

**The merits of not knowing:  
The paradox of *espoir certain* in late-medieval French narrative poetry**

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The idea of medieval love poetry is perhaps most often associated with the lyric verse of Occitan troubadours or Northern French trouvères: fixed-form poems expressing the plangent lament or yearning desire of the unfulfilled lover, such as Gace Brulé's *chanson* 'Desconfortez, plains de dolour et d'ire' (Discouraged, full of sorrow and rage).<sup>1</sup> As criticism has readily acknowledged, such vehicles of emotional expression were also vehicles for formal and conceptual experimentation, playing with ideas of poetic composition, such as the paradox of positive creativity proceeding from a negative, dispossessed state, as in Guillaume IX d'Aquitaine's 'Farai un vers de dreyt nien' (I will make a poem out of nothing at all).<sup>2</sup> Later, first-person narrative verse developed this capacity for debating ideas within the conventional discourse of *fin'amor*, attesting to an increasing intellectualisation of vernacular love-poetry in the period.<sup>3</sup> Key to this development was the phenomenally popular thirteenth-century poem *Le Roman de la rose* (hereafter *Rose*), started by Guillaume de Lorris as a tale of courtly love and continued by Jean de Meun, a master at the University of Paris, who amplified the story into a vast, 21,000-line exploration of philosophical and scientific questions of moment.<sup>4</sup> Without wishing to impose an unduly teleological reading, it would be

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<sup>1</sup> *Chanson XVII in Gace Brulé trouvère champenois: édition des chansons et étude historique*, ed. by Hologer Petersen Dyggve, 2nd edn. (Helsinki: Imprimerie de la Société de Littérature Finnoise, 1951), p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> In *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères: An Anthology and a History*, ed. and trans. by Frederick Goldin (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 24-26.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sylvia Huot, 'The Daisy and the Laurel: Myths of Desire and Creativity in the Poetry of Jean Froissart', *Yale French Studies* (1991), 240-51 (p. 241).

<sup>4</sup> On the *Rose* itself, see Sarah Kay, *The Romance of the Rose* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1995). Whilst recognising that one should exercise caution in asserting 'phenomenal' popularity in relation to a medieval work, it seems fair to single out the *Rose* for such an accolade given the number of surviving copies (over 320) and the evidence for its influence on subsequent writers: see *Debating the Roman de la Rose: a critical anthology*, ed. by

fair to say that for poets writing after the *Rose*, the expanded intellectual scope of the first-person love narrative enabled literary reflection on a range of epistemological issues.<sup>5</sup> One such vital question for the lover-persona: to know or not to know whether his lady reciprocates his desire, which may elaborate into a more complicated *how* to know/not know, how to discern her feelings from scant evidence, how to massage this evidence to contrive the longed-for successful scenario or refute signs of rejection, whilst still maintaining a state of yearning that is, after all, the primary motor for the whole enterprise of poetic composition. The medieval lover lives, and therefore writes, in hope: that potent and yet insubstantial blend of longing and fear that renders the quest for knowledge an emotion-fuelled cognitive craving.

For lover-personae in late-medieval French narrative poetry, love brings profound instability. It was widely acknowledged amongst poets and commentators on the effects of amorous desire that it risks impeding cognition and derails a man from his normal ('correct') path;<sup>6</sup> as the Thin Knight in Alain Chartier's *Debat de deux fortunés d'amours* (c. 1416-17) states:

[...] Amours fait cuer d'amant bestourner

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Christine McWebb (London/New York: Routledge, 2007); Pierre-Yves Badel, *Le Roman de la rose au quatorzième siècle: étude de la réception de l'œuvre* (Geneva: Droz, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> There has been much recent scholarly interest, fostered by an AHRC-sponsored project, in the relationship between poetry and knowledge in late-medieval France, <<http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/french/poeticknowledge>> [accessed 09 March 2013], and Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay, *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the Rose to the Rhétoriqueurs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Contemporary medieval commentators are, therefore, rehearsing arguments that may be found diversely in much earlier sources, such as Aristotle, Lucretius, and Augustine. Perhaps the most elaborate medieval vernacular exposition of how the amorous subject should attend to his mental well-being and avoid pitfalls of error, madness and deception, is provided by Évrart de Conty's *Livre des eschez amoureux moralisés* (for which, see later in this essay).

Et de son droit estat le destourner.<sup>7</sup>

([...] Love makes a lover's heart go off course and deviate from its proper condition.)

He concludes his ensuing catalogue of love's effects by affirming that

[Amours fait] seurté doubter

Et en doubte seurement se bouter,

A son preu sourt, son contraire escouter,

Volenté croire et raison rebouter (*DDFA*, ll. 1075-78).<sup>8</sup>

([Love makes] one doubt certainty and enter doubt with certainty; it makes one ignore one's friend and heed one's enemy, trust one's will and reject reason.)

The interlocking wordplay (traductio of *seurté* / *seurement* and *doubter* / *doubte*, and annominatio of *bouter* / *rebouter*) of his commentary, emphasizing cognitive confusion, prefaces an enumeration of oxymorons that is typical of medieval discourse on erotic desire:

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier*, ed. by James C. Laidlaw (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), pp. 158-95, ll. 1068-69. Hereafter *DDFA*; subsequent references will be incorporated in the text. English translations of all texts are my own, unless stated otherwise. The image of derailment from a correct path is rendered variously across a range of texts, especially those dealing with cognitive or spiritual peregrination, such as Guillaume de Deguilleville's *Pèlerinage de vie humaine* (1330-1, rev. 1355), a spiritually corrective re-writing of the *Rose*. Frequently used verbs to depict a figurative straying from the right path or taking a wrong or false direction are *forvoyer* and *errer*; similar imagery is present, for example, in Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Minor*, in which he deprecates the sensual imagination's 'wandering' (*evagatio*) (*PL* 196, 19B).

<sup>8</sup> In Old French, the prevailing sense of *doubte* is 'fear', though 'doubt' or 'uncertainty' (the primary modern meanings) are also current, at least in Middle French. The contexts in which *doubte* features in quotations throughout this article will be used as a guide to which meaning is intended: for instance, the collocation and intended antithesis with *seurté* here indicates 'doubt' rather than 'fear'.

love is contradictory – ‘sorrowful joy’, ‘bitter sweetness’ – and mingles hope with suspicion: ‘certain espoir de souspeçon meslé’ (certain hope mingled with suspicion) (*DDFA*, l. 1093). One could, therefore, easily pass off this lover’s lament as an unremarkable recycling of established commonplaces. However, there is a noteworthy tension between the effects he lists. On the one hand, love turns everything topsy-turvy – hence the love-stricken man’s confidence in his enemy and mistrust of his friend; things are not so much uncertain, therefore, as soundly inverted. On the other, love engenders doubt and clouds hope, which makes things unclear and unsure either way. The present essay wishes to explore in more detail the way poets developed this latter, more ambiguous condition as a key element of their lover-personae’s condition, with particular regard to the nature and role of hope.

