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Interpreting Guillaume de Lorris's Oiseuse: Geoffrey Chaucer as Witness

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Certes, the hevene is yeven to hem that
wol labouren, and nat to ydel folk.
—Chaucer's Parson

Near the opening of the *Roman de la Rose*, Guillaume de Lorris introduces the first allegorical character in Deduit's garden, the garden's gatekeeper. She is an attractive young woman, pictured with a mirror, whose carefree life includes no more work than her own daily toilet.¹ The interpretation of this character, Oiseuse, presents a textual crux. The Old French word "oisose" or "uiseuse" indicates "inaction," "leisure," "laziness," or "folly."² Nevertheless, twentieth-century critics have been unable to agree on the character's exact import. Two general positions have arisen. To one group of critics, Oiseuse represents a personal vice, perhaps lechery or idleness or laziness. Critics holding this view believe that Oiseuse is a reprehensible figure, justly condemned by Guillaume and all historically aware readers of the *Roman*. To the other group of critics, Oiseuse represents a virtue. She might be the aristocratic leisure necessary for the contemplation of beauty or even the pleasure of beauty itself. For them Oiseuse is an attractive figure and a necessary condition for the practice of Courtly Love. Using the terms "courtly" and "clerkly" to identify these schools is helpful.³ However, in each of these camps one finds subtle differences of interpretation and methodology.

In this article I hope to sort out the differences of opinion on Oiseuse and advance our historical understanding of this character using reception criticism. Specifically, I offer evidence on her meaning from the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, one of Guillaume's early and influential readers. Not only did Chaucer translate the *Roman* into Middle English, but he also commented—directly and indirectly—on the *Roman*, its imagery, and its doctrine. Indeed, James Wimsatt calls Chaucer the *Roman's* "most famous evangelist."⁴ Chaucer's authority as a translator of French love poetry was acknowledged by his French contemporary, Eustache Deschamps, who, after praising Chaucer for the *Romaunt of the Rose*, called him "grand translateur" and sent him some of his own poetry.⁵ Nevertheless, evidence from Chaucer's writings, important as it is, has not been given the systematic

attention it deserves in the recent debate over Oiseuse's meaning.

Within the clerkly and courtly schools, many different methodologies—lexicological, exegetical, iconographic, and formalist—have been used to decipher Oiseuse's meaning. Moreover, critics have looked both into her literary pedigree and into her medieval reception. A few key interpretive assumptions, however, necessarily precede judgments on Oiseuse's meaning. Since both camps invoke *context* as an important justifying element, the first assumption concerns what the critics take to be the central message of the whole *Roman*.⁶ The second follows from the first assumption: namely, the significance of Deduit's garden. From these follows what is often the key interpretive assertion: the iconographic significance of Oiseuse's comb and mirror.

The clerkly school of readers is dominated by the Exegetes. Finding the *Roman de la Rose* to be neither a handbook of love nor an authoritative dream, they declare it to be a nightmare offering an exemplum of a lover caught in "idolatrous lechery." The nightmare, however, is only an "integument," a covering, which hides the necessarily Christian moral of the poem.⁷ Deduit's garden is, then, a garden of sinful pleasures. Oiseuse, the porter of this garden, is a vice. On the basis of Oiseuse's mirror and comb, D. W. Robertson, Jr., underscores the strong iconographic links between Oiseuse and *luxuria*. John Fleming and Charles Dahlberg take up and elaborate Robertson's arguments.⁸ Fleming argues that Oiseuse is not exactly *luxuria* but Ovidian idleness "cognate with the capital vice of Sloth."⁹

Not all clerkly readers are Exegetes, however. Through an exploration of Guillaume de Lorris's indebtedness to Ovid, Marta Powell Harley finds that the *Roman* is not a celebration of Courtly Love but "a statement of some consequence on the destructiveness of . . . obsessive passion."¹⁰ Harley argues that Guillaume's characterization of Oiseuse is ultimately derived from Ovid's treatment of Salmacis in the *Metamorphoses* because both characters carry combs and mirrors.¹¹ Because of this link, Harley finds that Oiseuse represents "narcissistic lethargy."¹²

While clerkly readers see the *Roman* as an ironic piece of moral didacticism, courtly readers tend to see it as a handbook on the practice of Courtly Love.¹³ They tend to interpret without irony Guillaume's comment that the *Roman* is a book "ou l'art d'Amors est tote enclose" [in which the whole art of love is contained] (38). Deduit's garden becomes, then, a secular Paradise, wherein aristocratic lords and ladies practice a refined code of love. Oiseuse is the aristocratic leisure necessary to enjoy Deduit's garden.¹⁴ Herbert Kolb, for example, finds that, while a woman with a mirror and comb could represent *luxuria*, such a moralistic interpretation would not be appropriate for the keeper of the paradise of love. Kolb would rather trace Oiseuse's pedigree to monastic *otium*, the leisure monks needed to practice contemplation. Interpreted in this context, Oiseuse becomes the leisure necessary for a "höfisch-weltlich . . . kontemplativen Lebens," a secular, courtly

