

37

El Mois de Maii la plusjoieuse chose
C'est fin amour, mais vous, ma dame chiere,
Prenetz a vous plustost la Ruge Rose
Pour vo desport, et plus la faites chiere
5 Qe mon amour, ove toute la priere
 Qe vous ai fait maint jour y ad passé.
 Vous estes franche et jeo sui fort lié.

 Jeo voi toutplein des flours deinz vo *parclose*,
 Privé de vous, mais jeo sui mis derere.
10 N'y puiss entrer, qe l'entrée m'est forsclose.^o
 Jeo prens tesmoign de vostre chamberere,
 Qe sciet et voit trestoute la matiere,
 De si long temps qe jeo vous ai amé.
 Vous estes franche et jeo sui fort lié.

15 Qant l'erbe croist et la flour se desclose,
 Maii m'ad hosté de sa blanche banere,
 Dont pense assetz plus qe jeo dire n'ose
 De vous, ma dame, qui m'estes si fiere,
 A vo merci car si jeo me refiere,^o
20 Vostre danger tantost m'ad deslaié:
 Vous estes franche et jeo sui fort lié.

 En le douls temps ma fortune est amiere;
 Le Mois de Maii s'est en yvern mué;
 L'urtie truis si jeo la Rose quiere:
25 Vous estes franche et jeo sui fort lié.

10 *Mac* forclose

19 *Mac* reads *refiers* and emends to *refiere*. It's a close call. The scribe's *e* and his final *s* are very similar in form, and the letter in question is written over a natural wrinkle in the parchment that distorts its shape. It is easier to think that the scribe's pen slipped slightly in forming an *e* than it is to think that he wrote both an ungrammatical and a non-rhyming form ending in *s*.

37

In the month of May the most joyous thing
is *fin amour*,° but you, my dear lady,
sooner take to yourself the red rose
for your pleasure, and show it greater joy°
5 than (you do) my love, with° all the pleading°
that I have made to you for many a day gone by.
You are free° and I am tightly bound.°

I see a great many° flowers in your garden,
your private place,° but I am left behind.
10 I cannot enter there, for the entry is closed to me.
I take witness of your chambermaid,
who knows and sees the entire matter,
that I have loved you for so long a time.
You are free and I am tightly bound.

15 When the grass grows and the flower opens up,
May has excluded me from her bright banner,°
°for which I think rather more than I dare say
about you, my lady, who are so haughty towards me,
for if I make appeal° to your mercy,
20 your *danger*° immediately has put me off:°
You are free and I am tightly bound.

In the sweet season my fortune is bitter;
The month of May has turned into winter;°
I find the nettle if I seek the rose:°
25 You are free and I am tightly bound.

37 heightens the confrontation between poetry and reality that we perceive in 36 both by identifying in more precise terms the source of the persona's expectation and by giving greater substantiality to the woman's very different point of view. In the first two lines, the persona's claim to his lady's love is based exclusively on expectations of behavior drawn from the poetry of *fin amour* rather than on worth or any personal attraction. His other statements are equally figurative in nature: he is excluded from her garden (8-10), May bars him from her company (15-16), and when he seeks "merci," he finds "danger" (19-20). The lady, by contrast, experiences the arrival of spring by taking pleasure in the blooming of the rose. Butterfield was the first to draw attention to the importance of this ballade and to its self-conscious use of

