

17

Ne sai si de ma dame la^o durtee,
Salvant l'estat d'amour, jeo blamerai.
Bien sai qe *par tresfine* loialté
De tout mon coer la serve et serviray,
5 Mais le guardon, s'ascun deservi ai,
Ne sai coment, m'est toutdis eslongé,
Dont jeo ma dame point n'escuseray.
Tant meinz reprens com plus l'averay doné.

A moun avis ceo n'est pas egalte,
10 Solonc reson, si jeo le voir dirrai,
A doner tout, coer, corps, et volenté,
Qant pour tout ceo reprendre ne porray
D'amour la meindre chose qe jeo sai.
Om dist, poi valt service q'est sanz fee.
15 Mais ja pour tant ma dame ne lerray,
Q'a lui servir m'ai tout abandoné.

Ma dame, qui sciet langage a plentée,
Rien me respont qant jeo la prierai,
Et s'ensi soit q'elle ait a moi *parlée*,
20 D'un mot soulein lors sa response orrai.
A basse vois tantost me dirra, "nay."
C'est sur toutz autres ditz qe jeo plus hée.
Le mot est brief, mais qant vient a l'essay,
La sentence est de *grant* dolour parée.

25 Ceste balade a celle envoieray,
En qui riens falt fors soulement pitée.
Ne puis lesser mais*que* jeo l'ameray,
Q'a sa merci jeo m'ai recomandé.

1 *Erasure between la and durtee, the space filled in with a line crossed with two slashes. Cross drawn in margin.*

17

- I don't know if I'll blame my lady's hardheartedness,^o
with all due respect to love.^o
I do know that out of pure loyalty
I serve and will serve her with all my heart,
5 but the reward, if I have deserved one,
I don't know how, is always denied^o me,
for which I will not excuse my lady at all.
The less I get back, the more that I have given.^o
- In my opinion that isn't fair,^o
10 according to reason,^o if I will speak the truth,
to give all—heart, body, and will—
when for all that I could not get back
the slightest thing from love, as far as I know.
They say, of little worth is service without reward.^o
15 ^oBut nonetheless I will not leave my lady,
for I am completely dedicated to serving her.
- ^oMy lady, who knows language in abundance,
makes no response to me when I entreat her,
and if it should happen that she speak to me,
20 then I'd hear her answer in one word alone.
In a low voice, she'd immediately tell me, "Nay."^o
It is above all other statements what I hate the most.
The word is short, but when it comes to the test,
the meaning is wrapped in great sadness.
- 25 ^oThis ballade I will send to her
in whom nothing is lacking^o except pity.
I cannot desist from loving her,^o
for I have commended myself to her mercy.

Ballade 17 seems to be assembled out of pieces borrowed from other poems, but the envoy ties it together in a uniquely Gowerian way. Stanzas one and two weigh the lover's devotion against the lack of any perceived reward. The claim of unfairness is not an uncommon theme (see the note to 12.9-13), but nowhere is it approached more delicately than in the first stanza, as the persona is at first reluctant to blame his lady but then gains the courage to assert that she shouldn't be excused. The stanza ends in a line that, with its balanced phrases, has all the appearance of a refrain: "Tant meinz reprens com plus l'averay doné." The second stanza takes a rather stronger stand, but while

Balade 17

one might expect it to be heading to a repetition of the same line, the tone of complaint yields to a statement of the lover's willing subjection to a service without rewards and another final line that could well have served as a refrain. The third stanza returns to the theme of the persona's attempts to address his lady first introduced in ballade 14, and as in 14, his account of his lack of success is followed by the announcement in the envoy that he will send his ballade to her.

The envoy achieves two effects. It unites the themes of the first two stanzas in a statement of the persona's compulsion to seek the "mercy" of a woman whom he acknowledges is without "pity," and the choice to send her the poem becomes another expression of the same paradox. The confession of helpless undying love to a lady without pity is one thing; to send a ballade about his rejection to the lady who has already rejected him is quite another, for it doesn't just describe the persona's condition, it re-enacts it. In 17 and also in 18, moreover, the persona doesn't address his lady in the envoy, as he does at the end of 14 and 16, for instance, but he continues to speak of her in the third person to the impersonal, imagined audience of the first three stanzas to which we belong. The only other such poems that I know of that speak of sending the poem that are not addressed directly to the addressee are Gower's own ballades 5 and 36. Ballade 5 is an ardent expression of the lover's sincere devotion, and there is no evidence that it will not be happily received: sending it is another act consistent with the lover's feeling. (On 36, see the note to 36.23.) In 17 and 18, the act of sending is also consistent with all of the persona's earlier entreaties, but his inability to address his lady directly adds another dimension to his plight, for it underlines the very pointlessness of the attempt. It is not even clear what he expects: he doesn't ask for a response, and as the poem ends, he remains even more firmly caught between his helpless love and his inability to win either his lady's mercy or her pity.

