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« DOUCE DAME D'ONOUR »

LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY QUALIFICATIONS OF THE LADY

When the French poet in the late fourteenth century addressed his ladylove, or spoke of her, almost without exception he referred to her as his *dame*. The term seems to have enjoyed universal use by lovers who subscribed to the convention of courtly love — or «courteous» love, whatever we may want to call it — with *amie* used relatively rarely and *damiselle* practically non-existent. To indicate his feelings about his beloved the courtly poet of the period qualified the word *dame* with a number of epithets whose choice presumably reflected in part his attitude, whether sincere or merely conventional, toward her; and in part, too, the choice of epithet in all probability reveals the existence of a more or less banal pool of designations which poets habitually drew upon to evoke the sort of attractive but heartless person whom the poet's audience could all the more readily imagine.

French lovesongs of the end of the fourteenth century tended for the most part to be polyphonic. In a corpus of 261 of these polyphonic lovesongs¹, comprising some 4096 lines of text, the

¹ The present study is based upon a reading of the manuscript sources, which are as follows: Autun, Bibliothèque municipale, 152; Berkeley, University Library; Bern, Bürgerbibliothek, A 421; Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, 596, Busta HH2'; Cambrai, Bibliothèque communale, B. 1328; Cambridge, University Library, MS addl. 5943; Chantilly, Musée Condé, 564; Florence, Biblioteca nazionale, Panciatichi 26; Grottaferrata, Biblioteca dell'Abbazia, Ms E.β. xvi; Ivrea, Biblioteca capitolare; Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, B.P.L. 2720; London, British Museum, Addl. 41667 (1); London, British Museum, Royal 12.C.VI; Lucca, Archivio di Stato, Ms. 184; Modena, Biblioteca Estense, M.5.24; Montserrat, Monastery Library, Ms. 823; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Douce 381; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Canonici misc. 213; Padova, Biblioteca universitaria, Ms. 1115; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, n.a.fr. 6771; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, fonds italien 568; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Coll. de Picardie, 67; Pistoia, Archivum Capituli Pistoriensis, Ms. B.3 n. 5; Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 6 E 37. The 69 polyphonic lovesongs of Machaut (excluding his motets) were read in the edition of V. Chichmaref: Guillaume de Machaut, *Poésies lyriques*, Paris, 1909, pp. 535-633.

word *dame* occurs a grand total of 175 times. Of these instances, *dame* is *not* qualified by any word other than possessive (*ma dame*) or an article (*la dame que j'am*) 91 times (52%). In the remaining cases at least one epithet is applied to the noun. The number and relative position of the epithet vary, as the following table indicates:

one epithet before <i>dame</i> :	16 instances (9% of the 175 total)
two epithets, one before and one after:	17 instances (10% of the 175 total)
one epithet after <i>dame</i> :	39 instances (22% of the 175 total)
two epithets after <i>dame</i> :	5 instances (3% of the 175 total)
three epithets after <i>dame</i> :	2 instances (1% of the 175 total)

If we read these statistics and think of modern French — without looking yet at the actual words used — the 39 instances of a single epithet following the noun seems to indicate that the poets of the period preferred a fairly simple qualification of their beloved. Yet it seems, too, however, that the comparatively large number of cases (17) in which poets wrote an adjective both before as well as after the noun *dame* indicates that their concepts of their lady were not in fact all that simple. This observation, as hesitant and inconclusive as it is, would probably be fair insofar as modern French goes, but the fact of the matter is that in middle French the preferred position for the epithet adjective was *in front of* the noun.

L'ancien français avait mis de préférence l'adjectif devant le substantif, présentant ainsi la qualité comme inhérente à la personne ou à l'objet en question (84% de tous le cas au XIII^e siècle). Cette proportion, qui se maintient encore assez bien au XVI^e siècle (75%), tombe tout à coup à 50% au XVII^e siècle, pour descendre encore dans les siècles suivants. Ainsi le français a fini par donner une certaine indépendance à l'adjectif à valeur distinctive, en le mettant après le substantif².