contemplative life.¹⁵

Other courtly readers agree that Oiseuse is a virtue in the system of Courtly Love expounded by the *Roman*. Sounding much like Kolb, Jean Batany argues that Deduit's garden is a monastery of love to which Love's followers flee. Oiseuse is leisure, a "social-psychological force" that makes Courtly Love possible.¹⁶ Erich Köhler finds Oiseuse to be the "paradiesischen Lebenslust im Lande ewigen Frühlings und harmonischer Geselligkeit im Geiste sündfreier Liebe" [heavenly love of life in the land of eternal spring and harmonious company in the spirit of love without sin].¹⁷ Shigemi Sasaki writes that Oiseuse, leisure, "est une valeur et une vertu que Guillaume intègre à bon escient dans l'éthique courtoise traditionnelle" [is a value and a virtue that Guillaume advisedly integrates into the traditional courtly ethic]. She adds that Guillaume's attitude toward aristocratic leisure is that aspect of the *Roman* to which Guillaume refers when he comments "La matire est et bone et nueve" [Its matter is good and new].¹⁸ Carlos Alvar writes that Oiseuse, like Ovid's Venus, simply represents feminine beauty.¹⁹ Finally, Earl Jeffrey Richards believes that Guillaume's personification is a sensual and erotic figure who signifies "verbal folly." Although he, like Kolb, agrees that a woman with mirror and comb could represent *luxuria*, he argues that this would be a "marginal tradition in the overall 13th-century iconographic tradition."²⁰

These are the modern interpretations of Oiseuse. If one assumes that only a single, foundational meaning resides in the text, such radically different and seemingly incompatible interpretations of Oiseuse's character suggest that we must abandon the interpretations of either the courtly or the clerly readers. Oiseuse's meaning, however, does not simply reside in Guillaume's text. As reception theorists have argued, her meaning is in part constructed by Guillaume's readers.²¹ Thus, it is possible that both sets of critics may, at least in part, offer historically valid interpretations. Specific commentary about Oiseuse by Guillaume's near contemporaries offers a valuable method of evaluating these conflicting interpretations. Indeed, critics using reception methodologies have already deepened our historical understanding of the *Roman* considerably. Nevertheless, important materials relating to Oiseuse's medieval reception still await exploration.²²

For all the reasons mentioned in my introduction, Geoffrey Chaucer is a good reader to query. Although Chaucer's reading of Oiseuse does not necessarily give us Guillaume's understanding and although he writes more than 100 years after Guillaume, he was an important medieval translator of the *Roman*. He knew the *Roman* intimately, and it influenced his poetry profoundly. Moreover, because he was not French and his opinions antedate those in the "Querelle de la Rose," his writings offer a fresh, outside perspective. Scholarship on Chaucer and the *Roman* is voluminous, but generally Chaucerians treat the *Roman* as a way to set the background for Chaucer's writings rather than using Chaucer as a witness for the interpretation of the *Roman*.²³ F. N. M. Diekstra's recent study is an excep-

tion to the rule, but, finally, it is less a reception study than an interpretation of the *Roman* via what Diekstra takes to be a Chaucerian perspective.²⁴

Using Chaucer to clarify meaning in the *Roman* is risky, of course, because interpretations of his writings are subject to the same hermeneutical controversies that afflict interpretations of Oiseuse. Chaucer's rich poetic complexity and artistic self-consciousness often render his texts opaque. Nevertheless, by overtly reflecting on the meaning of the *Roman* and by having some of his characters comment directly on Oiseuse, Chaucer seems to invite such a project. Chaucer's opinions on the *Roman*, even if mediated through the reading of a twentieth-century critic, carry unquestionable authority.

Evidence concerning Chaucer's overall opinion of the *Roman* is a good place to begin for, as my brief survey of modern scholarship on Oiseuse suggests, opinions on her significance are often split along fault lines created by the larger question of the *Roman's* final meaning. What did Chaucer think of the whole *Roman de la Rose*? In the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer first reviews and evaluates some of his earlier writings. Here, Chaucer returns to the conventions of dream-vision poetry and depicts himself as a dreamer, wandering through a field of daisies. He is approached by the God of Love and the daisy, identified with Queen Alceste. In a curious passage, the God of Love accuses Chaucer of treason against his religion because of two "translations": his *Romaunt of the Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The *Troilus* is offensive to Cupid because in it Chaucer tells the tale of an unfaithful woman, which "maketh men to wommen lasse triste."²⁵ This condemnation gives, of course, the ostensible *raison d'être* of the *Legend*: Chaucer must write a legendary about good women to atone for his "misjudgment" in writing about a bad one.

The reason for Cupid's condemnation of Chaucer's translation of the *Roman*, however, is less clear. Cupid says: "Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose, / That is an heresy e ayeins my lawe, / And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe" (F.329-31). Here the God of Love seems to take the position of the Exegetes: that the *Roman* is a satire on *fol amour*.²⁶ In a wonderful passage filled with humor at his own expense, Chaucer has Alceste seem to agree with Cupid's reading of the *Roman* but attempt to mitigate Chaucer's offense by pleading his ignorance. She adds that he has "maked lewed folk delyte / To serve yow, in preysinge of your name" (F.415-16). Among the works in this category she includes the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Knight's Tale*.

However, Chaucer reserves the real defense for his dreamer, who argues that the *Romaunt* and the *Troilus* were meant to foster true love. True lovers, he writes:

... oghte rather with me for to holde
For that I of Criseyde wroot or tolde,
Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,

Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
By swich ensample; this was my menyng. (F.468-74)

Whatever my author meant, he says in lines 470 and 471, God knows that at all times it was my intent to further truth in love. Although the dreamer is not ready to speculate on the intents of Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, or "Lollius" (supposedly the author of Chaucer's source in the *Troilus*), he is prepared to argue that his two "translations" are not heresy, that they are most properly seen as supporting, not undercutting, the religion of love. While it is always dangerous to identify the positions of Chaucer's narrators with those of the author himself, some recent commentators take this passage as a serious defense of Chaucer's own art.²⁷ In any case, contrary to Fleming's argument in "The Moral Reputation of the *Roman de la Rose* before 1400," this passage suggests that disagreement on the moral character of the *Roman de la Rose* already existed before the French "Querelle."²⁸ The debate between the God of Love and the dreamer in the *Legend of Good Women* makes it clear that, at least in Chaucer's England, people were debating whether the *Roman* was an inducement to worldly love or a satire of it.

