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The Lover's Voice: The Poetics of Direct Discourse in Medieval French Romance

By

Kathryn Elizabeth Levine

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

French

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

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Committee in charge:

Professor David F. Hult, Co-Chair
Professor Noah D. Guynn, Co-Chair
Professor Mairi-Louise McLaughlin
Professor Debarati Sanyal

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The Lover's Voice: The Poetics of Direct Discourse in Medieval French Romance
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Abstract

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This dissertation proposes that the frequent inclusion of characters' speech in medieval romance is more than a formal marker of genre; rather, certain romance texts use dialogue between male and female protagonists to portray varied experiences of affect and desire, and to explore questions of subjectivity and gender difference. While scholars often assume that asymmetrical models of gender difference are deeply entrenched in twelfth-century courtly literature, I argue that an ephemeral subgenre of early romance not only problematizes such models, but also reaches toward an ethos of collaboration between men and women. In the Old French adaptation of Ovid's "Pyramus and Thisbe," the adaptor grants his protagonists lengthy paired monologues that illuminate their interiority and agency, suggesting a humanistic affirmation of subjectivity. At first glance, the Old French text might seem to depart from its Latin model mostly in form; however, the adaptor's interest in his character's speech marks a more profound commitment to a poetics of dialogue. Chrétien de Troyes's romance *Érec et Énide* might be read as a repudiation of such a poetics, given its unusual problematization of dialogue between its titular couple: Énide's speech is not represented until after her marriage to Érec, and when she does speak, her words disrupt rather than repair the couple's peaceful marriage. I argue that, despite Énide's troubled speaking status, this romance shows how a female subject might navigate courtly society by focalizing Énide's subjectivity; furthermore, although conversation within the couple rarely leads to greater accord, mutual touch offers an alternate form of communication. Direct discourse is less fraught but no less charged in the Tristan legend; this chapter analyzes three Tristanian texts in order to examine the role of evocation in the narrative and in the way communication between Tristan and Yseut is portrayed. I advocate for a reconsideration of the "fragmented" Tristan tradition, and propose reading it as episodic instead, a shift that reveals the ways in which different authors evoke a larger narrative. This relationship of the part to the whole is echoed by the way communication between Tristan and Yseut is treated as both exceptionally seamless and oddly overwrought: these lovers understand each other so effortlessly that their speech must be glossed for the reader, in order to explain the evocative nature of their dialogue. These three chapters reveal romance's

exquisite sensitivity to its characters' speech, and outline a model of the medieval love relationship that champions a cooperation and dynamism that can only be represented in dialogue.

Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	iii
Voices in the Text	
Chapter I	1
The Old French “Piramus et Tisbé”: The Dialogic Poetics of Tragic Desire	
Chapter II	22
“Que que li grevast”: Communication, Confusion, and Suffering in <i>Érec et Énide</i>	
Chapter III	58
“Assez en ay or dit a sage”: Reception and Evocation in the Fragmented Tristan Legend	
Conclusion	96
The Modern Reader, Listening	
Bibliography	101

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Lastly, I thank *l'autre*. According to Roland Barthes, "Savoir qu'on n'écrit jamais pour l'autre, savoir que ces choses que je vais écrire ne me feront jamais aimer de qui j'aime...c'est le commencement de l'écriture."¹ He is right – and yet, how lifeless my work would be without *l'autre* as occasional interlocutor, antagonist, disturbing element, unlikely ally.

¹ Roland Barthes, "Écrire," in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977), 116.

Introduction

Voices in the Text

I turned the bass all the way down on the car's stereo and the treble all the way up, trying to isolate the frequency of Wiley's voice, and drove around town for the better part of an hour...The problem words refused to give themselves up, but as the tape ran, the song itself emerged around them, in spite of them, and I heard it for the first time...the narrow, haunted cosmos of the song, which one hears as a kind of reverberation, and which keeps people up at night. — John Jeremiah Sullivan²

