

19

Om solt danter la beste plussalvage  
Par les paroles dire seulement  
Et par parole changer le visage  
Et les semblances muer de la gent,  
5 Mais jeo ne voie ascun experiment  
Qe de ma dame torne<sup>o</sup> le corage.  
Celle art n'est pas dessoubtz le firmament  
Por atrapper un tiel oisel en cage.

10 Jeo parle et prie et serve et faitz hommage  
De tout mon coer entier, mais nequedent  
Ne puis troever d'amour celle avantage  
Dont ma tresdoulce dame ascunement  
Me deigne un soul regard pitousement  
Doner; mais plus qe Sibille le sage  
15 S'estrangle, ensi qe jeo ne sai coment  
Pour atrapper un tiel oisel en cage.

Loigns de mon proeu et pres de mon damage  
Jeo trieus toutdis le fin du parlement.  
Ne sai parler un mot de tiel estage  
20 Par quoi ma dame ne change son talent,  
Sique jeo puiss veoir tout clierement  
Qe ma parole est sanz vertu, volage,  
Et sanz exploit,<sup>o</sup> sicom frivole au vent,  
Pour atrapper un tiel oisel en Cage.

25 Ma dame, en qui toute ma grace attent,  
Vous m'avetz tant soubgit en vo servage  
Qe jeo n'ai sens, reson, n'entendement  
Pour atrapper un tiel oisel en cage.

6 MS torne over erasure. Cross drawn in margin.

23 Mac exploit

19

One is used to taming the most wild beast  
just by speaking words  
and by speech to changing the expression  
and altering the appearance of people,  
5 but I don't see any device  
that turns the heart of my lady.  
That art does not exist beneath the firmament  
to catch such a bird in a cage.°

10 I speak and pray and serve and do homage  
with all my entire heart, but nonetheless  
I cannot find that benefit from love  
by which my gentle lady in any way  
might deign to give to me piteously a single look,  
but more than Sibyl the wise°  
15 she remains aloof, so that I don't know how  
to catch such a bird in a cage.

Far from my profit and close to my harm  
I always find the end of the conversation.  
I don't know how to speak a word of such a nature°  
20 by which my lady might change her will,  
and thus I can see completely clearly  
that my speech is without power, fleeting,  
and without success, like a trifle° in the wind,  
to catch such a bird in a cage.

25 My lady, on whom all my grace° depends,°  
you have so subjected me in servitude° to you  
that I don't have sense, reason, or understanding°  
to catch such a bird in a cage.

Like **18**, **19** is a poem on the ineffectiveness of the lover's pleas, but it wears its imagery much more lightly, and it presents a very different view of his relationship to his lady. The examples that he uses for contrast in stanza one are both drawn from actual, more successful uses of language rather than from another realm, and the rest of the poem directly concerns his unsuccessful attempts to solicit her regard, which seem, in contrast to **18**, both sincere and even well-mannered. His claims against her are also more modest and less accusatory: she remains unaffected, aloof, like a bird that cannot be caught and caged. The image of the bird provides

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the focal point for the subtle inter-reference of the imagery in the poem, echoing the “beste salvage” of the first line (as well as performing its own transformation of the bird imagery—the “chalandre” of 12.1, the sparrowhawk of 18.8—in the preceding poems), and echoed in turn by the description of the lover’s language as “volage” (22; from “voler,” “to fly”) and as “frivole au vent” (23), a “trifle in the wind.” And like the comparison to the Sybil in line 14, it is not necessarily unflattering. In 34.25, “ma belle oisel” is used as a term of affection. Here, as the figure for the lady’s elusiveness, there is no reason for her to be displeased with the comparison, and it helps to turn the persona’s admission of his lack of success from blame of her to a simple acknowledgment of her nature. Despite the failure of his earlier words, he turns to address her directly in the envoy, unlike his predecessors in 17 and 18, not with any expectation of change and thus not simply re-engaging in the same unsuccessful efforts that he has described, but instead reaffirming her elusiveness and the independence of her will. And isn’t there finally some begrudging admiration in his final lines? He makes no further mention of his frustration but only of how he has become subject to her, and “tiel oisel,” “such a bird,” now seems to refer to the very aspects of the woman that have attracted him: the qualities that make her so hard to catch are also the ones that have most captured the lover’s affection. And perhaps putting her in a “cage” might not be so desirable after all.

