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Deadly Words, Captive Imaginations

Women and Poetic Creation in Jean Froissart's *Prison Amoureuse*

Jean Froissart's *Prison Amoureuse* (c. 1372), a courtly narrative by an author better known today for his historical works, is very much a poet's poem. The most noteworthy human relationship in this self-reflexive tale is the literary friendship between the poet and his male patron, and the traditional romantic intrigue takes a back seat to the story of the book's composition. Flos, the narrator-poet, and Rose, his patron, exchange a series of poems and letters that Flos eventually compiles into a book—the *Prison* itself. Meanwhile, the female figures of the *Prison* are relegated to its margins: the two unnamed ladies whom Flos and Rose love make brief appearances, and a smattering of the book's allegorical and mythological figures are female, but the *Prison*'s main concern would appear to be the male characters and their collaborative literary project.

The *Prison*'s lack of prominent female characters might seem to indicate that the book's subject, literary creation, is for Froissart the domain of men. However, this essay will argue that such is not the case. Rather than excluding women from the literary process, the *Prison* in fact portrays them as having creative powers that are by turns helpful and threatening to the male writers. Both Flos's and Rose's ladies compose poetry, and both have the potential to contribute to the success of the men's literary project by adopting the roles of reader and critic.¹ However, when these women misread, refuse to read, or adopt independent voices that run counter to the male poet's, they pose a distinct threat. The *Prison* makes it clear both that feminine creativity can be harnessed in the service of a male-authored book, and that it must be kept under strict control, "captured" in much the same way as

the male poet harnesses the feminine principle of imagination in order to imprison it in his text.

I. Deadly Words: misreading and refusing to read

Two poems in women's voices bracket the text of the *Prison*, the first sung by Flos's lady, the second composed by Rose's. Within the space framed by these parallel compositions, the two women perform acts of reading, misreading and literary commentary in scenes that sketch out the range of their creative functions vis à vis the two male writers. These scenes, while brief in terms of the overall length of the *Prison*, nonetheless demonstrate both the importance and the dangers of women for writers.

The *Prison*'s first episode involves a poem sung by Flos's lady, in a scene that showcases not only her role as a reader of Flos's work, but also her own creative abilities. We learn that Flos has composed a virelai about his sufferings in love (ll. 273–326).² His lady hears of the virelai, asks for a copy, learns it, and sings it—a success for the poet (ll. 337–42). However, soon afterwards the lady does something that upsets Flos greatly. At a dance, when his virelai is sung by a young lady, his lady immediately sings another virelai as if in response.

Mes a painnes peut il fin prendre,
Quant ma dame en volt un reprendre
Qu'onques mes je n'avoie oï. (ll. 421–23)

[But it (my virelai) was scarcely finished when my lady wanted to take up another one that I had never heard before.]

The virelai sung by the lady, in a first person feminine voice, expresses the speaker's happiness at seeing her lover downcast, "because he takes joy and delight [in melancholy]" (l. 438). The song that his lady sings casts Flos into deep despair, for reasons that bear a closer look. As he explains:

Li oï par tres grant revel
Chanter un virelai nouvel.
Bien le glosai, mieuls l'entendi:
Elle paia seck et rendi
A celi qui pour l'amour d'elle
Fu fes et q'une damoiselle

*Eut chanté. Trop fort me reprens,
Quant pour s'amour ensi m'esprens.
Lors est elle, ce dist, moult lie
Quant je sui en merancolie,
Et qu'elle me feroit grant tort
Se j'avoie grasce ou confort.
Ce sont parolles pour morir! (ll. 505–17; emphasis mine)*

[I heard her sing a new *virelai* with great merriment. I interpreted it well and understood it better: *she paid back and replied to that (virelai) that was made for love of her, and that a young lady had sung*. I am greatly offended, since I burn like this with love for her. Now she says that she is very happy because I am melancholy, and that she would do me wrong were she to accord me grace or comfort. These are deadly words!]

The italicized portion of this passage has been subject to a surprising misinterpretation. In his edition of the *Prison*, De Looze translates these lines as “she did this to remunerate and in recompense for a poem another man had composed and which a young maiden had sung.”³ This translation, apparently, leads De Looze to the following seductive but unfounded view: “in the *Prison Amoureuse* [. . .] [Froissart] depicts the narrator as jealous not because the lady he wants may have other men, but because she might have other (men’s) poems; he is miffed when she sings another’s *virelai*.”⁴ However, there is no “other man” in question in the original text: “celi” (l. 509) refers not to a person, but to Flos’s *virelai*, as the two relative clauses modifying it make clear: “that [thing] that was made for love of her, and that a young lady had sung.” The lady is responding to Flos’s poem, not recompensing another poet. Thus, Nouvet pinpoints the true importance of the lady’s *virelai* when she writes: “Devenu à son tour poète lyrique, [la dame] répond au poème [du narrateur] par un *virelai* où elle déclare vouloir le laisser à la ‘mélancolie’ qui lui procure tant de plaisir.”⁵ Flos’s displeasure, then, is due to the fact that he understands the *virelai* sung by his lady as an unsympathetic response to the *virelai* that he made for her, sung immediately beforehand by a young lady. While Flos’s *virelai* complains of his lady’s lack of pity and of his own suffering and pain, the lady’s puts a new spin on the situation by explaining that, since melancholy suits her lover well (l. 433) and does not even prevent him from leading a joyous life (l. 445), she sees no reason to have pity on him. Flos takes offense at

the apparent suggestion that his melancholy is not deeply felt, and goes on to protest that his next poem will *prove* to her how much he suffers:

