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Chaucerian ‘Merciles Beaute’
Treated in a Newfangled Spirit

Toshinori HIRA

... for thy lady saugh nat thy distresse,
Therfore thow yave hir up...?

Lenvoj de Chaucer a Scogan

LOVES LIGE MAN

Regard was still in Chaucer’s day had of the traditional beliefs, ecclesiastic or aristocratic, while in reality the increasing interest in the material way of thinking of the newly-risen middle classes brought disrespect for the codes of old-world values. A court poet was expected to sing of love, divine or courtly, as in the artificial but flat lines of Gower’s ambitious Confessio Amantis 2 (i 9: I (i.e. the poet) ... / ...speke of thing is noght so strange, / Which every kinde hath upon honde, / And wherupon the world mot stonde, / And hath don sithen it began, / And schal whil ther is any man; / And that is love, of which I mene / To trete...).

Apart from ‘the love of Crist’ the court poet’s polite audience who had a fine ear for rhyme and his reader who was absorbed in ‘rymes’ 4 had intelligent interest in the traditional ideas of courtly love, in which could be recognized, in addition to the lover’s worship of his lady analogous to that of the classical or Christian deity, the feudal submission of the lover to his lady’s will. Guillaume de Lorris reveals himself as the god’s ‘man’ in the Roman de la Rose. The Middle English translation called the Romaunt of the Rose says: ‘...at youre (i.e. the god’s) biddyng, / I (i.e. the poet) wole me yelde in alle thyng. / To youre servyse I wol me take (II. 1945—1947).’

Having made a pledge of allegiance the poet, as a lover, ought to honour his lady and serve her as the god bids even if she never grants him a favour. The god says: ‘If thou canst bide in sufferaunce, / And serve wel withoute feyntise
(deceit), / Thou shalt be quyt of thyn emprise / With more guerdoun (reward)...
(ll.2946—2949).’ The Romaunt’s lines seem to consist of Chaucer’s metrical
phrases, which are two to the line.5 Chaucer also deserves well of the god of
Love. The eagle in the House of Fame makes a mollifying remark on Chaucer’s
unselfish devotion to the god in a conversational phrase-rhythm6: ‘... thou so
longe trewely / Hast served so ententyfly (attentively) / ... Cupido, / And faire
Venus also, / ... / And never-the-lesse hast set thy wit / ... / To make bookys,
songes, dytees (ditties), / In ryme, or elles in cadence, / As thou best canst, in
reverence / of Love, and of hys servantes eke, / ... / And peynest the to preyse
hys art (ll. 615—618, 620, 622—625, 627).’ ‘With dredful herte and glad
devocioun’ Chaucer again praises in an iambic rhythm with phrasal meters a
lady through the daisy symbolic of an object of his adoration7 in the B Prologue
to the Legend of Good Women: ‘So glad am I, whan that I have presence / Of it (i.e.
the daisy), to doon it alle reverence, / As she (i.e. a lady praised through the
daisy) that is of alle floures flour, / Fulfilled of al vertu and honour, / And evere
ilyke faire, and fressh of hewe; / And I love it... / .... / She is the clernesse and
the verray lyght / That in this derke world me wynt (directs) and ledeth. / The
erht in-with (in)my sorwfull brest yow dredeth / And loveth so sore that ye ben
verrayly / The maistresse of my wit, and nothing I (ll. 51—56, 84—88).’ The
caesuras which occur before ‘whan that (l. 51)’ and ‘to doon (l. 52)’ divide the
lines into two groups of words respectively, and the second half of line 51 and
the first foot of line 52 produe a phrase having four stresses. And a stress is
laid on the stressed syllable of the first foot of line 52. These lines quoted have
a fascinating flow of iambic rhythms in which join the conventionalized terms of
praise with a background of ‘gode’ thoughts of love, such as ‘of alle floures
flour,’ ‘the verray lyght,’ ‘maistresse.’8