One of the most striking exchanges in twelfth-century romance takes place at the end of the Oxford *Folie Tristan*. It is one of several surviving episodic narratives, as opposed to complete romances, of the Tristan legend, in which the knight returns to court from his exile so completely disguised that he cannot get Yseut to recognize him. He tries to prove his identity, but Yseut insists that the stranger in front of her cannot be Tristan. Finally she asks him to show the ring she had given him before he left, saying, “Les ensengnez crei” (“I believe signs”).³ Tristan produces the ring, and Yseut bursts into tears: she does believe signs, and although she recognizes the ring, she cannot believe that this unrecognizable man is truly her beloved. She concludes that Tristan must be dead, and all seems lost for a moment, as the divided couple stands at an impasse. But then: “quant Tristan plurer la vait, / pité le em pris, e ço fu droit” (when Tristan sees her cry, he takes pity on her, and rightly so, 969-70). He reassures her:

“Dame raïne,
belë estes e enterine;
des ore ne m'en voil mes cuverir:
cunuistre me frai e oïr.”
Sa voiz müat, parlat a dreit. (971-75)

“My lady, the queen,
You are beautiful and fully loyal;
From now on, I no longer wish to disguise myself:
I will make myself known and heard.”
He changed his voice, spoke in a true way.

The tension of the scene resolves instantaneously, as Yseut recognizes Tristan's authentic voice. His voice is the only falsified element that he changes in this moment, but it is as if he has dropped the whole disguise: such is the irreplaceable, thrillingly visceral, power of the voice to cut through confusion and misunderstanding, and to layer language with sensory meaning.

² John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Unknown Bards,” in *Pulphed: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 258-61. With the exception of epigraphs, the complete publication information of cited works will be provided in the bibliography, beginning on page 101.

³ *The Anglo-Norman “Folie Tristan,”* ed. Ian Short, 957.

And how much more believable, and affecting, it is to “hear” Tristan explain his decision, with his own reported speech. What is showcased in this scene is not only the live wire of the voice, but also the formal feature of direct discourse. In Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner’s beautiful reading, this scene shows “that voice is not a sign of something else, but the thing itself.”⁴ Voice allows for “transparence,” and creates “intimate, direct spoken contact”⁵; and yet, “in a written text we lose precisely that element that conceals and then reveals Tristan’s identity – that is, the sound of his voice.”⁶ Reported speech, however, conserves the trace of that sound, and aspires to transmit similar effects; a written text of course cannot produce the acoustic effect of a voice, but it can gesture toward the intimacy of speech. This is the starting point of the present study: how a written text can use the formal feature of direct discourse in order to channel the presence of the voice; that is, how direct discourse can work at once on a stylistic and a deeply intuitive level.

The perceived immediacy of direct discourse is a phenomenological literary effect; to read for the presence of the voice in a text does not necessarily mean to betray what Bernard Cerquiglini calls “le désir subreptice de rechercher du vivant, de percevoir coûte que coûte sous les codes pesants ce qui vibre encore.”⁷ As he notes, “le discours que le texte donne à lire n’est pas reproduit, mais représenté,” and as such, direct discourse in a medieval text does not reveal “une ‘vérité’ mais...un code littéraire.”⁸ And yet, in a way, the end of the Oxford *folie* does “vibre encore” as it stages Tristan’s voice and speech as “the thing itself.” The scene’s resolution completely depends on his voice, and his theatrically conscious control of it; the revelation of Tristan’s real voice is striking enough when read silently, and thus might have been even more dramatic when read aloud.⁹ In any case, what we seem to hear in this passage is not the linguist’s idea of authenticity in the sense of reproduced speech, but the phenomenological sense of the effect of the voice’s truthfulness, its “transparence.” For Tristan to say “cunistre me frai e oïr” to Yseut instead of the narrator relating the same phrase in the third person, for example, invites what Bruckner calls the “intimate, direct spoken contact” of the voice into the written text, not from character to character but from text to reader or receiver. It invokes the “greater reality” that Walter J. Ong identifies in “words and sounds” over that which is written. In his view, because “sound conveys meaning more powerfully and accurately than sight...the spoken word does have more power than the written to do what the word is meant to do, to communicate.”¹⁰ The end of the Oxford *folie* shows how a the trace of a voice in a text, encoded by direct discourse, might echo the additional communicative potential of speech. In this way, direct discourse can be seen to gesture toward the “genuine, living intonation” that Mikhail Bakhtin identifies in “verbal discourse in life”; it does not reproduce the spoken word, but it does leave room for nondiscursive meaning within the text.¹¹

In the romance texts I examine in this dissertation, lovers’ speech demonstrates that the extra communicative potential afforded by the representation of the spoken word is affective;

⁴ Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24-5.