Mes je jur, se jamés je cante
Ou je fai virelai nouvel,
Soit par courous ou par revel,
J'en ferai et chanterai un
Si entendable et si commun
Qu'elle pora bien percevoir
Se c'est a faute ou s'est a voir
Que merancolie me touche. (ll. 526–33)

[But I swear, if I ever sing or compose a new virelai, either in anger or in merriment, I will make and sing one so understandable and accessible that she will well be able to tell whether it is true or false that melancholy affects me.]

Since Flos's problem is that his lady has missed the import of his poem, the solution he envisions is to make another, so "understandable and accessible" that even she cannot fail to grasp his message.⁶

This incident expresses both the crucial place of women in the consumption and transmission of poetry, and the dangerous power that such a place affords them. What marks the initial success of Flos's virelai is the fact that his lady learns and sings it (l. 342). At the dance, Flos specifies that only women, both *dames* and *damoiselles*, are singing (ll. 405, 409). In such a world, it is clear that the success of a song is dependent on its reception by a group of female consumers; conversely, a song's misinterpretation could indeed be "deadly" to the poet.⁷ But are the words of the lady's virelai "deadly" because they condemn Flos to a death from lovesickness, or because they negate and "kill" his poem through misinterpretation? Who is actually guilty of misreading here, the lady or Flos himself? And, if the lady has "become a lyric poet" as Nouvet claims, is she the same kind of poet as Flos?

In fact, the *Prison* stops just short of presenting Flos's lady as a poet in her own right. Nowhere does Flos say whether or not he believes that his lady composed this virelai, although he does state that he has never heard it before and that it is "new." The virelai itself emphasizes the female speaker's action of singing, "qui me fait dire et chanter" (l. 459), but it does not mention its own composition, only

its own enunciation. The lady's status as singer and performer would thus seem to take precedence over her possible status as poet. Yet, even if she has not made the *virelai*, Flos clearly believes that she uses it to express herself: his grief and shock are based on his conviction that the ideas the *virelai* expresses are his lady's own, and that the first-person voice is hers. If the lady is a poet, then she is a different sort of poet from Flos: we never see her at work at her writing table, but then we never see Flos singing in public.

What is particularly intriguing about Flos's analysis of the lady's *virelai* is his immediate identification of the speaker in the *virelai* with his lady, and of the lover described in the *virelai* with himself. He sees the lady's *virelai* as a transparent message expressing the feelings of the woman who sings it: "*she* says that she is very happy because *I* am melancholy." However, Flos's haste to identify the voice speaking *in* his lady's song with the performer *of* that song may be misguided. After all, the *virelai* composed by Flos in a first-person masculine voice has just been performed by a young lady. This apparent interpretive blunder on the part of the overwrought Flos signals that he himself, rather than the lady, may be guilty of misreading. Indeed, he retains a trace of doubt about the correct interpretation of the lady's *virelai*:

Puet estre que li virelés
 Qui fu chantés a plains eslés
 Ne fu pour moi ne fes ne dis. (ll. 557–59)

[Perhaps the *virelai*, which was sung so loudly, was not made or performed for me.]

Flos remains unsure, not only whether his lady has understood his *virelai*, but also whether he has understood hers. As a form of communication, it would seem that such an exchange of poems leaves much to be desired.

Significant for its position at the beginning of the text, this episode marks a deliberate turning aside from the possibility of a literary dialogue between the lovers.⁸ Upset by his lady's *virelai*, Flos sulks until, as he says, love sends him "a way of forgetting" his pains (l. 662) in the form of a letter from a male admirer calling himself Rose. The literary correspondence that develops between Rose and Flos allows the

latter to “forget” the very unsatisfactory poetic dialogue with his lady. Rose replaces Flos’s lady, not because he represents a new romantic interest, but because the lady’s function has from the beginning been literary rather than romantic.

As this episode suggests, if the *Prison* chooses two men as its principal writer figures, this does not imply that women lack creative talent so much as that productive literary communication between the sexes is nearly impossible. Such a theory finds its confirmation later in the *Prison*, when a parallel to the misreading committed by Flos’s lady arises, in the form of a refusal to read by Rose’s lady. While the episode involving Flos’s lady concerned efforts to establish a poetic dialogue and was recounted in verse by Flos, here the subject is an effort to initiate an exchange of letters, recounted in prose by Rose. Attempting to begin a correspondence with his lady, Rose sends her an initial letter in which he specifically asks her to write back to him (“voelliés m’ent, si tant m’adagniés, rescrire,” p. 58; [please write back to me, if you deign to]). A few days later, when the lady sees Rose, she hands him a letter that he takes for a reply to his. As he says:

Je pris la lettre liement et cuidai de premiers que ce fust une lettre que elle eüst rescripte; si le boutai en mon sein en grant desir de savoir quel cose il y avoit dedens escript. Si me parti de le place au plus briefment que je peus et, en moi issans dou lieu, le pris et ens regardai. Et quant je vi que c’estoit la lettre que je li avoie envoiëe, si fui forment pensieus. (p. 60)

[I took the letter happily, and at first I thought it was a letter that she had written back to me, so I put it next to my heart with a great desire to know what was written in it. Then I left that place as quickly as I could and, as I was going out, I took the letter and looked into it. And when I saw that it was the letter I had sent to her, I was very depressed.]

