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Rondeau

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GEOFFREY CHAUCER'S *PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS* details a dream vision in which Chaucer observes a group of birds, in a mock parliament, arguing over choosing mates for themselves on Valentine's Day. The birds conclude their assembly by singing a rondeau.¹ This short lyric, originating in Francophone Europe, traditionally ranges in length between just eight and seventeen lines. It opens with a one- to two-line refrain that is repeated in the middle of the work and again at the end to create the circular structure suggested by its name. Chaucer points to the overseas roots of this form by having his dreamer note that the lyric's music "imauked was in Fraunce" (394, line 677).² However, extant manuscripts of the *Parliament of Fowls* do not record anything that would actually resemble a French rondeau: three manuscripts omit the insertion entirely; three replace it with the popular French proverb "Qui bien aime a tarde oublie" [He who loves deeply is loath to forget], which also functions as a popular refrain in French lyric; and three do contain a short lyric text, but it does not actually feature the triple refrain structure.³ As an actual French rondeau, then, the birds' song is a manifest failure.

In its failure, though, the moment signifies in other ways. It gestures aspirationally to the prestige of French poetry from across the Channel. The choice to offer the rondeau as birdsong heightens the rumination on translation here: the birds sing in this French mode, even if the song is not being transmitted, so that this scribal confusion is mapped onto an interspecies communication breakdown. In the three manuscripts that replace the rondeau with the proverb, this moment of interlingual rupture is only further intensified. Eclipsing lyric form and stifling bird-song, the French proverb-cum-refrain invades the English text, offering jarring code-switching as a broken replacement for translation.

Chaucer's small untransmissible rondeau thus affords a wide-ranging meditation on Anglo-French literary exchange, translation loss, and translation failure, all revolving around the theme of Valentine's Day.⁴ One generation later these ideas, and the form for their expression, emerged in the poetry of the bilingual Anglo-French poet Charles d'Orléans. Charles d'Orléans composed two Valentine's Day ballades, one in French and one in English, during his long imprisonment in England from 1415–40, during which he learned English and composed a lengthy cycle of English poetry full of Chaucerian echoes.⁵ After his release back to France, when he returned to composing solely in French, he produced, among other things, a set of Valentine's Day rondeaux. Amplifying Chaucer's far-reaching discussion of translation, interlingual disjuncture, and the breakdown of communication, Charles's rondeaux showcase the profound cultural force of the humble short-form lyric in the later Middle Ages.

Charles's debt to Chaucer's treatment of Valentine's Day is especially apparent in Ballade 72, in which the speaker is woken up on Valentine's Day by the cries of birds choosing their mates. This moment is a clear allusion to the avian setting of the *Parliament of Fowls*: Charles's birds wish to "wrappe" their mates "in wingis softe" (FS 224, line 2467), while Chaucer's wrap wings around each other's necks (C 394, lines 670–71).⁶ The Chaucerian resonance is further strengthened by Charles's opening lines—"Whan fresshe Phebus, day of Seynt Valentine, / Had whirlied vp his golden chare aloft" (FS 224, lines 2455–56)—which echo the *Squire's Tale's* "Appollo whirleth up his char so hye" (C 177, line 671). In a further connection to Chaucer, Charles's birds sing in "ther latyne" (FS 224, line 2465), while again in the *Squire's Tale*, a falcon speaks in "ledene" (C 175, line 478), that is to say, in Latin.

Charles's and Chaucer's odd mutual detail that birds speak Latin itself goes back to a commonplace of troubadour poetry, found in work by poets such as Marcabru and Arnaut Daniel and later Chrétien de Troyes and Guido Cavalcanti.⁷ As several scholars have shown, speaking "Latin" is not just for the birds. More broadly, it refers to speaking in a particular jargon or following a set of conventions defined by one's social standing and rhetorical intent. For example, in a poem by Raimbaut de Vaqueiras from ca. 1190, the female character, who speaks in Genoese dialect, rejects the flowery advances of a man who speaks to her in Occitan by saying: "no vollo questo lati!" [I don't want this *lati*].⁸ As Simon Gaunt has argued, here "lati" acquires a broader meaning than simply the Latin language, particularly given that neither character is speaking Latin. It refers not only to the linguistic difference—Genoese versus Occitan—between the two speakers, but also to their differences in gender, class, and discursive aim.⁹ In rejecting his "lati," she is rejecting not just his use of Occitan, but his amorous advances altogether, as embodied in his courtly and excessively florid speech. Similarly, Christopher Davis has demonstrated the wide semantic range of "lati" for twelfth-century troubadour Guilhem IX, who uses it across his poetry with meanings as disparate as amorous birdsong (here a metaphor for a lover's discourse); vernacular dialect, especially when used for power play and concealment; nonsense speech, especially when strategically deployed; ecclesiastical discourse dissociated from secular parlance; and hostile language. As Davis concludes, "In its vernacular sense ... *lati* invites commentary on the nature of language and on the social and intellectual contexts in which different varieties of language may be employed. The word is thus primarily metalinguistic in that its meaning derives from reflection on language as a medium."¹⁰