⁷ Bernard Cerquiglini, *La Parole médiévale*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ Bruckner, *Shaping Romance*, 27-28. Bruckner notes that no matter the way the Oxford *folie* might have been performed, it “clearly leads us to explore the relation between oral story and written text.”

¹⁰ Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 114-15.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art,” 3, 6.

that is, it involves both intuition and cognition. “Emotional” and “affective” are often used interchangeably, especially in literary studies, but I prefer “affective” because this term invokes the cognitive, or phenomenological, processes of feeling, rather than the culturally and temporally determined specificity of an “emotion.”¹² Using “affect” is an attempt to mark the disjuncture between medieval and modern understandings of emotion, as well as the different ways in which medieval and modern readers experience and respond to texts; I am interested more in identifying the places where a text signals the possibility of eliciting, or a character’s experience of, strong feeling than in defining what that feeling is or would have been. That is, I am interested in “the delicate mechanisms of feedback in human processes ranging from perception to very complex thought,” which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as central to affect theory.¹³

The presence of direct discourse in and of itself in medieval literature is not particularly noteworthy – as Christiane Marchello-Nizia succinctly puts it, “les textes médiévaux sont parcourus de représentations de discours”¹⁴ – but one of the stylistic hallmarks of romance is its frequent inclusion of its characters’, particularly its lovers’, speech. This inclusion can be read as simply typical of the genre; Michèle Perret, for example, asserts that “le monologue est né...en même temps que le roman,” setting romance apart from earlier genres such as epic.¹⁵ Anne-Marie Cadot sees the lovers’ speech in the Old French “Piramus et Tisbé” as a way for the author to outline “une psychologie bien élémentaire de la femme” which both differentiates the two lovers from each other and establishes the work as belonging to the romance genre.¹⁶ Direct discourse might also be of interest as a stylistic phenomenon; for example, Sophie Marnette identifies the “prosodie particulièrement souple” with which romance authors introduce and manage characters’ reported discourse as creating an “effet de vivacité.”¹⁷ Or, as E. Jane Burns argues, the proliferation of direct discourse in romance opens up space for female characters to speak, and therefore to resist misogynistic courtly conventions. Writing about Chrétien de Troyes’s *Érec et Énide*, she maintains that “The heroine’s speech more staunchly resists colonization and appropriation; her constructed voice cannot be fetishized as easily as her fictive flesh.”¹⁸ My interest in direct discourse has to do with its affective charge, and especially with its ability to put men and women into dialogue with each other. It is this dynamic, relational quality of lovers’ speech that reveals not only “une certaine conception de la communication intersubjective,” as Marchello-Nizia argues about “l’aveu, en dialogue, d’un amour réciproque,” but an array of ideals and hypotheses about communication between

¹² A strictly psychological definition of affect might not distinguish it very much from the term “emotion”; for example, see *The Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology*, s.v. “Affect”: their first definition is “a transient neurophysical response to a stimulus that excites a coordinated system of bodily and mental responses including facial expressions that inform us about our relationship to the stimulus and prepare us to deal with it in some way,” and the second is “The subjective feeling or evaluative component of human experience or thought.” The same reference work defines “Emotion” nearly identically: “A transient, neurophysiological response to a stimulus that excites a coordinated system of bodily and mental responses that inform us about our relationship to the stimulus and prepare us to deal with it in some way.”

¹³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Affect Theory and Theory of Mind” in *The Weather in Proust*, 147.

¹⁴ Christiane Marchello-Nizia, “Une nouvelle poétique du discours direct,” 164.

¹⁵ Michèle Perret, “Aux origines du roman, le monologue,” 214.

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Cadot, “Du récit mythique au roman: étude sur *Piramus et Tisbé*,” 452-56.

