an innovative steam chest: the patient sat in a cut-open empty wine pipe, surrounded by heated bricks, and covered with a sheet. This device, with its method of enclosed steam heat, contrasts sharply with prevailing renaissance therapeutic philosophy.

A description of an innovative steam chest is found within the medical collection in the British Library attributed to Dr. Thomas Watson (1513-84), Bishop of Lincoln. Watson, who graduated B.A. from St. John’s College, Cambridge, in 1534 and B.D. in 1545, was chaplain to Steven Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor of England. He became Master of St. John’s College in 1553 and received the degree of D.D. the following year. Watson was consecrated Roman Catholic Bishop of Lincoln in August 1557, but deprived on 26 June 1559 by the new Elizabethan regime. Over the succeeding decades he experienced frequent incarceration, and died in September 1584 while a prisoner in Wisbech Castle. Watson developed a medical expertise focused upon the cure of physical ailments. This included the treatment of headache, back pains, sore eyes, worms, kidney stone, jaundice, lameness, swollen legs, and gout. Watson recommended five methods for the relief of gout, which generally involved wrapping the limbs in hot cloths soaked in preparations. These were standard treatments of that period. His first recommendation, however, was for an unnamed device to create a steam bath. It does not appear that Watson invented this apparatus; he entered the word “peroued” (proved) below the entry, indicating, as with many of the recommendations, that he had used the treatment successfully in his own practice.

1 Watson, “Certayne experiments,” Sloane Ms. 62.

For the goutte or payn in the joints

Tak a great wyn pype vessel and cutt in mydle height that a mane may sit in it wth a little stoole under his feete and heat as many brickes red hott as will lye wth in the tubb bottom. Let ther be Juery berys under the bricks and som about them, let the patient sitt in the tubbe naked and then couer him wth a sheet wch must be pinned hard about his neck and couer all over the tubbe that no heatte com forth and soe couer him wth as many clothes as he may suffer from his neck to the upper parte of the tubbe that no heat com forth and so continew the space of a good howre and then let the patient have clothes warmed to dry him selfe whill he is in the tubbe and so com forth and goo in to a bedd and ly all night resonable warme and he shall find great ease whether it be gowt or pain in the joynts.

Watson’s manuscript later came into the hands of the Elizabethan surgeon John Caryinton, a member of the Barber-Surgeons’ Company of London, and, subsequently of other, unidentified, individuals, each of whom added additional remedies. No new material was added to the section on gout. Eventually, the manuscript passed into the possession of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), President of the Royal Society of London.

Watson’s steam tub is noteworthy in two respects. First, while there existed a long, much earlier, medical philosophy of gout pain relief using steam baths, this relied upon bathhouses or similar open spaces. Watson’s device is the first known description of an enclosed, private, receptacle in therapeutic healing. Second, the history of gout treatment in renaissance and early modern England was largely directed away from the use of water, especially heated water. Overall, medical recourse to water externally, as in bathing, emphasized cold water, not hot water or steam. Even George Cheyne during the opening decades of the eighteenth century recommended cold-water bathing, every second day, in the treatment of gout “to brace the Nerves inwardly.”

During the Reformation period, priority

3 Watson, “Certayne experiments,” fol. 11.
4 Watson, “Certayne experiments,” fol. 16.
5 Young, Annals of the Barber-Surgeons, 591.
6 Thomas, “Cleanliness,” 57.
7 Cheyne, An Essay, 114.
was assigned to physical and spiritual purity and chastity, and as a consequence sixteenth and early seventeenth century texts often devoted scant attention to water or steam in relation to the treatment of either the symptoms or the causes of the discomfort produced by gout. Pain relief was to be secured through sensible diet – the avoidance of excess in food and drink. In the Elizabethan era there existed isolated, scattered, brief commentary on the relief from gout pain afforded by hot mineral springs. However, the literature emphasized the need to evaluate the utility of individual springs for particular human bodies and specific maladies. This attitude of mind worked against any general reliance upon hot springs in the treatment of gout. Indeed, the leading specialist in the treatment of gout for late seventeenth-century England, Dr. Thomas Sydenham, argued directly against the use of hot compounds or steam. He stated: “it is not so much the Physician’s as Nature’s Business to force Sweat.”

