



GEOFFREY CHAUCER

Born, London, c. 1340

Died, Westminster, 25 October 1400

The Minor Poems

To Rosemounde: A Balade

The Complaynte unto Pite

Madame ye be of de beste petyne
de se de beste to the manernde
ful de the suffall petyne ye petyne
And hke vnyr deu ye egebe/roade
Hec wite ye deu so merydud so iocunde
that at a vnyr vnyr tgeat q se you dme
It is an ornement vnto my wounde
Hec wite ye to me ne do no dilliance

Hec wite I me po of kece ful a tyne
yet may wite vnto my vnyr vnyr
ye se my vnyr that ye se hke vnto tgeat
petyne my wite in my dme vnyr vnyr
So contaynly q no wite deu comde
that to my wite q se in my vnyr
Hec wite me to loue you vnyr vnyr
Hec wite ye to me ne do no dilliance

Hec wite ye wite in vnyr vnyr
de q in loue am wite dme vnyr vnyr
Hec wite ye ful of q of my wite vnyr
that q am vnyr vnyr vnyr vnyr
ye loue may hke vnyr vnyr vnyr
I petyne de in vnyr vnyr vnyr
de what you wite q wite ye vnyr vnyr
Hec wite ye to me ne do no dilliance

890
10
10

trayntul ——— chauer



To Rosemounde: A Balade

On April 2nd, 1891, W. W. Skeat discovered in the Bodleian Library an unknown poem by Chaucer. Two days later, the discovery was reported to the library and scholarly world in the *Athenæum* of April 4th, 1891, where Skeat printed the complete poem with manuscript and textual notes, which he had inscribed *To Rosemounde*. A facsimile of the MS page, accompanied by a diplomatic reprint of the text, was included in *Twelve Facsimiles of Old English Manuscripts*, published by Skeat in 1892, and in 1894 the poem was entitled *To Rosemounde: A Balade*.



To Rosemounde: A Balade

It exists on a single MS of *Rosemounde*, written on a flyleaf at the end of the *Bodleian MS Rawlinson Poet. 163, fol. 114r*. The *Rosemounde* facsimile is a little bit darker than the original. Two errors were found: *Tristram* for *Tristam* and *secounde* for *secunde* (l. 20). In the facsimile transcript of 1892 the former appears as *Tristam*, the *secounde* remains equal. Conversely, the reading *iocunde* (l. 5) is erroneously rendered *iocounde* in the facsimile transcript, but correctly in the MS notes.

To Rosemounde: A Balade

At the foot of the last stanza is written in a different, much larger hand
TREGENTIL - CHAUCER, the two words being approximately two inches
apart; scribbled upwards on the right are the unintelligible: *odgod ol lord*.
The colophon is identical with that at the end of the *Troilus* on fol. 113v, except
for the fact that the latter has, between *Tregentyll* and *Chaucer*, the words,
“*heer endith the book of / Troylus and of Cressyde.*” In the *Athenæum* Skeat
suggested that *Tregentil* was the name of the scribe, and restated this opinion
still more emphatically in *The Complete Works*. Other scholars, who believe
that by *Tregentil* the scribe probably wished to convey a compliment to the
poet, have seriously questioned it, but Skeat didn't agree at all.

To Rosemounde: A Balade

What is a ballad? Is Chaucer's *To Rosemounde: A Balade* a standard one?

From the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

1) A poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas. Traditional ballads are typically of unknown authorship, having been passed on orally from one generation to the next.

2) A slow sentimental or romantic song.



To Rosemounde: A Balade

We are in front of a *typical ballad* which consists of 3 stanzas, each one composed of 8 lines riming (ababbcbe). Also, each stanza closes with the same line:

“Though ye to me ne do no dalliance”

[Though you do not to have a dalliance with me]

To Rosemounde: A Balade

Definition of *Comedy* in **Medieval Times**: the conventional medieval etymological definition of the Latin word *comedia* explained it as a *rustic song*, dealing in a low vocabulary and style with peasant life. Chaucer's practice of comedy in English depended on his familiarity with comic texts in French, Flemish, Latin and Italian; he also entertained himself and his entourage by experimenting with comic writing and one of his most innovative comic texts, seen against the background of serious love poetry, in his comic parody of a lover complaint in his ballad *To Rosemounde*.



To Rosemounde: A Balade

Madame, ye ben of al beaute shryne
As fer as ceryl is the mapamounde,
For as the cristal glorious ye shyne,
And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde.
Therwith ye ben so mery and so jocounde
That at a revel whan that I see you daunce,
It is an oynement unto my wounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce.



To Rosemounde: A Balade

For thogh I wepe of teres ful a tynne,
Yet may that wo myn herte nat confounde;
Your semy voys that ye so smal out twynne
Maketh my thought in joy and blis habounde.

So curtaysly I go with love bounde
That to myself I sey in my penaunce,
"Suffyseth me to love you, Rosemounde,
Thogh ye to me ne do no daliaunce."