Another passage in which Chaucer morally evaluates his poetry occurs in his *Retraction*, found at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*.²⁹ In the *Retraction*, Chaucer classifies his works into two camps: works that are morally edifying and those that are "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees" (10.1084). Among the edifying works he lists his translation of Boethius' *De Consolacione* and other "bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (10.1087). Among the "worldly vanitees" are the *Troilus*, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and "many another book, if they were in [his] remembrance" (10.1086). The *Romaunt of the Rose* is, unfortunately, not mentioned.

One might speculate on where it should have appeared in the following way: In the *Retraction*, Chaucer seems to divide his works on the basis of their literal topics, not their supposed allegorical or hidden meanings. Thus, saints' lives and homilies are categorized as books of "moralitee" while works ostensibly on erotic love are classed as "worldly vanitees." Based on this criterion of classification, the *Romaunt* clearly belongs in the latter category. After all, in the *Legend of Good Women*, both the God of Love and the dreamer highlight the close connection between the *Romaunt* and the *Troilus*, a work that the *Retraction* specifically condemns. Following this logic, then, Chaucer would have judged the *Romaunt* a new art of love and, in Christian terms, a "worldly vanitee."

But this, finally, is mere speculation. The fact is that Chaucer draws no such conclusion. Perhaps he genuinely forgot about this translation, although it hardly seems likely that he would have remembered the *Boece* but

forgotten the *Romaunt*. It is more likely that either he was undecided as to where it properly belonged or he thought the very act of classification impossible. This should not surprise us. From his survey of other fourteenth-century interpretations of the *Roman*, Pierre-Yves Badel concludes that the *Roman* was generally read discontinuously, not with the aim of finding a global unity of theme or coherence. Furthermore, highlighting the *Roman's* encyclopedic character, he finds that "le *Roman de la Rose* [était] une autorité en matière amoureuse où chacun a puisé l'enseignement qui lui convenait" [The *Roman de la Rose* [was] an authority on the question of love from which each person drew the teaching that suited him].³⁰ Chaucer's apparent refusal to categorize the work seems to give support to Badel's argument. Although he toyed with such a global evaluation in the *Legend of Good Women*, his last word on the subject is silence, a fitting tribute to the *Roman's* subtlety—from one of its most subtle readers.

While evidence from the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Retraction* does not yield a clear moral judgment on the whole *Roman*, Chaucer refers specifically to Oiseuse in other parts of his oeuvre. Recent work on the *Romaunt* suggests that it is a close, literal translation of the *Roman*.³¹ In the *Romaunt*, Oiseuse is translated "Ydelnesse," not "Vanitee," "Folie," or "Plesaunce" as the arguments of Richards or Köhler might lead us to expect.³² However, Middle English "ydelnesse" could mean "vanity" or "futility" as well as "inactivity," "lack of employment," "sloth," "indolence," "relief from work or strain," "leisure time," and "rest."³³ Thus, philologically speaking, the major twentieth-century lines of interpretation are consistent with the word Chaucer chose to translate "Oiseuse."

Outside of the *Romaunt*, Chaucer refers to Ydelnesse at least twice in other works. First, in the *Canterbury Tales* the Second Nun refers to:

The ministre and the norice unto vices,
Which that men clepe in Englissh Ydelnesse,
That porter of the gate is of delices. (8.1-3)

The identification of Ydelnesse with the "porter of the gate . . . of delices" suggests a reference to Guillaume's character. The nun's interpretation, based on untainted Christian morality, identifies Ydelnesse as a personal vice and, consequently, supports the Exegetes' interpretation.³⁴

Another of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*, the Knight, mentions Ydelnesse in his description of the walls in the temple of Venus, a passage for which Chaucer is heavily indebted to Boccaccio's *Teseida*.³⁵ After enumerating the personifications depicted on the walls, the Knight says, "Nat was foryeten the porter, Ydelnesse" (1.1940). Although Ydelnesse appears in the *Teseida*, she is not there depicted as a gatekeeper. Nevertheless, the Knight, like the Second Nun, pointedly describes her as such. This suggests that Chaucer had Guillaume's character in mind. In this passage, the Knight stresses the enslaving, obsessive nature of love over its more appealing qualities.

Venus, says the Knight, robs a person of "wysdom," "richesse," "beautee," and "hardynesse" (1.1947-49). Indeed, the story of the lovesickness of Palamon and Arcite is a superb exemplum of such effects.

Although it is difficult to specify Ydelnesse's exact denotation here, it seems reasonable to conclude that she shares in the Knight's general disapproval of Venus and her temple. At best, the Knight's Ydelnesse is but a symptom of lovesickness; at worst, she is a subcategory of the Christian vice.