The lady is pedestalled for her high social position and for her beauty and
goodness. Thus she is a ‘lady sovereyne’ worthy to be served. The lover is his
lady’s servant, beseeching her for mercy even though she is indifferent to his
courting. The royal tercel in the Parliament of Fowls, though with ‘hed en-
clyned and with ful humble cheere,’9 makes in a convincing speech phrase a
qualified assertion: ‘And syn that non loveth hire (i.e. the tercel’s mate) so wel
as I, / Al be she nevere of love me behette (promised), / Thanne oughte she be
myn though hire mercy, / For other bond can I non on hire knette (fasten), / Ne nevere for no wo ne shal I lette (cease) / To serven hire, how fer so that she wende (ll. 435–440).’ The life of the lover is at the mercy of his ‘emperesse’ or his ‘erthly god.’ The god of Love regards his servant’s love for her in the same light with his love for him.10 Alceste ‘the debonaire,’ ‘quene’ of the god (who is confused with Queen Anne),11 is identified with the daisy Chaucer worships in the B Prologue to the Legend. The god commands Chaucer to serve the ‘fresshe dayesye’ which the poet asserts is the god’s ‘relyke, digne and delytable.’ The courtly lover’s is a love for the deity. The lover as the god’s liegeman ought to love his lady. If the lover’s ‘wit is too ‘sharp’ to serve her he is to be condemned by the god for disobeying his commands. In reality Alceste intercedes with the god for Chaucer who was condemned by him for having held it folly to serve him and imposes upon the poet the penance of telling the glorious legends of good women ‘trewe in loving.’

I AM SO FAT

The Roundel entitled Merciles Beaute, which is included among Chaucer’s ‘Poems of Doubtful Authorship’ in the Cambridge Chaucer12 though Ian Robinson ascribes the authenticity of the Roundel to Chaucer,13 has three thirteen-line stanzas, riming abb abab abbabb, with five stresses falling normally on the second, fourth, sixth, eighth and tenth syllables. The first three lines in each stanza recur as a refrain at the end of the stanza and the refrain repeats two lines in the middle.14

Chaucer associates his roundels, in the Knight’s Tale (ll. 1511ff.), with Arcite’s praise of May and, in the Franklin’s Tale (ll. 943ff.), with Aurelius’s heart-rending sorrow. In the B Prologue to the Legend, at the same time, he includes his roundels among ‘many an ympne (hymn) on the god of Love’s ‘halydayes.’15