- 1 *hardheartedness*. The lady's "durté" (or her "dur cuer [hard heart]" as in Machaut, *Lou*. 214.19) as the obstacle to the lover's success appears just as commonly as "Danger" in the lyrics of the 14th century, and often in its company (as in Machaut, Motet 4.20, 22, 15.31, 35; Granson 61.25-26, *et al.*), but it implies that the fault lies even more strongly in the lady's character than mere "disdain" or "standoffishness." The noun recurs in 18.22.
- 2 *with all due respect to love*. More precisely "preserving the status of love" (*AND* s.v. "salver," 2, 3; *DMF* s.v. "sauver," I.B); as Macaulay notes (1:465), "a kind of apology for the idea of blaming his mistress." See *MED* s.v. "sāving(e)" (prep.), 2, "with due respect, regard, or consideration for," with numerous citations from this period. This may be another English expression that has crept into Gower's French. It recurs in 22.26.
- 6 *denied*. More literally, "eslonger" means "to keep away, to keep at a distance," but for its figurative use, see *DMF* s.v. "esloigner," B.1.
- 8 The "plus . . . , moins . . ." formula, here and in 18.R, echoes the "plus . . . , plus . . ." construction in 14.8-9. Amans uses the English equivalent in his denial of Sloth (4.285-86). Deschamps uses it in a refrain—"Quant plus me voit ma dame et moins me prise [when the more my lady sees me, the less she values me]" (414.R)—in a ballade in which the persona claims, as here, that his service "de cuer, de corps, de tout mon pensement [in heart, in body, in all my thoughts]" (414.9) goes unrewarded; and he uses a similar line in another ballade on the arbitrariness of fortune (921.R).
- 9 *fair*. The noun "egalté" does not appear in *AND*; it does in *DMF* s.v. "égalité," but not in this sense. Each also lists the cognate "égalité," defining it roughly as "equivalence." *AND* s.v. "egal," 3, however, offers "equitable" as one of its definitions, with two citations, one from approximately 1400, and that is clearly the sense of "egalté" in this line. Cf. 13.6 and note.

Balade 17

- 10 *according to reason*. “Solonc raison” might go with the preceding clause or, because of Gower’s habit of placing modifiers before the beginning of the subordinate clause to which they belong (see the note to 6.6-7), with the clause that follows. The position has little consequence on the sense, as the persona makes an appeal to reason to support his claim.
- 14 The obverse of this expression is proverbial; see 28.20 and the note. But I have not found any analogues in this form, despite “om dist [they say].”
- 15-16 The persona is not the first to persist in his love despite the lack of any reward. The first stanza of Granson 19, for instance (already cited above in the note to 14.8-9), ends, “Et si n’en quier pourtant mon cuer oster. / Plus m’escondit, plus la vueil tenir chiere [And yet I do not want to remove my heart from her. / The more she rejects me, the more I hold her dear].” This last line appears twice more as the refrain.
- 17-21 Earlier lovers whose solicitations meet with rejection are too numerous to count. To choose four different but typical examples, all from Machaut: In *Lou.* 78.18-31, the persona’s effort to speak to his lady only provokes the intervention of Danger and “Reffuz [Rejection]”; in *Lou.* 184.7-8, he declares, “Quant je li di mon amoureux martyre, / Las! et ses cuers ne me fait qu’escondire [When I tell her about my suffering for love, alas! and her heart only rejects me]”; in *Lou.* 203.R he complains, “Qu’adès la pri et riens ne me respont [that I constantly entreat her and she says nothing in reply]”; and in *Lou.* 254 a woman addresses her lover directly, complaining of his “cuer de marbre [heart of marble]” (9) and that “or ne me vues oïr ne regarder [now you don’t want to hear or see me]” (15). See also the passages cited in the note to 14.8-9 above.
- 17 *language in abundance*. *AND* s.v. “plenté,” translates “a plenté” as “thoroughly,” citing only this line, and one wants very much to agree. (Cf. Yeager: “who has a full command of language.”) All other uses of the phrase “a plenté” in *AND*, in *DMF* s.v. “plenté,” and in *MO* 11144, 19960, however, refer either to a plural noun or to a non-count noun (in one instance, “vitaille [food]”) and are the equivalent of English “plenty of.” “My lady knows plenty of languages”? Perhaps “my lady knows plenty of language” comes closer to what Gower meant, shifting the meaning of “langage” a bit to the act of talking, as in Christine’s “Vous perdez vostre lengaige [you’re wasting your speech]” (*100BD* 4.1). But then is this a praise of her eloquence or a hint that perhaps she sometimes talks too much? Cf. *DMF*, loc.cit, A.1., “Avoir beaucoup langage. ‘Parler beaucoup [to speak a lot],” with one mid-15th-century citation.
- 21 *Nay*. This is, of course, an Anglo-Norman form (as opposed to continental French), borrowed from contemporary English. Cf. 30.19. 36.R; *AND* s.v. “nai.” Amans receives the same answer from his lady in *CA* 1.2749, 3.55-60, 4.2813, 8.2048. Cf. Granson, 26.R, “Mais vous m’avez tousjours respondu ‘non’ [But you have always answered me with ‘no’]”; and his light-hearted rondeau, “Se Dieu eust oblié ‘non’ / Quand il faisoit le langaige, / Je tien qu’il eust fait que saige / Et que gracieux et bon [If God had just forgotten ‘no’ when he created language, I hold he would have proven wise and gracious and good]” (1.1-4).
- 25-28 As noted above, there is no precedent for an envoy that refers to sending the poem to the addressee in the third person. Machaut does have a *chanson royale* in which after complaining about his lady’s lack of *merci*, the persona requests the “princes” who are his addressees to have his lady hear his song, “Car tant me het que l’eüst refusé [for she hates me so much that she would have refused it]” (*Lou.* 46.43), thus imagining, at least, a presentation to the lady while not addressing her directly.
- 26 *nothing is lacking*. For the formula, see 11.12-14 and the commentary on 11.
- 27 More precisely, if much more awkwardly, “I cannot desist but that I love her.” More colloquially, “I cannot help loving her.” “Maisque” is “but that” rather than “provided that” in this context, as also in 40.7, and as pointed out by Macaulay in his note to this line (I:465). He translates, “I cannot leave off from loving her.” Cf. the note to 10.5 above.