While Flos’s virelai receives a disconcerting and potentially “deadly” response, Rose’s attempt at an epistolary dialogue instead results in silence: there is no response. This lack of response, like the virelai sung by Flos’s lady, defies interpretation. The puzzled Rose asks Flos whether he can decipher the situation: “I pray you that you give me your opinion and write back to me by the present messenger, according to your ideas, what it seems to you” [“je vous pri que vous en voelliés avoir avis et moi rescrire par le porteur de ces presentes sus vostre ymagination qu’il vous en semble,” p. 60].

The refusal by Rose's lady to respond is also a refusal to read, or at least to acknowledge having read. Such a refusal has literary implications that are especially significant within the symbolic world of the *Prison*. As De Looze has shown, what distinguishes the *Prison*'s vision of literary creation from that of other self-referential *dits* of its time is its insistence that interpretation is itself an act of creation, that a text is always an intertext.⁹ Here, the lady's refusal to engage in interpretation stifles the writer's power of speech. Immediately before receiving his own letter back from his lady, Rose finds that he has "lost all his words" in her presence:

Je cuidoie moult bien parler et remonstrer ma besongne, car pour ce estoi la trais,
mais soudainement je fui si souspris que je perdi et oubliai tout mon pourpos.
(p. 58)

[I thought that I would be able to speak very well and explain what I wanted, for that was why I had come there, but suddenly I was so stunned that I lost and forgot all my words.]

Rose's loss of speech will be allegorized later in the poem. In a dream sequence written by Rose, the lover loses a battle because "Avis" (counsel, speech) deserts him at a crucial moment. Flos, glossing Rose's text, explains that this battle represents the "amorous war" between lover and lady, because the lover loses the power of speech when faced with his lady.

J'entens par Avis qui se parti de vostre compagnie et se mist ou confort de vestres ennemis, le sentement de parler que vous perdés quant vous estes en le presence de vostre dame. (p. 202)

[I understand Avis, who left your company and aided your enemies, to mean the ability to speak, which you lose when you are in the presence of your lady.]

Just as Rose saves Flos from a potentially destructive poetic dialogue with his lady, so Flos is able to save Rose from the loss of speech (*avis*) that his lady's silence creates. Lacking a response from his lady, Rose requests instead a gloss on the situation from Flos, using the key word *avis*: "je vous pri que vous en voelliés avoir *avis*" (please form an opinion/ speech about this, p. 60). As the terms of Rose's request imply, only an interlocutor can restore to the tongue-tied lover the speech (*avis*) that he has lost. Flos's responding *avis* in the form of

a letter once again allows the dialogue to continue by bypassing the intractable lady.

Flos's and Rose's problems imply that the male writer requires, above all else, a receptive female audience. Rose's situation in particular recalls a scene in another of Froissart's *dits*, *L'Espinette Amoureuse*. There, the narrator attempts to communicate his love for a lady by inserting a poem between the pages of a romance that he lends to her. When the lady returns the romance, he finds his ballade exactly where he put it, and is left speculating about what this means.¹⁰ In this episode, as in the episode Rose recounts, the lover wishing to initiate dialogue with his lady is instead confronted with his own text returned to him unchanged, but indecipherable precisely *because* unchanged. The poet's text is not fully legible, even to him, until it has found a reader.

The poet's specific dependence on female readers, and the simultaneous danger that their misreading may pose to him, surface yet again in a third scene of the *Prison*.¹¹ Out for a ride, Flos encounters his lady and a group of young women who mischievously steal the letters and poems he has received from Rose out of his purse. In the romp that follows, the poet attempts to regain his papers while being "pushed, shaken, pulled and grabbed" (ll. 1133–34). At last, the ladies agree to give him back his letters in exchange for "the newest song that he has made or heard from someone else" (ll. 1152–53). When Flos's lady opens the letters and sees Rose's ballade and virelai, it is agreed that these two poems will serve as ransom for the letters. However, since verse and prose are written together on the same parchment, separating them demands a delicate operation. Flos's lady literally dismembers the text, using the diamond in her ring to slice poems away from prose "without making any other cuts" in the letters (l. 1188). Handing the mutilated pages back to Flos, she announces significantly "take your part; here is ours" (l. 1191). She and the other women then fall to circulating the poems that they have acquired among themselves:

La furent monstrees et dittes
Et copiies et escriptes
En grant joie et en grant revel. (ll. 1195–97)

[There they were shown and read aloud, copied and written, in great joy and merriment.]