Balade 37

language ("French Culture," pp. 109-12) . But if I may quibble with her: She finds the rose enigmatic: "Is not the red rose normally a sign for love? . . . [The lady] can play fast and loose with metaphors, [but the persona] is tied to real emotion" (111). There is no tradition in which the rose serves as a metaphor for the object of a woman's desire, however, and it is the persona who invokes the metaphorical sense when, echoing 36.15, he refers to his quest of a "rose" in the second to last line (24). While the lady's conduct might well be a painful and paradoxical reminder of everything that the persona fails to achieve, her admiration for the flower appears to be quite literal, all the more to his frustration. All of her experience, in fact, takes place in this more literal register: however symbolic for the persona, her garden is real, and she even has a real chambermaid as her companion, the witness to the man's pleading in the second stanza, as opposed to his supposition that she is accompanied by "Danger" (20). The poem is built around that contrast between figurative and literal and between artifice and reality: she experiences the return of spring in very literal terms, and he is tied to convention and metaphor. In the envoy, he can express his frustration only by the same means, in a string of three formulae, each of which appears elsewhere in *50B* but that here, in its briefness, is reduced to a mere cliché (22-24). And the refrain, which in the first instance seems to be about only the separate degrees of their attachment to love, becomes a statement of how he is confined by the commonplaces of the language that he has inherited and she is not. "Vous estes franche et jeo sui fort lié [You are free and I am tightly bound]" (25). In this final instance, it sounds less like reproach than envy.

Like 40 and 46, this poem does not end with the narrator sending the ballade to his lady, but in all three cases, the lack of a direct exchange between them is expressive of their lack of communication at a much more important level. Here, our consciousness of the addressee makes us aware of an entirely different attitude both to their relation and to the language that the lover uses. Separating the lady's perspective from the persona's also separates the persona's from that of the poet, and in this case suggests a critical view of the entire poetic idiom around which the persona's complaints are shaped. This ballade does not cancel out those in which that gap between artifice and reality is treated more playfully nor those in which the same idiom is used for the expression of a serious commitment to love. Instead, it offers another of the many voices in the collection. But Gower's ability to distance himself from that idiom, both in 36 and 37 and in the more lighthearted examples, is important testimony to his own awareness of the nature and limitations of the language and the devices that he inherited.

2 *fin amour*. See the note to 7.1.

4 *show it greater joy*. DMF s.v. "chere," B.3 "faire/montrer chere," "Laisser paraître de la joie, de la bonne humeur [to show joy, good humor]." There are also contexts in which "grant chere" might signify "welcome" (DMF, loc.cit., C.2.a, "Faire grant chere à qqn," "Faire grant chere"), as evidently in 30.19 (see the note to that line). "Plus" functions as the comparative of "grant," and as Macaulay notes (1:467), "la" appears for the feminine indirect object. Less likely does this mean "hold it more dear." "Faire" + noun + "cher" can be used to mean "to cause something to be dear" (AND s.v. "faire¹," 8), as in MO 12840, but the normal expression for "to hold dear" was "tenir cher" (DMF s.v. "cher," II.A.1.b, II.A.2.b), as in MO 8907.

5 *with*. That is, "despite."

pleading. "Priere" is commonly used with reference to the lover's supplication. See the note to 24.8.