Cheyne was most influential in promoting the curative or restorative properties of the hot springs at Bath. This, for the first time in early modern England (Watson’s device excepted), placed hot water at the center of gout therapy. Cheyne’s method relied upon copious consumption of Bath water with simultaneous emersion in the public baths. He sought to remove the “gouty Humours” via profuse perspiration. Externally, “the Bath Waters being hot, and consequently more active, may be drawn in [via the pores], and get thro’ the Pores of the Skin into the Blood Vessels.” Cheyne used the analogy of the soaked sponge: the human body was subjected

8 Classen, ed., Bodily and Spiritual Hygiene; Kosso and Scott, Nature of Water.
10 Mullett, Public Baths, 13; Coley, “Cures,” 191.
11 For example: Bayly, A Briefe Discours, A2v, A3v.
12 Sydenham, “A Treatise,” 354-5. For Sydenham and his contemporaries, see Porter and Rousseau, Gout, 36-47.
to hot Bath water internally and externally, and the patient was then placed in bed under covering. Only this, he alleged, would produce the copious sweats necessary. Bishop Watson had aimed at the same result (without specifying his medical reasoning) solely through external use of concentrated steam.

Renaissance knowledge of the history of hot-water bathing in gout relief arose from the ninth-century Arabic text of the Iranian, Rhazes (Al-Razi). Hot water, or steam, baths figured as one of Rhazes’s ten methods of treatment. There is no evidence in Bishop Watson’s notebook that he knew of Rhazes’s advice, or of the citations by Vesalius and other authors. Cheyne, as well, did not refer to this history; he limited himself to one brief, imprecise, sentence on how “Hot-bathing was [in high regard] amongst the Romans.”

In conclusion, Watson’s description, with its “peroued” notation, suggests that there is more to the English history of gout relief pre-1700 than the standard narrative, focused upon the cultural framing of the disease, implies. The circumstances through which Watson became aware of this technology are not known, nor is the extent of use by Watson in his practice, nor of any subsequent utilization by the London surgeons or physicians who acquired “Certayne experiments.” The steam bath was praised by a learned empiric healer (Watson) and the manuscript then circulated amongst surgeons (Caryington and unidentified successors). It is speculative to suggest that the devise originally arose within the same milieu, as a ‘grass roots’ experiential response to a medical problem. This must remain a speculation.

17 Cheyne, An Essay, 58.
19 For the likelihood of some empirical knowledge in the diagnosis of gout, see: Churchill, Female Patients, 165.
James Alsop is Professor Emeritus of History at McMaster University. His current research topic is the scholar and crown servant Sir Thomas Chaloner the Elder.

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Watson, Dr. Thomas. “Certayne experiments and approved medicines, good for those that be any wayes diseased, of the famous Dr Watson,” in British Library, London, Sloane Ms. 62.


This review essay addresses pedagogical principles found in Scott Newstok's recent book *How to Think Like Shakespeare: Lessons from a Renaissance Education* (2020). Specifically, the essay discusses the progymnasmata exercises of paraphrase and ἔθοποια and provides real-life applications and examples. The essay also suggests how such study aims at “fruitful” effects, as well as providing distinctions between “fruitful” and “useful” study. Other points relevant to the fruitful ends of the study of the liberal arts, such as freedom and empathy, are discussed as they pertain to a student’s ability to think creatively and to express thoughts with clarity and originality. Finally, the essay highlights James Baldwin’s experience with reading, hating, and eventually accepting Shakespeare in order to provide readers with a tangible example of the fruitful ends of liberal education.