It is clear that in referring to their *dame* the poets of the late four-

² Walter von Wartburg, *Evolution et structure de la langue française*, 5th edn., Berne, 1946, p. 175. See also Joseph Anglade, *Grammaire élémentaire de l'ancien français*, 11th edn., Paris, 1958, p. 264, and Karl Wydler, *Zur Stellung des attributiven Adjektivs vom Latein bis zum Neuf Französischen*, Bern, 1956, pp. 214-223.

teenth century chose to give exceptionally strong value to the adjectives they used to qualify her when, of the 96 epithets used, 63 are made to *follow* the noun. This observation will be worth returning to later.

What were these adjectives, then? Before the noun *dame*, the epithets used³, in order of frequency, were the following:

(a) <i>douce</i>	19 instances
(a) <i>chiere</i>	7 instances
(b) <i>belle</i>	3 instances
(b) <i>gente</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>gracieuse</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>noble</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>haulte</i>	1 instance

The quality *douce* is far and away that which receives the attention of poets when they think of their lady and want to express their ideas about her by means of an adjective, in its usual position, preceding the noun; *chiere* runs a very poor second; and *belle* is recognized as an attribute worthy of mention in this preceding position in only 3 of the total of 33 instances.

The choice and, of course, the combinations of epithets which poets place after the noun *dame* are more varied. A list of these, in order of frequency, is below⁴:

(c) <i>d'honour</i>	9 instances
(b) <i>jolie</i>	8 instances
(c) <i>sans per</i>	8 instances
(c) <i>de valour</i>	6 instances
(b) <i>belle</i>	4 instances
(c) <i>de pris</i>	4 instances
(a) <i>chiere</i>	3 instances
(c) <i>honnouree</i>	3 instances
(c) <i>pure</i>	3 instances
(b) <i>plesant</i>	3 instances
(c) <i>sovraine</i>	3 instances

³ Without considering at this point whether the adjective is used alone or in conjunction with another adjective which follows the noun.

⁴ In this catalogue I include adjectival phrases (e.g. *de pris*) because they function as epithets, but I exclude all predicate modifiers (*vous, dame, qui avez tant de vaillance*), which in any case are not particularly numerous.

(a) <i>desiree</i>	2 instances
(b) <i>blanche</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>coye</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>gente</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>gentil</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>debonnaire</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>gracieuse</i>	1 instance
(b) <i>simple</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>bonne</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>excellente</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>franche</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>nette</i>	1 instance
(c) <i>vaillans</i>	1 instance

To this list of modifiers we can add a short group of slightly more complex phrases, each of which occurs only once in the whole of the poetry:

- (b) *a chiere lie*
- (b) *au dous accueil*
- (c) *digne de tout honour*
- (c) *luisans de loyalté*
- (c) *paree de bonté*
- (c) *sachans de bien et de honesté*

When choosing a qualifying term to occupy the less usual position after the noun, the poets do not demonstrate any clear preferences. Three terms vie for most common use, *d'honour*, *jolie* and *sans per*; and then we find a slew of second-choice terms: *de valour*, *belle*, *de pris*, and so forth. Even the preeminence of the preferred terms over the second-choice terms is not nearly so great as we found among the epithets which precede the noun. There seems to be no convention, no habitual usage yet established to guide the poet in his phraseology as he chooses modifiers to occupy this unusual position after the noun.

Qualifiers are grouped — that is, the poets use more than one adjective together — only in the position following the noun *dame*. Here is a listing of these groupings:

ma dame simple et coye
ma dame bonne et belle
dame nette et pure

ma dame bele, sens per (*sens per* is perhaps adverbial if the comma is deleted)

dame vaillans, de pris et de valour

dame luisans de vraye loyalté et de bonté paree

dame sachans de bien et de honesté

dame d'onour, plesant et gracieuse

From this list it is clear, firstly, that groupings of two or more qualifiers after the noun *dame* were not particularly common; and secondly, that no particular grouping recurs so that we might perhaps be able to see it as being used like a cliché. In fact, there is a remarkable variety in the choice of terms: only the word *belle* appears more than once in these groupings, and it only twice.