To Rosemounde: A Baladē

Has nēuer pyk walwēd in galauntynē
As I in lovē am walwēd and gwoundē,
For which ful oftē I of mysēlf dēvynē
That I am trēw Tristam thē sēcoundē.
My lovē may not rēfrēydē nor affoundē,
I brēnnē ay in an amorous plēsaunēz.
Do what you lyst, I wyl gour thral bē foundē,
Thogh yē to mē nē do no daliaunēz.

To Rosemounde: A Balade

“ Madam, ye ben of al beaute shrynȝ/
As fer as cȝreled is the mapamounde,
For as the cristal glorious ye shynȝ/
And lykȝ ruby ben your chȝkȝs rounde. “

Chaucer makes a vivid, original comparison between a woman's body and a *mappamundi*. The use of *mappamundi* reflects the knowledge as well as the view of the world. It is clear from his poem that Chaucer had considered a world map to use it metaphorically, by recalling the contemplative and educational functions of the *mappamundi* genre in medieval Christian culture.

To Rosemounde: A Balade

*“ Nas neuer pyk walwed in galauntynē / As I in love am walwed and ywounde, / For
which ful ofte I of myself devyne / That I am trew Tristam the secounde. ”*

Chaucer's inept *lover-persona* compares himself to a *hooked and cooked fish*: he is even more hopelessly wound up in love than a pike engulfed in galantine sauce. Why a pike? Maybe because it suggests his frustrated desire, for the pike has a very large mouth that, when open, gives it a voracious look. After this grotesquely comic analogy, the inept lover incongruously bursts into an inflated comparison between himself and *Tristan*, one of the greatest lovers of medieval romance.

The Complēyntē unto Pite

MS. Bodl. 638 (Medieval Manuscripts in Oxford Library)

Summary Catalogue no.: 2078

Chaucer, Lydgate, Hoccleve, etc.; England, 15th century, third quarter, 6. (fol. 46)

Rubric: *The complayntē vnto Pite*

Physical Description

Form: codex Support: parchment, paper Extent: i + 220 leaves

Dimensions (leaf): 8.25 × 6 in. Decoration: colourēd capitals.

The Compleyntē unto Pitē

Origin: 15th century, third quarter ; English

Provenance and Acquisition: there is much scribbling, with the following names (among others) of the 16th cent.: Richard Becher (fol. 17, 159), James Hedington (fol. 83v), Humfrey Flemyng (fol. 214, cf. 127, 162), Antony Sherington in Lemsster (Lecomister), 1563 (fol. 36v, cf. 144v), John Smart (fol. 191), S. Pot (foll. 193v, 194r): 'Gyl: Astley' (front cover). Apparently acquired between 1613 and 1620.

The Complēyntē unto Pity

Chaucer's *The Complaint unto Pity* has a sophisticated artistry and suggestiveness that invite attention and challenge analysis. Most commentators, however, tend to undervalue the poem seeing it only superficially as a frigid exercise in the courtly love mode. According to the few literary critics we have, it has two main aspects: an allegorical surface, the situation that the poem purports to present, and what is really about. To distinguish those two acceptations we can call the first *apparent plot* and the second *real plot*.



The Complaynte unto Pite

Pite, that I have sought so yore agoo
With herte soore and ful of besy peyne,
That in this world was never wight so woo
Withoute deth-- and yf I shal not feyne,
My purpos was to Pite to compleyne
Upon the crueltē and tirannye
Of Lovē, that for my trouthe doth mē dye.



The Complaynte unto Pite

And when that I, be lengthe of certeyne yeres,
Had euer in oon a tyme sought to speke,
To Pitez ran I al bespreynt with teres
To prayen hir on Cruelte me awreke.
But er I myghte with any word outbreke
Or tellen any of my peynes smerte,
I fond hir ded, and buried in an herte.

The Complayntē unto Pitē

The aim of Chaucer is to evoke a situation describable in other terms, but the apparent plot, when considered in isolation, is very difficult to examine to find the real significance. The real plot of the poem has two facets: the human situation obliquely evoked and the examination of a theme suggested by it. The situation embedded in the poem seems reasonably clear: the poet is probably both recounting an unsuccessful interview with his lady and renewing his suit. At the same time, however, Chaucer is exploring the nature and importance of compassion.



The Complaynte unto Pite

Aboute hir hersẽ there stoden lustely,
Withouten any woo as thoughtẽ mẽ,
Bounte parfyt, wẽl armed and richely,
And fresshe Beautẽ, Lust, and Jolytẽ,
Assured Maner, Youthẽ, and Honestẽ,
Wisdom, Estaat, Dredẽ, and Governauce,
Confedred both by hondẽ and alliaunce.