The lover-personae with which we are dealing are thus unrequited lovers who long for, but never attain fulfilment – a state of affairs that accounts, in fact, for the vast majority of so-called *amants* in *dits* and *débats* of the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, from Jean Froissart to Alain Chartier.<sup>9</sup> The composers of these poems express, through their characters’ mental and emotional agitation,<sup>10</sup> a keen interest in epistemology, specifically as regards the psychology of human knowledge: the individual human subject is presented as a flawed character, one who strives to know something, but whose approach is faulty. The

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<sup>9</sup> *Dit* is an umbrella term for a form of later-medieval narrative poetry which is anchored in a first-person, usually masculine subjectivity. It is often about love (hence *dit amoureux*), and characteristically injects a note of comedy into its treatment of the *je*, whether he is presented as the amorous subject or, for instance, overhears another’s love lament. Dialogue and debate are frequent features of the *dit*, which makes it problematic to make any definitive distinction between *dit* and *debat*, since there is, equally, usually a measure of narrative in a *debat*, introducing the scenario and the participants and establishing a witnessing *je*. The late-medieval master of the *dit* is seen to be Guillaume de Machaut, whose *œuvre* comprises no fewer than nine illustrious examples of the form. Our primary attention is directed towards the lesser studied, but equally fascinating *dits* of Jean Froissart and Alain Chartier.

<sup>10</sup> It is difficult, even inappropriate, to make clear distinction between ‘mental’ and ‘emotional’ which would correspond to a modern dichotomy of head and heart; in medieval thought, the mind and the body are not distinct entities. See, for instance, Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 506, n. 12. In vernacular literary contexts, human understanding (‘entendement’) does not have a discrete location in the body / psyche.

desiring lover is a perfect vehicle for such psychological probing, not least given the amount of time (and thus poetic space) that he accords to recounting his cogitations. He wants to know whether his lady returns his affections, which does not always equate with wanting to know the truth, given the risk (presented in many cases as the likelihood) that she may not reciprocate. What he wants to know, therefore, is that his investment in loving his lady has been worthwhile – he wants to be proved right, and his mistake is often to equate his subjective wish for positive knowledge (his hope) with objective truth.<sup>11</sup> Hope, fuelled by erotic desire, is the motor for this epistemological drive. It would seem from the foregoing summary that uncertainty is the condition from which the lover seeks relief; hope is, he hopes, his way to surety, as Deschamps's persona remarks in his ballade 413:

[...] c'est un piteux wacarnes,  
Quant on n'en peut avoir seur estat:  
Plus a de griefz en amours que en armes.<sup>12</sup>

(It is a pitiful state of affairs when one can't be certain of things; there's more harm to be suffered in love than in war.)

But there are merits in maintaining this state of uncertain knowledge; as Congreve remarked, 'Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joys of Life'.<sup>13</sup> By (wilfully) maintaining uncertainty, one ensures that everything remains still possible and *hopeful*, and lover-personae excel in

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<sup>11</sup> Armstrong and Kay, in their introduction to *Knowing Poetry*, are careful to specify that they as critics are not endorsing the idea that knowledge has truth value (p. 20); this is, however, precisely the (mistaken) equation made by several lover-narrators of medieval *dits*.

<sup>12</sup> *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Gaston Raynaud and Henri Auguste Édouard Queux de Saint-Hilaire, 11 vols (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1878-1903), III, 214-15, ballade 413, ll. 28-30.

<sup>13</sup> The line is spoken by Angelica in *Love for Love* (1695), in *The Works of William Congreve*, ed. by Donald F. McKenzie, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), I, pp. 247-391 IV.xx.6.

their imaginative stratagems for cultivating possibility and, not infrequently, for equating such possibility with certain knowledge. There is ambivalence, then, from the lover's perspective, but more unequivocal gain from the author's point of view, given the creative potential for poetic development of an uncertain state, especially in the context of late-medieval narrative poetry's predilection for deferral or obfuscation of resolution.<sup>14</sup> For example, the debate in *DDFA* is, in the absence of the 'noble count' (*DDFA*, l. 1224) who could have served as arbitrator, submitted to an indeterminate extratextual audience for judgment: 'Qui mieulx sçaira, le demourant supplie' (l. 1242). Whoever may 'know' better is invited to complete it.<sup>15</sup>

What *we* hope our investigation of lovers' states of uncertainty will enable us to uncover is three-fold. First, we shall probe the workings of *espoir* in quests for knowledge in the late-medieval *dit*, the poetic genre marrying erotic and intellectual desires. Chartier's Thin Knight seems to posit unproblematically the idea of 'certain espoir', which is complicated into a doubting state only by the incursion of 'sousseçon'; but can hope itself be certain? We shall consider in what contexts the collocation appears paradoxical and in what senses it is congruent. Second, we shall cast fresh light on the constitution of the first-person persona as

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<sup>14</sup> For this resistance to closure as a deliberate poetic strategy, see Adrian Armstrong, *The Virtuoso Circle: Competition, Collaboration and Complexity in Late Medieval French Poetry* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2012), pp. 11-12; Emma J. Cayley, 'Drawing Conclusions: The Poetics of Closure in Alain Chartier's Verse', *Fifteenth Century Studies*, 28 (2003), 51-64. In the specific context of love poetry, one might also highlight contemporary predilection for versified litanies of oxymorons on the effects of desire, which prevent resolution through their holding in tension of antitheses, such as 'joyful sorrow'. Later in the fifteenth century, François Villon plays on this tangling of contraries (including 'je riz en pleurs...') in his so-called *Ballade des contradictions*, which includes the famous line: 'Riens ne m'est seur que la chose incertaine' (I am sure of nothing except uncertainty) (*Poésies*, ed. by Claude Thiry (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1991), p. 277, l. 11)

<sup>15</sup> We note the choice of verb here as *savoir* rather than *connaître*, which should perhaps be rendered more precisely as: 'whoever has the better know-how'. Knowledge in act rather than knowledge as content is being evoked here, which fits with the idea of deferring the act of concluding the poem: the *je* (ostensibly) yields to anyone who may have superior skills in knowing how to resolve the debate rather than to someone who simply knows more about the subject-matter.

poetic subject; the *dit amoureux* has been characterised as ‘an investigation of self’,<sup>16</sup> and we propose that the operation of forces of desire and hope in these poems reveals, in fact, a very uncertain self: an unstable subject of no fixed self-hood with no single consciousness producing its subjectivity. Finally, our study will contribute to the recent swell of interest in the relationship between poetry and knowledge in late-medieval France.

Having referred to the lover-persona as ‘he’ thus far, our initial focus will, in fact, be a female speaking subject, in Alain Chartier’s *Le Livre des quatre dames* (1416). Chartier’s acute interest in processes of human perception and understanding is most clearly demonstrated in his later prose work *Le Livre de l’Espérance* (c. 1430), with its dramatisation of melancholy’s assault upon the narrator’s imagination.<sup>17</sup> However, more than a mere token nod towards psychological concerns is evident in his earlier poem, which stages a debate between four ladies as to who suffers the greater grief in the aftermath of Agincourt and its consequences for their respective lovers. The third lady to speak, whose betrothed is missing, is uncertain because she does not know what has become of him:

Las! Congnoissance

N’ay se m’amour et ma fiance

Est mort, prins ou mis a finance.<sup>18</sup>

(Alas! I don’t know whether my love and my trust is dead, captured or cashiered.)