And, finally, a list of that type of loose association in which one epithet precedes the noun and another follows:

douce dame chiere

douce dame chere

douce dame chiere

doulce dame sans per

douce dame sans per

doulce dame sanz per

douce dame jolie

douce dame jolie

douce dame de valour

douche dame de valour

douce dame d'onour

belle dame d'honour

belle dame d'onour

haulte dame de honour

gente dame pure

gracieuse dame de pris

nouble dame souverayne

A general observation about this type of association of epithets must surely be its relative simplicity: one adjective before, and never more than one adjective after the noun. Even in an eight-syllable line (and late 14th century lyric verse regularly runs to ten syllables and occasionally twelve) the poets could easily add a second epithet after the noun had they wanted, and still keep the whole phrase within a single line of verse. Yet apparently they prefer this rela-

tively brief, elementary and perhaps rhythmically symmetrical expression.

A more particular observation about the list bears upon the choice of words. In the entire body of adjectives used with *dame* the four adjectives which occur only once before the noun (*haulte*, *gente*, *gracieuse* and *noble*⁵) are ALL reinforced with a following adjective which we see here. In other words, only those adjectives which are most commonly used before the noun appear WITHOUT a following adjective: *douce*, *chiere*, *belle* — and even two of the three uses of *belle* before the noun are followed by another adjective, which is in both cases *d'honneur* (above): *belle dame d'honneur*. In effect, then, *douce* and *chiere* alone seem regularly to be used by themselves in front of the noun *dame* without any additional qualification; and yet, again, we see that 11 of the 19 occurrences of *douce* are reinforced by a following epithet. Which leaves only *chiere* unsupported by an epithet after the noun; and *chère dame* must surely be the most common form of address (other than simply *ma dame*) in any love poetry in any period. One of our conclusions, therefore, respecting the use of epithets preceding the word *dame* must be that the poets of this period did not have a great deal of faith in the efficacy of such qualifiers. For the reasons behind this disinclination to use a single unsupported adjective before the noun we shall return later.

From these various lists of qualifiers of the word *dame*, both before and after it, we can attempt to make some general observations. These will have to do with the types of epithet which the poets make use of in order to qualify their lady, and with the preferences which the poets show in their choices of epithets.

If we consider, overall, the adjective which the poets preferred to apply to their lady, there is no doubt that that word is *douce*. If we consider at the same time the position of the preferred adjective with respect to the noun, then *douce* overwhelmingly dominates as we have seen, in the preceding position; but, remarkably, the word *douce* is completely absent from use AFTER the noun *dame*. A whole range of qualifiers — thirty of them — is used after the

⁵ See the list of epithets which precede *dame*: page 39 above.

noun, a very much greater variety than the poets rely upon before the noun, but *douce* is simply not among them⁶.

How can we explain this relative poverty of adjectival resources before the noun *dame* and the very great dependence upon the single word *douce*? Is it enough to say that we are witnessing one effect of a literary convention, a lexical effect? In part, probably yes: *douce dame*, with its alliteration, was clearly a phrase which enjoyed a certain consecrated status within the convention of courtly love⁷. But we might be able to gain a better understanding of how the late fourteenth century French poets qualified their lady by looking at the TYPES of qualification they used, and by trying to see whether particular types tended to be associated with one or the other of the positions with respect to the noun.

In very general terms the epithets applied to *dame* by these lyric poets can usefully be classified according to three areas of value or quality which the epithets refer to: affective qualities, physical qualities and moral qualities. The affective qualities (which I have designated in the previous lists as « a ») are subjective and involve the sentimental or emotional relations between the lover and his lady. The physical qualities (« b ») are objective and outward, the lady's appearance and behaviour, what the lover and everyone in the lover's society sees of the lady; these qualities include primarily beauty and graciousness. The moral qualities (« c ») are inward in the lady but are still objective since not merely do they depend upon the lover's perception or his feelings, but they are recognized and appreciated by his society in general; they include, for example, goodness, worth, merit.

⁶ The only instance of this epithet used after *dame* is when the poet has incorporated it in a phrase where, again, it precedes its noun: *dame au dous accueil*.