¹⁷ Sophie Marnette, *Narration et points de vue dans la littérature médiévale*, 130.

¹⁸ E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*, 158.

gendered subjects, different experiences of desire, and how love can facilitate understanding.¹⁹ For Marchello-Nizia, the avowal of love that takes place in dialogue between the lovers in question is “le moment auquel tend tout le roman courtois”; for me, it is not only the specific form of the avowal, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the less dramatic and not always successful ways in which romance texts portray their male and female characters speaking to and with each other. These attempts take place in dialogue, reported exchanges between two speakers, but also in direct discourse that might be called “dialogic”: monologues, often with the beloved as their addressee, that suggest dialogue without necessarily involving extended turn-taking. As this dissertation will show, the significance of speech in romance goes beyond rhetorical or formal considerations: rather, it marks an exquisite sensitivity to the phenomenology of desire, the ways men and women might come to a shared understanding, and the limits of how affect can be expressed discursively. What this dissertation aims to do is to examine a subgenre of, or a trend in, twelfth-century romance that is particularly invested in portraying the contingencies and potentialities of speech, as well as non-discursive communication, between lovers.

I. The Old French “Piramus et Tisbé”: The Dialogic Poetics of Tragic Desire

My first chapter examines the mid-twelfth century Old French adaptation of Ovid’s “Pyramus et Thisbe” as a case study for the importance of direct discourse in early romance texts. In what I see as a remarkable act of creative initiative, the anonymous French adaptor composes and elaborates long passages of paired monologues, producing an Old French text that is much longer than the original Latin, and made up of significantly more direct discourse. Ovid’s text contains little reported speech, although it features a shared monologue where the lovers speak in unison. In addition to inventing a pair of monologues without antecedent in Ovid’s version, the adaptor splits this shared monologue, sharing its lines between Piramus and Tisbé. His choice to emphasize not only speech, but specifically individual speech, shows a proto-humanistic interest in subjectivity and interiority. Since so much direct discourse is granted to both characters, they are able to express many aspects of lovesickness and desire, and to do so in a differentiated way: Piramus’s experience of desire juxtaposed with Tisbé’s is a particularly striking example. He suffers so much from lovesickness that he imagines dying of it, while she imagines death as a preferred alternative to being “reprise de putage” (accused of promiscuity).²⁰ That is to say, for Piramus, desire is individual, whereas for Tisbé it is imbricated in a social structure. The monologues they each speak open up these two separate experiences, allowing for a kind of thinking through of the problematic of gender difference in desire.

I argue that the Old French adaptor’s insistence on Piramus and Tisbé’s speech indicates an idealism about relationality that takes place discursively, and that is illuminated by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “unfinalizability.” Bakhtin, writing about dialogue in the novels of Dostoevsky, describes “dialogue not as a means but an end in itself,” an “eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord” that affirms existence itself. “To be,” Bakhtin asserts, in Dostoevsky, “means to communicate dialogically.”²¹ Dialogue, or rather, dialogic communication—since the

¹⁹ Marchello-Nizia, “L’Invention du dialogue amoureux,” 224.

²⁰ “Piramus et Tisbé,” ed. by C. de Boer, line 243.

²¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, 252.

lovers' paired monologues gesture toward dialogue, but do not constitute prolonged turn-taking—for the Old French adaptor is not simply a formal addition to Ovid's text, but a re-imagining of it, where the lovers articulate their respective experiences of desire and affect, sharing and negotiating what it means for them to love each other. This is most apparent in the tragic dénouement of the story, where the dying Piramus manages to speak to Tisbé only for a moment, as if to underscore the centrality of speech to the Old French text. The lovers' communication seems to end with their shared death; however, in one manuscript, the text ends with an exhortation to the reader to pray for the couple, gesturing toward the eternal and renewing the potential of the dialogic.