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<sup>16</sup> Armstrong and Kay, *Knowing Poetry*, p. 199.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Chartier, *Le Livre de l’Espérance*, ed. by François Rouy (Paris: Champion, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> in *Poetical Works*, pp. 198-304, ll. 2166-68. Hereafter *LQD*; subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

Chartier uses this particular circumstance in order to extrapolate a more general reflection on the psychology of human uncertainty, especially in the context of love. The third lady expounds the nature of her grief:

Entre espoir et desesperance

Ainsi chancelle,

Plaine de doubtes, comme celle

Qui a douleur et ne scet quele.

Je ne sçay quel nom je m'appelle:

Ou d'amours veufve,

Ou prisonniere. [...]

[...]

Se j'ay Esperance, elle est vaine

Et ne puis perdre espoir sans paine,

Ne je ne sçay quel dueil je maine.

Bien souvent songe

Sa mort que mon cuer de dueil ronge,

Puis faiz de la prison mon songe,

Et ne sçay lequel est mensonge.

Ce qui l'empesche

Est mort ou prison trop grïesche;

Ce sçay je bien, l'un des deux est che.

[...]

[...] avoir certain jugement

De son mal est l'abregement



Des douleurs et l'alegement (*LQD*, ll. 2169-75, 2183-92, 2199-201).

(I oscillate between hope and despair, full of doubts, like one who has a pain but doesn't know the source. I don't know by what name to call myself: whether a widow or a prisoner of love [...] [...] If I have hope, it is vain, and [yet] I cannot lose hope without suffering, nor do I know what sort of grief I am enduring. Very often I dream that he is dead, such that my heart is tormented by grief; then my dream becomes one of prison, and I do not know which is false. What obstructs him is either death or a terrible imprisonment; this I know well, one of these is the case. [...] Having certain knowledge of one's ill diminishes and alleviates the pain.)

The lady's syntax freely enjambes the verse form, in long, complex sentences. Her uncertainty is underscored by repetition of the remark 'ne sçay (le)quel' (I do not know what/which), which culminates ironically in the pathos-inducing single-line phrase expressing the one thing she does know (l. 2192): that her betrothed is either captured or killed; in other words, even on this point her knowledge is not certain. Having related her oscillation between hope and despair, she elaborates further on her state of hopefulness: she perceives its vanity whilst recognising that she cannot dismiss hope without incurring suffering. From vain hope she moves to speak of dreams – a progression whose aptness is revealed through the homophonous rhyme 'mon songe' / 'mensonge'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, this section of her monologue is framed by hope's vanity and the deceptiveness of dreams, except that the lady herself does not make this connection. Her argument considers whether death or prison is her lover's true

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<sup>19</sup> Occurrences of this rhyme pair are very frequent in medieval French dream-vision poetry, which debates the value of the oneiric experience that it relates. See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 'Remarques sur *songe* / *mensonge*', *Romania*, 101 (1980), 385-90.

fate, but does not itself interrogate the truthfulness of dreams,<sup>20</sup> whereas the rhyme scheme does. One could, in fact, see *songe* itself as a mode of uncertainty, given the reputation it has accrued through later medieval poetry, from the *Rose* onwards, as either / both a reliable or / and an untrustworthy vehicle of communication. Writers seem to have been keen to experiment with the familiar true-false dichotomy of *songe* to innovate new states of semi-consciousness. *Dorveille / dormeveille* is frequently the state of late-medieval first-person narrators as they negotiate the value of visionary experience on a scale between truth and falsehood that seems most often to rest somewhere in the middle in the creative uncertainty of ‘possibility’, whether hopeful or doubtful.<sup>21</sup> Chartier’s lady’s questioning of her lover’s fate – his identity as killed or captured – clearly also impacts on her own selfhood; as a corollary of lack of knowledge as to his condition, her own identity is undecided: is she a widow or prisoner herself?

Her pathos-inducing play on conventional ‘prisoner of love’ rhetoric (touching her own situation as potentially the lady-love of a literal prisoner) is one indication of how Chartier’s third lady in *LQD* is addressing a broader context of experience than her own specific case. She depicts the influence and effects of Love as a hypostasized force on her emotional and mental state:

Maiz forte amour

Qui ne veult qu’en ce point demour

Me fait enquerre sans demour

Ce que j’ay de savoir cremour.

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<sup>20</sup> Though one could argue she does so implicitly by questioning which *of the dreams* (‘lequel’) is true, thereby implying that dreams can be true or false.

<sup>21</sup> See Christiane Marchello-Nizia, ‘La rhétorique des songes et le songe comme rhétorique dans la littérature française médiévale’ in *I Sogni nel Medioevo*, ed. by Tullio Gregory (Rome: Ateneo, 1985), pp. 245-59.

Pour esprouver  
Les cuers ou n'a que reprouver,  
Amours fait querir et rouver  
Ce qu'on ne voudroit pas trouver.  
En ceste doubte  
S'arreste ma pensee toute (*LQD*, ll. 2214-23)

(But powerful love, which does not want me to remain in this position, makes me ask without delay after that which I am afraid to know. To test hearts in which there is nothing to reprove, Love makes us seek and search for that which we do not wish to find. In this state of fear my every thought is fixed.)

Repetition of lexical items (anonymatio of *esprouver* / *reprouver* and traductio of *demour* / *demour*) reinforces the lady's position of being stuck: love motivates her to seek incessantly the knowledge that she is fearful of learning, to look for what she does not want to find, in order to move her beyond her current state of uncertainty; but instead, she remains there, with doubt being posited as a substantive position, a location in which her mind is lodged. The ostensible *enjeu* of *LQD*'s four-way debate being to establish who suffers the greatest grief, the third lady stakes her claim to this title by explaining that uncertainty entails the most acute, in fact redoubled pain:

Et s'on dit, 'Quel mal est le tien?'  
Les deux d'elles, je les soustien.  
L'adversité  
Court si que par nécessité

J'ay l'un des maux en verité,  
L'autre en doute et craintiveté.  
Je souspeçonne  
Les deux; nulle part ne m'est bonne.  
Souspeçon toujours me foisonne;  
C'est dangier pour toute personne (*LQD*, ll. 2232-41).

(And if someone says: "Which ill is yours?" I endure both of them [i.e. death and imprisonment]. Adversity rules, such that of necessity I have one of the ills in truth, the other in doubt and fear. I suspect both; no option is favourable to me. Suspicion continually grows in me; it is a danger for everyone.)

Of the two options, her beloved's imprisonment or his death, she is afflicted by both: one, she recognises, will actually have happened whilst the other will be felt equally keenly in fearful doubt. 'Fear' is not here opposed to 'truth'; the two experiences are apposed: uncertainty is neither true nor false, nor is it contradictory of truth. This complementarity may also be related to conventions of the genre in which the lady's speech is cast, namely those of the *dit*. As Finn Sinclair has explored, this dominant genre of late-medieval narrative poetry 'allows for the communication of a "truth" of experience that is not to be equated with factual detail because it is not located in external reality but in subjective processes of reflection, sentiment, or memory'.<sup>22</sup> Chartier's lady is dealing precisely with a truth of lived experience: the felt reality of her anguish in which the pain of both options is equally true. Her *uncertainty* is, in

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<sup>22</sup> Finn Sinclair, 'Memory and Voice in Jean Froissart's *dits amoureux*', in *Les voix narratives du récit médiéval: approches linguistiques et littéraires*, ed. by Sophie Marnette and Helen Swift, *Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes*, 22 (2011), 139-49 (p. 143).

this sense, *certain*: it is ‘held to be true’, ‘sincere’ and ‘resolute’ as an emotional state,<sup>23</sup> as her suspicion accumulates.