Critics have read this episode in two very different ways. On the one hand, McGrady offers an appreciation of the light-hearted tone and erotic suggestiveness of the romp, in which the women investigate the contents of Flos's waist pouch and he in turn threatens to retrieve his stolen letters from within their bodices.¹² On the other hand, De Looze sees a disquieting undercurrent of eroticized violence in the scene, and argues that the lady's dismembering of the text with her ring is reminiscent of castration.¹³ Whichever of these interpretations one accepts, the fact remains that, as Cerquiglini-Toulet points out, this scene testifies to a "crisis of invention: there is a paucity of poems, since theft, ransoming and fines occur."¹⁴ Furthermore, it seems significant that all of these literary highway robbers are women, just as all of the singers at the dance in the opening scene were women. In the world of the *Prison*, women are consistently those who make poems circulate: in the first episode, by singing them publicly; here, by showing and reading them to each other, then copying them down.

Yet women's roles as literary purveyors are precisely what make them dangerous to the poet. De Looze has demonstrated that "one of the dominant concerns of the *Prison amoureuse* [is] how to control the dissemination and distribution of the literary text."¹⁵ Here, women constitute a disseminating force beyond the poet's control, for, as Flos's lady remarks, she and her friends can easily get the better of Flos ("on voit bien que nostre est la force" [it's easy to see that we are stronger] l. 1149). This uncontrollable feminine strength is sexualized, since the lady proposes demanding a poem as ransom literally "before they rape" Flos ("ainçois qu'on l'efforce," l. 1150). Insofar as the literary dissemination depicted here is beyond the poet's control, it would seem to constitute a game of textual rape, to which the poet may good-naturedly assent, but in which he apparently has little choice.

McGrady's argument that the romp is sexually enjoyable to the poet is well taken as far as the literal level of the story is concerned: Flos does indeed say that he is "light of heart" after the encounter.¹⁶ However, one of the *Prison*'s principal intertexts suggests that another, darker level of meaning underlies the scene: the women who laughingly rip Flos apart ("detirer," l. 1134) recall the screaming maenads who dismember Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹⁷ The maenads are able to kill Orpheus only because their shouts and clam-

or drown out his enchanting song: are Flos's lady and her band similarly deaf to the true charms of poetry? Insofar as their separation of poems from letters defaces the very text that they covet, Froissart suggests that they are. Cerquiglini-Toulet has argued that the papers stolen by the ladies are the type of a "lyrical book," similar to the *Prison* itself, in which "the poems are inseparable from the material of the letters, themselves enclosed within a *loiiere*, a pouch, which is also a tie (*lien*)."¹⁸ By cutting poems apart from letters, dividing the text—incidentally along gender lines—into "their own" share and the poet's, the ladies dismember the book just as the maenads dismember the poet. Their passionate love of poetry goes hand in hand with a disregard for the integrity of a composite text similar to the *Prison* itself. The necessary condition for a poem's success—its dissemination by feminine voices—here seems to come at the price of a book's dismemberment.

In the scenes cited thus far, the *Prison* consistently proposes the same solution to the problems that female readers pose: Rose and Flos must bypass their difficult ladies and turn to each other, becoming each other's readers and critics in a mutually beneficial creative process. Nevertheless, at least one episode of the *Prison* suggests that it is unwise to write women out of the literary equation altogether. In Rose's allegorical dream, the crucial loss of Avis (speech) discussed above comes about because the dreamer fails to request the help of Avis's mother Atemprance (moderation). Atemprance's assistance is spurned by the dreamer's male followers specifically because she is a woman. As two of the dreamer's men, Hardement and Desir, declare:

[. . .] Quoi qu'il en aviegne,
 Tout y ariens honte et diffame,
 Se par le conseil d'une fame
 Nous couvenoit user, qui sommes
 Tant de nobles et vaillans homes. (ll. 2493–97)

[Whatever happens, we would all have shame and infamy if we were obliged to follow the advice of a woman, we who are such noble and valiant men.]

It is when faced with this rejection that Avis deserts the dream narrator to join his mother and fight on the side of the dream narrator's

enemies. When the dream narrator loses and becomes the prisoner of Atemprance, revealed to be a powerful lady, he recognizes that his loss is directly due to his failure to seek her help as an ally (ll.2930–33; 2883–84). In other words, his followers' belief that "war is men's business" leads directly to his defeat. The dream allegory makes it clear that the lover's loss of speech is not only occasioned by a lady, but is directly related to a failure to seek out a lady's help. In this episode at least, the *Prison* appears to regard Flos's and Rose's failures to engage their ladies in literary dialogue with a critical eye.

It is notable, then, that the *Prison*'s first successful literary exchange involving a lady occurs within this same dream allegory. The imprisoned dreamer (aka Rose) sends his lady letters and a *complainte*; in return, the lady sends him letters and two virelais that she has written. This literary correspondence has a practical function in that it will be essential to the dreamer's eventual release from prison. In his poem, the dreamer asks his lady to request the help of the eagle, who will arrive with his birds to burn the countryside and rescue him (ll. 3036–41; 3098–3105; 3116–21). This is in fact what happens at the end of the dream: the lady has apparently delivered the dreamer's message, because the eagle arrives, and the scenarios envisioned in the dream narrator's *complainte* become a reality. The poem accomplishes its purpose, but only through its proper reception by the lady. Although the lady is crucial to this exchange, it is also noteworthy that she serves as an intermediary rather than as the primary recipient of the poetic message: her function is to mediate between the dreamer and the eagle.