The ideas in the first two stanzas of the Roundel Merciles Beaute are courtly love conventions. The poet refers as his ‘lady sovereyne’ or his ‘erthly god’ to a lady by whose beauty he was suddenly enamoured of when she cast her eyes on him16 and whose beauty dispells pity from her heart (9: ...ye ben of my lyf...
and deeth the quene / 21: Allas! that Nature hath in you compassed / So greet beautee, that no man may atteyne / To mercy, though he sterve for the peyne). The second half of line 22 runs on to the first foot and the unstressed syllable of the second foot of the following line and line 23 is not divided into two balanced phrases,\(^1\) a caesura occurring between ‘To mercy’ and ‘though he sterve for the peyne.’\(^1\) The rhythmic phrase in lines 22–23 (‘that no man may atteyne / To mercy’) and the whole of the rest of line 23 have four metrical stresses. Similarly, the second half of line 14 and the first foot of the following line produce a phrase (14: So hath your beautee fro your herte chaced / Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne). Thus line 15 does not consist of two balanced phrases, ‘Pitee (l. 15)’ containing one metrical stress and the rest of the line four stresses. The rhythmic phrase in lines 14–15 (‘fro your herte chaced / Pitee’) and the whole of the rest of line 15 have four metrical stresses. ‘To mercy’ or ‘Pitee’ balances the rest of the line and a phrase-stress of line 23 or line 15 is on ‘peyne’ or ‘to pleyne.’ So the stress is placed on ‘To mercy’ or ‘Pitee.’\(^1\) The five-stress iambic lines of the first and second stanzas have trochaic substitution of the first or fifth foot.\(^1\) ‘sodenly (l. 1)’ is somewhat stiff but has a verbal effect on a wound which the poet received in his heart at the sight of his lady’s beautiful eyes and which he can not heal if she does not grant him her ‘grace’ (l: Your yen two slee me sodenly; / I may the beautee of hem not sustene, / So woundeth it thorought my herte kene. / And but your word wol helen hastily / My hertes wounde, while that hit is grene). On the other hand ‘Giltles’ as the first-foot trochee in line 17 represents a complaint about the god of Love’s law. The trochaic substitution causes irregularity to the regular iambic meter of this line\(^2\) (17: Giltles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced). It is to deny the rhythmic movement of the whole lines of the first and second stanzas as well. The tone of the small-fly poet’s liability for the god’s law or his pains in loving a merciless beauty in those lines is made rather critical by the words like ‘sodenly,’ ‘Pitee’ which have had some ironical meaning.\(^2\) In these lines the poet, instead of complaining about his lady’s ‘Daunger (l. 16),’ finds his gratification in her rejection of his service. His complaint against the god underlying the conventional complaint about the lady’s indifference appears in the third stanza. The poet delights to have escaped from the god’s custody: ‘Sin I fro Love escaped
am so fat, / I never thenk to ben in his prison lene; / Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene (ll. 27—29).’ In the lines of the last stanza is jaunty but rather a little humorous the iambic rhythm, which matches well with the poet’s delight in a departure from the god’s ‘lawe’ of love. Nevertheless his delight is not necessarily blasphemous; the god had freed the poet of his vassal duty to the lady, the poet having been fat as he grew old (34: Love hath my name ystrike out of his sclat (slate), / And he is strike out of my bokes clene / For evermo; [ther] is non other mene). If an ‘olde fole’ (like January in the Merchant’s Tale) loves a lady he should interpret a young lover’s pain as ‘childyssh vanytee’ and enlist her pity.23 The corresponding idea of the lover’s sinning against the god is found in the lines of the G Prologue to Chaucer’s Legend. Alceste refers in an innocent tone to Chaucer as a ‘renegat’ out of sympathy with the worship of Love. She says pretending not to know ‘wher he be now a renegat (l. 401)’ that‘...for that this man is nyce, / He may translate a thyng in no malyce, / But for he useth bokes for to make, / And taketh non hed of what matere he take (ll. 340—343).’ The poet makes himself an object of derision. Indeed Chaucer who, says the god, begins to be ‘dote’ when ‘his spirit fayleth would move his courtly audience or readers to laughter. He spoke amiss about a ‘trouthe in love’ heretical against the god’s ‘lawe’ in the Rose and Criseyde. His blasphemy (ll. 247ff.) is diluted with this ridiculous paradox. Rather defiant of the god is the Merciles-poet who asserts that he speaks just as he means. He speaks in a ratiocinative tone: ‘He (i.e. the god) may ...seye this and that; / I do no fors (not care), I speke right as I mene. / Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat, / I never thenk to ben in his prison lene (ll. 30—33).’ He finds out a valid reason for speaking just as he means; the god has released his fat servant from his duties bound to love his lady in honour of Love. In the Parliament the waterfowls, quite ignorant regarding the doctrines and veritable art of love, do not appreciate rightly what the ‘foules of rayyne’ mean. The duck sees no reason why ‘men shulde loven alwey causeles,’ and gainsays in a rebutting tone: ‘Who can a resoun fynde or wit in that? / Daunseth he murye that is myrtheles? / Who shulde recche (care) of that is recheles (ll. 591—593)?’ It is from the understandably human point of view of love that the duck sharply makes a critical remark upon conventionalized love.
Supposing Chaucer composed *Merciles Beaute*, its dating would be set at the period of the Petherton forestership when he was writing some fabliau tales of the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Pardoner’s Tale, the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, the Merchant’s Tale.²⁴ Possibly at this time he again revised the B Prologue to the *Legend*, omitting his words of a fervid but fulsome adoration of the daisy, behind the lines of which we see the worship of the Virgin or of his ‘lady sovereyne’ who might mean Alceste. Alceste presents Cupid as ‘a god’ or ‘a kyngh’ and the god Cupid could be identified with King Richard. Alceste might have been intended to represent Queen Anne by analogy with the position of the queen of god Cupid.²⁵ Whether Cupid represents King Richard and Alceste Queen Anne or not, Chaucer, released from the duties of his offices in London Customs, lived at Greenwich and at North Petherton. He must have felt himself free from being restricted to the palace of courtly tradition. However a solitary wilderness as dull as death at the end of the stream of grace, honour and worthiness might have borne heavily on him. And he presumably became deepened in the impression that he was rewarded, after all is said and done, with no good fruit. It is not known how far the king concerned himself with Chaucer’s appointment as justice of the peace for Kent, but his relinquishment of the controllerships, as is presumed, was brought about by the animosity of the Duke of Gloucester, Richard’s enemy.²⁶ Chaucer owed to King Richard the office of clerk of the king’s works to which he was appointed after the king’s reassertion of the royal authority. His withdrawal from the clerkship in 1391 was accompanied by the Petherton forestership which he was to hold till 1398. If Chaucer’s cult of the daisy had been undertaken to please his patron²⁷ the poet might hardly have expected to live apart from ‘the stremes hed / Of grace and worthynesse’ in his advancing years. In *Lenvoy de Chaucer a Scogan* the poet wearily complains: ‘...shal we for oure labour han no mede (l. 33).’ His dwelling at Greenwich or North Petherton which new duties necessitated seems to have driven him to recklessness. He asks for ‘swich thing as in the lawe of love forbode is (l. 17).²⁸ Admonishing young Scogan not to ‘dyffye’ at the god of Love the adviser asks his acquaintance who kneels ‘at the stremes hed / Of
Chaucerian ‘Merciles Beaute’ Treated in a Newfangled Spirit