I mentioned above a scale *between* truth and falsehood along which one could locate degrees of uncertainty; it is perhaps more accurate now to speak of a scale of uncertainty *separate from*, but perhaps *alongside* that between true and false assessed in objective terms. During the course of the lady’s speech, she oscillates between different strains of uncertainty, relayed through shifts in vocabulary: from acknowledgement of objective lack of knowledge (‘ne sçay’) to recognition of various subjectively experienced inner turmoils of *doubte* and *souspeçon*, albeit mitigated in places by *esperance*, however vain. In the most recently cited passage (*LQD*, ll. 2232-41), she inclines towards the most intensely negative disquiet and seems, in fact, almost certain of the worst: finding double despair in both possible outcomes. Her relationship to hope is failing and precarious:

Et triste vivray et mourray

Tresloing en l’ombre

D’Espoir dont j’ay en petit nombre (*LQD*, ll. 2253-55).

(I shall live sorrowfully and die in the distant shadow of Hope, which I have in small quantity.)

At other points, however, *doubte* is counterbalanced by *espoir*, such that her thought is not so much fixed in *doubte*, as in vacillation between the two:

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<sup>23</sup> Definitions from Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IX<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 10 vols (Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint; repr. Paris: Vieweg / Bouillon, 1880-1902).

Dont suis tiree  
De deux douleurs et martiree.  
Quant la joie qu'ay desiree  
Le plus, m'est du tout empiree  
Par doubte, voire  
Si fort que je ne sçay que croire:  
Ou se je doubte, ou se j'espore (*LQD*, ll. 2463-69).

(Because I am torn apart and martyred by two sufferings. When the happiness that I have most wanted is totally ruined by fear, so profoundly, in fact, that I do not know what to believe: whether I should fear or whether I should hope.)

This state is more akin to the Thin Knight's 'certain espoir de souspeçon meslé'. But Chartier tosses a further spoke into the wheel of the lady's struggle to know what to believe: the ironic collocation of doubt and truth created by the homonymy of 'voire' (as adverb, meaning 'indeed') and 'voire' (as noun, meaning 'truth'), whose chiming-in at the rhyme with 'croire' indicates a further nuance in the states of uncertainty dramatised by the poem. 'Not knowing what to believe' is significantly different from simple 'not knowing', since the introduction of 'belief' compounds the subjectivity of the subject lacking knowledge (that is, the lady) because of its uncertain relationship to truth, a relationship thrown into question by the rhyme with 'voire'.

Desire is the primary motor in the quest for knowledge, but also a disruptive force, as the lady extrapolates from her own experience to that of others:

Ainsi poursuivent

Amans leur vouloir et desuivent,  
 Desir plus que Raison ensuivent;  
 Et mesme leurs semblans les suivent,  
 En couvoiant,  
 Par un droit chemin forvoiant  
 Sans estre a Dangier pourvoiant.  
 Desir n'est que devant voiant:  
 Derrier n'a dextre,  
 Ainsi ne scet amant son estre,  
 Car qui n'est pas de son cuer mestre,  
 Du maintien ne le pourroit estre (*LQD*, ll. 2439-50).

(Thus lovers pursue their will wholeheartedly and follow Desire more than Reason;  
 And even their thoughts follow in their company, wandering down a straight path  
 without watching out for Rebuff. Desire is nothing but looking forward: not behind or  
 to the right, thus a lover does not know himself, for he who does not have mastery of  
 his heart could not be master of its behaviour.)

She details the psychological trajectory of the typical lover – ‘typical’ in the sense of  
 ‘typically misguided’, because, by necessity, susceptible to *misdirection* (*forvoiant*) because  
 blinkered to any wider picture, such as the obstacle of Dangier.<sup>24</sup> Her depiction of a lover’s  
 ‘tunnel-vision’ gaze is pertinent to explaining the condition of uncertainty in which any lover,

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<sup>24</sup> Dangier is a regular fixture in the cast-list of personifications in medieval courtly love poetry. He is an obstacle to love, whose most celebrated appearance is in opposition to Bel Accueil (‘Fair Welcome’) in the *Rose*. The issue of how best to translate ‘Dangier’ into English (he is variously rendered, for example as ‘Haughtiness’ or ‘Rebuff’) is addressed by Peter Haidu, *The Subject Medieval / Modern* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 235-38. For *forvoiant*, see above, n. 7.

as desiring subject, exists. Desire is simply a relentless looking forward, a force with considerable momentum; it has no substance in and of itself, and thus nothing in which a lover can ground himself. Hence the lady's comment as to the lover's lack of self-knowledge, since he is not master of himself, having yielded rational control to rampant ardent desire. Not knowing himself, he is thus incapable of making any judgment, of establishing any certainty:

Quant Amour forge  
Ses dars ou cuer comme en sa forge,  
L'ardant fume qui regorge  
S'espart par la bouche et desgorge.  
Lors a songier  
Prins a leur fait, car c'est dangier,  
Faucte de sens, vouloir legier,  
De tart entendre et tost jugier (*LQD*, ll. 2503-10).

(When Love fires his arrows into a heart as he casts them in his forge, the burning smoke that overflows spreads through the mouth and is disgorged. Then I started thinking about their position, for it is dangerous, without good sense and with light-minded will, to understand slowly and judge quickly.)

The lover's understanding and judgment are impeded. Whilst it is undeniably a commonplace of medieval discussions of erotic love that desire overwhelms reason and thwarts rational thought, what is notable about Chartier's deployment of the topos is his tailoring of it to the particular issue of uncertainty.



The third lady in *LQD* offers a protracted exploration of uncertainty as a state of mind. Our analysis has served to introduce several key aspects of late-medieval poets' treatment of this theme: the subjective nature of uncertainty as a condition more variable and complex than objective 'not knowing', and which is constituted by varying measures of doubt / suspicion and hope; the impact of uncertainty on the coherence of identity, as a threat to certain articulation of I-hood; the apt genre-context of the *dit* for developing a topic defined by personal experience; the role of desire as the directing motor of amorous questing for knowledge, but the inevitable misdirection of this engine into an uncertain state since it has no substance in itself, but requires nourishment – negatively by fear, which paralyses it, positively by hope, which gives the promise of fulfilment, albeit a promise unfulfilled.

The role of hope in orientating desire towards a positive and certain outcome is dramatised through dialogue between the Lover and the Sleeper in Chartier's *Debat de reveille matin* (c. 1420?). The despondent Lover is (as yet) unrequited in his affections for a certain lady.<sup>25</sup> He presents as a fact 'que pitié n'est pas en elle' (that there is no pity in her) (*DRM*, l. 120) and is equally convinced of his own hopelessness: 'je suis malheureux et maudit' (I am wretched and cursed; l. 152). In one light, the role of his interlocutor is to provide compensation for his unfulfilled erotic desire through consoling discourse as the altruistic friend who stays awake, in fulfilment of the code of platonic love: 'un bon amy pour l'autre veille' (a good friend stays awake for his friend; l. 39).<sup>26</sup> In another light, though, and since the substitute the Sleeper furnishes cannot in fact serve as full comfort, the interlocutor's role is less helpful: it attempts to move his lovesick friend from a state of certainty (albeit an unhappy one) to one of uncertainty – what one might view critically as

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<sup>25</sup> In *Poetical Works*, ed. by Laidlaw, pp. 306-19, l. 118. Hereafter *DRM*; subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of this code, see Emma J. Cayley, "'Avoir la puce en l'oreille": Voices of Desire in Alain Chartier's *Debat Reveille Matin* and Guillaume Alexis' *Debat de l'omme mondain et du religieux*', in *Les voix narratives du récit medieval*, ed. by Marnette and Swift, pp. 43-57.

misguided hopefulness. The seed of hope is planted by the Sleeper's well-meaning assertions of a positive outcome: 'A la fin faut qu'el se rende' (In the end, she will have to give in; l. 192),<sup>27</sup> his encouraging collocation of 'hope' with 'promise' (l. 236), and his affirmative, future tense statements:

Par Dieu, son cuer s'adoulcira.