⁷ Its antiquity is amply demonstrable:

Douce dame, pregne vos en pitiez!

Les Chansons de Colin Muset, ed. Joseph Bédier, Paris, 1938, p. 13 (Muset was writing about 1230).

*Belle douce dame chiere,
A vos me doin c m'otroi.*

Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, *Vers*, a cura di Thomas G. Bergin, Florence, [1956], p. 52 (the work dates from about 1185). The poem in which this particular French line is found is polyglot: the Provençal poet tries to catch his lady's attention with quite conventional professions of his love in Italian, French, Gascon and Portuguese.

To a reader of modern French it is perhaps understandable that those which we might qualify as « affective » words dominate in the position preceding the noun; *belle*, in fact, is the only non-affective word used in that position more than once. As the usage of the fourteenth century more and more allowed modifiers to be placed after the noun, the more common epithets — such as *douce* and *chiere* — firmly retained their traditional positions in front of the noun. This is certainly what we find here in our lyric poetry. And we find the counterpart, too. Following the noun *dame* the poets have made great and daring use of a surprising number of qualifiers which belong to my second and third categories, terms having to do with the physical and moral qualities of the lady. Terms of endearment, related to the affectionate qualities of the lady, are virtually absent in this position: *chiere* and *desiree* alone are used here — and even *desiree*, a past participle, undoubtedly owes its position to its grammatical form, as participles are only very rarely found in a preceding position in Old French⁸. The qualifiers preceding *dame* tend to be subjective; virtually all of the qualifiers following *dame* are objective, or at least refer to qualities which are normally assessed in a relatively objective manner by society at large.

The poet's vocabulary for expressing the affections is astonishingly limited. Apparently in this realm the total resources of these love poets consist of three epithets — of which, again, one is verbal, a past participle: *douce*, *chiere*, *desiree*. We might, to allow the sentimentality of the poets the benefit of any doubt about our classifications, throw in the words *plesant* (used three times) and *gentil* (used once), though neither of these has anything approaching the emotional content of *douce* and *chiere*. They remain fundamentally words which characterize the lady's behaviour and bearing without possessing, apparently, a great deal of affectionate content.

But the poets' ladies ARE lovable — one assumes — and when each describes his ladylove he must surely be telling his audience WHY she is lovable.

What we are led naturally to suppose is that for the fourteenth

⁸ Wydler, *Zur Stellung*, p. 223.

century writer of lyric love poetry the affections must not have mattered a great deal; what did apparently count for him, what explained and what in front of his audiences he must have relied upon to justify his love for his lady was not the « a » category of qualities but rather just the « b » and « c » categories. These physical and moral qualities are, as we have seen, those which are more or less objectively perceived by the poet and by his audience. It was his society as a whole which determined the real value of such words as *d'honour* and *honnouree*, *sans per*, *de valour*, *de pris*, *sovraine*, *jolie* and *belle*. Would it then be safe to conclude that these poets were particularly conscious of social norms, and that in their choice of qualifiers for their *dame* they reveal a dependence upon objective, non-sentimental measures of their lady's worth? Love is in a sense validated, and the sufferings brought on by love are given a serious significance, to the extent that the lady is shown to occupy a position of esteem in society, whether for her grace and gentility (she is *coye*, *gente*, *debonnaire*) or for her irreproachable morality (she is *pure*, *bonne*, *excellente*, *sachans de bien et de honesté*). Such a conclusion would jibe nicely with our notions about the conventionality of courtly love toward the end of the Middle Ages. There is no real emotion here; *douce* and *chiere*, as grossly overworked and trite as these epithets may be, serve adequately to say all that the poets think is worth saying about their feelings for their lady. And on the other hand the convention of courtly love depends at this time for its very existence, as effete as THIS may be, upon something much more real and effectual than merely a lover's feelings: the lady must be seen objectively to be worthy of all that love and all that suffering.

Fine, as a tentative conclusion. But there is one final observation to be made about all these epithets applied to *dame*, and that may change our inferences somewhat. It has again to do with the position of the epithets.

