

ALAIN CHARTIER AND THE DEATH OF LYRIC LANGUAGE

Helen J. Swift

Abstract

The fifteenth-century poet Alain Chartier uses the courtly contexts of his lyric, narrative and debate poems as enabling fictions to support his interrogation of the validity of courtly language and his metapoetic questioning of the rhetoric of his own, inherited poetic discourse. This *mise en question* is performed through several, interacting ironic strategies, which may most fruitfully be elucidated in terms of Linda Hutcheon's theory and politics of irony expounded in *Irony's Edge* (1994). Thus 'meta-ironically functioning signals', together with intertextual, 'relational' irony and the 'oppositional' irony constituted by his *Belle Dame sans mercy's* pro-feminist discourse, articulate Chartier's *esprit critique* regarding 'la parole' as both the general unit of human communication and the specific resource of poetic creativity. A satirical reading of his *oeuvre* enables us to appreciate how the rhetorical play in which Chartier engages functions as an indictment of the courtly code's hermeneutic disintegration: its obsolescence results from a divorce between ethics and aesthetics as its language has lost the capacity to mean.

Alain Chartier's *Debat du herault, du vassault et du villain*,¹ one of the poet's characteristic pseudo-political debate poems, stages a debate between three protagonists: a young nobleman – the Vassault – whom the Herald catches berating a Villain with quite inappropriate language. The Herald expresses his disapproval, but the Vassault is at first quite unrepentant: after all, in a world where valiance is depreciated, is there any point in chivalry and in observing the linguistic "offices" of valiance? The Villain, however, will have none of either of them: "*Tout ne vault ung bouton de haye. / Vous ne parlés point de la taille*" (DHVV, vv. 333-4) – and they finish on a note of despairing resignation: "*Tout se pert /... Tout se perdra / Perdra? Mais est il ja perdu!*" (vv. 388-93). This (near) stichomythic exchange neatly encapsulates the theme of this paper: at one level, of course, what has 'died out' or is to be 'lost' is a world of chivalry, but at another – and this is certainly what the Villain is scornfully dismissing – what is lost is the very language of chivalry and courtliness.

¹ Which was previously known as the *Débat Patriotique*, and which is addressed to Chartier's fellow poet, Pierre de Nesson. The title I use here is the one preferred by Chartier's most recent editor, James C. Laidlaw. All quotations (excepting *Le Lay de Plaisance* and *La Response des Dames*) will be taken from J.C. Laidlaw (ed.), *Poèmes d'Alain Chartier* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1988).

The succession of opinions expressed by the Vassault, the Herault and the Vilain may be interpreted as pointing both to the death or “*perte*” itself and to the semi-ludic mode of *mise à mort* suffered by the conventional language of *fin’amors* and performed by Alain Chartier in his poetic *ouvre*. The loss the triumvirates lament appears as a *leitmotiv* for Chartier’s *deuil*-stricken narrators; in *Le Livre des quatre dames* “*Je n’ay que deuil*” (v. 52) and, particularly in *La Belle Dame sans mercy*, the *Acteur* embraces his state of mourning: “*Au dueil...il fault que je soye / Le plus dolent*” (vv. 3-4). This presumed necessity of extreme grief is undercut by *La Dame* who points up the wilfulness of *L’Amant’s douleur*: “*Il a grant fain de vivre en dueil*” (*BDSM*, v. 233). “Mourning” begins to accrete a metaphorical value as the Lady implies that, by committing himself to an outdated code of language, *L’Amant* is willing his own fate – his figurative “*veuvage*”² from *La Dame* and thus from poetic creation since *La Dame* rejects the courtly code and thereby refuses to exist as the *matere* for his poetic art. As *La Dame* herself expounds, hinting at the alternative possibility of grief’s resolution and of the recoverability of the “*bien*” of poetic skill: “*Qui par conseil ne se desmeut, / Desespoir se met de sa suite; / Et tout le bien qu’il en requeult, / C’est de mourir en la poursuite*” (*BDSM*, vv. 509-12).

