

21

Au solail, qe les herbes eslumine
Et fait florir, jeo fai *comparisoun*
De celle q'ad dessoubtz sa discipline
Mon coer, mon corps, mes sens, et ma *resoun*,
5 *Par* fin amour, *trestout* a sa *bandoun*.
Si menerai *par* tant joieuse vie
Et servirai de bon entencioun,
Sanz mal penser d'ascune vilenie.

Si femme porroit estre celestine
10 De char humeine a la creacion,
Jeo croi bien qe ma dame soit devine,
Q'elle ad le port et la condicion
De si *tressainte conversacioun*,
Si plein d'onour, si plein de courtoisie,
15 Q'a lui servir j'ai fait ma *beneisoun*,^o
Sanz mal penser d'ascune vilenie.

Une autre tiele belle et femeline,
Trestout^o le mond pour sercher *enviroun*,
Ne truiست om, car elle ad de sa covine
20 Honte et paour *pour* garder sa *mesoun*,
N'i laist entrer ascun *amant feloun*,
Dont sui joious, car jeo de ma *partie*
La vuill amer d'oneste *affeccioun*,
Sanz mal penser d'ascune vilenie.

25 Mirour d'onour, *essample* de bon noun,
En bealté chaste et as vertus amie,
Ma dame, jeo vous aime et autre noun,
Sanz mal penser d'ascune vilenie.

15 MS, *Mac veneisoun*. See the note to this line in the commentary.

18 MS *Terstout*

21

°To the sun, which shines brightly upon the meadows
and makes them flower, I make comparison
of her who has under her rule
my heart, my body, ° my sense, and my reason
5 out of pure love, ° entirely in her power.
I will lead therefore ° a joyous life °
and I will serve with good intent,
without evil thought of any baseness. °

°If a woman of human flesh
10 could be heavenly upon creation,
I do believe that my lady is divine,
for she has the comportment and the character
of so holy a way of life, °
so full of honor, so full of courtesy,
15 that to serve her I have made my blessing, °
without evil thought of any baseness.

Another such a one, beautiful and womanly, °
in searching ° all about the entire world,
one does not find, for she has in her party °
20 Shame and Fear ° in order to guard her house,
nor does she allow any wicked lover to enter,
for which I am joyous, for I, on my part,
wish to love her with virtuous ° affection,
without evil thought of any baseness.

25 Mirror ° of honor, example of good name,
chaste in beauty and a friend to virtue,
my lady, I love you and not another,
without evil thought of any baseness.

21 is the first of a group of five poems—with 31, 38, 39, and 45—that are all but exclusively concerned with praise of the lady, in which her beauty is not neglected but in which the dominant theme—as in 21—is her virtue and the effect that it has not just upon the persona but also upon others, in inspiring not just love but equally virtuous conduct. We learn little else about her and there is virtually nothing about their relationship: the persona neither complains nor pleads; he says nothing about hope or desire, about languishing or healing, or about the false turns of Fortune. He is joyful simply to know and love her because of her great “bonté.”

Balade 21

These poems also share a common diction, a group of words found either exclusively or all but exclusively in this group, some of which are not even necessarily inherent to the theme that they share but which serve to link them together even more strongly:

- “Eslumine [brightens, illuminates, enlightens],” in **21.1**, occurs elsewhere in *50B* only in **45.2**, and it links the image of the sun to that of the crystal, each cited as an analogy to the lady’s effect upon those around her.
- “Beneisoun [blessing]” in **21.15** (if my emendation is correct; see the note below) is echoed in “benoit [blessed]” in both **31.23** and the refrain to **39**, in nearly synonymous lines. “Benoit” occurs elsewhere in *50B* only in **5.18** in a very different context.
- “Discipline” appears in *50B* only in **21.3**, **31.6**, and **45.12**, in slightly different senses in each case. In **21**, it refers to the lady’s command over the lover; in **31**, the reference is to the commands of Love; and in **45** it refers to the effect that the lady has upon the lover’s behavior.
- “Femeline [womanly]” occurs only three times in *50B*, in **21.17**, **31.26** and **45.9**, in all three cases as a compliment to the lady (see the note below).
- “Covine” appears in *50B* only in **21.19**, **31.22**, and **45.16**, also with a slightly different meaning in each case. In the first instance it has the common meaning of “company” or “party,” though with a possible double meaning; in **31** it seems to mean “agreement”; and in **45** it refers to “nature, character.” (See the notes to each of these lines.)
- The woman provides an “essample” to others in **21.25** and in **45.13** and **24**. The word occurs only once elsewhere in *50B*, in **18.3**, but not with reference to the lady.
- “Vertu [virtue]” occurs in each of these five poems, but in three different senses. It refers specifically to moral virtues in **21.26** and (we presume) the refrain of **31**. (“Vertuose” is also used in this sense in **31.9**.) It refers to good qualities more generally (that might include beauty) in **38.15** and **39.2**; and it means “power” or “force” in **45.4**. “Vertu” occurs elsewhere in *50B*, but less frequently than one might imagine. It refers to “power” or “force” in **19.22** and **40.20** and to the moral virtues only in **9.34** (presumably, where it is paired with “graces”), **11.11** and **28.8**.

“Vertu” is the only one of these words that occurs in all five poems. There are other linkages among the remaining four that do not include ballade **21**:

- “Encline” occurs only twice in *50B*, in the refrain of **31** and in **45.22**, in the first case as a verb and in the second as an adjective. See the notes on the possible double meaning in the first case and on the uncertainty of meaning in the second.
- “Piere [rock]” in **38.1** links the image of the lodestone to that of the crystal in **45.3**. The word occurs elsewhere in *50B* only in **24.2** in a very different context.
- The “fine force [pure force]” of the lodestone in **38.4** echoes the same phrase in **31.5** but occurs nowhere else in *50B*. Except in the recurring phrase “fin amour” (as in **21.5**; see the note to **7.1**), “fin(e)” itself occurs elsewhere in *50B* only in **4¹.5**.

- The lady's qualities are attributed to God and Nature together in **38.15-18** and **45.18-19**. God gets credit in **11.10** and Nature in **13.1-12**, but nowhere else in *50B* do they work together.
- The strongest link among the other four ballades is provided by the "beauté, bonté, grace [beauty, goodness, grace]" triad, each of which provides the subject for an entire stanza in **31**. They are directly echoed in **39.3-5**; in **38** they appear in the list of the woman's qualities in lines 18-23; and in **45** they also provide the basis for the persona's praise in lines 6, 8-9, and 23. This triad appears elsewhere in *50B* only in **32.15-19**, where the context, however, is the qualities that the woman lacks and where "grace" is used in a very different sense.
- Elsewhere in *50B*, "grace" is used almost exclusively to refer to that which the lover seeks from his lady (as in **32.19**). (On the range of meanings see the note to **1.8**.) Except for the allusion to this sense in **31.17**, "grace" is used in this group of poems to refer instead to the lady's "graciousness" and her quality of character (in **31.19**, **31.21**, **38.23**, **39.5**, and **45.23**), a sense that occurs elsewhere in *50B* only in **9.34** and **10.3**.

These verbal links create a texture of inter-reference very much like that which we find among the ballades at the beginning of *50B*. Five of these words—"eslumine," "discipline," "femeline," "covine," and "encline"—share the same final syllable and all are used in the rhyming position. Three of these poems (and only these three in *50B*, but also *Tr* **13**) use *-ine* as one of the three rhymes, and a fourth uses the closely related *-eine*. If the choice of word was governed by the rhyme, the choice of the same rhyming syllable for a group of poems also so closely united by theme is no less remarkable than the similarity of diction, and it suggests no less strongly that they were conceived and written as a group, as was perhaps true of the opening ballades and is more certainly true of the thematically interconnected ballades at the end of *50B*.