Just as in modern French a deliberate dislocation of the adjective from its normal position following the noun to a position in front of the noun lends to the adjective an abnormal stress, so in the same way in Old French a similar dislocation — but in reverse, from before the noun to after it — allowed the poet to lend a greater stress to the adjective. The reason for this effect of increased

affectivity — apart from that which would come from the mere action of disrupting normal word order — has to do with the natural stress present in Old French phraseology.

Während im Altfranzösischen das letzte Wort einer Mitteilung im Ton hervorgehoben ist, befindet sich im Neufranzösischen der letzte, die eigentliche Mitteilung enthaltende Redeteil in Stimmensenkung... Die Tonverteilung ist dann entweder / \ oder / ˘ \, vgl. *j'ai tout fait; bon ou grand; tout à fait*. Es kann daher nicht heissen *c'est un homme grand*, da *grand*, das affektiv oder unterscheidend hervorgehoben ist, nicht an einer gänzlich unbetonten Stelle des Satzes, stehen kann. Dass es im Altfranzösischen dagegen in dieser Stellung durchaus möglich ist, steht im Folgenden⁹.

French writers of the fourteenth century had increasingly at their disposal a stylistic technique for reinforcing the expressivity of their language, and this consisted merely of moving the epithet to the unusual position after its noun.

When, in the polyphonic lyric poetry of the fourteenth century, we count 33 epithets before *dame* and 63 after *dame*, and keep in mind that, according to von Wartburg¹⁰, something like 80% of the adjectives during this period NORMALLY preceded their noun, then clearly our poets are making a very great use of this technique. The reasons for the high frequency of the use of adjectives after the word *dame* are probably quite understandable. What the poets seek and achieve by displacing their modifiers is affective stress. Just as the modern French writer can imbue his adjective with a heightened emotional tension by using it before the noun (for example in saying *une épouvantable scène*), the fourteenth century poet implied that *gracieuse*, *franche* or *pure* expressed for him not merely the coldly rational sense of the adjective in its basic accepta-

⁹ Ernst Gamillscheg, *Historische französische Syntax*, Tübingen, 1957, p. 27. « Nach alten Grammatikern werden einsilbige Adjektiva vorangestellt. Die Einsilbigkeit kann nur dann ausschlaggebend sein, wenn die Satzrhythmik die Stellung mitbestimmt... Tatsache ist, dass eine grosse Zahl dieser einsilbigen Adjektiva ausschliesslich oder zumeist Ausdrücke der Beurteilung sind, und deshalb, nicht wegen ihrer Einsilbigkeit, ihren Platz vor dem Substantiv haben, so *beau*, *bon*, *laid*, afrz. *ort*, *vil*, *vain*, *fier*, usf. ... Die Regel gilt nicht für das Altfranzösische, das die letzte Silbe eines Satzes stimmlich her vorhebt ».

¹⁰ See above, p. 38.

tion but a sense which went beyond that; within the context of its use each possesses a subsidiary connotation which reflects emotionally upon the thing or person being modified.

In short, the epithet following its noun was itself imbued with a certain affectivity. Even though these epithets may designate primarily physical and moral qualities in the lady it would be wrong to assume that this choice of terms betrays merely a tendency on the part of the poets to subordinate their sentiments to a certain absolute set of social values which included, *inter alia*, beauty, honour and merit. All of these epithets themselves, despite their literal meaning, had an affective value because of their very position with respect to the noun.

If we feel inclined to belittle the skill of these late fourteenth century love poets who seem so much a part of a tired old convention, or to decry the poverty of their imagination because the very old terms *douce dame* and *chiere dame* remain in use as virtually the sole expressions having to do with the emotions, we should read their poetry again. What we ought rather also to do is try to feel the affective tension¹¹ in all of these following adjectives, and admire the poets' inventiveness in finding a new way to express the tension of their feelings toward their lady. Though French poets had sung of their love for their lady for some 200 years this love still remained for them a passion.

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¹¹ This is what Wydler, *Zur Stellung*, p. 45, calls « *einen stark erregten Gemütszustand* »