Charles's decision to have his birds sing Latin in his Valentine's Day ballade points back to this troubadour trope, while his bilingual work speaks to the relevance of the concept of a metalanguage for his own literary project. Although the rest of his Valentine's Day rondeaux do not incorporate birds, they insistently bring up the issue of speaking Latin. Thus in Rondeau 74 the speaker refuses to participate in Valentine's Day revelry: let others join in contests and games of love, he is too old "a l'escolle aler" [to go to school] (P 470, line 10) because, he says: "J'entans asses bien mon latin / A ce jour de Saint Valentin" [I know my Latin well enough / On this day of St. Valentine] (P 470, lines 11–12). In line with troubadour poetry, the rondeau's conceit of imagining love as a

school establishes "Latin" as a specialized amorous discourse that is set apart from everyday parlance and requires pedagogical instruction to be understood, just as Latin language requires special study in the schoolroom.

In two other rondeaux, the reserved place of Latin is further highlighted by the macaronic insertion of actual Latin into the French text. In Rondeau 292, the speaker complains to St. Valentine: "Nulle rien ne me rapportez / Fors *bona dies* en latin, / Vielle relique en viel satin" [You have brought me nothing / Save *bona dies* in Latin, / An ancient relic in old satin] (P 660, lines 8–10). Here "Latin" is reimagined as radically opposed to amorous discourse, and its unwelcome intrusion of musty religiosity into the joyously secular Valentine's Day celebration is emphasized by the code-switching of French into Latin: "*bona dies* [good day] en latin." In this way, it reminds us of the flat French proverb supplanting the birds' amorous discourse in manuscripts of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. Rondeau 263 also deploys macaronic insertion, though it functions differently. Here the speaker fights back against an allegorized Soussi [Anxious Care] who is trying to ruin Valentine's Day for him and proclaims: "*Maledicatur* en latin | A ce jour de Saint Valentin" [*Maledicatur* (let her be cursed) in Latin / On this Day of Saint Valentine] (P 634, lines 11–12). In this rondeau, by contrast, Latin operates as a protective barrier to keep bad thoughts out of the sphere of love. Instead of showcasing failure, code-switching here speaks to the salvific power of multilingual expression in its capacity to draw defensive borders.

Paradoxically, the rigid circularity of the rondeau's minute form conditions its openness to incorporating vastly different meanings because its structural requirement for repetition facilitates an almost endless substitution of terms. Charles emphasizes this feature of the rondeau by having "Latin" consistently rhyme with a fixed set of other words—"Valentin," "matin" [morning], "hutin" [dispute], "butin" [booty]—even as the term "Latin" acquires a vastly distinct resonance in each poem, as we have just seen. The rondeau's formal fixity, expressed here in narrowly defined rhyme schemes, only highlights the extensive proliferation of meanings behind "Latin."