Irony is present in both the *Belle Dame’s* and the triumvirates’ discourses. In the former it appears incisive and explicitly critical, if intended as constructive advice. In the latter it appears more overtly ludic in the dynamic interplay of present, future and past perfect verb tenses of “*se perdre*”; however, this lighthearted appearance is only semi-ludic since the *perte* or death of a language’s validity is a serious matter indeed and revelatory of weaknesses and flaws present, if not lamentably inherent, in what we rely upon as the fundamental means of effective human communication – *la parole* itself.

I therefore wish to demonstrate how, in his poetic *ouvre*, Chartier employs numerous, interacting ironic strategies in order to point to the contemporary fifteenth-century crisis of the conventional lyric language as used by fervent adherents to the code of *fin’amors* exemplified by the Lover of *La Belle Dame sans mercy*; a crisis which resulted, under Chartier’s pen, in the *mise en question* and voiding of significance of the established discourse of courtly love poetry.

The focus on language of Chartier’s irony is two-fold, as both means of expression and principal target of ironic intent. Linguistic irony pervades his *ouvre* in diverse manifestations and we are therefore called to address the central question: “How do we deduce that a poet is being ironic through his use of language?” or, phrased differently by Linda Hutcheon in her book on the theory and politics of irony, *Irony’s Edge*: “What triggers you to decide that what you heard is not meaningful alone, but requires supplementing with a different, inferred meaning?” (p. 2)³ The answer lies, to employ Hutcheon’s terminology, in the poet’s judicious use of “meta-ironically functioning signals” which frequently function conjointly to “signal the possibility of

² See Chartier’s rondeau ‘*La mort me tolly ma maistresse*’ (*Poèmes*, p. 158), v.6. It is: “*je*” *L’Acteur* whose state of “*deuil*” is literal.

³ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

ironic attribution” (p. 154) to an utterance. In Chartier’s *Lay de Plaisance*,⁴ the “structuring signal” of “change of register” operates with effects of “repetition”⁵ to project a satirical portrait of the self-absorbed narrator. The otherwise unequivocal shift in tonality between “*mainte dame estrenee*” (LP, v. 3) and “*je*” who “*doy bien piteusement plourer*” (v. 16) is accompanied by a corresponding shift in movement. The affirmative, directional movement of parallel reiterated purpose clauses – “*Pour commencer*” (v. 1), “*Pour plus s’enamourer*”(v. 5), “*Pour...parer*” (v. 8) – is halted by the abrupt negation of v. 9 which rejects the content of the preceding lines: “*Mais aux amans ne me vueil comparer*”. However the narrator proceeds to engage in precisely such a comparison, intratextually foregrounding this ironic act by “echoic mention”⁵ of his opening discourse on lovers: “*Dame qui soit ne sera huy penee / Pour m’estrener, ne moy pour dame nee*” (LP, vv. 14-15).

Having established the “How?” and the “What?” of ironic deduction we should now address the “Why?” – the reason for the use of such ironic techniques. They serve in the *Lay* to destabilise the reader’s perspective, to undercut our confidence in the “*je*” as reliable and univocal narrator and to critically deconstruct the lyric rhetoric this narrator rehearses: the cluster of first person, object or emphatic pronouns within the first 22 lines of his self-centred discourse: “*ne me vueil*” (v. 9), “*ne me fut donnee*” (v. 10), “*m’estrener*” (v. 15), “*moy mener*” (v. 21) thus suggests, not uncritically, a certain narcissism. The signal of repetition indicates a self-conscious operation by the author to project a self-indulgent lyric persona intended to be held at an ironic and critical distance⁶ from Alain Chartier *poète*. Elsewhere, in *Le Livre des quatre dames*, and again through use of repetition, the poet creates his own “meta-ironically functioning signal” operating similarly upon the melancholy-consumed narrating persona. A pattern is imposed upon the narrator’s responses which serves to evince their ironic treatment; as in *Le Lay de Plaisance* a change in register of emotion works concomitantly to enhance the effect. The narrator’s initial, positive response to the *locus amœnus* in which he finds himself – “*Ainsi un pou m’esjoysoie, // Et hors de la tristour yssoie*” (LQD, vv. 105-7) – is rapidly undercut by his return to “*mon tourment*” (v. 115). Irony is generated by repetition of this pattern of reaction upon sighting the eponymous *quatre dames*: “*Quant ces dames chois y a l’oil, / Un pou entr’oubliay mon doit*” (vv. 165-6) – an optimistic observation immediately subverted by the subsequent *digressio* focussed upon the very “*doeil*” he claims momentarily to have forgotten (vv. 167-200). The repeated linguistic detail “*un pou*” becomes signalised as a marker of ironic reversal of humour in the narrator promoting, in turn, an *esprit critique* in the reader who suspects a narrator constantly invalidating his own discourse. Our presupposition as to the unmarked nature of an ‘innocent’ adverb is overthrown and this “re-evaluative” aspect of irony will be of primordial importance in considering, what Hutcheon

