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ENG 312

January 14, 2014

**Cringe Comic Meets Feminist: An Argument for Chaucer’s Authorship**

**of “Complaynt d’Amours”**

In studying the writings of any historical figure, there is a little sliver of mystery and uncertainty about who truly wrote the piece in question. Identification in the past was not nearly as robust as it is today, and a lot of information can be lost over the course of six centuries. With this uncertainty comes speculation and dueling ideas of what actually happened in the past, with no verifiably correct answer. Even today, theories exist that some of Shakespeare’s poems were actually the work of an Italian Jewish woman. While that topic is the subject of a different essay, the idea is relevant to evaluating Geoffrey Chaucer’s works. Chaucer, as the father of English literature, has been ardently studied for centuries, yet there are still countless poems that have or have not been attributed to Chaucer, whose definite authorship eludes today’s academia. One such is “Complaynt d’Amours,” which has, over the years, been attributed to Chaucer and then been taken away. However, because the tone of “Complaynt d’Amours” is so similar to that of “To Rosemounde” and *The Knight’s Tale*, and its theme of womanhood is prevalent throughout *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*, I will argue that the authorship of “Complaynt d’Amours” does in fact belong to Chaucer.

The “Complaynt d’Amours,” with its love-spurned narrator, is very similar in tone and content to another of Chaucer’s poems, “To Rosemounde”. Like “Complaynt d’Amours,” Chaucer’s “To Rosemounde” is a love poem in which the narrator describes the deep grief that he encounters when faced with unrequited love. On the surface, the poems do not seem too out of the ordinary. However, closer readings give the poems somewhat more off-colored tones.

The imagery that Chaucer uses to describe the narrator’s love for Rosemounde is less than romantic and is bordering on creepy. While the poem starts out fairly conventionally, describing Rosemounde’s beauty, it quickly devolves into something wholly less flattering. While the intent of phrases like “It is an oynement unto my wounde,” and “Nas never pyk walwed in galauntyne / As in love am walwed and ywounde” are good, they paint a less than flattering picture, as they associate the narrator’s supposedly loving relationship with Rosemounde with blood and pus or a dead fish (“To Rosemounde,” 7, 17-18). Such comparisons should raise a red flag and hint to the reader that perhaps the intent of the poem is not as straightforward as it initially seems. While I am unable to argue, due to my limited knowledge of Middle English literature, that parodying romantic poems is unique to Chaucer, “To Rosemounde” shows that such satire is definitely a characteristic of Chaucerian literature.

The “Complaynt d’Amours” makes use of similarly less-than-romantic imagery to describe the narrator’s love. In describing his condition of unrequited love, he accuses the object of his affection of being “verray rote / of my disease and of my deth also” (“Complaynt d’Amours,” 43-44). Rather than paint a romantic picture of what their love could be, the narrator instead decides to use a rotting corpse to depict his unrequited love. Furthermore, he claims that “It is hir wone plesaunce for to take / To seen hir sevaunts dyen for hir sake” (CA 48-49). He accuses his rejecter of getting pleasure out of the pain of other, and at this point, all the earlier remnants of romanticism are gone. Like “To Rosemounde,” “The Complaynt d’Amours,” through its exaggeratingly unromantic imagery, is a parody of the genre of complaints.

Through Chaucer’s use of imagery, his complaints have a pathetic, rather than romantic tone. In “To Rosemounde,” a poem where the narrator is allegedly professing his love for Rosemounde, he says “For thogh I wepe of teres ful a tyne, / Yet may that wo myn herte nat confounde” (TR 9-10). Rather than making a case for why he is someone worth her love and affection, he is merely seeking her pity, hoping that if he looks pathetic enough eventually she will feel obligated to return his love. He complains that she “to me ne do no daliaunce,” but there is no indication that he has made any attempts to meet her, rather than passively wait for her to reach out to him. In merely wallowing in his own self-pity until Rosemounde notices him and returns his love, the narrator proves to be rather pitiful, and his passivity sets the tone for the piece.

In “Complaynt d’Amours,” the narrator is even more explicitly dependent on pity as the solution to his unrequited love. Exasperated, he asks “Why that she lefte Pite behinde? / It was, ywis, a greet defaute in Kinde” (CA 55-56). The narrator places all of the blame for his despair on her inability to pity him, setting a pathetic tone, similar to the one that Chaucer exhibited in “To Rosemounde”. He places no blame on himself for his sadness, as her lack of kindness is to blame. However, he even claims that she is innocent of malice, for “God or Nature sore wolde I blame” (58). The narrator takes his fate as given, and is therefore passive, whining about his misfortunes rather than seeking to improve his situation. This further adds to the pathetic, Chaucerian tone of satire, because his supposed lack of free will makes his situation all the more hopeless, and by extension more pathetic. Like the narrator “To Rosemounde,” our narrator does nothing but complain of his inevitably unrequited love.

The reason the narrator feels so hopeless, perhaps, is that there is no evidence that he has actually met the woman with whom he has allegedly fallen in love. Chaucer plays on this situation often, from “To Rosemounde” to *The Knight’s* Tale, and it would therefore be fitting that “Complaynt d’Amours” is one of Chaucer’s works. In “To Rosemounde,” the narrator describes how in love with Rosemounde he is, yet “ye to me ne do no daliaunce” (TR 8). However, using the Middle English Dictionary, we see that “daliaunce” is defined as an “exchange of pleasantries” or “polite conversation” (MED). Such interactions are more similar to how strangers would talk to each other than how lovers would. But our narrator cannot even get “daliaunce,” suggesting that Rosemounde does not even know who the narrator is. This revelation furthers the creepy and pathetic tone that I discussed earlier, because it is possible that Rosemounde simply does not know that she is breaking someone’s heart or causing any pain at all.