Finally, in the Parson's Tale, under his treatment of *acedia*, the Parson refers to idleness as "the yate of alle harmes" (10.713). It is possible that this is a reference to the gate of Deduit's garden, but idleness here is the *gate*, not the porter. It is unclear, then, whether Chaucer is referring to Guillaume's character. But the Parson's attitude toward idleness is far from unclear. An idle man, he says, is like a place with no walls, for the devil may shoot him with arrows of temptation from all sides. Idleness is a storehouse filled with "jangles, truffles, and of alle ordure" (10.714). He concludes, in a verse appearing as this article's epigraph, by stating that heaven is reserved only for those who labor (10.715).

If we had only the evidence from Chaucer's Knight, Second Nun, and Parson, it would be evident that his understanding of Oiseuse matched that of the Exegetes exactly.

One more source of evidence exists, however. In the *Book of the Duchess* Chaucer makes several relevant references to the quality of idleness in a Courtly Love setting. Scholars are in general agreement that the poem was written to commemorate the death of Blanche of Lancaster, who died of the plague in 1369. It was probably presented at one of the annual memorial services at St. Paul's in London.³⁶ If the poem is read as a secular elegy, then the character White represents Blanche and the Black Knight represents John of Gaunt, Blanche's husband.³⁷

Although idleness is not personified in the poem, Chaucer refers to the quality often in the course of the poem.³⁸ These references are significant because in a key passage Chaucer points directly to the influence of the *Roman* on the *Book of the Duchess*. When the dreamer awakes into his dream, he finds himself in a cheery bedroom, the walls of which "Were peynted, bothe text and glose, / Of al the Romaunce of the Rose" (333-34). In fact, as Wimsatt has shown, the *Roman* influenced the *Book of the Duchess* in two ways. First, the *Roman* directly influenced the dream sequence preceding the elegy proper. Second, the *Roman* influenced the *Book of the Duchess* indirectly via the later French *dits amoureux*.³⁹

The center of the poem concerns the Black Knight's wooing and winning of White. Through much of it, the Black Knight's situation resembles that of the dreamer in the *Roman*.⁴⁰ An early devotee of love, he leads a life of idleness (797-804). He is soon stricken with love, but after he presents his love to White, she rebuffs him (1035-41, 1236-44). After suffering a long separation, he again offers his "servise," this time with better results (1245-66). His service leads to the gift of her mercy "al hooly," and this, in turn,

leads to a fully developed love relationship (1269-95). Thus, given the explicit reference to the *Roman*, both text and gloss, and given that the situation of the *Roman's* dreamer is directly relevant to that of the Black Knight, the many references to idleness in the *Book of the Duchess* are helpful pieces of evidence in reconstructing Chaucer's interpretation of Oiseuse.⁴¹

The Black Knight makes three comments on idleness. First, after being questioned by the dreamer, he describes his sorrowful condition in the following terms:

My song ys turned to pleyynyge,
And al my laughtre to wepyng,
My glade thoghtes to hevynesse;
In travayle ys myn *ydelnesse*
And eke my reste. (599-603; emphasis added)

Here the Black Knight uses "ydelnesse" to suggest leisure, a state parallel to "reste." In this passage, he explains why his world is out of order: his leisure and even his sleep are overwhelmed with his "travayle," his mourning. If the Black Knight were an old man, no longer fit for love, his "ydelnesse" here would have nothing to do with Oiseuse. However, this is clearly not the case. The Black Knight is "Of the age of foure and twenty yer" (455). Although no longer an immature youth, he looks young: "Upon hys berd [is] but lytel her" (456). It is not impossible, then, that the Black Knight's "ydelnesse" in this passage refers to Oiseuse. If so, the passage suggests that he cannot yet reenter Deduit's garden because his idleness, his leisure, is presently taken up by mourning.

A second reference is more directly helpful, however. Describing his state when he happened to meet White, the Black Knight recounts how in his youth he had chosen to study love over all the other useful crafts:

For that tyme Yowthe, my maistresse,
Governed me in *ydelnesse*;
For hyt was in my firste youthe,
And thoo ful lytel good y couthe,
For al my werkes were flyttyng
That tyme, and al my thoght varyinge.
(797-802; emphasis added)

Here the Black Knight's similarity to the dreamer entering Deduit's garden in the *Roman de la Rose* comes out forcefully. In fact, the presence in this passage of the personified Yowthe, one of Deduit's companions, offers even more evidence of the *Roman's* direct or indirect influence. If, then, "ydelnesse" here is meant to represent the same quality as Oiseuse, what can be said? First, "ydelnesse" here could again mean "leisure." The Black Knight has time to give himself up to the study of love. At the time he was a tabula rasa, waiting to be filled with his choice of arts or letters (775-84).

He chose "love to [his] first craft" (791) and became, through "plesaunce," love's "thral" (767).

The word "thral" and other indications of the Black Knight's disapproving tone, however, make it possible that "ydelnesse" denotes "vanity." From the perspective of an older, grieving man, his youthful "werkes" were folly because they were "flyttinge," impermanent. Thus, the moral context of this judgment could be either clerkly or courtly. Perhaps the Black Knight condemns his "werkes" because they were directed at earthly rather than heavenly ends. It is also possible, however, that he condemns them because they were directed at many goals instead of just one, for he quickly adds, "Al were to me ylyche good / That I knew thoo" (803-04). The antecedent of "al" is unclear. It could refer to the "werkes" appearing in line 801. However, if it refers to "women," another, reasonable possibility, the Black Knight would be admitting that, as a young knight, he had not yet learned the constancy required of good courtly lovers.⁴² An argument for the second interpretation could be made from the Black Knight's reflections on his own process of maturation. It is clear that the older Black Knight judges his younger self immature. "I was ryght yong," he says, "And ful gret nede I hadde to lerne" (1090-91). However, in his difficult passage from idle immaturity to mature happiness, he was forced to pass the mastery of his life from Yowthe to White, a woman who became the sole focus of his efforts in love (797, 1286).