grace’ to keep him remembered in the minds of the king and princes. He refers to the god’s displeasure with the ‘Loves servauntz’ like Chaucer or Scogan who flouted at the god with whom the king might be identified and says he intends ‘never of slep to wake my muse / That rusteth in my shethe stille in pees (ll. 38 – 39)’ although he ‘put hir (i.e. his Muse) forth in prees (l. 40)’ while he was young. He lives in ‘solytarie wildernesse and does not devote himself to his writing. Chaucer whose name was ‘ystrike’ out of the god’s ‘sclat,’ desires to have a ‘mede for his labour’ in the king’s court. His intention is concealed in this advisory Envoy.

The Merciles-poet also presents himself as an old man who, although he was relieved of the burden of the god’s service, might have felt himself neglected or might presumably have asked for his lord’s ‘guerdoun’ as is forbidden in the service of love.

NOTES

1 Chaucer’s Works are quoted from the edition of F. N. Robinson, Boston, 1957.
6 Ibid., p.179.
8 See D. Everett, Essays on Middle English Literature, Oxford, 1959, p.142.
9 Cf. Parliament of Fowls, ll.570 – 574.
10 See Griffith, op. cit.
11 See Bernard L. Jefferson, ‘Queen Anne and Queen Alcestis’ in Chaucer, ed. E. Wagenknecht, pp. 405 – 413.
12 Chaucer’s Works, p.542.
15 B Prologue, ll. 422 – 423.
16 See the Knight’s Tale, ll. 1096 – 1100.
19 See Robinson, op. cit., p.64.
22 See Robinson, op. cit., p.41.
23 Cf. the Merchant's Tale, ll. 1850–1854.
25 See Jefferson, op. cit.
27 See B Prologue, ll. 496–497.
29 See B Prologue, ll. 431–432.

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