⁴ J.C. Laidlaw (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Alain Chartier* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), pp. 147-54. Quotations for this poem are taken from this edition.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 156. She enumerates “in verbal terms” “generally agreed-upon categories of signals that function structurally” which include “various changes of register” and “repetition / echoic mention.”

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 47. In her diagram relating the functions of irony (Figure 2.1), she refers to the “distancing” function as “offering a new perspective” which translates in *La Belle Dame* as the implied extratextual perspective of Chartier ‘*poète*’ upon Chartier ‘*Acteur*’.

terms, the “oppositional”⁷ function of irony operating through the anti-*fin’amors* discourse of the *Belle Dame* herself which serves as another means of deconstructing the male-generated conceits of courtly language.

Attribution of irony – the supplementing of a particular discourse with inferred meaning – thus appears to work through *intratextual* inter-relation of signals. However, Hutcheon’s principle of the “relational aspect of irony” (p. 58) functions equally on an *intertextual* level and I believe Chartier adhered implicitly to the principle made explicit by Hutcheon that “irony is a semantically complex process of relating, differentiating, and combining said and unsaid meanings – and doing so with some evaluative edge” (p. 89). Such an “edge” is particularly pertinent to the representation of the figure of *la dame sans merci* in Chartier’s *ouvre* – a figure whose “meaning” must be inferred both with and without irony, its attribution being determined by an “intertextual context” (p. 144) of “relating...meanings”. Within *La Belle Dame sans mercy* itself we find *La Dame* introduced as speaking “*amesurement*” (v. 220), a quality assimilated by contemporary continuators of the poem to her alleged “*cruauté*”.⁸ However, “*mesure*” is precisely the quality insisted upon by Chartier as a cardinal chivalric virtue in his *Breviaire des nobles*, particularly in the context of “*droiture*”: “*Raison, equité, mesure, / Loy, Droiture / Font les puissances durer; / Et honneste nourreture, / par nature, / Fait bon cuer amesurer*” (vv. 114-9).

Furthermore, on an intertextual level, we find an interesting parallel between the dialogic situations of the Lover and Lady in *La Belle Dame sans mercy* and the Lover and Sleeper in *Le Debat de reveille matin*; both *L’Amant* and *L’Amoureux* lament their *dames* “*bonne[s] et belle[s] // Fors que pitié n’est pas en elle[s]”* (vv. 118-20) to a critical audience – the *Belle Dame* herself or *Le Dormeur*. If we allow the latter to act as a gloss upon the former, we discover a discourse to exonerate the *Belle Dame*. *Le Dormeur* defends her right – her “*droit*” – to maintain *franchise*: “*Merci de dame est un tresor, // Si ne l’a pas chascun tresor / Qui a volenté de l’aquerre*” (DRM, vv. 249-52), and thus releases her from the configuration of “*cruelle femme*”, releasing also the potential for a non-ironic, non-critical and thus proto-feminist reading of her self-exemption from the courtly code’s obligation to bestow “*merci*.” Conversely, when viewed in intertextual context, *L’Amant* and *L’Amoureux* are drawn into focus as targets of the ironist’s intention. The philosophy of an irresponsible surrender of the self that they represent, and that the courtly discursive system articulates, is held up for scrutiny – for “*evaluation*”. *Le Dormeur* challenges *L’Amoureux*: “*Puis que vous estes si avant / Savez vous comme il en yra?*” (DRM, vv. 281-2) while *La Dame* exhorts *L’Amant*: “*Ostez vous hors de ce propos / Car, tant plus vous vous y tendrez, //...jamais a bout n’en vendrez*” (BDSM, vv. 649-652).