Before discussing Chaucer's next reference to idleness, I note that, while in many ways the story of the Black Knight is parallel to that of the *Roman's* dreamer, it also has strong parallels to that of Troilus. Indeed, the Black Knight's tale involves a "double sorwe," the sorrow of his early, unsuccessful courtship and the sorrow of his subsequent loss of White (*T&C* 1.1). Both young men are somewhat green and timid in their reactions to love. Troilus's first words to Criseyde, "Mercy, mercy, swete herte," are very close to the Black Knight's "Mercy" (*T&C* 3.98, *BD* 1219). After difficult courtships, both men find success in love, which, in turn, is taken from them by Fortune. Both fall into immoderate grief. Troilus finds consolation only after death, but the Black Knight finds his consolation in the course of his conversation with the dreamer.⁴³

Two significant differences separate the stories of Troilus and the Black Knight, however. One concerns the way the two lose their loved ones: the Black Knight loses White through death, but Troilus loses Criseyde through her infidelity. Indeed, juxtaposing the two poems suggests the influence of the debate that underlies Machaut's *Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne*: which is worse, losing a lover through death or infidelity? The second difference is more directly relevant to the matter at hand. The reactions to the two knights' initial disappointments in love could hardly offer more of a contrast. Throughout most of the *Troilus*, Troilus is a captive to despondency and passivity. Without the tireless efforts of Pandarus and the subtle complicity of Criseyde, Troilus could scarcely have moved past his first

despairing inactivity. In fact, one could argue, as I have done elsewhere, that Chaucer used the medieval conception of *acedia*, sloth, as an important device in fashioning Troilus' character.⁴⁴ The Black Knight's character, however, is marked by personal courage, one of the antidotes to sloth.⁴⁵ After having fallen in love, the Black Knight decides to offer White his service "Withoute feynynge outhur slouthe" (1100). Although he is first somewhat timid about revealing his love, he resolves, after considering that such a perfect creature could not be without mercy, to tell her of his pain (1186, 1194-98)—all this without the help of a go-between. Moreover, after the initial rejection and a period of sorrow, the Black Knight independently tries again to win White's love. The second effort ends in success. In short, courage and purposeful activity in love are two of the important character traits that distinguish the Black Knight from Troilus. Unlike Troilus, the Black Knight moves quickly from youthful idleness to determined work.

In this context, then, it becomes doubtful that the third passage on idleness indicates anything about Oiseuse. In it, the Black Knight describes his activity during the time that his love for White was unrequited. He says,

But for to kepe me fro *ydelnesse*,
 Trewly I dide my besynesse
 To make songes, as I best koude,
 And ofte tyme I songe hem loude;
 And made songes thus a gret del.
 (1155-59; emphasis added)

Once inside love's garden, the Black Knight rejects idleness. But what does "ydelnesse" signify here? It is certainly not the Ovidian idleness, so often evoked by the clerkly critics, of which he wrote "*Otia si tollas, periere Cupidinis arcus*" [If you take away idleness, you break Cupid's bow].⁴⁶ In this passage the Black Knight seems to imply that idleness is a liability in the pursuit of love. Moreover, if "ydelnesse" refers to the Christian vice, then the Black Knight's remedy, the making of songs, is a curious one, for it is unlikely that a strict Christian would consider this kind of activity to be *bona fide labor*, as was the Second Nun's translating of saints' lives.⁴⁷ Therefore, it is most likely that "ydelnesse" here refers to a parody of the Christian vice sometimes found in courtly literature, the aimless lack of activity of a slothful lover. In fact, the Black Knight's situation here looks forward to that of Amans in Book Four of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. When queried by Genius on whether he avoids idleness in love, Amans replies that he does, for

I serve, I bowe, I loke, I loute,
 Min yhe folweth hire aboute,

 And if it falle, as for a time
 Her liketh noght abide bime,

Bot besien hire on other thinges,
Than make I othre tariinges
To dreche forth the longe dai.⁴⁸

From a Christian moral perspective, these "tariinges," like the Black Knight's song making, hardly qualify as labor. They include making songs as well as playing with his lady's birds and dogs (4.1189, 1191, 1210-17). Nevertheless, from the perspective of Courtly Love, they are accepted as appropriate labor. "Mi Sone," replies Genius, an authority figure in the poem, "bot thou telle wilt / Oght elles than I mai now hierie, / Thou schalt have no penance hierie" (4.1224-25). Thus, the work in which the Black Knight partakes, an activity that clearly sets him apart from Troilus, is his purposeful labor in love and courtship. Idleness of *BD* 1155, then, could hardly be what Guillaume meant by making Oiseuse the porter of Deduit's garden. Nevertheless, if the passage does not tell us anything directly about Oiseuse, it does suggest that more than one interpretive context for judging idleness existed in Chaucer's world. Besides the context of orthodox Christianity, there was also the moral context of Courtly Love, whether one judges that context to be serious or essentially recreational.

Chaucer's Black Knight, then, uses the word "ydelnesse" with several different denotations, two of which are directly helpful in determining his reaction to Oiseuse. He uses it to mean "leisure" and, perhaps, "vanity." Although none of these references explicitly links idleness to Guillaume's character, given Chaucer's direct reference to the *Roman*, Guillaume's poem is clearly an intertextual presence. Thus, these references lend support to the mainstream interpretations of the courtly circle of critics.