II. "Que que li grevast": Communication, Confusion, and Suffering in *Érec et Énide*

While the author of the Old French "Piramus et Tisbé" valorizes dialogic communication as an ideal way for separate subjects to articulate the love relationship, Chrétien de Troyes specifically withholds dialogue between the titular couple of *Érec et Énide*. Rather than extol the possibilities of dialogue, this romance portrays its failures and difficulties, exploring whether it is even possible for male and female speakers to communicate effectively. The optimism that the author of "Piramus" places in dialogue moves from speech to touch; in some moments, touch communicates desire, tenderness, and affection far more clearly than Érec and Énide's speech can. Gender difference figures as an ominous disjuncture between the couple, but a careful reading of the way Chrétien presents Énide demonstrates a sustained and nuanced interest in the problematics of female subjectivity in romance. Ultimately, I read *Érec et Énide* as a portrait of how a woman might navigate a profoundly unequal and sometimes bleak societal landscape. Unlike many feminist critics, I do not see Énide as alternately disempowered and empowered by her *prises de parole*, or even necessarily as the "heroine" of the romance, as does E. Jane Burns.²² Rather, I see her as a subject who engages in what Ross Chambers calls "oppositional practice," finding and taking advantage of the "room for maneuver" within the crushingly misogynistic norms of courtly society.²³ It is not exactly that Énide subverts courtly values, or rebels against them; rather, she makes these values "livable," to use Chambers's term, by making moments of comfort and tenderness as well as self-determination possible within her relationship with Érec.

In this way, I read the characters of Érec and Énide as particular individuals negotiating with and against the ideals of courtly society; that is to say, their courtship and marriage is not a model for how a love relationship should work, but a case study of how even the most conventional relationship might exist uneasily within the conventions that govern it, and how lovers can or cannot communicate across the division of gender. The avenue of communication that seems easiest for Érec and Énide is touch: in order to illuminate the communicative potential of these sensory, material gestures, I turn to Walter J. Ong's phenomenological understanding of the ways in which sight, touch, and voice can be addressed. The "reciprocating" quality of touch that he elucidates, I argue, reveals how physical contact can be expressive for this couple in a way that words cannot be.²⁴ What I show is that although speech can be fraught and even dangerous for the couple, mutual, pleasurable touch provides for Érec

²² Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak*, 158.

²³ Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*, 7.

²⁴ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 171.

and Énide a similar kind of intimacy and connection as does dialogue for Píramus and Tisbé. Ultimately, this is a romance about the way a couple – and particularly, the way the female half of a male/female dyad – might attempt to communicate, and how they might make the necessary room for maneuver in order to forge a connection. If the couple is never able to fully articulate their relationship, it does not mean they have failed, or that Chrétien implies that candid communication between men and women in a courtly society is impossible: rather, what this enigmatic, difficult romance portrays is the importance and poignancy of attempting to communicate across gender lines.

III. “Assez en ay or dit a sage”: Reception and Evocation in the Fragmented Tristan Legend

In stark contrast to Érec and Énide, the Tristan legend presents a couple whose unity is unbroken, and for whom communication is uncannily easy. However, at the same time, their communication – not only speech between them, but also the messages they send back and forth to each other, and the way they can use deceptive speech to protect themselves – is also continually problematized. This apparent paradox is present in all the extant fragments of Tristanian texts. This chapter focuses on the way Tristan and Yseut speak with each other, using dialogue to remind, recall, and re-narrate the primacy of their love. Their speech, I find, rarely relies on the explicit pragmatics of dialogue, and instead emphasizes evocation over denotation, drawing on an underlying shared understanding that sets their spoken communication apart from other couples in romance. However, this evocative quality is often difficult to identify, since instances of direct or reported discourse between them can appear to be either overdetermined or even inexplicable. The three texts I examine in this chapter – Marie de France’s Tristanian *lai* “Chèvrefeuille,” the episode of Béroul’s *Tristan* where the lovers decide to leave the Morois Forest, and the avowals of love from Thomas d’Angleterre’s version – all feature complicated discursive exchanges which capture Tristan and Yseut’s shared understanding at work.

