

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 Athenaeum 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.



It exists one 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 finded: Tristram for Tristam and secounde for secunde (1. 20). In the facsimile transcript of 1892 the former appears as Tristam, the secounde remains equal. Conversely, the reading iocunde (1. 5) is erroneously rendered iocounde in the facsimile transcript, but correctly in the MS notes.

To Rosemounde: A Balade

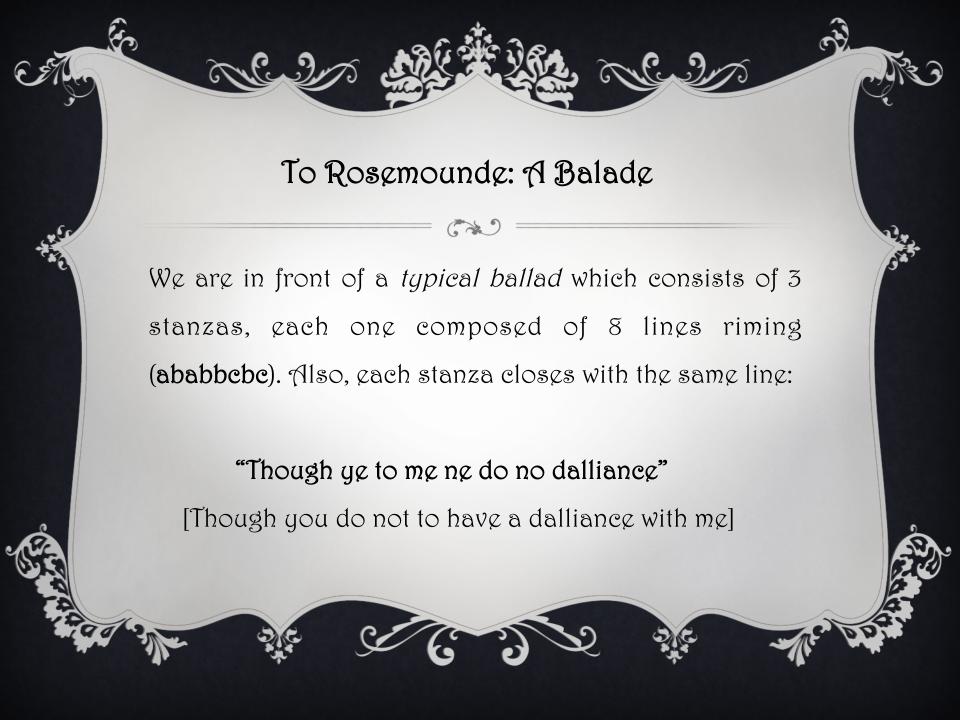
TREGENTIL - CHAUCER, the two words being approximately two inches apart; scribbled upwards on the right are the unintelligible: odgod of olord. The colophon is identical with that at the end of the Troilus on fol. 113v, except for the fact that the latter has, between Tregentyll and Chaucer, the words, "heer endith the book of / Troylus and of Cresseyde." In the Athenaeum 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 scriously questioned it, but Skeat didn't agree at all.



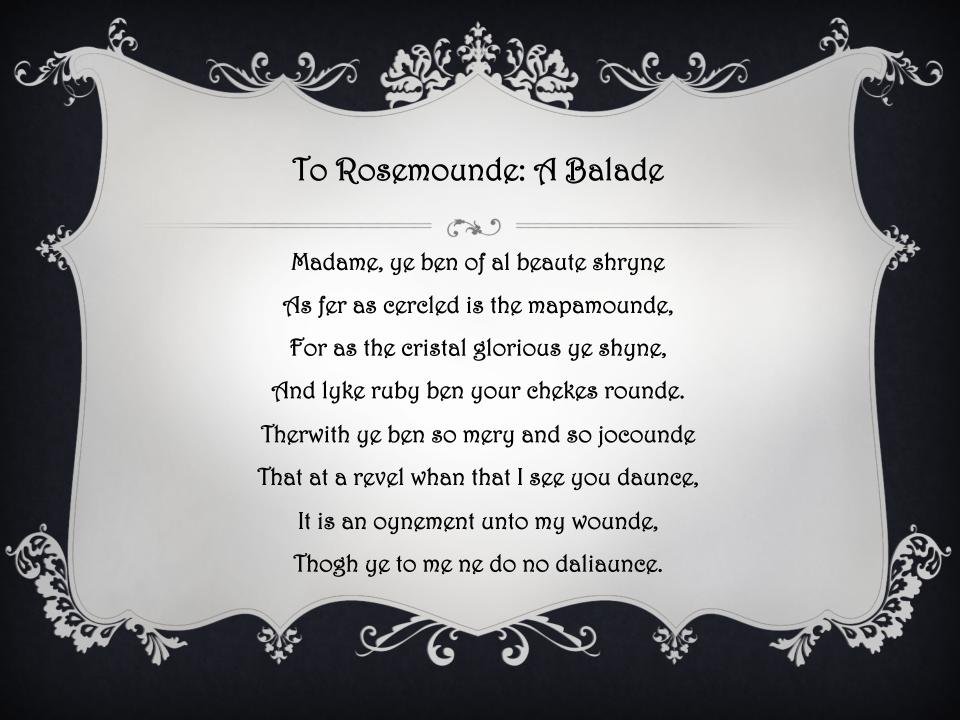
What is a ballad? Is Chaucer's To Rosemounde: A Balade a standard one?