Scott Newstok’s recent book, *How to Think Like Shakespeare*, has been tucked inside my bookbag for the past couple of months. It’s not that I can’t put the book down so much as that it represents something special—something I want to hang on to because of the possibilities it brings about whenever I walk into the classroom. I teach lots of different kinds of courses, online and in-person, from freshman composition to art courses, general humanities courses to English literature. What unites all of the students in these varied courses and formats is each student’s belief in what education can do. Education is thrilling because it causes well barricaded doors to blast open. Education vents the brain; thoughts of fresh air come in and conversation ensues. Wonderful as this is, I believe the main reason that cohort after cohort lines up to enter college, especially to take courses in our field, has to do with something even deeper. As our fields become increasingly hyper-specialized, and our scholarly
research and publications have less and less in common with what actually happens in a typical undergraduate college classroom, this moment is one particularly auspicious for serious teachers to stop and reflect upon college from a different perspective from our own. After all, even we were all once undergraduates.

Changing places with my undergraduate self, I would say that I enrolled in college because I sought “truth.” Now stop and remind yourself: Why did you enter college?

As I progressed through the degree, it became more and more clear to me that truth and freedom are closely related, as in, the truth will set you free. Newstok touches on some of these ideas in a chapter called, “Of Freedom.” He draws attention to a piece James Baldwin wrote called “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” and quotes from Baldwin’s essay:

> My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it.

The sentiment Baldwin expresses above compresses much of what is wonderful about Newstok’s book and also why I am excited to get back into the classroom tomorrow. Education is a process and Newstok devotes an entire chapter to “imitation,” the rhetorical stage Baldwin alludes to above. The imitation of authors, models, exemplary passages, turns of phrase, and even sentence patterns represents a crucial step toward gaining the ability to express oneself freely with language. Indeed, imitation is how we learn anything “human,” whether it be carpentry, a golf swing, how to rap, play piano, or paint portraits. Yet imitation is only a stage. It is curious and somewhat of a paradox, but it is the case that imitation somehow

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1 Newstok, *How to Think*, 140-151.

2 Newstok, *How to Think*, 147.

leads to personal freedom: “[A]fter a period of disciplined imitation something remarkable happens…[the writer] ‘starts sounding like himself.”’4 This experience echoes the very concept Baldwin appears to have come to realize in the passage quoted above. Newstok further develops this point, “Baldwin saw that he must move beyond the necessary but early stage of imitation, to the stage that makes that external voice internal, synthesizing it into one’s own…ultimately, an act of freedom.”

Building upon this notion of freedom and imitation, there is a “classic political distinction” to be made, Newstok says, “between negative liberty and positive liberty. It’s the difference between ‘freedom from’ (as in I am slave to no man) and ‘freedom to’ (as in, I am my own master).”5 This insight is crucial, for the temptation to focus pedagogical approaches utterly upon the notion of “negative liberty” is a great one today. It is all well and good to identify aspects of negative freedom which have curtailed the agency of subjects in various ways throughout history, however, it is also beneficial to students to provide them with particular abilities now, so they may have the “freedom to.”

Hence the so-called “liberal arts.” Historically speaking, liberal meant “free” and arts meant much more than we ascribe to the term today; it meant something all-inclusive like “know how,” “ability,” “craft,” “technique,” and “science”:

   The emancipatory artes liberales were crafts of freedom: the highest level of thinking suitable to a free citizen—the bane of every despot. Such an educational program presumes that freedom is fragile, demanding vigilant, endless exertion: there is nothing more arduous than the apprenticeship of freedom.6

4 Newstok, How to Think, 82. In the quote within the quote, Newstok is quoting a statement George Saunders made on imitation and originality.