In a similar fashion, Rose's lady plays a constructive part near the end of the *Prison*, but her role remains auxiliary to the primary literary relationship shared by Flos and Rose. This sequence begins when Rose sends Flos a ballade that his lady has composed. Emphasizing the unusual fact that his lady is indeed capable of writing a good poem, Rose tells Flos not to be surprised: "Dou bien faire ne vous voellies mie esmervillier, car elle est bien propisce de faire ce et plus grant cose" (Don't be surprised that it is well written, for she is quite able to do this and even greater things, p. 224). Flos examines the ballade with interest. Like Rose, he dwells on the female authorship of the poem, stating that it "renews his joy" (l. 3716) specifically because it comes from "the mouth of a lady" (l. 3717). The ballade itself

reads like the best possible explanation of a difficult lady's behavior: although the lady has never encouraged her lover, she has decided that she will have pity on him now.

The ballade composed by Rose's lady, positioned near the end of the text, forms a pendant to the virelai sung by Flos's lady near the beginning; these two opposing models of feminine poetic discourse bracket the *Prison*. Rose's lady offers *merci* while Flos's lady challenges the very idea that lovers desire *merci*; the former "renews Flos's joy" while the latter casts him into despair; and the text emphasizes Rose's lady's authorial agency but Flos's lady's performance. It is perhaps this sort of parallelism through opposition that Flos has in mind when he says that the poem by Rose's lady makes him think of his own lady (l. 3743).

Once Flos and Rose encounter this productive feminine poetic discourse, their own mode of literary creation attains a new level. Rose's lady is directly responsible for the compilation by Flos of the book that will become the *Prison*. When the lady takes an interest in the two men's correspondence, Rose asks Flos to put together the book specifically "for his lady's information and at her request" ("par l'information et requeste de li," p. 222). Rose's lady then becomes the first reader of sections of the *Prison* as they are being compiled. She keeps Rose's and Flos's correspondence for a long time in order to read it "at her leisure" (p. 230), then asks to have copies made so that she can continue to reread the letters. When she reads one of Flos's longer compositions, the mythological story of Pynoteüs and Neptisphelé, she "imagines a new matter" that should be added to it in the form of a gloss. (p. 232) In this way, her reading and commentary add another layer of complexity to the *Prison* as it is being created.

In these final scenes, then, we see Rose's lady successfully engaging in the kind of literary collaboration that Flos might have expected of his own lady: reading, glossing and expanding rather than misreading and dismembering, and writing verse that is sympathetic to the male character's suit rather than otherwise. The contributions of Rose's lady are not an afterthought, but the final catalyst to the two men's work. The text makes it clear that without her insistence, questioning and commentary, the *Prison* would never have become a book. However, Rose's lady always remains a receptor, rather than a disseminator, of literary works. Instead of performing in public, she reads in private; when she composes a poem, she communicates it to

Rose alone rather than to an assembled audience, and it is Rose who takes the initiative of sending her poem on to Flos. This textual discretion is what distinguishes Rose's lady from Flos's, and is the crucial detail that keeps the former's literary enthusiasm from becoming a threat.

II. Rebellious Images: Neptisphele and Toute Belle

The *Prison*'s deeply ambivalent portrayal of creative women as at once necessary and dangerous to the poet is in part a reaction to another work in which a creative woman plays a pivotal role—Guillaume de Machaut's *Voir Dit*. Like the *Prison*, the *Voir Dit*, written some six years earlier, purports to document its own composition by tracing a collaboration between a poet and a patron. However, while the *Prison*'s patron is a man, the patron figure in the *Voir Dit* is a young woman called Toute Belle, and the relationship that she shares with the poet is erotic as well as literary. Flos's lively and independent lady, good at singing, possibly a poet, and certainly a lover of poetry, would vividly recall Toute Belle to Froissart's audience. Like Flos's lady, Toute Belle is a voracious consumer who constantly demands new works from her lover-poet, and who constitutes a potential hazard as an over-enthusiastic disseminator of texts. The narrator of the *Voir Dit* repeatedly fears that she may be showing his works to others before they are ready to be circulated;¹⁹ the rumors that she is showing his letters to everyone she knows seem to bother him just as much as the rumors that she may be unfaithful to him.²⁰ Nevertheless, his ability to continue writing is dependent on his continued dialogue with her. This is why, at one point, her injunction that he not write to her renders him unable to write at all.²¹ For the *Voir Dit* narrator, texts prove impossible to fabricate without the "matière" provided him by his lady.²²

In the *Prison*, Froissart adopts the *Voir Dit*'s premise of literary correspondence about love, but removes Toute Belle from the center of his text, replacing her with a male patron.²³ Nonetheless, the question that Toute Belle raises, that of the enclosure of a female character's seemingly independent voice within a narrative text, is the subject of the *Prison*'s central mythological episode, the tale of Pynoteüs and Neptisphele. A closer look at this episode reveals not only a specific reference to Toute Belle, but the symbolic stakes behind the *Prison*'s portrayals of creative women.²⁴

The tale of Pynoteüs and Neptisphele is a pseudo-Ovidian myth written by Flos at Rose's request. The hero of the story, Pynoteüs, is like Pygmalion in that he creates an image that miraculously comes to life. However, unlike Pygmalion's statue, Pynoteüs' creation is in fact a re-creation: after his beloved Neptisphele is killed by a lion, he decides to create an image that will resemble her in every way. As he says,

Neptisphele ne rarai mes
Mes j'en ferai bien une tele. (ll. 1689–90)

[I will never have Neptisphele back, but I can certainly make a woman like her.]