Dame n'a pas cuer d'aïmant (*DRM*, ll. 287-88).

(By God, her heart will mellow. A lady does not have a heart of steel.)

However, the Lover is not to be swayed from his despair: 'Il me convient en ce point vivre' (I must live in this state; l. 246). He does, though, develop an interesting metaphor for the lover's quest for knowledge. In response to the Sleeper's insistence that 'no' does not really mean 'no' from a lady –

Mais soubz un courtois reffuser

Sont les biens d'amours en embuche (*DRM*, ll. 303-4),

(But beneath a courteous refusal the gifts of love are concealed) –

the Lover depicts as a physical search his attempts to 'locate' the joys of love:

De long temps a, n'ay sceu ouvrir,

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<sup>27</sup> There is quite possibly comedy here: whilst we have no reason to question the Sleeper's sincerity, we may deduce some self-interest in his prompt prediction: presumably, cast as 'Le Dormeur', his own greatest desire is to get back to sleep...

Ne trouver maniere ne tour  
De ceste embusche descouvrir,  
Ou ma joye est en un destour.  
J'ay esté emprés et autour,  
Mais oncq jusqu'a elle n'avins;  
Et quant j'en vien a mon retour  
Je suis en l'estat que je y vins (*DRM*, ll. 305-12).

(For a long time now, I have not been able to gain access to, or find any way or means of discovering this hiding place, where my happiness lies in a well-concealed spot. I have been near it and around it, but never have I reached it; and when I come back from there, I am in the same state that I was in when I set out.)

Drawing implicitly on the imagery of the *Rose*, with its castle of Jalousie shielding the lady from the lover,<sup>28</sup> he also integrates the familiar misdirection ('forvoisement') associated with erotic questing, as his searching is revealed as a circular path which has not advanced his case: he is back where he started – stuck:

Helas! Je n'ay pouoir n'espace  
D'aler avant ne de retraire (*DRM*, ll. 289-90).

(Alas! I do not have the ability or the room either to go forwards or to move backwards.)

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<sup>28</sup> In his reply, the Sleeper immediately references *Bel Accueil* (l. 313), as if picking up on the implied intertext. See also above, n. 24.

*DRM*'s Lover's emotional state is akin to the darkest moments of *LQD*'s third lady's despair: certain of a negative outcome, but still suspended in some degree of vacillation. The Lover does, at least, implore the god of Love to grant him fair reward for his constant service:

Or pri a Dieu qu'Il me doint

Selon le bon droit que je y ay (*DRM*, ll. 353-54)

(And so I pray to God that He may grant me what is rightfully my due.),

the logic of which being that he *might* deserve his lady after all. Both poems present not knowing, and the anguish of uncertainty that epistemological lack induces, as an undesirable state. Chartier's lady affirmed emphatically that

[...] avoir certain jugement

De son mal est l'abregement

Des douleurs et l'alegement (*LQD*, ll. 2199-201).

([...] having certain knowledge of one's ill diminishes and alleviates the pain.)

His Lover in *DRM* is equally absolute that his current state is entirely contrary to his well-being:

Vivre en ce point m'est si contraire

Qu'il me fault cuer et corps faillir (*DRM*, ll. 293-94).

(Living in this state is such an affliction to me that my heart and body must surely fail.)

There seems thus far to be scant evidence of ‘the *merits* of not knowing’ proposed in this essay’s title. However, looking back at the two previous quotations from *LQD* and *DRM*, we can see that they are not in fact comparable: whilst Chartier’s third lady asserts that certainty would be better than uncertainty, *DRM*’s Lover does not; he is undoubtedly discontented in his present state of extreme doubt, but he does not go so far as to express a preference for knowing over not knowing.

The benefits of maintaining uncertainty are revealed by Chartier’s poetic persona in his fixed-form lyrics. A series of rondeaux express the dilemma of a lover whose uncertainty derives from his timorousness in not daring to voice his love to his lady and thereby ascertain whether she reciprocates:

Pres de ma dame et loing de mon vouloir,  
Plain de desir et crainte tout ensemble,  
Le cuer me fault et le parler me tremble  
Quant dire doy ce qu’il me fault vouloir<sup>29</sup>

(Near to my lady and distant from where I want to be, full of desire and fear both together, my heart fails me and my speech falters when I have to say what I must surely want.)

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<sup>29</sup> In *Poetical Works*, ed. by Laidlaw, pp. 374-86, rondeau I, ll. 1-4. Subsequent references to the rondeaux, by way of their number in the sequence, will be incorporated in the text. For the manuscript tradition (no single witness features every extant rondeau), see pp. 371-73.

The refrain of the first rondeau encapsulates how ‘arestee’, to use Chartier’s third lady’s term, he has become, mired in inaction as fear disables his desire. Interlocking repetition of ‘[mon] vouloir’ and ‘me fault’ trigger pertinent ambiguity in the refrain’s last line, as it is suggested that the imperative of desire making him want is, at the same time, the failing of his own will – he does not know whether he wants it or not.

Oseray je ja desbucher du tremble

Pour requerir ce qui me puet valoir? (rondeau I, ll. 11-12)

(Will I ever dare to leave off my trembling [lit. ‘come out of (a hiding-place in) the trembling poplar’] in order to request that which could avail me?)

He posits possibility (‘me puet’), but seems, in asking whether he will dare move out of his current position, also to imply a certain attractiveness to this position as a refuge from which emergence courts the risk of refusal. This attractiveness is made more explicit in rondeau VII; the persona here is in a more positive frame of mind, though still lacking knowledge: he invokes his lady not to deny him ‘ce que je tiens pour mien’ (that which I hold to be mine; VII, l. 4), his psychological state being ‘riche d’esper et pouvre d’autre bien’ (rich in hope and poor in all other goods’; VII, l. 1). Hope nourishes his desire and is his one ‘good’; he may not possess ‘les biens d’amour’, to quote Chartier’s Sleeper, but he does have one certain possession: hope. And this is, perhaps, too valuable to risk losing, as he recognises: ‘Si je le pers, je n’avray jamais rien’ (If I lose it, I will have nothing at all; VII, l. 5).

Je n’aim riens tant que le mal qui me blesse.

J’ayme trop mieulx l’endurer qu’il me lesse,

Mais que Pitié me retieigne pour sien (rondeau VII, ll. 10-12).

(I love nothing so much as the pain that wounds me. I greatly prefer to endure it than that it leave me, so long as Pity keeps me in her service.)