It is indeed the “*propos*”, the very language, of *L’Amant* which the *Belle Dame* targets as focus for her re-evaluation of the doctrine of *fin’amors* since, as Joseph

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 47. In Figure 2.1, she characterizes the “oppositional” function as being “transgressive” and “subversive” in its “positive articulation”, “insulting” and “offensive” in its “negative articulation.”

⁸ See Achille Caulier, *La cruelle femme en amour* and Baudet Herenc, *Le parlement d’amour*, wherein it is decreed that: “*Mais doit estre femme clamee / Cruelle et plaine de faux tours*” (vv. 407-8). Both poems are published in Antoine Vérard’s *Jardin de plaisance et fleur de rethorique*, *Reprod. en facs. de l’éd. publ. vers 1501* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1909), t. I, ff. cxlii-cxlviii and ff. cxxxix-cxlii.

Brami has noted, *L'Amant* embodies the discourse of this code as “*une sorte de métamorphose des “je” lyriques qui l’ont précédé*” (p. 57).⁹ She thus proceeds to demystify the metaphoric rhetoric of love-sickness, countering the maxim bewailed by *L'Amant*: “*Qui plus tost meurt en languist moins*” (*BDSM*, v. 264) with the pithy, pragmatic rejoinder: “*Si gracieuse maladie / Ne met gaires de gens a mort*” (vv. 265-6) wherein the clichéd courtly adjective and litotic negation serve to enhance her ironic interrogation of the value of the proffered proverbial wisdom. A direct assault upon the Lover’s discourse is signalled by the Lady’s subversion of the courtly tenet of *espoir*, redefining it as “*foul espoir*” (v. 623) and thereby undermining the code upon which it rests. Through similar operation of semantic devaluation she undercuts the feudal vow of fealty, replying to *L'Amant*’s avowal of “*ommage*” (v. 295) “*que mon service vous plaise*” (v. 278) with the pejoration that such protestations are but “*un peu de plaisans bourdes / Confites en belles parolles*” (vv. 299-300). In dynamic interaction with the language of her interlocutor, the *Belle Dame* – the conventionally silent lyric *dompna* given voice – undermines with this voice the language and thus the ethos of the lyric mode, redefining the central tenet of binding “*courtoisie qui...semont / Qu’amours soit par amours merie*” (vv. 407-8) to accord with her enlightened perspective of “*courtoisie...si aliee / D’Onneur... / Qu’el ne veult estre a riens liee*” (vv. 409-11).

The ‘combined’ counsels offered by *La Belle Dame* and *Le Dormeur* possess a particularly ‘cutting’ “evaluative edge” in that they carry a moral weight which extends the ironist’s intention to the “*événements extérieurs*” (p. 23)¹⁰ of courtly poetry. Arthur Piaget¹¹ and Janet Ferrier¹² both deny that “real thoughts”¹³ can be expressed in the “*pauvre idée*” of poetry, which was regarded universally (so Piaget alleges) as mere “*passé-temps*”¹⁴ in the fifteenth century. However, it is C.S. Shapley who rightly perceives the “serious” potential of a ludic technique: “The lightness of tone present in several of his poems, far from being frivolous or blindly conventional, represents a critical wit at work on serious concerns in an individual way” (p. 34).¹⁵ Through “relation” with the so-called “mature” (Ferrier) prose works, we find the discourse of *La Belle Dame* to be imbued with political resonance since there is interesting correlation between *La Dame*’s portrayal of *losengiers* as the “*Male Bouche*” of “*faulx amoureux*” who corrode *fin’amors* from within by “*gouliardye*” (*BDSM*, St. XC) and *France*’s reproach of her *enfants* in Chartier’s moral treatise *Le Quadrilogue Invectif*: “*Mes...*

⁹ Joseph Brami, “Un lyrisme du veuvage: Etude sur le *je* poétique dans *La Belle Dame sans Mercy*,” *Fifteenth Century Studies* 15 (1989), pp. 53-66.