The fact that this tale focuses on a moment of re-creation rather than creation is appropriate to the *Prison*'s insistence on glossing and re-writing as the highest form of literary invention.²⁵ However, this is a re-creation that ends up taking an unexpected turn, thanks to an unpredictable woman who turns out to have a mind of her own.

The moment when Pynoteüs' image awakens contains a subtle yet significant reference to the *Voir Dit*. Pynoteüs prays to Phoebus, asking him to infuse a laurel leaf with his power (ll. 1739–40), and it is by means of this leaf, placed on the image's mouth, that Pynoteüs' creation comes to life (ll. 1919–25).²⁶ The image of a leaf placed on the lady's mouth also figures in a scene in the *Voir Dit*. In that text, the narrator, a friend whom he calls his secretary, and Toute Belle are sitting in an orchard. When Toute Belle falls asleep on the narrator's lap, the secretary teasingly places a leaf on the mouth of the sleeping woman and invites the narrator to kiss it. When the narrator begins to do so, the secretary snatches the leaf away and the narrator kisses the lady's mouth instead, awakening her and provoking a rebuke.²⁷

Despite the obvious differences in tone between these two scenes, the leaves, placed in the same position, have a similar symbolic function and provoke similar results. Because a *feuille*, or leaf, is also a leaf of paper, in each case it marks the literary status of the transaction that takes place. In the *Prison*, the divine fire of Phoebus, god of poetry, must enter into the poet's page in order to bring the poet's creation to life.²⁸ In the *Voir Dit*, the narrator is invited to kiss a "page" rather than his lady's mouth, emphasizing the textual basis of their romance.²⁹ In both cases, the fact that the lady's mouth is covered with the poet's page/leaf is significant: both Pynoteüs' image and

Toute Belle are creations of the poet, and the words that issue from their mouths are the poets' words. Yet this is not where the story ends. Instead, the leaf serves to rouse the woman who, far from being docile, immediately changes the direction of the scene, notably refusing the sexual role in which the poet has placed her. Toute Belle upbraids the narrator for his kiss, calling him "outrageus" and asking him if he can't think of some other way to amuse himself.³⁰ Pynoteüs' image jumps up and, discovering that she is naked, covers herself with her hands (ll. 1924–28). She then begins to speak, and we are treated to a surprising revelation.

Inexplicably, the image that Pynoteüs made as a Neptisphelé look-alike turns out to be Neptisphelé herself. We learn this when she speaks, expressing concern about her friends and asking to be taken to her sister (ll. 1936–41) and the people in her household (l. 1951). Neptisphelé's words emphasize the human relationships that prove her identity. Surprisingly, these are all relationships that have nothing to do with Pynoteüs, whom she recognizes but for whom she seems to have little concern. Only after she has mentioned her friends and her sister does Neptisphelé tell Pynoteüs that she has awakened "for his love" ("pour vostre amour sui esvillie," l. 1949). This is a statement that is ambiguous in the original: has she awakened "because of the effects of Pynoteüs' love" (emphasizing his agency) or "in order to have his love" (emphasizing her agency)?³¹ In either case, it is telling that Neptisphelé does not say that that Pynoteüs has awakened her, but simply that she has awakened (*sui esvillie*).

Pynoteüs, for his part, seems stunned to discover that his creation is not "his" after all: "Neptisphelé, is that you?" he demands incredulously (l. 1946). Unlike Pygmalion, who keeps his docile creation all for himself, Pynoteüs gives this too-real Neptisphelé back to her father. The latter recognizes his daughter, not by her appearance, the work of Pynoteüs' artistry, but by what has ultimately identified her as herself, her voice:

Et toute tele le rendi
A son pere, qui l'entendi
Au parler et le recongneut. (ll. 1982–84, emphasis mine)

[Just as she was, he gave her back to her father, who knew her *by her speech* and recognized her.]

This insistence on Neptisphelé's problematic voice clues us in to the paradox at the heart of the Pynoteüs story: the image's defining moment comes when she spits out the poet's leaf and talks back, in a voice that he has not foreseen for her.

Froissart describes Pynoteüs as "the greatest poet of his age," a title also applied to Machaut by his contemporaries.³² Given that Pynoteüs' tale revisits the central paradox of the *Voir Dit*, the parallel seems deliberate. The narrative's mysterious insistence that this is the real Neptisphelé rather than an artfully crafted look-alike parallels the *Voir Dit*'s insistence that the entire story is true. Both assertions problematize representation, and both end up posing problems for the hapless poet figure. Pynoteüs' project, like that of the *Voir Dit* narrator, spins out of control because of his failure to capture and contain an image of his own creation. Although the Pynoteüs story sets its readers up to expect a celebration of art's power to overcome death, by its end it has become an unsettling parable of a poet's loss of control over his own work, a tale of literary creation in which the creator is forced to take a back seat to a creation that appears to disown him.³³