He claims to find merit in his state of suffering and would prefer to maintain rather than lose it, unless his lady's mercy should save him. There is, of course, pathetic irony tingeing his words here, but also emotional truth, especially as the stanza is followed by the refrain 'Riche d'espoir et pouvre d'autre bien', which reasserts the value of clinging onto hope, whilst the rondeau's circularity of form enacts his suspension in hopefulness. We thus encounter the paradox of certain hope: it is, to the persona of rondeau VII, a definite possession, something (a 'bien') that he is sure of having. Whilst hope may be the substance that nourishes desire, its own substantiality is, at best, precarious, its essence uncertain. The role of hope in this regard is sketched out by Guillaume de Lorris in the *Rose*. The desire-inflicted lover's perspective is the same as that of a prisoner:

Esperance confort li livre  
Et se cuide veoir delivre  
Encore par quelque cheance.  
Trestoute autele beance  
A cil qu'amors tient em prison:  
Il espoire la garisson.  
Cest esperance le conforte  
Et cuers et talanz li aporte

De son cuer a martire offrir.<sup>30</sup>

(Hope comforts him and he still imagines that some fortunate occurrence will release him. The man held captive by Love has exactly the same desire. He hopes to be saved, and this hope gives him the strength, the courage, and the desire to endure his martyrdom.)

As the subject of verbs of consolation in this passage, it appears as if hope is substantively furnishing the lover with material, but the form her comfort assumes is simply that of a promise. This is the ‘riche espoir’ of Chartier’s rondeau VII, which enables the persona to endure present hardship. The psychological vehicle for the fulfilment of this promise is erotic imagination, ‘douz pensers’ (Pleasant Thought);<sup>31</sup> in the *Rose*, the god of Love promises to grant the lover three other ‘biens’ (‘gifts’) *besides* hope, but in fact *douz pensers*, the first of these, is still very much tied up with it:

Li premerains bien qui solace  
Ceus qui li laz d’amors enlace,  
C’est douz pensers qui lor recorde  
Ce ou Esperance s’acorde (*Rose*, ll. 2641-44).

(The first gift which brings comfort to those trapped in Love’s toils is Pleasant Thought, who reminds them of Hope’s promises.)

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<sup>30</sup> Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. by Armand Strubel (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1992), ll. 2613-24. Subsequent references to the *Rose* will be incorporated in the text. English translations are from *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> The other two gifts are ‘douz parlers’ (Pleasant Conversation) and ‘douz resgarz’ (Pleasant Looks): *Rose*, ll. 2669, 2716.



He goes on to explain the mechanisms by which *douz pensers* functions as a gift:

[...] a l'amant en son venir

Fet de la joie souvenir

Que Esperance lui promet (*Rose*, ll. 2649-51).

([...] as he comes, [he] reminds the lover of the joy that Hope promises.)

The vertiginous interweaving of temporalities in the god of Love's explanation highlights the uncertain foundation of hope: a tangle of past memory, present thought and future projection, highlighted by enjambment across the rhyme-scheme. According to the syntax here, that the longing lover is made to remember the joy that hope promises him indicates the potency of hopeful thinking to fabricate a memory that is only anticipated in the future and not grounded in experience that has already occurred. Hope is thus presented as making something out of nothing, and doing so in a biased, selective manner ('ce ou [elle] s'acorde' (literally 'that to which she consents'; *Rose*, l. 2644)) that is favourable to the lover's cause. Hope, memory, and thought cooperate in concocting a pleasant fantasy for him;<sup>32</sup> from his point of view, this confection is imbued with certainty: it is a prediction of reality and the realisation of his

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<sup>32</sup> Memory and hope operating in the service of desire and in the pursuit of pleasure may be traced back to Aristotle, with particular regard to the lovesick: *Ars rhetorica* I.xi.5-11 (*The 'Art' of Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. by John Henry Freese (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1926). The production of similar illusions (*simulacra*) of love is discussed, and criticized at length by Lucretius: *De rerum natura*, ed. by William Henry Denham Rouse, 3rd edn (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1937), IV. Augustine condemns the power of the will to induce the imagination to generate thoughts that are not based on memory: *De Trinitate* (PL 42, XI.x.17). See also above, n. 6, and Helen J. Swift, "'Tamainte consolation / me fist lymagination": A Poetics of Mourning and Imagination in Late Medieval *dits*', in *The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Catherine Léglu and Stephen J. Milner (London/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), pp. 141-164.

desire, as when the lover-narrator of the anonymous fourteenth-century *Verger d'amour* discusses his pain of unrequited love with Doulx Espoir and Confort, becomes fixated on the thought of his lady, and falls into an exceptional dream:

Advis me fut lors que Desir  
En mon dormant se vint gesir  
Auprès de moy, et Souvenir  
    Qui ne preschoi[en]t  
Et doublement amonnestoi[en]t,  
Disans que mes yeulx tost verroient  
La chose que plus desiroient  
    A regarder.<sup>33</sup>

(It seemed to me then that Desire came to lie down next to me while I slept, together with Memory, who lectured me and vigorously counselled me, saying that my eyes would soon see the thing that they most desired to look upon.)

What occurs in the account of the dream is a multiple traversing of boundaries: temporal, as memory of the past fuelled by desire in the present is made to project forwards into the future; ontological, as the image of his lady is used as an absent, imagined presence to anticipate a real presence and furnish the lover with sufficient reassurance – ‘comfort’ and ‘hope’ – to sustain him in his pursuit. There is certainty because he is working within a closed system, a blinkered wish-fulfilment mechanism whose terms he does not question. As R. G.

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<sup>33</sup> In *Recueil de poésies françaises des XV<sup>e</sup> et XVI<sup>e</sup> siècles: morales, facétieuses, historiques*, ed. by Anatole de Montaiglon and James de Rothschild, 13 vols (Paris: Jenet, 1855-78), IX, 281-93 (p. 286).

A. Dolby remarks: ‘When a particular world view is complete in its own terms, its content tightly bound together in a consistent system by rigorous reasoning, it appears certain to its practitioners.’<sup>34</sup>

One could definitely argue that our lover-personae’s thinking processes are far from ‘rigorous reasoning’, but the point is that they appear reasoned and logical to the characters themselves. A classic example from Froissart’s *dits* would be the case of the lover in *L’Espinette amoureuse* (c. 1369) who posits as certain knowledge his lady’s affection towards him. Her affection, he deduces, is demonstrated by her coming along and pulling his hair, an act he labels confidently ‘cel amoureux tour’ (this amorous act)<sup>35</sup> after a lengthy cogitation on its circumstances: wish-fulfilment-reasoning himself out of doubt: ‘Je prise petit mon eur’ (I do not think much of my fortune; *EA*, l. 3797), through what he deems to be the inevitable uncertainty of erotic experience (‘Ensi se voellent amourettes / rampronner une heure dures / Autre moles et debonnaires’; It is thus that love affairs like to play themselves, one hour painful, the next sweet and pleasant; ll. 3806-8)), towards the (evidence-less) conviction that

[...] ja se ne fust esbatue

A moi que la ert embatue

Selle ne mamast je l’entens

Ensi et men tieng pour contens (*EA*, ll. 3824-27).