¹⁰ Arthur Piaget, “*La Belle Dame sans merci* et ses imitations,” *Romania* 30 (1901), pp. 22-48.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

¹² Janet M. Ferrier, “The Theme of Fortune in the Writings of Alain Chartier,” *Medieval Miscellany Presented to Eugene Vinaver* (Manchester; New York: Manchester Univ. Press; Barnes and Noble, c. 1965), pp. 124-35.

¹³ Janet M. Ferrier, *op. cit.*, p. 126: “If we are to find his real thoughts we must look to the prose works which mark his maturity as a writer.”

¹⁴ Arthur Piaget, *op. cit.*, p. 22: “Chartier, qui se faisait de la poésie la même pauvre idée que ses contemporains, ne voyait en elle qu’un *passé-temps* à l’usage des hautes classes de la société.”

¹⁵ C.S. Shapley, *Studies in French Poetry of the Fifteenth Century* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1970).

ennemis...me guerroient au dehors par feu et par glaive et vous par dedans me guerriez par vos couvoitises et mauvaises ambitions" (p. 11, ll.16-19).¹⁶

Hutcheon remarks that "...in the corrective function of satiric irony...there is a set of values you are correcting toward... satire is ameliorative in intent" (p. 52). The particularised, satirical portrait of the self-indulgent lyric narrator opens onto the universal moral issue of refusing personal responsibility; in both courtly and political domains Chartier advocates the same ideal set of values. *L'Amant* surrenders himself to abstract destinal forces, claiming that "*Fortune a voulu que je tieigne / Ma vie en vostre mercy close,*" (*BDSM*, vv. 453-4), for which *La Dame* reproves him, with her humanist imperative – "*De vous mesme juge soyez*" (v. 764) – serving to direct him towards his true source of salvation, namely asserting responsibility for his own condition. Semantic inter-relation occurs with the *Quadrilogue* as *France* instructs her *enfants*: "*Tournez vos yeulx et convertissez vostre jugement sur vous mesmes*" (p. 11, ll. 30-1).

Although it appears that Chartier '*l'auteur*' espouses the "set of values" promulgated by his *Belle Dame* character, thereby implying her words to be "meaningful alone" without "supplementation", it is evident that the focus of his "ameliorative intent" is primarily linguistic rather than ethical since the *impasse* in communication between his fictional interlocutors indicates both courtly and anti-*fin'amors* discourses are subject to ironic treatment. Douglas Muecke remarks: "Marking an ironical text means setting up...some form of perceptible contradiction, disparity, incongruity or anomaly" (p. 365).¹⁷ In *L'Amant's* case his "contradiction" of his professed code is manifested in his sudden, merciless, verbal assault upon *La Dame*: "*Ha, cuer plus dur que le noir marbre / En qui Mercy ne puet entrer./ Plus fort a ployer q'un gros arbre, / Que vous vault tel rigueur moustrer?*" (*BDSM*, vv. 689-692), while the lyric language he voices is marked as "anomalous" – as having, to quote Hutcheon, "the 'critical' dimension in its marking of difference at the heart of similarity" (p. 4): the sincerity of his postulations is set in doubt by the "incongruous" overload of rhyme stemming from the same root word "*servir*" in his first direct address to *La Dame* as feudal servitor:

Ja soit ce que pas ne desserve
Voustre grace par mon servir
Souffrez au moins que je vous serve
Sans voustre mal gré desservir.
Je serviray sans desservir
En ma loiauté observant,
Car pour ce me fist asservir
Amours d'estre voustre servant (BDSM, vv. 209-216).