Inseparable from any discussion of the twelfth-century Tristan tradition is its fragmentation: because no complete version of the Tristan narrative in French is extant, scholars have tended to treat it, overtly or implicitly, as ruined, incomplete, or insufficient, and in need of repair or reconstruction. I argue that this is a mistake, since not every extant piece of the Tristan narrative is a randomly broken-off bit of text (a “fragment” in the philological sense); for example, a text like “Chèvrefeuille,” which is written as a stand-alone episode, is a tiny narrative that can be fitted, in the reader’s imagination, into the larger Tristan story. Larger “fragments,” such as that of Béroul’s text, also show an episodic organization. However, both the narrative units of episodes and the fractured bits of text, the true fragments, are illuminated by Paul Zumthor’s concept of the model and the text. For Zumthor, any medieval text is a fragment by nature of its inability to fully encapsulate its model, its “*pré-texte virtuel*.”²⁵ A text does not represent its model, it evokes it, and what creates the meaning of a text is its back-and-forth of denotation and evocation. This opens up the space to think of the extant Tristan texts as having their own sufficiency: if even a “whole” text is a Zumthorian fragment, then, theoretically, a fragmented text poses little additional interpretive difficulty.

The three texts I discuss in this chapter show the centrality of these mechanisms of evocation to the Tristan legend on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. This chapter thus

²⁵ Paul Zumthor, “Intertextualité et mouvance,” 10.

takes a different approach from the previous two by analyzing three texts which are distinct from each other despite belonging to one textual tradition, and by interrogating the complex and somewhat abstract question of evocation, which I examine both as a textual phenomenon, in the way an author can evoke a larger narrative for a reader, and as an effect or technique that has to do with the expression of love between Tristan and Yseut. The Tristanian episodes of “Chèrefeuille” and Beroul’s portrayal of the lovers returning from the forest both make references to the larger narrative that highlight the reader’s role in interpreting the story; even Thomas’s avowal of love, transmitted by the Carlisle fragment, briefly references previous events. In this way, these texts explicitly refer to a virtual model. What is highlighted in all of them, too, is the markedly unusual communication between Tristan and Yseut: “Chèrefeuille,” which is nearly always read as a philological problem to be solved, showcases a flash of understanding between the lovers that Marie, uncharacteristically, takes it upon herself to explain at length. When Tristan and Yseut return from the forest and part from each other, they have two apparently repetitive conversations about how they will send messages while separated. These conversations reveal a sensitivity to the way affect can or cannot be expressed discursively, and the lovers’ last, evocative look upon Tristan’s departure seems to confirm that their shared understanding fits imperfectly into speech. The playful, collaborative dialogue of the magnificent Carlisle fragment, on the other hand, shows how speech can express and perform the ineffable unity of falling in love. Evocation is thus, I show, both a methodological and an aesthetic question, one which calls into question the modern reader’s position in regard to the text as an object of study, and which ultimately asks not only great attention of the reader, but imagination as well.

An intriguing model of the twelfth-century love relationship emerges from these three chapters, emphasizing speech between lovers as a critical venue for expressing and experiencing affect. Direct discourse plays a slightly different role in all of these texts: in “Piramus,” the lovers’ relationship is entirely constituted by speech, and never consummated, where in *Érec*, mutual touch, including the couple’s consummation of their marriage, is preferred to conversation. For *Érec* and *Énide*, speech is not absent, but is specifically problematized. In the Tristan tradition, Tristan and Yseut’s dialogues play with evocation, always meaning more than can quite be articulated. Gender, too, emerges as a defining characteristic of the experience of desire—except, of course, when Tristan and Yseut are alone together, since the intense unity of their love smooths out the gender divide between them. But *Tisbé* and *Énide* must grapple with the ways in which their own experiences of suffering and agency do not align with their male partners’. To love Piramus and *Érec*, for them, means maneuvering within courtly conventions that are more constraining to women than to men, and which often resist female self-determination and silence or ignore female speech. In this way, analyzing how lovers speak to each other also means analyzing the ways in which romance texts might articulate or explain experiences of gendered subjectivity.