In fact, in both “To Rosemounde” and “Complaynt d’Amours,” the narrator fails to provide any evidence that the object of his unyielding affection actually knows who he is. Because of this, the narrators in the complaints seem more like Arcite and Palomon in the *Knight’s Tale*, admiring from afar, rather than a lover who is truly spurned. When Palomon casts his eyes on Emelye for the first time, “The fairnesse of that lady that I se / Yond in the gardin romen to and fro / Is cause of al my cryinge and my wo” (*The Knight’s Tale*, 1098-1100). He continues, chastising Arcite, And now thow woldest falsly been aboute / To love my lady, whom I love and serve / And ever shal, til that min herte sterve” (*KT*, 1142-1144). Palomon, only just having seen Emelye, is already in love with her and willing to serve her until death. In “Complaynt d’Amours,” the narrator, “ a trewer servaunt shulle yenever have / … / And yit wol I evermore her serve / And love hir best, although she do me sterve” (CA, 75, 90-91). The nearly identical phrasing between the “Complaynt d’Amours” and *The Knight’s Tale* suggests that the narrator and Palomon are in very similar situations and the narrator has not in fact even met his alleged lover. This further enhances the Chaucerian nature of “Complaynt d’Amours,” as it makes the seemingly genuine cry of despair simply overly melodramatic and naïve. The narrator of “Complaynt d’Amours,” like the narrator of “To Rosemounde” and Arcite and Palomon, are naïve, lovesick melodramatics. Because the narrator of “Complaynt d’Amours” is so similar to other characters in Chaucer’s works, it is difficult to differentiate him from other characters in Chaucer’s works. For this reason, it is only logical to ascribe “Complaynt d’Amours” to Chaucer.

But “Complaynt d’Amours” is similar to Chaucer’s other works in more ways than just its tone and characters. The complaint, with its use of the word “womanhede,” has a similar theme of feminine empowerment and gender egalitarianism to *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. Because “womanhede” is not yet in the Middle English Dictionary, I will use Tara Williams’s definition of the word, via a review done by Nicole Nyffenegger. The rise of the concept of “womanhood,” according to Williams, arose in the fourteenth century as a channel through which to further describe women. Prior to this time, women were either described by their relation to men, such as maiden, wife or widow, or by their holiness, either Mary-like or Eve-like. The word “womanhood” allowed writers discuss femininity in more depth, and discuss womanliness as an independent entity, not relative to man or God.

The “Complaynt d’Amours” not only acknowledges that womanhood exists, but the narrator appeals to his love object’s womanly traits to try to evoke pity out of her. The narrator “Biseche[s] unto your meke womanhede” (CA 65). In doing so, he is making himself subservient to characteristics unique to women, as womanhood, by definition, is independent of man’s control. By accepting that he is dependent on her womanliness, the narrator implicitly affirms and promotes feminism by empowering her femininity, a relatively novel concept of the time. While he is by no means condoning complete gender equality, the fact that the author of “Complaynt d’Amours” conceded empowerment to women at all is rather extraordinary, and as I will argue next, a very Chaucerian theme.

The Wife of Bath, in her *Prologue*, shows Chaucer’s relative progressivism in terms of gender equality. While, ironically, we only know her as the wife of a man, contradicting Williams’s definition of womanhood, the Wife of Bath’s independent thinking and reliance on her own experience instead of Biblical teachings exemplifies the term “womanhood”. From the very start of her *Prologue,* we see that the Wife of Bath relies solely on her own wit as justification for her actions. She starts off saying “‘Experience, thogh noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right inogh for me / To speke of wo that is in mariage” (*Wife of Bath’s Prologue,* 1-3). Because of her extensive experience with men and marriage, she feels more qualified to discuss marriage than the written authorities, who are primarily celibate men who have no experience in marriage at all. While a woman rejecting the predominantly male written authority is in itself an argument for feminine empowerment, the fact that she gained her authority because “Housbondes at chirche-dore I have had five” further suggests that she sees men as disposable, and can therefore define herself independently of man (*WB Prologue,* 6). Furthermore, because the written authorities on the rules of marriage are religious in nature, the Wife of Bath, in rejecting them, fully personifies Williams’s definition of womanhood. She rejects men, as we saw by her multiple marriages, and she rejects the Eve-like label that promiscuity draws from the Catholic Church.

With this refined definition of “womanhood,” with the Wife of Bath as our exemplar, we can further explain the narrator’s unrequited love. In appealing to his unrequited lover’s womanhood, he is acknowledging that her womanhood is not only her source of pity, but is also her source of freedom and independence, and he therefore relies on womanhood’s role as decision-maker as the only chance of receiving a reciprocation for his love. With this definition of “womanhood,” we can see that the object of the narrator’s love in “Complaynt d’Amours” puts forward a theme of feminine empowerment similar to that of the Wife of Bath in *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue*.

While it is truly impossible to say, the similarities in tone, characters and theme between “Complaynt d’Amours” and Chaucer’s known works suggest that authorship of the complaint does in fact belong to Chaucer. The pathetic tone set, with its grody imagery and thoroughly unappealing narrator, is reminiscent to that of “To Rosemounde”. The naïve and melodramatic narrator is nearly identical to Palomon and Arcite of *The Knight’s Tale*. And the independent object of the narrator’s affection has themes of feminism similar to the ones that the Wife of Bath espouses in her *Prologue*. For these reasons, I am comfortable arguing that Chaucer, contrary to the modern consensus, did in fact write the “Complaynt d’Amours”.

**Bibliography**

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