What can be learned about Oiseuse from the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, dedicated translator and reader of the *Roman*? First, Chaucer recognizes that characters with different social and moral agendas would interpret Oiseuse and, indeed, the entire *Roman* differently. Chaucer's writings give support to no single theory of the *Roman*'s meaning. In the *Legend of Good Women*, the God of Love claims that the *Romaunt* is a heresy against the religion of love, but the *Legend*'s dreamer sees it differently. He calls the *Romaunt* an endorsement of love and faithfulness. Moreover, in the *Retraction* the aged Chaucer refuses even to classify the moral import of the *Roman*. With respect to Oiseuse, Chaucer's Second Nun links her directly with the Christian vice of sloth. The Knight and the Parson of the *Canterbury Tales* implicitly link Oiseuse to sloth as well. The Black Knight, however, uses "ydelnesse" to denote leisure and, perhaps, vanity. On the whole, Chaucer's various references support the findings of Badel and Huot: medieval readers found in the *Roman* an authority on love from which each could draw a lesson suitable to his or her own needs. If critics insist on reducing Oiseuse to a single denotation, they needlessly impoverish their historical understanding of the character.

It is one thing to argue that many of the various denotations of "oiseuse"

find support in the Chaucer canon; it is quite another, however, to suggest that Chaucer's overall attitude toward idleness was noncommittal. On the contrary, taken as a whole I find that his oeuvre conveys an attitude of disapproval or, at least, distrust. In fact, one sees this distrust not only in the comments of those favorites of the Exegetes, the Parson and the Second Nun, but also in the treatment of his aristocratic knights—the “verray, parfit gentil knight” of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Black Knight, and Troilus. Comments by and about these three characters make the case most eloquently. In the *Knights Tale*, the narrator's distaste for idleness is palpable, and the mature Black Knight in the *Book of the Duchess* implies that, once a lover passes through the gate of Deduit's garden, he must leave Oiseuse behind and work diligently at love's labor. Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, the *Troilus* is in part an exemplum of the enervating effects of sloth in love. Nowhere in Chaucer's works can one find support for the courtly argument that Oiseuse is a virtue to be celebrated or a secular parallel to religious contemplation. On the whole, Chaucer's attitude toward Oiseuse comes closest to that of Marta Powell Harley: idleness emasculates lovers. Chaucer seems to believe that one should always be busy about something, whether the labor is physical, spiritual, or amatory. Like his Parson, he affirms that heaven, the heaven of the Christian religion or the secular paradise of Courtly Lovers, is the reward of laborers and not of idle folk.

NOTES

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1. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1983), lines 523-616 (1: 17-20). Quotations from the *Roman* are from this edition. Translations of the *Roman* are taken from Charles Dahlberg, trans., *The Romance of the Rose* (1971; reprinted Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986).

2. Although these definitions are taken from A.J. Greimas' *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Larousse, 1968), they are essentially the same as those found in Frédéric Godefroy's *Lexique de l'ancien français* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1964).

3. I take these terms from Sylvia Huot, "The Scribe as Editor: Rubrication as Critical Apparatus in Two Manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose*," *L'Esprit Créateur* 27 (1987): 68. By examining rubrics on early manuscripts, Huot shows that these terms indicate two broad categories of *Roman* interpretation dating back to at least the fourteenth century.

4. *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Background of the Book of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 5.

5. *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Derek Brewer, 2 vols. (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 1: 40.

6. Compare, for example, Exegete John Fleming's remark "Context is all" ("Further Reflections on Oiseuse's Mirror," *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 100 [1984]: 29) with David Hult's comment: "Need we mention that these various figural interpretations seek to apply a moral or religious context that is scarcely justified in Guillaume's text taken as a whole?" (*Self-Fulfilling Prophecies: Readership and Authority in the First Roman de la Rose* [Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1986], 222n. Of course, these writers emphasize two different kinds of contexts in their analyses. For the Exegetes, the context is ultimately the spirit of the Middle Ages, a spirit dominated by Christianity, whereas for New Critics and many others in the courtly camp, the context is the self-enclosed work of literature. See Lee Patterson's historical analysis of the conflict between these two methodologies, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1987), 3-39.

7. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 90, 103, 361.

8. Robertson, 92-93. Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose: A Study of Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 73-81 and Dahlberg, "Love and the *Roman de la Rose*," *Speculum* 44 (1969): 581.

9. Fleming, "Further Reflections," 32.

10. Marta Powell Harley, "Narcissus, Hermaphroditus, and Attis: Ovidian Lovers at the Fontaine d'Amors in Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la rose*," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 335.

11. It should be noted that critics sometimes supply combs and mirrors that are not actually found in the texts. Ovid's Salmacis, for example, does not carry a mirror. Ovid says of her: "saep̄e Cytoriaco deducit pectine crines / et, quid se deceat, spectatas consulit undas" (*Metamorphoses*, ed. Frank Justus Miller, 2nd ed., Loeb Classical Library [London, 1925], 4.311-12). Salmacis regards herself in the "spectatas . . . undas," the "glanced-at waves." No mirror is mentioned. At the same time Guillaume de Lorris does not, in fact, mention Oiseuse's comb. Although he mentions the mirror directly, he only implies that she carries a comb (555, 566-68).

