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Fair Welcome and the Temple of Priapus: Speakers and Readers as Autoeroticists and Voyeurs
in *The Romance of the Rose* and Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls*

1: Autoeroticism

Prominent among the themes of the 13th-century poem *The Romance of the Rose* is that of voyeurism. Denied physical possession of the rose, the speaker is nevertheless “very pleased to be able to stay so close to the rose that [he] could have touched it.” (*Romance* 43) The sexual undertones of the rose become more blunt later in the poem: in his second close contact with the rose the speaker describes how much “more beautiful and redder” it is than before (52); by the end of the poem he has “shaken the bud” and “scattered a little seed there [...] probing its very depths,” at this point moving beyond voyeurism to euphemized yet obvious sexual contact. (334) The striking sexual overtones, in effect, imbue the *Romance* with an element of pornography.

Given Geoffrey Chaucer's literary indebtedness to *The Romance of the Rose*, it is unsurprising that he draws on this same voyeuristic theme in his dream poetry. However, his agile imagination interrogates these themes rather than parroting them, taking them in a less idealized direction than does the *Romance*. The temple of Priapus in *The Parliament of Fowls* is dim, close and tawdry, not a shrine of desire, but of desire frustrated. This less rosy vision of sexuality is complicated by the fact that Chaucer's speaker is also a voyeur, gazing upon the half-naked body of Venus, and that he chooses to share the experience of his spying with the reader. The sharing of voyeuristic experiences in fact underlies much of both poems' treatments of sexuality; in effect (because the speakers have chosen to share their private glimpses of sex and nudity) they implicate the reader in the experience. That is, such scenes, which could be

handled by allusion, are really for the reader's benefit rather than the speaker's. In this light, Chaucer's decision to make the temple of Priapus so uncomfortable suggests a commentary on the medieval literary practice of what is effectively pornography. His motive, as I will show, is his interest in interpersonal relationships rather than courtly autoeroticism. Chaucer is attempting to move away from the mirror of Narcissus, so to speak, to a more interpersonal kind of narrative, and in so doing uses the concept of voyeurism as a tool to manipulate and instruct the reader.

Such autoeroticism as Chaucer questions is part and parcel of the *Romance of the Rose*. The speaker's love for the rose comes by way of the mirror of Narcissus; the Greek figure's mythic self-love is a strange framework for a relationship unless one supposes the speaker's feelings to be inwardly directed (i.e., self-directed or selfish). Also, the fact that the rose is a rose in the first place is significant, as in the myth of Narcissus the eponymous youth is turned into a flower for his self-obsession—the rose, in this light, can represent the speaker himself. Thereby the rose—and the courtly love the *Romance* purports it to represent—fades into the background, leaving only the speaker and his autoerotic feelings. Furthermore, the figure of Fair Welcome, who in the *Romance's* allegorical structure represents the maiden whose virginity the rose represents, is depicted as “a handsome and pleasant [...] young man,” stripping femininity of any sexual role in relation to the speaker and replacing it with a figure mirroring the speaker himself. (43) The *Romance* can easily be read as a story of self-obsession and lust rather than the instructive allegory in courtly life that it was received as. Even the *Romance's* second author, Jean de Meun, seems to have taken note of this and found the issue worth exploring, as he concludes the poem with the speaker “[breaking] the bark” and “plucking the rose,” turning the earlier coy voyeurism into what is arguably a rape. (334, 335) Chaucer noticed this as well.

The temple in the garden in Chaucer's *The Parliament of Fowls* is full of "syghes hote as fyr [...] which [...] were engendred with desyr," yet also with "sorwes [...] Com of the bitter goddesse Jelousye." (*Parliament* 103, 104) Chaucer appends to his exposé of the unhappy side of lust a depiction of Priapus as the "sovereyn" of the temple. (104) The god cuts a ridiculous figure, bedecked in flowers and "with his ceptre in honde". (104) In short, Chaucer chooses as the patriarch of his temple a chagrined, lewd figure whose only apparent recourse in frustration is to masturbate. At the same time, Venus lounges in a secluded, dim corner "naked fro the breste unto the hede." (104) Her benevolence, however, is arguable: all around the temple walls are hung "bowes y-broke", deliberately uncomfortable symbols of lost virginity. (104) As in the *Romance*, extreme self-love is juxtaposed with the loss of someone else's virginity. However, Chaucer takes care to make the temple of Priapus an eerie, disturbing place. His implication is that self-love is associated with rape (for the "bowes y-broke" surely did not enjoy being splintered in two). Given such a claim, one would expect an alternative; Chaucer happily provides one, illustrating it through the parliament of fowls itself.

The parliament's Nature-driven discussion of love and marriage is a counterpoint to the temple's description of the wrong kind of "love." In the fowls' debates over which tercelet eagle should wed the formel, various methods of arranging relationships are discussed, until Nature at last says, "she herself shal han her eleccioun"; that is, the formel shall choose for herself. (114) The fact that she chooses none of them for the present is significant in that it illustrates a view that to decline or postpone a proposal of marriage is permissible. Mutual feeling is the foundation of a proper courtship.