"*Ce langage*" (v. 217) is profoundly distrusted by the Lady who concludes it to be evidence of "*foul pensement*" (v. 221) with the result that the couple remain entangled in debate. While *L'Amant* urges that "*voustre bonté voit et treuve / Que j'ay fait l'essay et la prouve / Par quoy ma loyauté apert*" (vv. 548-50), *La Dame* rejoins with

¹⁶ Alain Chartier, *Le Quadrilogue invectif*, ed. E. Droz (Paris : Champion, 1923).

¹⁷ Douglas C. Muecke, "Irony markers," *Poetics* 7 (1977), pp. 360-72.

suspicion “*Qui encor poursuit et requiert / N’a pas loyauté esprouvee*” (vv. 557-8) and it is the “misunderstanding...and lack of clarity in communication” (Hutcheon, p. 48-9) upon which Chartier insists in this confrontation between the speakers’ conflicting theories of language which evaluate differently the assertion of a verbal pledge as proof of loyal intention; he foregrounds “negatively valued ambiguity” (ibid.) through *La Dame*’s nominalist scepticism that “*mal emprunte bien autrui nom*” (BDSM, v. 426) such that the “values” that he seeks to “correct toward” are those of validating word by deed in both courtly and political spheres: “*Pensee.../ preuve ses parolles par euvre*” (vv. 311-312); should this tripartite equation of “*pensee...parolles...euvre*” be ruptured at any point, “*parolles*” become voided of all value as a means of effective human communication.

While the contemporary continuators¹⁸ of *La Belle Dame sans mercy* clung to the conviction that a single “*vray sens*”, to quote *La Response des Dames*¹⁹, lay in the “*parolles*” of Alain Chartier, the poet himself actively rejects such univocity and seeks, in his *ouvre*, to discourage an interpretation that is closed to the potential for ironic supplementation. He achieves this by undercutting the reader’s “semantic security of ‘one signifier : one signified’” (Hutcheon, p. 13) in both the structure and the poetic voice of his poems. As William Calin remarks, in *La Belle Dame sans mercy* “the order and stability of the courtly ideology are mirrored in the order and stability of the literary form – debate and frame constituting precisely one hundred *huitain* stanzas and totaling precisely eight hundred lines” (p. 256).²⁰ However, such formal stability is specious, being subverted by the equivocal content – the *disorder* of ineffective communication; to quote Zumthor: “*Ce sont là des facteurs arithmétiques et géométriques qui remplacent la cohérence interne perdue*” (p. 310).²¹ In terms of poetic voice, as it is at best ‘unclear’ for whose discourse Chartier claims responsibility between his characters, it is equally ‘unclear’ as to whether “*je*” *l’auteur* claims responsibility for the “*parolles*” of “*je*” “*L’Acteur*” since the narrating personality is subject to ironic treatment in its multivocity, complicated further by the subsequent *Excusacion aux dames*, and in its self-contradictory discourse. Such self-contradiction is manifested most pertinently, as regards the reflexive nature of the poet’s concern with language, in Chartier’s use of the topos of melancholic inability to compose: “*Si suis desert, despoiné et deffait / De pensee, de parolle et de fait*” (vv. 25-6) claims the narrator of *La Complainte*, while “*le plus dolent des amoureux*” (v. 4) of *La Belle Dame* commences his “*livre*”²² paradoxically with the rejection of his narrative purpose: “*...Il fault que je cesse / De dicter et de rimoyer,*” (BDSM, vv. 9-10). That an “edge” is to be attributed is revealed “perceptibly” by the fact that both poems *are* composed despite their narrators’ renunciation of their artistic task.

¹⁸ See note 8.

¹⁹ *La Response des Dames faite a maistre Allain*, in Piaget op. cit., Romania 30 (1901), pp. 31-5: “*...le vray sens de ton double langage / Nous donroit tost aultrement blasme et honte*” (vv. 63-4).

²⁰ William Calin, *The French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1994).

²¹ Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poésie médiévale*, (Paris : Seuil, 1972).