As the tale of Pynoteüs and Neptisphelé suggests, for Froissart the germ of the creative process involves a feminine image that the poet must capture and enclose. His problem is how to control that image, to make a poem out of a potential maenadic monster. Such a vision of the poet's project depends upon a blurring of the lines between the capturing of an image, the capturing of a rebellious woman, and the capturing of a poem. Froissart's narrator repeatedly boxes up his poems, and the gesture is at once one of preservation or compilation (a box is like a book), and of entombment (a box is like a coffin).³⁴ In the tale of Neptisphelé, the parallel between imprisoned feminine image and imprisoned verses becomes explicit: as Cerquiglini-Toulet notes, "Neptisphelé's mold [enclosing her image] is described in terms that will be used later to describe the small chest enclosing the ballads."³⁵ Although powerful women would at first seem to be the jailers of the *Prison*—Rose's dreaming self is the prisoner of Atemprance just as the lover is the lady's prisoner (p. 236)—these images suggest that the real jailers are poets who imprison lyric poems, images and women in books. Nor is the metaphor unique to Froissart: at one point, Machaut's narrator incarcerates Toute Belle's portrait or "image,"

angrily shutting it into a box that he calls “my prison.”³⁶ Like the lyric poems to which she occasionally gives voice, the woman is an object enclosed within the poet’s text.

This type of systematic imprisonment not only recurs throughout the *Prison*; it is structurally integral to the poet’s work. A poet is someone who captures an image through a process designated by the technical term “imagination,” literally the retention of an image in the mind.³⁷ For Froissart, the writer’s job is to “capture imaginations,” as in the following passage describing Flos’s search for a title for his book.

Sus le quel livre j’ai moult *ymaginé* a li donner nom agreable et raisonnable; toutes fois la darraïne *ymagination* que j’ai eü et la ou le plus me sui arestés est tele que je l’appelle *La Prison amoureuse*. (p. 236)

[About this book, I imagined for a long time how to give it a pleasing and suitable name. The last imagination that I had, and that on which I am most fixed (*arestés*), is that I should call it *La Prison amoureuse*.]

Imagining, according to this passage, is the reflection that precedes writing. Froissart, however, especially emphasizes the idea of “fixing on,” “stopping at” or “arresting” a solution. Literally, Flos says that he “is fixed on” (“me sui arestés”) the idea of calling the book *La Prison amoureuse*. A similar idea emerges even more clearly at another point:

J’ai une *ymagination*
Que je ne voel pas hors jeter,
Ains le voel prendre et arester,
Que je ne le mette en oubli. (ll. 3811–14)

[I have an imagination that I do not want to throw away. Instead I want to take it and arrest it (*arester*), so that I do not forget it.]

Here, the poet must “take and arrest” the spark of imagination in order to integrate it into his work. As its title attests, captivity is one of the *Prison*’s central themes. It would now appear that imagination, like the languishing lover, is subject to arrest and incarceration.³⁸

Lest we miss the implications of such a poetic program, the *Prison* explicitly portrays imagination as a feminine component within po-

etry. The allegorical lady Imagination, who plays a role in one of the glosses late in the text, is described as the consort of Phoebus, god of poetry (p. 238). This personification of Imagination makes her appearance in response to a request from Rose's lady for a more detailed gloss of part of the *Prison*, based on a "new subject" that she herself has "imagined" ("et sus ymaginé une nouvelle matere," p. 232). Appropriately, it is only in response to persistent questioning from Rose's lady that Flos is able to articulate the vital yet restricted place of the feminine in poetry.

In passages like these, the *Prison*'s discussion of femininity in poetic creation turns away from female characters to focus increasingly on feminine allegories. Notably, although certain passages of the *Prison* appear to redeem women's creative potential, its examples of positive feminine influence are largely figurative. Besides the allegorical ladies Atempérance and Imagination, Rose's lady herself halfway belongs to the allegorical world, insofar as we first see her as an active participant in literary dialogue when she appears as a character within Rose's dream allegory. Before the *Prison* can admit feminine creativity to the realm of positive, non-threatening literary dialogue, it must sublimate it. The woman is vital to literary creation, but her threatening independence must lie concealed under, and give life to, the mask of her image.

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Notes

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1. On female readers in Froissart in general, see Bennett, who largely focuses on Froissart's other *dits*. The *Prison*, however, is something of a special case, for in its reading and interpretation are explicitly forms of literary creation. See De Looze, "Text to Text" 89; and De Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography* 127.

2. References to the *Prison Amoureuse* will be from De Looze, ed., and will specify line number (l.) or page number (p.), since this hybrid text contains both. English translations will be my own.

3. De Looze ed., *Prison* 27, 29.

4. De Looze, "Text to Text" 90. Boulton seems to be following De Looze when she speaks of a virelai "composed by someone else" and the narrator's "pangs of jealousy when his lady sings it" (217). Zink similarly misinterprets the primary reason for the narrator's distress when

he states that “the narrator is distraught to hear the virelai he composed for his beloved, who had learned it by heart, being sung, quite well in fact, by a young woman in whom he has no interest, while the one he adores prefers to sing something else” (161). Nevertheless, the narrator clearly states that he takes offense at the content of his lady’s poem; he never mentions any disappointment that she has not sung his poem instead.

5. Nouvet 344. McGrady also recognizes that lady uses this virelai to reply to the poet, 171–179.

6. On this passage, see also McGrady 178.

7. As De Looze remarks of the *Chroniques*, “Froissart . . . is aware of the power of the interpreter who, in rereading, can completely rewrite events,” *Pseudo-Autobiography* 115.