One has to wonder if Gower might have had in mind as a model Granson's "Cinq balades ensuivans [Sequence of five ballades]" (Granson **37-41**). Granson's poems were known in England: Chaucer drew directly upon them for his "Complaint of Venus," and he acknowledges his debt to Granson in the final line (82). If Granson's did provide the idea for assembling five ballades into a group, Gower did not imitate their structure. Granson's all use the same rhyme scheme (*ababbccb*, a scheme that he uses nowhere else, though Gower could not have known this), while Gower's mixes seven-line and eight-line stanzas. On the other hand, Granson does not employ the same kind of verbal inter-reference as Gower, nor are all five poems simply variations on a single theme. They proceed instead from the persona's praise of the lady to expressions of his frustration and disappointment at her "durté," ending in ballade **41** with a resolution to continue to serve her nonetheless, imitating the conventional argument of a great many individual ballades. Perhaps the best reason to think that Gower might have known Granson's poems comes from the similarity in the way in which their two ladies are described. Granson's lady too is provided with all the virtues (**37.12**, **38.1-4**); God and Nature (and in Granson, Reason too) join together in creating her (**38.1**; cf. *50B* **38.15-18**), she too inspires good in others (**37.17**); and most suggestively, in **37.9** we find reference to the same triad with which Gower praises the lady in four of his five ballades: "Il a en lui beauté, bonté, et

grace [in her there is beauty, goodness, and grace]." While each of these qualities is commonplace in earlier poetry, I have not found any other occurrence of this triad in this form.

Whatever their origin, Gower finally chose to disperse these ballades among the others in his collection rather than to present them as a group. Each is unique in some particular way, and each now is also positioned so that it has some link to the poems that immediately surround it. **21** begins the sequence with the strongest affirmation both of the lady's good character—though there is no reference to her "bonté," line 26 contains the only instance in *50B* of the word "chaste"—and of the persona's own chaste affection. It draws upon a number of recognizable motifs from earlier poetry (see the notes below), but turned to a use that would seem to make love as normally understood in the lyrics all but impossible. Echoes of the two immediately preceding ballades in lines 4, 6, and 9-11 suggest that this version of love is offered as a deliberate alternative to the more painful and less stable version that they describe. In that way, and in the affirmation of honest intention in the refrain, this poem, as others in this group do sometimes in more specific terms, seems to anticipate the advocacy of virtuous love with which *50B* concludes.

- 1-7 Machaut makes a similar comparison of the effects of his lady to those of the sun in *Lou.* **196.1-6.**
- 4 The collocation of "coer" and "corps" is commonplace; see the note to **5.26.** The invocation of "sens" and "raison" echoes **19.27.**
- 5 *pure love.* On "fin amour" see the note to **7.1.**
- 6 *therefore.* "Si . . . par tant" is redundant. "Therefore" covers both. *lead a joyous life.* "Mener" echoes **20.22;** "joieuse" echoes (with a reversal) the refrain to the same poem.
- 8 The refrain offers one version of a common lyric formula which appears identically in line 24 of the second "Dedicatory Ballade" and in the form "sanz null penser vilein" in **27.23** and "sanz mal penser" in **49.5.** Other variants include "sans penser vilainne" (Granson **14.18**), "sans penser villonnie" (Machaut, *Lou.* **21.12**), "sans nul vilain penser" (Granson **11.3**), "sans penser nul villain tour" (Machaut, *Lou.* **21.5**). More broadly, the formula includes such expressions as "sanz mesprisure" (**12.25**), "sans penser deshonneur" (Machaut, *Lou.* **3.4**), "sans meffaire" (Machaut, *Lou.* **30.19**), "sans mesprison" (Machaut, *Lou.* **36.18**), *et al.* For contrast, cf. *Tr* **10.8**, with reference to Tarquin, "q'ot la pensé vileine [who had base intent]."
- 9-11 This flattering description echoes **20.26**, where, however, the comparison to a goddess suggests the persona's veneration rather than a proof of her character.
- 13 *a way of life.* "Conversacioun" is a "false friend." See *AND* s.v. "conversacion," *DMF* s.v. "conversation." In *DMF*, the first citation for definition C, "entretien ['conversation' in the modern sense]" is from 1489.
- 15 *blessing.* For MS "veneisoun," Macaulay offers (in his note to this line, 1:466) "'chase,' hence 'endeavour,'" evidently drawing upon Godefroy s.v. "venacion" "chasse, vénerie [hunt, hunting]," who includes, however, only one undated citation that might be from before 1482, and the only figurative example that he cites (also undated) does not mean "endeavor" but rather "persecution," as listed in Godefroy, *Lexique* s.v. "venacion." *AND* s.v. "veneisun" provides only two definitions, "game" and "venison, flesh of game," and no suggestion in any of the citations that the word might also mean either "hunt" or "endeavor"; see also *DMF* s.v. "venaison." One has to suspect that Gower instead wrote "beneisoun," "benediction or blessing," a word that appears (as "beneiçon" or "beneiçoun") four times in *MO* and in *Tr* **5.15.** See *AND* s.v. "beneiçun," *DMF* s.v. "beneiçoun," with many citations from the same period. Lower case *B* and *V* might easily be confused: on f. 21 of