This concept of Latin as a specialized jargon, a metalanguage peculiarly suited to love, and the visible alterity of Latin—real Latin—dramatically converge in Rondeau 264. Here the speaker exhorts poets to draw on their adventures in love for composing "rhymes en françoys ou latin" [rhymes in French or in Latin] (P 636, line 4). Just as birds sing "their latyne", that is to say in their *own proper language* to choose their own proper mate, so too, Charles seems to suggest, poets need to choose their own proper language or idiom to express their particular experiences. In the rondeau copied immediately after in Charles's personal manuscript of his poetry, the speaker announces that he chooses Pensee [Thought] for his mate, but, were he able to choose Hope instead, "Je parlasse d'autre Latin / A ce jour de Saint Valentin" [I would be speaking another kind of Latin / On this St. Valentine's Day] (P 636, lines 11–12). Here Charles posits "Latin" as a general term for poetic love discourse, within which the lover is able to choose the idiosyncratic *dialect* that best speaks to his experience. Indeed, as the cross-Channel history of Valentine's Day poetry reminds us, poets sharing French as their lingua franca did make concerted linguistic choices for their otherwise thematically similar compositions. Chaucer famously wrote all of his work in English, while his English contemporary John Gower composed equally prolifically in Latin, French, and English, and reserved his Valentine's Day treatments exclusively for his French work.¹¹

For bilingual Charles himself, this question could not be more apt: he wrote a substantial bulk of his poetry in the foreign language he learned from his English captors. Toward the end of his imprisonment, he commissioned separate manuscripts for his English and French love poems. Leaving the manuscript of English works behind in England, he took his French collection to France where it became a public poetry album for the guests at his court, who could add their compositions to his own.¹² For Charles the choice of the proper language for poetry, and the proper language for love, appears to have been indissoluble from his status as England's most prominent late medieval political prisoner. Whether he abandoned his English manuscript or gifted it to someone, he clearly felt that the collection belonged in the country of its language, rather than the country of its

author. Fixed yet free, self-contained yet open, small yet expansive, the little rondeau thus reveals itself to be an especially flexible tool for poets to position themselves within the vexed interstice of literary history, linguistic exchange, and political history.

NOTES

- [1.](#) Mark Everist, "'Souspirant en terre estrainge': The Polyphonic Rondeau from Adam de la Halle to Guillaume de Machaut," *Early Music History* 26 (2007): 1–42.
- [2.](#) All Chaucer references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987) (hereafter cited as *C*). On the rondeau in Middle English, see Jenni Nuttall, "The English Roundel, Charles's Jubilee, and Mimetic Form," in *Charles d'Orléans's English Aesthetic: The Form, Poetics, and Style of 'Fortunes Stabilness*, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and R. D. Perry (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, forthcoming). I thank Nuttall for letting me read this piece in advance of publication.
- [3.](#) See the textual notes to lines 680–92 in *C* 1150.
- [4.](#) On this theme, see Jack B. Oruch, "St. Valentine, Chaucer, and Spring in February," *Speculum* 56, no. 3 (1981): 534–65, and Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Chaucer and the Cult of Saint Valentine* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).
- [5.](#) Arn, "Introduction," in *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orleans's English Book of Love: A Critical Edition*, ed. Arn (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 1–45.
- [6.](#) Charles's English poems are edited in *Fortunes Stabilness*, ed. Arn (hereafter cited as *FS*) and the French poems in *Poetry of Charles d'Orléans and His Circle: A Critical Edition of BnF MS. fr. 25458, Charles d'Orléans' Personal Manuscript*, ed. John Fox and Arn with Stephanie A. V. G. Kamath, trans. R. Barton Palmer (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS and Turnhout: Brepols, 2010) (hereafter cited as *P*). I reproduce the order and line numbering of both editions; all translations are my own.
- [7.](#) Simon Gaunt, "Sexual Difference and the Metaphor of Language in a Troubadour Poem," *The Modern Language Review* 83, no. 2 (1988): 309–310.
- [8.](#) Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, "Domna, tant vos ai preiada," in Gaunt, "Sexual Difference," 299 (line 81).
- [9.](#) See Gaunt, "Sexual Difference," esp. 304–12.
- [10.](#) Christopher Davis, "'Chascus en lor lati': Guilhem IX, Birdsong, and the Language of Poetry," *Tenso* 30, no. 1–2 (2015): 19.
- [11.](#) See, in particular, R. F. Yeager, "Politics and the French Language in England during the Hundred Years' War: The Case of John Gower," in *Inscribing the Hundred Years' War in French and English Cultures*, ed. Denise N. Baker (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 127–58.
- [12.](#) See Arn, *The Poet's Notebook: The Personal Manuscript of Charles d'Orléans (Paris BnF MS fr. 25458)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008); and Jane H. M. Taylor, *The Making of Poetry: Late-Medieval French Poetic Anthologies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 83–146.