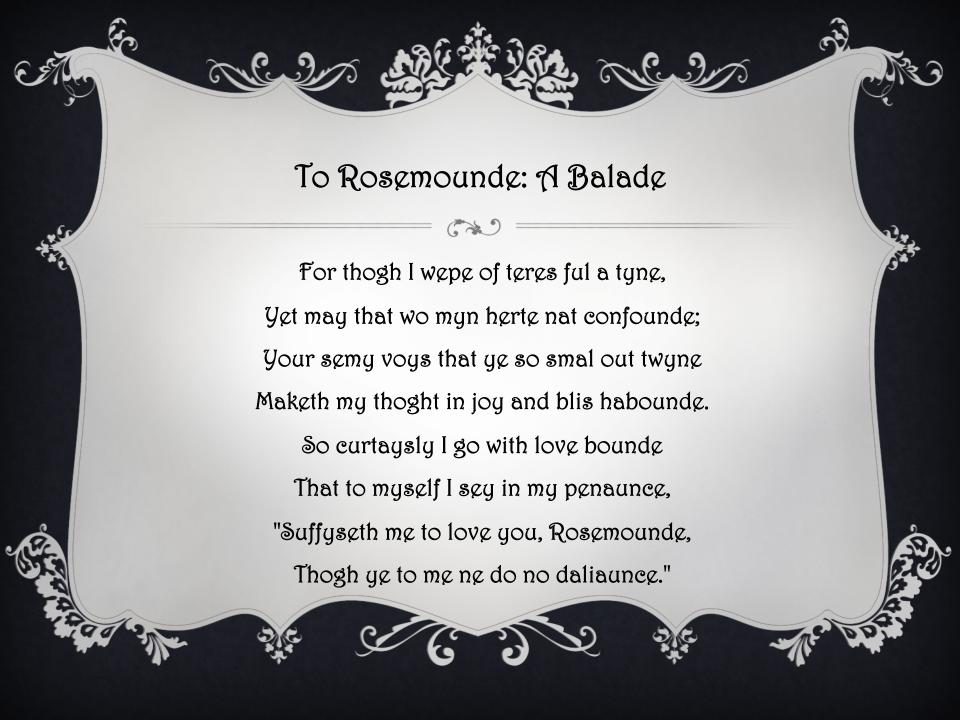
From the Oxford English Dictionary:

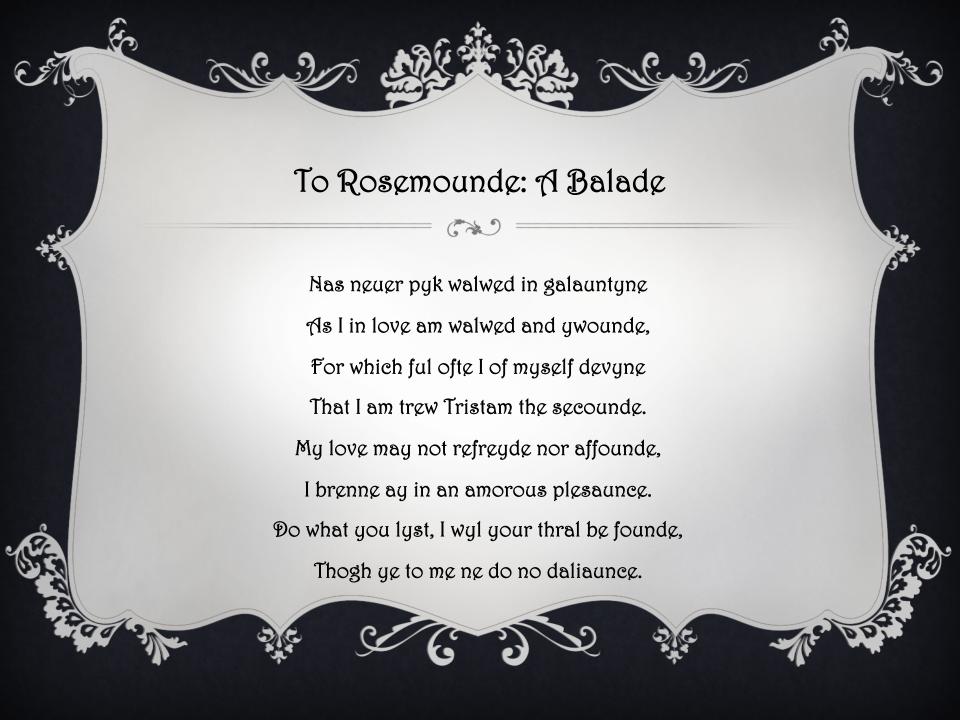
- 1) A poem or song narrating a story in short stanzas. Traditional ballads are typically of unknown authorship, having been passed on orally from one generation to the next.
- 2) A slow sentimental or romantic song.



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.









"Madame, ye ben of al beaute shryne/ As fer as cereled is the mapamounde! For as the cristal glorious ye shyne! And lyke ruby ben your chekes rounde."

Chaucer makes a vivid, original comparison between a woman's body and a mappamundi. The use of mappaemundi 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.



"Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne As I in love am walwed and ywounde. For which ful ofte I of myself devyne That I am trew Tristam the secounde."

Chaueer'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.



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

Summary Catalogue no.: 2078

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

Rubric: The complaynte vnto Pyte

Physical Description

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

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



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 (foll. 17, 159), James Hedington (fol. 83v), Humfrey Flemyng (fol. 214, cf. 127, 162), Antony Sherington in Lemsster (Leominister), 1563 (fol. 36v, cf. 144v), John Smart (fol. 191), S. Pot (foll. 193v, 194r): 'Gyl: Astley' (front cover). Apparently acquired between 1613 and 1620.



Chaueer'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 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 various human characteristics he confers to Pity are both physical (Beaute and Youthe), of mind and disposition (Bounte, Lust, Jolyte, Honeste, Wisdom, Prede), 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 Compleynte unto Pite

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 hyperbolical 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 Bille (The Bill of Complaint)

The ease 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'



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