12. Harley, 325.

13. See, for example, Jean Batany, "Miniature, allégorie, idéologie: 'Oiseuse' et la mystique monacale récupérée par la 'classe de loisir,'" *Études sur Le Roman de la Rose de Guillaume de Lorris*, ed. Jean Duforet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1984), 29.

14. Alan M. F. Gunn, *The Mirror of Love: A Reinterpretation of the Romance of the Rose* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1952), 105.

15. "Oiseuse, die Dame mit dem Spiegel," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 15 (1965): 145-46.

16. Batany, 19-22.

17. "Lea, Matelda und Oiseuse," *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 78 (1962): 467.

18. *Roman*, line 39. Sasaki, "Sur le personnage d'Oiseuse," *Études de langue et littérature* 32 (1978): 11-13, 23.

19. "Oiseuse, Vénus, Luxure: Trois dames et un miroir," *Romania* 106 (1985): 117.

20. "Reflections on Oiseuse's Mirror: Iconographic Tradition, Luxuria and the *Roman de la Rose*," *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 98 (1982): 300, 306, 310-11.

21. Hans Robert Jauss writes: "In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. . . . A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. . . . It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers." (*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982], 19, 21).

22. Reception studies of the *Roman* include: Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose: A Study of Allegory and Iconography*; Fleming, "The Moral Reputation of the *Roman de la Rose* before 1400," *Romance Philology* 18 (1965): 430-35; Maxwell Luria, "A Sixteenth-Century Gloss on the *Roman de la Rose*," *Medieval Studies* 44 (1982): 333-70; Pierre-Yves Badel, *Le Roman de la Rose au XIVe siècle: Étude de la réception de l'oeuvre* (Geneva: Droz, 1980); and several important articles by Sylvia Huot: "The Scribe as Editor"; "Ci parle l'auteur": The Rubrication of Voice and Authorship in *Roman de la Rose* Manuscripts," *SubStance* 17 (1988): 42-48; and "Medieval Readers of the *Roman de la Rose*: The Evidence of Marginal Notations," *Romance Philology* 43 (1990): 400-20. None of these studies focuses specifically on the question of Oiseuse, and all are based on the French reception of the *Roman*.

In *The Roman de la Rose*, Fleming studies the *Roman's* reception primarily through its

illuminations. With respect to Oiseuse, he also cites interpretations in the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Echecs Amoureux* gloss, and *The Legends of the Saints in the Scottish Dialect of the Fourteenth Century* to support the Exegetical interpretation (73-74, 79, 80n). Huot cites evidence on Oiseuse's reception from the rubrics of two fourteenth-century manuscripts ("Scribe as Editor," 68-69, 74). Her evidence suggests a lack of uniformity in the interpretation of the character.

23. A select bibliography of studies treating the *Roman's* influence on Chaucer might include such works as Lisi Cipriani, "Studies in the Influence of the *Romance of the Rose* upon Chaucer," *PMLA* 22 (1907): 552-95; Dean Fansler, *Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose* (1914; reprinted Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965); Maxwell Luria, *A Reader's Guide to the Roman de la Rose* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1982), 75-87; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957; reprinted Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); David Wallace, "Chaucer and the *European Rose*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7 (1985): 61-67; and James Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets*.

24. "Chaucer and the *Romance of the Rose*," *English Studies* 69 (1988): 12-26. Diekstra believes that "Idleness . . . is carefully presented so as not to call up associations with the idleness of the vices" (12).

25. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), F.333. All references to Chaucer's works are taken from this edition and cited in the text by line number and, when appropriate, by fragment number or version.

26. Noted by Luria, *A Reader's Guide*, 77.

27. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 27-36 and Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 73-78.

28. Fleming, "Moral Reputation," 430. Huot believes that the *Roman* was subject to different moral interpretations before 1400. Her evidence is taken from manuscript glosses and rubrics ("Scribe as Editor," 67).

29. A scholarly controversy exists over whether in fact the *Retraction* is "an expression of personal remorse." See Siegfried Wenzel's summary of the controversy in the explanatory notes of Benson's edition (965). Whether or not the *Retraction* represents a death bed repentance, no critic, to the best of my knowledge, questions that it is a genuine part of the Chaucer canon, written near the end of the poet's career.

30. Badel, 135, 142-43. Huot's study of the *Roman's* manuscripts supports Badel's argument. She cautions that, while we need not abandon our quest for a single, continuous reading, we must always remember its "protean nature" and resist "the sufficiency of any one perspective to explain the whole" ("Medieval Readers," 414-15).

31. Caroline D. Eckhardt, "The Art of Translation in *The Romaunt of the Rose*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 6 (1984): 46.

The extant Middle English text could not be entirely Chaucer's work. Donald Sutherland, for example, concludes, "There is . . . no reason to doubt that Fragment A of the *Romaunt*, save for a few revisions, is Chaucer's genuine work. . . . [But] If Chaucer wrote Fragment A, then in all likelihood he was not responsible for the second translation, including Fragments B and C" (*The Romaunt of the Rose and Le Roman de la Rose: A Parallel-Text Edition* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967], xxxiv). Similarly, Alfred David believes that while Fragments B and C could not be by Chaucer, "there is no persuasive evidence that the author of A is not Chaucer" (*The Riverside Chaucer*, 1103).

32. Noted in Fleming, "Further Reflections," 31.

33. *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956-), "idelnesse," 1a, 2a, 2c.

34. The Second Nun's condemnation of Oiseuse is noted by both Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer*, 92 and Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose*, 73-74.