Balade 37

- 7 *free*. “Franc(he)” can suggest “noble, generous” as in 50.4, 23.22; *AND* s.v. “franc¹,” 3; *DMF* s.v. “franc,” adj., I.C; cf. “franchise” in 28.8 and 51.11. But opposed to “bound,” it bears its earlier and primary meaning, “free, unrestrained”; *AND*, loc.cit., 1; *DMF*, loc.cit., I.A, B. Machaut uses the word in the latter sense with reference to release from love in *Lou.* 252.9. Gower warns knights to remain “free” (“liber”) of love in *VC* 5.31.
bound. See the note to 15.3.
- 8 *a great many*. *AND* s.v. “plein¹,” a. “tut plein de(s), 1. many, all sorts of”; *DMF* s.v. “plein,” I.C.4. “*Tout plein de* + subst. ‘Beaucoup de.’”
- 9 *your private place*. In his glossary (s.v. “priver,” 1.541), Macaulay takes “privé” as a form of the verb meaning “to deprive,” thus “deprived of you,” modifying “jeo” with inversion of the conjunction and the modifying phrase (see the note to 6.6-7). This isn’t impossible, though such an inversion is much more common with an adverbial modifier or an object than with an adjective. But despite the lack of agreement in form (not uncommon in Gower’s French), it may be more consistent with the sense of the stanza to take “privé” as modifying one of the words in the preceding line. *AND*, *DMF*, and *MED* all provide numerous examples of the use of the adjective “privé” to mean “private,” as in “prive place,” which appears 9 times in *CA*, a sense that would work well with “parclose” but not well in the phrase “privé de vous.” In its less common use as a noun, it can mean “an intimate, a close friend” (*AND* s.v. “privé,” s., 1; *DMF* s.v. “privé,” A.1.b; *MED* s.v. “privē,” 3), but with reference to a location, it signifies a “privy” (*AND*, loc.cit., 3; *MED*, loc.cit., 2.) In brief, the available sources don’t provide any good solution, and on the basis of context alone (notably the line and a half that follows), I have taken “privé” as a noun referring exceptionally to the private place which is the lady’s garden. One has to wonder, though, if this should not instead be “prisé de vous,” “valued, esteemed by you,” modifying “flours” as in lines 3-4; see *AND* s.v. “preiser,” p[ast] p[articipe] as a[djective], “renowned, held in high esteem,” a verb that Gower uses in a similar sense in [51].17.
- 16 *from her bright banner*. That is, from her company, a common metonymy; cf. *MO* 6190, 6380, 8001, 9820, and Love’s banner in 27.9. See *DMF* s.v. “banniere,” A.4 and the many figurative expressions under C; also *MED* s.v. “banēr(e),” 6. “Blanche” might be “white,” but in heraldic use it can also mean “blank,” that is, without any markings (*DMF* s.v. “blanc,” I.B.2.c), or silvery and shining (*DMF*, loc.cit., I.D), though why May’s banner might be any of these is not completely clear.
- 17-18 Grammatically, these lines are as ambiguous in French as they are in English, signifying either “I think with regard to you rather more than I dare say about you” or “I think about you to a rather greater extent than I dare tell you.” For the former, the “plus qe” clause functions as an object of “pense,” as in this sentence cited in *DMF* s.v. “plus,” II.A, “Tu dis trop plus que tu ne sces! [you say much more than you know].” For the latter, the clause is adverbial, modifying “pense” (and should perhaps therefore be marked off by commas), and “penser de” serves where in Modern French we would say “penser à,” for which other examples are provided in *DMF* s.v. “penser,” I.A.2.b, I.B.1.a, I.C.2. For all that, the primary sense is surely the former: the persona explains why he cannot reveal what he is thinking in the lines that follow. Cf. *CA* 1.2105-06, “And to his tale an Ere he leide, / And thoghte more than he seide,” cited in Whiting M685, “To think More than one says (*varied*).”
- 19 *make appeal*. The translation, compelled by the context, is borrowed from Yeager, but it is not supported by any contemporaneous examples in our dictionaries. See *AND* s.v. “referir²”; *DMF* s.v. “referir”; *MED* s.v. “referren.” Gower uses the same verb reflexively six times in *MO* (in 1997, 2365, 4777, 15731, 19024, and 20200), but in varying senses. The closest is in 19024, “Au verité si m’en refiere,” which might well be “If I make appeal to the truth on this matter.” Rey, *Dict.Hist.* s.v. “référer” refers to the sense “s’en rapporter à qqn, à qqch. comme à une autorité, pour s’en prévaloir [to rely upon someone, something as to an authority, as a precedent]” emerging late in

the 15th-century. *OED* s.v. "refer" also cites as a sense of the underlying French verb "to submit or refer (something to someone for a decision) (15th cent.)." Gower's use in this line emerges somewhere in the intersection of these varying senses, and perhaps unknown to him, may have been somewhat before its time.

20 I leave "danger" untranslated as it seems to hover between the personification and the simple noun "disdain." See the note to 12.8.

has put me off. An apt translation from Macaulay's glossary s.v. "deslaier" (1:499), combining the notion of rejection with that of "delay." Cf. 27.12.

23 *The month of May has turned into winter.* Cf. 32.8-9, 40.26.

24 *I find the nettle if I seek the rose.* See the note to 36.15.