5 Newstok, How to Think, 147.

6 Newstok, How to Think, 148.

7 Newstok, How to Think, 149.
Baldwin’s conversation with Shakespeare began as outright hostility and opposition, with resistance—a desire to be “free from” having to read Shakespeare at all, and the desire to be free of all the structure of oppression he had understood Shakespeare to represent. However, it is interesting to see how Baldwin came to apprehend a much more radical positive freedom—the freedom to make Shakespeare his own: “Baldwin achieved a mutual recognition in Shakespeare that few of us ever reach—an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way than through inhabiting other minds through art.”

Newstok makes the further point that a “double translation” phenomenon was at work in this process, that is, that Baldwin came to see his own language in a new way through or with Shakespeare. In a sense, this is similar to how Shakespeare came to understand English himself, since he (and everyone else at the time) studied Latin, not “English” in school.

But what does this mean exactly, “an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way than through inhabiting other minds through art?” Indeed, it is the case that the main thrust and aim of Newstok’s book, as well as the subject of his many shortish chapters, is compressed in this odd statement. The pedagogical principle underpinning this process of reading and conversing with a text comes by way of entering into a text in a peculiar fashion—through creative reading and writing.

The education that Shakespeare (and Milton, Queen Elizabeth, Spenser, Margaret Cavendish, and Ben Jonson) received might be best described as an education which was thoroughly active. It emphasized creativity and original thought, and it inculcated these outcomes not by the verification of the “Assessments” of our parlance, but rather by the blunders, defeats, and stumbles that one always expects in practice. In chapters 8 & 9, Newstok discusses

8 Newstok, How to Think, 148.

9 Newstok, How to Think, 147; also see, 79-80.

imitation and a couple of the exercises of the *progymnasmata*. One of these exercises, *êthopoeia*, as Newstok puts it, “encouraged a rural English schoolboy to envisage what it might be like to occupy a different gender, in a different nation, observing a different religion, within a different era, under duress of different events.”

*êthopoeia*, the imitation of the character of another, asks the student to “impersonate another persona in a hypothetical scenario. The goal is to *imitate that you may be different*. Today, we tell students to ‘find their voice.’ Tudor educators did the opposite: sound like someone else.” Shakespeare was lauded for his ability to perceive what others perceived—a crucial activity that I think many would agree to be *absolutely lacking* in many areas today. Margaret Cavendish and Elizabeth Montagu both marveled at Shakespeare’s ability to empathize. Montagu said Shakespeare could “throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation.” Many agree.

In the classroom, I find that this exercise of *êthopoeia* translates well into various activities and formats. For example, in a standard first- or second-year composition and rhetoric course, a basic “character sketch” assignment can be enlightening. Theophrastus’s character types, such as the loquacious, the shameless, the oligarch, or the penurious types are a wonderful source of invention for this kind of assignment, but so are just everyday types that students come up with in class, such as the mechanic, the teacher, the doctor, the lawyer, the fashion model, the Silicon Valley software developer, etc. Students can write 200-400 words sketching out the character, adding dialogue and description as needed. In a drama or a poetry class, impersonation may be performed by way of memorization and recitation. My students often elect to memorize poetry for an “extra credit” assignment that I include on the syllabus. Students

11 Newstok, *How to Think*, 92.
12 Newstok, *How to Think*, 91.
13 Newstok, *How to Think*, 92.
who memorize poetry nearly always relate back to me that they were happy to have memorized the lines (usually 75 lines or so) and that they feel that their memory is stronger for having done so. Truly, memorizing poetry begets a closeness to the text which simply cannot be replicated, and the lines become part of the student, not to mention the feelings and empathy which ensue from such closeness and the passions aroused in the delivery of lines.