35. Boccaccio's description of Venus's temple is based on Statius's description of the "House of Sleep" in the *Thebaid*. See David Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of Classical Epic in Boccaccio's Teseida* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 160. However,

Boccaccio expands Statius's treatment so that Venus's temple represents the concupiscible appetite while the temple of Mars represents the irascible appetite. See Boccaccio's own comments in his gloss: N.R. Havely, ed., *Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 130-31.

36. D.W. Robertson, Jr., *The Book of the Duchess*, *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 403.

37. Although some read the poem as a religious vision, those who interpret the poem as a secular elegy are also convincing. See James Wimsatt, "The Book of the Duchess: Secular Elegy or Religious Vision?" *Signs and Symbols in Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. John P. Hermann and John J. Burke, Jr. (University, Alabama: Alabama University Press, 1981), 116-17 and James Dean, "Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*: A Non-Boethian Interpretation," *MLQ* 46 (1985): 236-37.

38. Bernard F. Huppé and Robertson note the importance of idleness in the *Book of the Duchess*. However, since they believe that the Black Knight is not John of Gaunt but the "sorrowing alter ego" of the dreamer, they emphasize the dreamer's idleness and overweening sorrow, tristitia, throughout their treatment (*Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963], 35, 52).

39. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets*, 16.

40. Marc M. Pelen notes this similarity ("Machaut's Court of Love Narratives and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 11 [1976]: 142).

41. Fansler does not believe that "idelnesse" in the *Book of the Duchess* is a direct reference to Oiseuse (85). I agree that the personification itself is not present in the *Book of the Duchess*, but this does not mean that Chaucer's references to idleness in the poem tell us nothing about his understanding of Oiseuse.

42. Chaucer took this passage from Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*:

. . . .
De l'estat qu'innocence avoie,
Que Jonnesce me gouvernoit
Et en oyseuse me tenoit,
Mes oeuvres estoient volages;
Varians estoit mes courages. (45-50; emphasis added)

[when I was in the state of innocence, when Youth governed me and kept me
in idleness, my works were fleeting; my heart was changeable.]

(*Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne and Remede de Fortune*, eds. James I. Wimsatt and William Kibler, The Chaucer Library [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988], 171). The English translation is given on facing pages of this edition. One immediately notes that Chaucer's "ydelnesse" is a direct translation of Machaut's "Oyseuse." This suggests that "ydelnesse" in *BD*, 797-802 is indeed linked, via Machaut's poem, to Oiseuse. Nevertheless, while a comparison of Chaucer's verses to those of Machaut is helpful, it is not decisive in determining Chaucer's meaning. Machaut's narrator says that "Tout m'estoit un quanque veoie, / Fors tant que tousdis enclinoie / Mon cuer et toute ma pensee / Vers ma dame" [whatever I saw was the same to me, except that my heart and all my thoughts were ever on my lady] (lines 51-54). Chaucer translates a part of this passage in *BD* lines 803-04, but he ignores the important qualification expressed in *Remede* lines 52-54. He apparently does so because at this point he is describing the Black Knight's condition before, not after, he met White. Thus, the important qualification of lines 52-54 could not apply to Chaucer's protagonist.

The extensive influence of Machaut's judgment poems and poems of complaint and comfort on the *Book of the Duchess* is fully treated in James Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets*, 88-117.

43. Most critics find that some kind of consolation is offered to the Black Knight although they do not agree on the kind of consolation offered. Helen Phillips offers a good summary of opinion up to 1981 in "The Structure of Consolation in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981): 107-18. Debate on the subject continues, however. Especially controversial is the influence of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* on the *Book of the Duchess*. For two recent arguments from

opposing camps, see Michael Cherniss, *The Book of the Duchess, Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (Norman: Pilgrim, 1987), 169-92 and Dean, "Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*: A Non-Boethian Interpretation," 235-49.

44. I refer to the private Troilus here, not the public warrior. See Sadlek, "Love, Labor, and Sloth in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*" *Chaucer Review* 26 (1992): 350-68.

45. Chaucer's Parson says, "Agayns this horrible synne of Accidie, and the branches of the same, ther is a vertu that is called *fortitudo* or strengthe," which "enhaunceth and enforceth the soule, right as Accidie abateth it and maketh it fieble" (10.727, 729).

Here I speak of the knight's character as a lover, not as a mourner. The case has been made that the knight's level of grief is unnatural and hence a form of sloth, *tristitia*. Pelen, for example, says that the mourning Black Knight represents sloth and lacks fortitude (147; see also Cherniss 177). Whatever the merits of this argument, it does not necessarily contradict my assessment of the Black Knight's character as a *lover*.

46. *Remedia amoris* (line 139), in *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, ed. J.H. Mozley, the Loeb Classical Library, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

47. Indeed, Huppé and Robertson do not consider song-making to be bona fide labor. "In recognition of his lady's example, the Knight did attempt to abandon his former mistress, idleness," they write, "but in his blindness, he succeeded only in going from one kind of idleness to another. He spent his time making idle songs" (84). But note Lisa Kiser's interpretation of the passage: "The [Black] Knight implies that idleness and writing poetry are never compatible. . . . Poets do not play at their craft; rather, they labor at it" (*Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry* [Hanover: University Press of New England, 1991], 17). While Kiser interprets the Black Knight as a laboring poet, I see him as a laboring lover. I believe the difference is only one of emphasis.

48. *Confessio Amantis, The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, ES, 81-82 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), 4: 1169-70, 1181-85. References to the *Confessio* are from this edition and cited in the text by book and line numbers.