²² “*Livre*” is the term applied to *La Belle Dame sans mercy* by *L’Acteur* in *L’Excusacion aux dames*, v. 193.

Each narrating persona projected by the poet-*auteur* engages in what Regula Meyenberg terms a “*discours réflexif qu’Alain Chartier mène... sur la rhétorique de son discours*” (p. 156).²³ Chartier’s near obsession with the capabilities and weaknesses of courtly rhetoric – of his own poetic language – is explored most exuberantly in his *Complainte*. The poem demonstrates what Zumthor calls “*mouvance*”,²⁴ its twelve stanzas being differently ordered in each of four extant manuscripts. This indicates that Chartier conceived of his poem not on a referential level as a faithful transcription of the poet’s pains of grief, but on a representational, experimental level as a ‘theme and variations’ – and a ‘theme and variations’ not so much exploring the emotional facets of “*dueil*” (v. 41) themselves, but rather exploring the language expressive of this state. In the third stanza,²⁵ he focuses upon the rhetoric of despoilment in his obsessive repetition of “*de*” as prefix and preposition: “*Si suis desert, despointé et déffait / De pensee, de parolle et de fait, / De los, de joye et de tout...*” (vv. 25-26). The eleventh stanza²⁵ exploits the semantic field of “*partir*” to contrive an eight-fold repetition of the term, its compounds and homophones, in rhyme position in order to highlight the pitch of the narrator’s psychological turmoil provoked by separation from his *Dame*:

Trop dur espart est sur moy esparty,
 Quant esgaré me treuve et departy
 D’un per sans per, qui oncques ne party
 En faintise n’en legier pensement.
 Oncq ensemble n’avions riens parti
 Mais un desir, un vouloir, un parti,
Un cuer entier de deux cuers miparti, (vv. 153-159)
*tout ce mal m’est avenu par ti*,
Dont je renonce a tout esbatement, (vv. 164-165)
Disant: « Mon cuer, pourquoy ne se part y? » (v. 168).

This artistic *tour de force*, exploiting lyric rhetoric almost *ad absurdum* to stretch its expressive capacities to the limit, may be said to illustrate the divorce that has finally occurred between the ethic of courtliness and the diction that used to embody this now outmoded code; a mere aesthetic play of language is all that remains, as our Herald, Vassault and Villain first acknowledged in their recognition that “*tout est ja perdu*” and that redundant rhetoric is not worth a bean.

In conclusion, therefore, while Chartier was clearly concerned by the contemporary fifteenth-century moral decline implied in his courtly verse which, itself, functions metatextually as a critical *mise en question* of the ethic of *fin’amors*, we may conjecture that the *fin’amors* contexts of his poems operate principally as enabling fictions for the study of linguistic activity and of the paradox innate in human commu-

²³ Regula Meyenberg, *Alain Chartier prosateur et l’art de la parole au Xve siècle*, (Zurich: Francke Berne, 1992).

²⁴ Paul Zumthor, op. cit.: “*mouvance*: « le caractère de l’œuvre qui, comme telle, avant l’âge du livre, ressort d’une quasi-abstraction, les textes concrets qui la réalisent présentant, par le jeu des variantes et remaniements, comme une instabilité fondamentale. »”

²⁵ Stanza featuring “third” and “eleventh” in the order adopted by Laidlaw in the edition cited.

nication. Through *La Belle Dame*'s "oppositional" discourse, countering the realist linguistic certainties that uphold the courtly code, Chartier dramatises the hermeneutic difficulties entailed by verbal negotiation in an obsolete linguistic currency. It is in this light that we may re-evaluate the succession of exclamations "*Tout se pert/...Tout se perdra/Perdra? Mais est il ja perdu*"; it functions both as a warning, "ameliorative in intent", to guard against invalidating the equation of "*pensee-parolles-euvre*" and as a question expressing Chartier's anxious uncertainty as to the validity and efficacy of language in general and, more specifically, to quote Bami, as to "*les limites du langage poétique de son temps*" (p. 61).

Magdalen College, Oxford