Another exercise of the *progymnasmata* is paraphrase. This exercise led Shakespeare to further develop his innate genius to retell stories. In fact, Shakespeare never seems to have entirely “made up” the plot for even one of his plays. Paraphrases, or the creative retelling of stories, may take all kinds of shapes. In his treatise on the *progymnasmata*, Hermogenes provides a memorable example of how to paraphrase with fables, the first stage of the *progymnasmata*:

Fables are sometimes to be expanded, sometimes to be told concisely, now by telling in bare narrative, and now by feigning the words of the given characters. For example, “The monkeys in council deliberated on the necessity of settling in houses. When they made up their minds to this end and were about to set to work, an old monkey restrained them, saying that they would more easily be captured if they were caught within enclosures.” Thus if you wish to be concise; but if you wish to expand, proceed in this way. “The monkeys in council deliberated on the founding of a city; and one coming forward made a speech to the effect that they too must have a city. “For, see,” said he, “how fortunate in this regard are men. Not only does each of them have a house, but all going up together to public meeting or theater delight their souls with all manner of things to see and hear.” Go on thus, dwelling on the incidents and saying that the decree was formally passed; and devise a speech for the old monkey.  

As can be seen from the quote above, the fable “The Monkeys in Council” could be easily expanded by adding dialogue. Shakespeare practiced this very exercise. However, there are lots of other creative exercises one can do with paraphrase: poetry may be paraphrased into prose, narrative put into poetry, dialogue paraphrased into poetry, a

14 Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education*, 182-183.
drama rewritten as prose, as an art piece, or as a screenplay (and so forth). Shakespeare paraphrased the stories he found in Plutarch, Holinshed, Cinthio, Lodge, Belleforest, and Saxo Grammaticus (to name a few) into drama—but then he also did much more. He changed the stories he found in those sources for the better in his retellings, ennobling characters, sympathizing with them, and changing key details.\(^{15}\)

Herein lies Shakespeare’s real genius. In addition to this, Shakespeare often used varieties of paraphrase techniques to incorporate and adapt various layers of material into his stories. For example, Shakespeare took the Aesop fable, “The Belly and the Members” and paraphrased it in such a way that he wove the fable into the dramatic lines which open the play *Coriolanus*.\(^{16}\) The very basic exercise of paraphrase enabled Shakespeare to write perhaps some of the most original and gripping lines of all of his plays, and it has certainly enabled screenwriters, producers, and directors to paraphrase Shakespeare’s plays into film as “adaptations.”

By now some of my patient readers may be thinking, “what for?” What exactly would be the end or telos of this kind of pedagogy? One answer to this is the obvious: To think like Shakespeare!

Another answer comes by way of my own teaching experience. I find that exercises like character sketches, impersonation, development of dialogues, paraphrases, retelling fables, and the like (there are many more!) translate well into all sorts of applications. I would add that I have had great success in adapting these kinds of activities in online courses too. Online learners often learn best by doing, rather than by passively receiving videos or readings, and these exercises facilitate excitement for students because they lead to creativity,

\(^{15}\) The character of Othello is an excellent example—compare Shakespeare’s hero Othello to Cinthio’s character. Also see my article in *Quidditas*, “The Role of Rumor and the Prodigal Son” (Vol. 36, Article 7). In the case of the *Henriad*, Shakespeare changed very little in his retelling of Holinshed’s history of Henry V, but he completely changed the other source he used, *Famous Victories of Henry V*, the source which inspired his memorable Falstaff.

\(^{16}\) Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, act 1, scene 1, 99-155.
to immersion into texts, and to personal engagement. They lead to original writing. As a quick aside—I should mention that I think Newstok rather too casually dismisses online learning in the book, and that the book would be greatly improved if revised to be more considerate and sympathetic to the millions of students enrolled in these types of classes.