This is a counterpoint to the courtly ethics of *The Romance of the Rose*, which idealizes the sort of relationship that Chaucer mocks with the figure of Priapus. Chaucer, it should be

remembered, lived on the periphery of the court, and while the customs of the late fourteenth century were different than that of the late thirteenth, the *Romance* was still a hugely popular book. It is likely that Chaucer had some exposure to people engaged in courtly relationships; while it cannot be said that these relationships were anything like that depicted in the *Romance*, it is true that *The Parliament of Fowls* was written at approximately the time of King Richard II's marriage to Anne of Bohemia, and may be a commentary on the courtship with its three suitors. Chaucer's Nature, in giving the formel the power to choose, perhaps offers a pointed commentary on the courtship as Chaucer saw it from his position just outside the court. Enough of politicking, she seems to say; let the woman marry according to desire.

Thus Chaucer's comment on the *Romance* takes shape as a critique of desire: desire directed towards the self, or self-gratification, leads to the temple of Priapus. Whether desire can be any other way; that is, focused outward, is a question he does not answer. The best he can do is to depict the formel as a creature currently without desire. The solution of mutuality is merely implied.

However, the idea of mutuality and reciprocity is interesting to Chaucer. Throughout his work, from *The Book of the Duchess* to *The Canterbury Tales*, he explores interpersonal relationships: the relationship between the speaker and the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess*, issues of social class and courtship in *The Parliament of Fowls*, interactions and tensions between various social classes in *The Tales*. Whether this has anything to do with the way he depicts autoeroticism as a negative, dangerous thing is arguable; it is sure, however, that he has an interest in relationships.

And not the least of those is the relationship between text and reader.

2: Beyond Sexuality: The Reader, Voyeurism and Layers of Narrative

The narrative style of both poems—namely, the first person—complicates the question of voyeurism by the speakers' decisions to share their carnal glimpses with the reader. This sharing implicates the reader vicariously, through the act of reading. Thus the reader too becomes a voyeur. Jean de Meun saw this clearly, as his closing chapter of the *Romance of the Rose* is lush with obvious delight in its overt sexuality, and near the closing lines the speaker addresses the reader as “you.” (*Romance* 334) This “breaking the fourth wall” equates the reader and speaker as intimates; the retelling of this sexual experience has been to and for the reader.

Chaucer, naturally, is interested in this relationship. Jean de Meun's narrative choices underscore the fact that in effect, the reader is *always* a voyeur, peeping into narratives from the outside rather than participating. Even when invited, as is the reader of the *Romance*, the experience is secondhand. A poem cannot “happen to” its reader; the action is bounded into the very words of the poem and must be understood as part of a static construct, akin to a painting or illumination. Given this property, the author has total control over what the reader sees, and Chaucer is clearly interested in this. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, he experiments with altering the layers of the narrative, so that the framing stories drop out—first the dream-guide Scipio, and then the speaker himself—so that all that remains is the parliament; the speaker appears afterwards only as a guide to the fowls' rondel and in the closing stanza of the poem.

Beyond the formal experiments the *Romance* inspired him to, Chaucer extends the idea of autoeroticism, or narcissistic desire, into scholarship possibly distinct from sexuality. The speaker's reading of Cicero is the frame of the poem's narrative; moving from *The Dream of Scipio* to a dream of Scipio, the speaker is given a glimpse into the science of Love. As Scipio tells the speaker at the beginning of the dream vision proper, “Yet that thou canst nat do, yet

mayst thou see.” (*Parliament* 101) After the speaker’s adventures, he laments that he did not dream “som thing for to fare the bet,” that is, a concretely beneficial dream. Like Priapus, his vicarious, unfulfilled experience has left him frustrated.

Whether by “Love” Chaucer meant sexual relations or the emotion is unclear; this indistinctness complicates the discourse. (97) If by love he means sex, the reader is left with a commentary well summed up by the allegory of the temple of Priapus; however if he is referring to the emotional state, the poem is also critiquing the speaker’s solitary, academic pursuit of the question: what is love? As has been established, a reader cannot help being a voyeur, and so the speaker of the *Parliament*, studying love through books, ensnares himself in the framework of auto-obsession and frustration that Priapus and the speaker of the *Romance* find themselves caught in.

Chaucer’s reinterpretation of the *Romance of the Rose* reflects his affinity for nuanced, ambiguous and complex poems. His refusal to provide a clear conclusion to the *Parliament’s* argument vis-à-vis love and self-love gives the poem a sense of restraint, as well as a fitting dreamlike quality. His experiments with the poet’s and speaker’s relationship with the reader are echoed in other poems, such as *The Book of the Duchess*, another reinterpretation of the *Romance*, this time with the speaker having received the tale of the romance rather than having experienced it, and in *The Canterbury Tales*, which feature a multiplicity of narrators. This manipulation of poetic conventions highlights the power of the author, a power that was not privileged in the Middle Ages as it is today. All these suggest the development of an author who may be considered one of the first authors to embrace *auctoritas* in the modern vein.

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