- 8 “Like a bird in a cage” is listed in both Hassell (O52) and Whiting (B307) as a proverbial expression for close or unwilling confinement.
- 14 It is difficult to know how much knowledge Gower might have had of classical Sybils. Chaucer uses “Sibille” to refer to Cassandra in *T&C* 5.1450, as does Gower in *CA* 5.7451-55, where (as in this passage) he refers to her as “sage.” (Macaulay, in his notes to the reference in *CA* [3:510], cites Godfrey of Viterbo’s *Pantheon* as the source for the identification.) Gower would have known of Ovid’s account of the Cumaean Sybil in *Metamorphoses* 14.101-53, and in *HF* 439, Chaucer refers to the same Sybil’s accompanying Aeneas in his descent into the underworld in the *Aeneid*, Book 6. But as Macaulay’s note suggests, there were also many available medieval sources. (For a survey, see the first two chapters of Jessica L. Malay, *Prophecy and Sybilline Imagery in the Renaissance: Shakespeare’s Sibyls* [London: Routledge, 2010].) Via Lactantius and Augustine, the Sibyl was credited with foretelling the birth of Christ. Elsewhere her prophecies were cited in both eschatological and historical writings, the latter including Geoffrey of Monmouth, Matthew Paris, and Ranulf Higden. The *locus classicus* for most medieval authors appears to have been a 4th-century Latin text known as the *Tiburtine Sibyl*, which was translated (with some additions) into Anglo-Norman by Philippe de Thaon in the mid-12th century; see *Le Livre de Sibille*, ed. Hugh Shields (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1979). Philippe identifies the sixth of ten ancient Sibyls (the Tiburtine Sibyl is the tenth) as Cassandra (line 36), perhaps based on a version of the Latin text that is known now from a 16th-century edition (see Shields’ note, page 92). Philippe also refers to the Sibyls as “sage,” lines 12, 53. Among earlier lyricists, Deschamps refers to Sibyl’s prophecies regarding both Christ and the Last Judgment at least four times (192, 284, 1046 and 1212). Gower provides too few details to indicate which Sybil he had in mind or in what guise, but in none of her many manifestations is the Sibyl known either for her elusiveness or for her taciturnity, which seem to be his point here.
- 19 *nature*. “Estage” not the word one would expect in this context, but it is susceptible to several extended meanings. See *DMF* s.v. “estage,” C. Macaulay includes “kind” (among other choices) in his glossary (1:509).

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- 23 *trifle*. "Frivole" might refer generally to something of little value (*DMF* s.v. "frivole," II.A, "bagatelle"), or more specifically to valueless talk (*DMF*, loc.cit., II.B), a sense that is clearly appropriate to this passage. *AND* s.v. "frivole" gives only "idle chatter, unfounded words," citing this passage and *MO* 10388; and five of the six uses of the word in *MO* are in contexts having to do with speech or language.
- 25 *grace*. See the note to 1.8. Here the sense appears to be "amatory grace," the benefits that one derives from love.  
*depends*. This is not the most common use of this verb, but see *DMF* s.v. "attendre<sup>1</sup>," I.B.2.a, "compter sur qqn pour faire qqc [count on someone to do something]."
- 26 *servitude*. "Servage" is a much stronger word than "service.," though it appears frequently in contemporary lyrics. See *DMF* s.v. "servage," B.3, with nine citations from Machaut and two from Charles d'Orléans. In *50B* it occurs only here and in 23.14. Cf. also the first "Dedicatory ballade," line 6, and *Tr* 1.11.
- 27 *understanding*. "Entendement" might be "Intelligence, judgement, esprit [intelligence, judgment, wit]" (*DMF* s.v. "entendement," II.a.1.a), close in meaning to both "sens" and "raison" in this line, but it might also be "Façon d'envisager les choses, intention, dessein, volonté [way of imagining things, intention, design, will]" (*DMF*, loc.cit., II.B.3), offering an even larger concession to the unchangeableness of the woman's character.