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<sup>34</sup> Albeit that Dolby is addressing a very different field of study: *Uncertain Knowledge: An Image of Science for a Changing World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> In Jean Froissart, *An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Kristen M. Figg, with R. Barton Palmer (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 104-265, l. 3823. Hereafter *EA*; subsequent references will be incorporated in the text. Translations of all texts drawn from *An Anthology* are the editors’.

([...] she never would have amused herself with me, having come in where I was, if she did not love me. I understand it this way and consider myself happy.)

He unwittingly discloses his own hope-skewed bias, as he correlates his interpretation of the act with the perspective that most pleases him and supplies his 'plaisance lie': desire-directed hope generates a travesty of knowledge. His apparent knowledge appears doubtful, as Froissart, through the voice of his retrospective narrator, colours with implicit criticism his earlier self's adventures in amorous questing. The reader shares the retrospective, privileged perspective, which identifies how the 'experiencing I' of the lover sets up an epistemological framework that is at once a route to knowledge and a deviation from that route: it has the trappings of apparent logic and careful reflection, but it errs in its application of those tools. And necessarily so: he is, we see clearly, misguided in his interpretation of the lady's behaviour; in order to maintain his hope, he needs to avoid a path to true knowledge (that she rejects his advances) and cultivate an alternative that enables him to conjure with the possibility that she may reciprocate. His intercalated lyrics help to sustain this productive uncertainty that is the avoidance of knowledge whilst at the same time professing the capacity to know. His activity gives an interesting twist to Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of the respective relationships between poetry, philosophy and knowledge: 'Poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it.'<sup>36</sup> The narrator never possesses his object, in the sense of obtaining his lady or her favour; but he professes to know everything about her and her conduct such that this may substitute for both real knowledge and actual possession. His uncertainty is thus a state that he needs to work

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<sup>36</sup> *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xvii. The citation features in Armstrong and Kay's introduction to *Knowing Poetry*, p. 21.

hard at nourishing in order to buttress his own existence as a desiring (and a poetic) subject.<sup>37</sup> We may recall Chartier's Lover's statement in *DRM*: 'il me convient en ce point vivre' (I must live in this state; l. 246), whose verb (*convenir à*) may be understood anywhere on a scale between 'it suits me' and 'it is necessary for me' to live in this state.

In their introductory discussion of the treatment and portrayal of knowledge in late medieval French poetry, Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay note how: 'Knowledge often needs to be duplication: to know is not enough, one must know that one knows.'<sup>38</sup> The same logic applies in an ironic way when a lover-narrator is trying to convince himself that he does *not* know (that his lady is not returning his love); he engages a range of elaborate strategies to validate this state of 'not knowing' or, indeed, redirect it into a more positive state of hopeful uncertainty, of 'maybe knowing (the opposite of what is actually the case)'. Witness, for example, in *L'Espinette amoureuse*, a lover's strenuous attempts to sustain his hopeful desire through a series of imaginative projections of his lady's face onto a mirror that her maidservant has given to him. He claims to see in it 'l'impression pure' (the perfect impression; *EA*, l. 2629) of her combing her hair. This being her imagined reflection, he 'logically' deduces that her physical reality must be beside him; whilst he fails to find her, he refuses to dismiss the image as having been generated by his own wish-fulfilment imaginings, declaring with ironic certainty: 'Le pooie pour voir veoir' (I could truly see her'; *EA*, l. 2666).<sup>39</sup>

A similarly effortful attempt to deny actual knowledge is dramatised in Froissart's *Paradis d'amours* (c. 1361-62) (hereafter *PA*). The lover-persona's poetic output proclaims

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<sup>37</sup> For discussion of the relationship between hope and poetic composition, see Armstrong and Kay, *Knowing Poetry*, pp. 147-48, who also chart the textual history of hope as a medieval personification (pp. 146-50).

<sup>38</sup> Armstrong and Kay, *Knowing Poetry*, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> We recall the wordplay noted above between 'voire' and 'voire'. The verb to see ('veoir') often features in similar homonymic or homophonic play on discrepancies between truth and the subjective perception of truth.

loudly his lack of knowledge; the intercalated lyric complaint features repeatedly the expression ‘je ne scai’, as seen in Chartier’s *LQD*. This disavowal in *PA* features alongside and in opposition to the knowledge that the lover does, in fact, have, but which does not suit him – namely that his lady refuses him. He admits to Lady Pleasure:

Vous devez tant savoir ma dame  
Que celle que jains plus que mame  
Ne voelt avoir pite de moi  
Je nai el que refus de soi.<sup>40</sup>

(You must know this much, my lady, that she whom I love more than my soul does not wish to have pity upon me; I receive nothing but rejection from her.)

What he is looking for is an alternative way of looking at things, of imagining his position otherwise. Pleasure, in the guise of sage advisor – a pseudo-Philosophy who promises him consolation, performing a similar role to *DRM*’s Sleeper – encourages him to let go of the certain knowledge he possesses and open the door to possibility and uncertainty:

Tu sces ou tu le dois savoir  
Bien a en toi tant de savoir  
Quant on a quelque cose empris  
Et de la fin nest nul apris  
A quel chief elle vodra traire  
Soit a bien ou soit a contraire

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<sup>40</sup> In *An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Figg, pp. 36-101, ll. 571-74. Subsequent references to *PA* will be incorporated in the text.

On sen doit sagement porter (*PA*, ll. 635-41).

(You know, or you should know, for you certainly have enough knowledge in you, when one has undertaken something and has no way of learning what end it is likely to come to, either for good or ill, one must proceed advisedly.)

She redefines his ‘savoir’: it is not what he has just told her, and which he said she must know, but is instead a gateway to knowledge that is yet to be introduced by Pleasure’s companion – who is none other than Lady Hope. The lover pledges allegiance to this companion and appeals for her to set him on the right track: ‘Remettes moi au bon cemin’ (put me back on the right road; *PA*, l. 711). Hope professes affiliation with moderation (‘atemprance’) and related qualities (though not reason, interestingly), but her claims to the lover sound, on the contrary, somewhat immoderate:

[...] mes pooirs est bien ytels

Quil vault lor de .v.<sup>c</sup> chites

Car jai a toutes gens mestier

Et qui use de mon mestier

Ja desconfis il ne sera (*PA*, ll. 791-95).

([...] my power is indeed such that it is worth the gold of five hundred cities, for I have mastery over all men. And whoever responds to my ministrations will never be discomfited.)

She guides him into a uniquely positive reading of all that happens: ‘Ne tesbahis de riens quaviengne’ (Do not be discouraged by anything that happens; *PA*, l. 721), and promises that he will reach his goal: hope seems to furnish certainty.

For the likes of Froissart’s lovers, though, ‘espoir certain’ is a paradox. ‘Certain hope’ is multiply flawed: first, it marks the distortion of a simple wish for improvement – Hope’s imperative to Froissart’s lover: ‘vif tout dis en esperant mieuls’ (Live always in hope of better; *PA*, l. 727) – into the conviction of a definite positive outcome: ‘a la fin fault il qu’el se rende’, as Chartier’s Sleeper advised (*DRM*, l. 192). The Thin Knight’s formulation of ‘certain espoir de souspecon mesle’ (*DDFA*, l. 1093) is itself perhaps gesturing towards a problem with the idea of hope being posited as definite and reliable. Froissart exposes how desperate desire, coupled with dogged determination and blinkered vision generate this perverted epistemology, for example through the rhyming of ‘voir’ with ‘vouloir’ in a rondeau in *PA* (ll. 890, 895): what the lover states to be truth, supposedly objective certainty (‘voir’), is in fact shaped by his own desire (‘vouloir’). A second flaw stems from the very nature of hope itself: as noted above, hope, in the context of medieval lyrico-narrative verse, is the result of an ingenious fabrication involving memory and desire; being ‘riche d’espoir’, as one of Chartier’s lyric personae claimed, has no substantive value.