the manuscript, compare the first letters of "bien" in 21.11 and "vilenie" in the refrain, especially line 16. The resulting line does not strike me as idiomatic, but "I have made it my blessing to serve her" is certainly more consistent with the other imagery in this stanza, and it anticipates "benoit [blessed]" in 31.23 and 39.R. For "blessing" in the sense of "favor bestowed by God" see *DMF*, loc.cit., A.

- 17 *womanly*. In *MO* (e.g. in 9155, 13481, 21334) and in the very rare uses in most earlier lyrics (as in Machaut *Lou.* 205.22), "femelin/femenin" serves only to identify gender, not as a term of praise, as it is used here and in 31.26 and 45.9. The citations in *AND* s.v. "feminin," 2 and *DMF* s.v. "feminin," B, suggest that when the word is used to mean "feminine, typical of a woman" rather than "female," the implication is most often pejorative. *DMF* does cite one passage from Froissart's *Chroniques* in which it is conjoined, as here, with "belle," and the reference to "li corps feminins [the feminine body or person]" in Froissart's Bal. 1.8 occurs in a complimentary context, as does Granson's reference to "ses doulz fais femenins [her sweet feminine qualities]" in 37.5 (the first of Granson's "Cinq balades ensuivans"). (Granson uses "femenins" in the more neutral sense in 71.46.) Gower's usage here, in 31.26, and in 45.9 corresponds to both his and Chaucer's use of "wommanliche," e.g. in *CA* 1.2757, 7.4879; *T&C* 3.106, 5.557; *LGW* 243; *MerT CT* IV.1604; *et al.*, where it is consistently a term of praise.
- 18 *in searching*. On the construction see the note to 14.1.
- 19 *in her party*. I.e., on her side (*AND* s.v. "covine," 4; *DMF* s.v. "convine," I.B), introducing the personifications in the next line. For a similar use cf. *MO* 17980. On the range of meaning of "covine" see the note to 31.22.
- 20 *Shame and Fear*. "Honte" and "Paour" are traditionally the guardians of the woman's honor and therefore the obstacles to the lover's approach, as in *RR* 2820 ff., where they are appointed as guardians of the rose. Consistent with his own chaste intent, the persona enlists them here in his praise of the lady's virtue.
- 23 *virtuous*. "(H)oneste," here and in 29.2, 31.26, 34.4, 49.18, and 50.11 (and in most appearances in *CA*, e.g. "honeste love" in 4.2297), implies much more than merely "truthful" or "genuine." See *AND* s.v. "honest," *DMF* s.v. "honneste," and *MED* s.v. "honest(e)."
- 25 *Mirror*. I.e., "A model or exemplar," as also in 42.17. See *AND* s.v. "mirur," 2; *DMF* s.v. "mireur," B; *MED* s.v. "mirour," 3.(a). Cf. *MO* 22884, with reference to David: "As autrez Rois il fuist mirour [he was a mirror for other kings]"; *CA* Prol. 496, 5.2605.