In any event, the basic principles touched on in the book provide for unique experiences to nudge students along on the path toward attaining more pointed creative thought and writing. Creative thought doesn’t necessarily lead to creative writing per se—after all, all writing is creative writing. Creative thought refers to the freedom to be able to think for oneself, to the freedom to be able, “to occupy leisure nobly,” as Aristotle says in Book VIII of the Politics.\(^{17}\)

Newstok makes this point early on in his book when specifically addressing pedagogy. Here he distinguishes between different types of utility, such as “short-term utility,” “material utility,” and “long term utility.”\(^{18}\) He further states:

> For Aristotle, the end of study (long-term utility) was to develop citizens who would flourish in a democracy. Education cultivated habits for the end of becoming a good [person], skilled in speaking, with an eye toward action: To be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.\(^{19}\)

The distinction between different kinds of utility is important to make because it suggests how learning and pedagogy may effect different ends. “Long-term” utility is necessarily at odds with “short-term” or “material” utility because of the objects and aims of each kind of study. To develop this point, Aristotle distinguishes the useful arts from the fruitful arts by stating that the fruitful arts are, “acquired merely in the pleasure in their pursuit, and that these studies and these branches of learning are ends in themselves,” whereas, he says, the useful or “necessary” arts, “are studied as necessary and as

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\(^{17}\) Aristotle, *Politics* VIII, 639.

\(^{18}\) Newstok, *How to Think*, 22.

\(^{19}\) Newstok, *How to Think*, 22.
means to other things.”

This is important to keep in mind for all of us who teach the humanities, a type of study deeply rooted in liberal education.

As we research and publish scholarly articles on niche issues in order to be able to engage in the high-level scholarly conversations happening within our respective disciplines, we necessarily manufacture a kind of trade or “vocational knowledge,” and this kind of knowledge is unfit for education in the liberal mode. In fact, I remember vividly that when I entered graduate school the first talk I received from the graduate director went something like this, “You need to publish now. The clock is ticking. As soon as you are in graduate school your chances of getting a job decrease exponentially if you are not publishing in your field. You need to read job ads and see what the trends are and adjust to these conversations.” I remember thinking to myself that this isn’t why I entered graduate school at all (no…I was still stubbornly attracted to truth, freedom, and all of that). The irony of this strikes me hard now as I reflect upon the vastly different kinds of knowledge our students may receive when taking a course in the humanities.

In an essay called, “Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education,” Mortimer Adler made a similar point by distinguishing different ends to the study of the same subject, carpentry:

> One might wish to learn carpentry simply to acquire the skill or art of using tools to fabricate things out of wood, an art or skill that anyone is better for having. Or one might wish to learn carpentry in order to make good tables and chairs, not as works of art which reflect the excellence of the artist, but as commodities to sell.

The fruitful end of the knowledge of knowing how to fabricate things out of wood represents an “intrinsic” end rather than an “external” end. These ends correspond to the distinction made between “useful” and “fruitful” learning. Fruitful learning has an intrinsic

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effect because it changes the learner, as “an improvement built right into [her] nature as a good habit is part of the nature of the person in whom a power is habituated.” Fruitful learning makes humans more human, as creatures always in the process of growing—like how trees become more like trees as they grow.

Although certainly quirky, Scott Newstok’s book vents the brain and engages the reader into conversation about what matters in the classroom and in life. What is education? What is it to be free? What is the purpose of life? Naturally if one has the leisure to muse upon these kinds of questions with seriousness, she becomes unfit for enslavement—be it to ideological fashions, economical systems, or political trends. The fruitful ends of the liberal arts I have sketched above equip one to think, to empathize with others, and to be able to creatively articulate original ideas in writing. In short, this kind of study provides one with the ability to both think and do. Earning the freedom (and habit) to be able to see an idea from multiple perspectives, as well as the freedom to be able to evaluate those perspectives with the aim of finding the most reasonable one, and then having the ability to articulate one’s views with clarity and intellectual force, this is precisely what education should lead us all to do. Perhaps this helps explain why James Baldwin ended up taking to Shakespeare after all.

Steven Hrdlicka teaches Humanities and English at Great Basin College in Elko, Nevada. His interests include renaissance and medieval literature, rhetoric and composition, philology, the Bible as literature, and art history. Steven has recently taken on the role of assistant editor of Quidditas.

Bibliography