We commented above that the comfort provided by hope is that of a promise. The precise value of that promise can only be defined according to the context in which it is proposed. Whilst it is difficult, even inappropriate, to venture any clear distinction between secular and sacred contexts of meaning in medieval love poetry, one can at least identify points at which poets are clearly conscious of playing on or between distinct registers of experience and epistemology.<sup>41</sup> Froissart’s *Joli buisson de Jonece* (1373) famously switches mode at the end of the ‘typical’ lover-persona’s narrative, at which point the lover decides to

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<sup>41</sup> For example, Guillaume de Deguileville’s spiritual re-casting of the *Rose*’s sensuality in his *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*. See above, n. 7.



reject corporeal desire for an earthly lady in favour of spiritual devotion to the Virgin Mary; he presents this enlightened realisation as a reorientation of belief and will in pursuit of a surer path, leading to higher knowledge:

Pour ce me vodrai retrenchier  
Que dacroire a un tel crunchier  
Que pechies est qui tout poet perdre  
Je ne mi doi ne voel aherdre.  
[...]  
Humlement je me voel retraire  
Viers la mere dou roi celestre.<sup>42</sup>

(Therefore I will wish to back away from assuming any belief that is sinful, which can lose everything: I must not and do not want to be attached to it. [...] Humbly I wish to withdraw towards the Mother of the Heavenly King.)

Hope is rendered truly, non-paradoxically certain in the context of Christian eschatology, in which the apparently transfigured persona expresses his hope of finding solace in heaven: ‘la ou toute joie maint’ (There, where all joy leads; *JBJ*, l. 5442)) through the Virgin’s intercession, buttressed by his sure knowledge of the Resurrection: ‘Je scai de fi’ (I know with certainty; l. 5295). Hope is certain knowledge here, in the sense that hope-as-faith derives from or is co-existent with a statement of spiritual knowing. Hope is still in itself not

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<sup>42</sup> In *An Anthology of Narrative and Lyric Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Figg, pp. 268-477, ll. 5174-77, 5183-84. Hereafter *JBJ*; subsequent references will be incorporated in the text.

‘certain’ in the sense that it does not have substance: it is knowledge-in-act (*savoir*), rather than substantive knowledge as content (*connaissance*).<sup>43</sup>

In noting that ‘espoir certain’ stands as a paradox in relation to erotic desire and not when a tenet of Christian faith, do we simply arrive at an unsurprising dichotomy between secular and sacred contexts of knowledge? Not entirely, as at least one writer proposes a middle ground applicable to erotic contexts: ‘raisonable esperance’ (reasonable hope), a collocation that may itself seem paradoxical in the light of Froissart’s Lady Hope in *PA* and her conspicuous omission of Reason figuring amongst her virtuous companions. Évrart de Conty, in his extensive prose commentary on the allegorical love poem *Le Livre des eschez amoureux*, writes at length on the delusions entertained by lovers who have erred into wild imaginings. The true lover, by contrast, is wiser:

Nulz sages amans ne doit metre son cuer en amour impossible ne en amour qui ne soit a ly appartenant [...] Et par especial, il la doit telle eslire qu’il en puisse concevoir raisonnable esperance de joir ent enfin, car autrement il aimeroit son ombre et perdroit son temps.<sup>44</sup>

(No wise lover should set his heart on an impossible love or on a love which is not appropriate for him [...] And above all, he must choose a love wherein he may conceive reasonable hope of satisfaction in the end, since otherwise he would love his shadow and waste his time.)

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<sup>43</sup> This distinction amongst medieval treatments of knowledge is noted by Armstrong and Kay: *Knowing Poetry*, p. 17. See also above, n. 10.

<sup>44</sup> *Le Livre des eschez amoureux moralisés* (c. 1400), ed. by Françoise Guichard-Tesson and Bruno Roy (Montreal: CERES, 1993), p. 594.

De Conty seems to envisage, in a secular context, a sensible and measured approach, one which estimates the odds of success before embarking on its amorous pursuit. The scenarios he rejects as being antithetical to a wise lover's ventures are precisely those which we encounter in Chartier's and Froissart's poetry – men who fall for unattainable women and cultivate illusory hope of obtaining them, defying knowledge of rejection. An important question is whether De Conty's moralisation here is to be interpreted at face value or whether he offers a more knowing, tongue-in-cheek commentary on the portrayal of hope in contemporary *dits*.

Where do De Conty and our medieval versifiers leave us in our thinking about relations between poetry and knowledge? In the hands of many lover-narrators, poetry is a great deferrer of any knowledge that is unwelcome, through its capacity (through many a love lament) to sustain a state of 'not knowing', whether an erotic friction to enhance anticipation or a fearful state of doubt. Throughout this postponement of *connaissance*, the narrator-poet demonstrates, of course, considerable creative *savoir-faire* and is, at least to some degree – even if this is revealed only retrospectively – knowingly constructing a framework that will enable him to err. The multi-levelled narrative structure of late-medieval poetry enabled writers to experiment with various levels of comfort and discomfort with senses of uncertainty, depicting a disturbed, unstable 'experiencing I' within a fiction recounted by a more confident and knowing 'narrating I'. Working between different registers of experience, sacred and secular, poets could consider different contexts of certainty / uncertainty for their dramatisations of hopeful expectation. Such dramatisations disclose particular sites of epistemological intrigue to be cultivated by the *dit*'s first-person subject: permutations of 'not knowing' and benefits of uncertainty as a potent state of poetic creativity; varied measures of certainty, and the relationship of certainty to the act of knowing or to the substance of knowledge; disjuncture between knowledge and truth, especially the productive dislocation

permitted by a dream-vision framework; and the psychology of hope, as a state of mind that exemplifies an understanding of uncertainty as neither ‘knowing’ nor ‘not knowing’, a state that can both preserve one from suffering and necessarily incur pain in its oscillations between anticipation and promise, on the one hand, and doubt and suspicion on the other.

The wealth of lines of intellectual enquiry pursued by these writers and the probing character of such investigations is perhaps belied, at least to a modern eye, by the lightness of touch with which they are treated. However, frequent touches of humour and teasing irony, typically to the detriment of a hapless male lover-protagonist, should not be seen to detract from the serious-mindedness of poets’ philosophical explorations, nor to serve as ‘sugar coating’ of an otherwise more-challenging-to-swallow pill. These comic fictions are, on the contrary, a singularly appropriate mode for thinking through epistemological concerns, keeping the reader on her / his interpretative toes: whilst s/he is able to share positions of superior knowledge over desire-addled characters, s/he does not yet dismiss their hopeful yearnings as valueless delusions, given the ideas *about* knowledge that they mobilise. Moreover, to refer back to the speaker of Deschamps’s ballade 413, ‘on n’en peut avoir seur estat’: one can never be completely sure – the joke may be on us.