8. As McGrady recognizes, and as I will discuss in the second half of this essay, this also involves a turning aside from the model of Guillaume de Machaut’s *Voir Dit*: “Froissart . . . rapidly introduces Machaut’s model of author and reader . . . only to reject it in the first quarter of the narrative” 171.

9. On interpretation as a form of literary creation in the *Prison*, see McGrady 185–187; De Looze, “Text to Text” 89; and *Pseudo-Autobiography* 127.

10. Fourrier ed., *Espinette* 72–73.

11. For other readings of this scene, see Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 236–37; De Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography* 119–120; and McGrady 180–185.

12. McGrady 180–83.

13. De Looze, “Text to Text” 93.

14. Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 237.

15. De Looze, “Text to Text” 90.

16. McGrady 182.

17. *Metamorphoses* XI.1–66. On Ovid and the *Prison* in general, see Fourrier ed., *Prison*, 17–19 and Brownlee, “Ovide” 156–61.

18. Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 237.

19. For example, *Voir Dit* p. 558. References to the *Voir Dit* are to the Imbs/Cerquiglini-Toulet edition, and, as for the *Prison*, specify line number (l.) or page number (p.).

20. *Voir Dit* ll. 7366–67.

21. *Voir Dit* pp. 514–516.

22. He specifies that he stops writing “puis que matere me fault” p. 516, p. 730; see also Cerquiglini-Toulet, *Engin* 225. The vision of the female patron as the provider of “matter,” on which the male poet imposes a form, goes back to Chrétien. It contains of course a reference to Aristotelian ideas of reproduction in which the woman provides the “matter” necessary to make a child while the man determines the “form.” See Cerquiglini-Toulet, *Engin* 18–19.

23. For more on the relationship between the *Prison* and the *Voir Dit*, see Fourrier ed., *Prison* 15–16; De Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography* 115–116; McGrady 170–171.

24. For other readings of this episode—one of the most discussed in the *Prison*—see Brownlee, “Ovide” 156–61; Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 234–35; De Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography* 120–25; Huot, *Song to Book* 312–15; and Nouvet 349–51.

25. See De Looze, “Text to Text” 89; and *Pseudo-Autobiography* 127.

26. On the importance of the laurel, see Huot, “The Daisy and the Laurel” 246. On the substitution of Phoebus, god of poetry, for Venus in the Pygmalion story, see Brownlee, “Ovide” 161; and Huot, “The Daisy and the Laurel” 244–46.

27. *Voir Dit* ll.2409–42.

28. See Kelly, “Inventions Ovidiennes” 89; and Brownlee, “Ovide” 159.

29. As De Looze puts it, speaking of the *Voir Dit* scene, “to imprint the marks of love (the kiss) on a *feuille* (leaf, but also a piece of paper or parchment) is to prefer the act of signifying love on a folio (that is, writing) to the act of love itself,” *Pseudo-Autobiography* 90.

30. *Voir Dit* ll. 2441–42.

31. My thanks to the anonymous reader for *French Forum* for pointing out this ambiguity.

32. Et de lettre fu moult bien duis

Car tel l'edefia Nature

Qu'il congneut plus de l'escripture

Que nuls poètes a son tamps. (ll. 1319–22)

[He was very well educated in letters. For Nature made him so that he knew more about writing than any other poet of his time.]

The *Prison* repeatedly refers to Pynoteüs as “li poëte” (ll. 1322, 1587, 1658, 1921), a word which, as Brownlee has taught us, carried a particular significance at the time. It was used only to designate classical *auctores* until the late 14th century, when its “semantic field [. . .] is expanded to include vernacular, contemporary poets” (Brownlee, *Poetic Identity* 7). Its first known usage to designate a French poet occurred when Deschamps applied it to Machaut in a ballade written after the latter’s death (*Poetic Identity* 7–9, 19–20). Although the Deschamps ballade was not written until 1377, some five years after the *Prison*, the “poëte” Pynoteüs’ superiority to all other writers of his time still evokes Machaut, the acclaimed master of his age.

33. See Nouvet, who describes Neptisphelé as a “création qui nie le processus créateur,”

351. For a more positive interpretation, see De Looze, *Pseudo-Autobiography* 122–24. However, De Looze’s assertion that “at no point does the ‘real’ Neptisphelé return” (124), while it may conform to common sense, flies in the face of the text’s repeated insistence that this is none other than the “real” Neptisphelé.

34. As demonstrated by Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 237.

35. Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Fullness” 235.

36. *Voir Dit* l. 7578.

37. Kelly, *Imagination* 26. This definition highlights two themes that are crucial in the *Prison*: that of the (feminine) image, and that of imprisonment. As Kelly goes on to explain, for medieval writers the term imagination typically designates the initial step in the creative process: only after imagining does the poet proceed to verbalize and arrange his idea (*Imagination* 32). Kelly also examines the uses of imagination in the *Prison* (*Imagination* 155–69).

38. For a more detailed analysis of enclosure in the *Prison*, see Busby 90–93. For Cerquiglini-Toulet, the gesture of locking a poem in a box “actually represents the emergence of writing as a profession” (“Fullness” 226); she cites the poet’s obsession with having finished pieces ready for the patron, and with preventing unwanted dissemination of his texts.

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