The Complaynte unto Pity

The various **human characteristics** he confers to Pity are both **physical** (*Beaute* and *Youthe*), of **mind and disposition** (*Bounte*, *Lust*, *Jolyte*, *Honeste*, *Wisdom*, *Dredde*), and some qualities of **behaviour and rank** (*Estaat*, *Assured Maner*, *Governaunce*). The poet then points out that no petition can succeed without compassion, which is the crown of all virtues, and later, while on the courtly love level recognising that these virtues unmixed with responsiveness protect his Lady against him, he returns to the idea that without compassion human beings are soulless.

The Complēyntē unto Pity

The signification of Pity is not fixed: sometimes it may be identified with the physical presence of the Lady, but in a contrast within sexual responsiveness or emotion that “appears” in seeing her. The emotional course has a particular value. of course, though Chaucer may depict himself as the helpless prey of Love, he does not mean that he wants to escape from its bondage, rather that his Lady should modify her attitude of sexual indifference to him (her Cruelty); this is the reason for the transition in the apparent plot from a complaint about Love to one about Cruelty. The poet is not merely playing with difference meaning of Pity, but he emphasizes, even if in a deliberately hyperbolic way, the significance and nature of the emotion.

The Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

In the **Bill of Complaint**, Chaucer is concerned with the relation of compassion to the other virtues in turn, but the **courtly love element** predominates, because he is now directly addressing Pity, making use of its dual meaning with great complexity, leaving it to the reader to decide which meaning of Pity is uppermost. In the last four stanzas Chaucer makes the very plea to the Lady directly, that he had pretended to be unable to make, and consequently here Pity is primarily identified with her. Chaucer uses the conventional language of courtly love with little suggestion of an underlying meaning in the closing stanzas.



The Billē (The Bill of Complaint)

Humblest of hertē, highest of revereņçē,
Benygne flour, coroung of vertuzs alle,
Sheweth unto youre rial excellençē
Yourē sērvaunt, yf I durstē mē so callē,
Hys mortal harm in which hē is yfallē,
And nocht al oonly for his evēl fare,
But for your reņoun, as hē shal dēclare.



The Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

Hit stondeþ thus: your contraire, Crueltẽ,
Allyed is agensþ your regalyẽ
Under colour of womanly Beaute--
For men shulde not, lo, knowe hir tirannyẽ--
With Bountẽ, Gentilesse, and Curtesyẽ,
And hath deþryved yow now of your place
That hyghtẽ 'Beaute apertenant to Grace.'



The Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

My peyne is this, that what so I desire
That have I not, ne nothing lyk therto;
And ever setteth Desir myn hert on fire.
Eke on that other syde where so I goo,
What maner thing that may encrease my woo,
That have I redy, unsoght, everywhere;
Me lacketh but my deth and than my here.

The Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

The case of Middle English literature requires, above all, a sympathetic understanding of the values dear to medieval writers together with an appreciation of the possibilities of literary modes and genres that are no longer current. In this poem, Chaucer used personification allegory perceptively and said something that is both interesting and true about the virtue of pity. According to the opinion summarised in *The Riverside Chaucer* 'it is artificial and therefore must have been written when Chaucer was still learning his craft; it is derivative, although no exact source has been found.'

The Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

'Writing poetry' is an unnatural act, so we should not be disappointed to find 'artificiality' in a poem, especially one written in a demanding verse form, the *rhyme royal stanza* (which Chaucer actually adopted *after* he had learned his craft) and in the mode of an allegorical story. Personification allegory is and has always been an unusually artificial genre. Maybe the real reason why Chaucer's *Complaint unto Pity* has not been well liked is the modern prejudice against *allegory per se*.

'But natheles yet my trouthe I shal sustene Unto my deth, and that shal wel be sene'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chaucer – Complete Works (Oxford standard authors), edited from numerous manuscripts by *Walter W. Skeat*, London, *Oxford University Press*, Ely House, London W. 1, pp. xii-xviii, 81- 83, 121 – 122, *Glossarial Index* 1-149

Geoffrey Chaucer - The Short Poems, translated and edited by *Gerard NeCastro*, Copyright ©, 2007, All Right Reserved

A Companion to Chaucer, edited by *Peter Brown*, 2002, Copyright © 2002
Blackwell Publishers Ltd, pp. 90-104

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chaucer's Rosemounde, author: Hëlge Kòkeritz, source: *Modern Language Notes*, May, 1948, Vol. 63, No. 5 (May, 1948), pp. 310-318 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press Stable URLs: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2909751>

Chaucer: The Complaint Unto Pity, author: MALCOLM PITTOCK, source: *Criticism*, spring 1959, Vol. 1, No. 2 (spring 1959), pp. 160-168 Published by: Wayne State University Press. Stable URLs: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23090966>

Chaucer's Complaint unto Pity and the Insights of Allegory by Ad Putter, Bristol University, edited by Christopher Cannon, New York University, Maura Nolan, University of California, Berkeley. Publisher: Boydell & Brewerpp, pp. 166-181