I

The Old French “Piramus et Tisbé”: The Dialogic Poetics of Tragic Desire

*De mon autre, je recevrai toute parole comme un
signe de vérité; et, lorsque je parlerai, je ne mettrai
pas en doute qu'il reçoive pour vrai ce que je
dirai. D'où l'importance des déclarations...rien
n'est laissé à la suggestion, à la divination: pour
qu'une chose soit sue, il faut qu'elle soit
dite; mais aussi, dès qu'elle est dite, très
provisoirement, elle est vraie. — Roland Barthes¹*

Although it is a commonplace to describe French medieval romance as marked by an emphasis on direct discourse and the variation of voice, the importance accorded to lovers' speech varies greatly across individual texts. It is not unusual for love to be requited without the couple in question ever having a conversation about their feelings, such as the mutually infatuated Alixandre and Soredamors in Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, or without the heroine voicing her love even to herself, as in *Erec et Enide*; the suffering of love, while putatively equivalent, may be fully articulated only from the male perspective, as in Thomas's *Tristan*; a heroine who is granted expansive monologues about love can easily be silenced upon the final arrangement of her marriage, as is Lavine in the *Roman d'Énéas*. This is not always the case, however, as some romances prominently feature their lovers' direct discourse; as Christiane Marchello-Nizia outlines, certain romance texts develop the negotiation of meaning occasioned by an avowal of love, which is mutual, but managed by the woman of the couple.² In this way, the formal element of direct discourse and the thematization of the heterosexual dyad, both constitutive of the genre of romance, actually coexist quite uneasily and appear in many different permutations, most of which seem to give female speech and desire short shrift. The early romance text “Piramus et Tisbé,” however, attempts to resolve this tension with a unique format of paired monologues that grants both lovers approximately equal time to speak and emphasizes the role of dialogue in the love relationship. While “Piramus” has mostly been read in the context of vernacular translation, I will argue that it should be read as an innovation in its own right that nuances the generally accepted genealogy of the origins of romance.

Translations of classical texts played a crucial role in the development of medieval romance: Ovid was part of the shared twelfth-century corpus that practically every medieval reader of Latin would have known, and his omnipresent influence is attested to by the many tropes of lovesickness and suffering from desire that are central to courtly love. In addition to the influence of Ovid, the mid-twelfth-century *romans antiques* — classical epics translated into Old French verse and embellished with chivalric conventions, such as the *Roman d'Énéas*, *Roman d'Alixandre*, and *Roman de Thèbes* — are seen as the forerunners of the *roman médiéval*. This genealogy depends on lengthy narratives which clearly influence subsequent works, although

¹ Roland Barthes, “Signes,” *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 255.

² Christiane Marchello-Nizia, “L'Invention du dialogue amoureux : le masque d'une différence,” 231.

this groundswell of vernacular translation also comprises lesser-read, more idiosyncratic texts, many of which experiment with narrative strategies that never end up being enshrined as conventional. Yet these outlier translations, such as “Piramus et Tisbé,” should not be overlooked as interesting sources of alternate ideologies present in early romance; the generative practice of medieval translation means that the medieval translator is also an adaptor and author, and that the resulting texts are creatively and critically engaged with the literary aesthetics of the milieu in which they were written. As Rita Copeland explains, medieval translations “work in effect to contest and supplant [the original] text,” but also that they evince “the discovery and augmentation of a native literary language” as their authors make use of “the original as a model against which to discover and define new textual idioms.”³ “Piramus,” which departs from Ovid’s Latin text in unexpected ways, certainly does demonstrate this kind of literary and rhetorical creativity, and also gestures toward the underlying humanistic impulse of the project of translation. A medieval translation into *romanz* represents the desire of an educated author, probably a cleric, to share a story in Latin with a lay audience; in the case of the author of “Piramus,” I will argue that his changes and additions demonstrate not only his conception of the most effective narrative gambits for conveying the interest of the text, but also—more importantly—an effort to emphasize and develop the individual subjectivities of the doomed couple. Where Ovid presents a hermetic, unified model of the love relationship, the Old French author formally and thematically rejects this model in favor of a dynamic exchange where both lovers are granted separate speech and agency.

Although Ovid’s lovers speak only sparingly and never with each other, nearly half of the Old French version of “Piramus et Tisbé” is taken up by the lovers’ monologues. This extensive direct discourse, far in excess of the conventional uses of speech in romance, takes the unique form of paired monologues. These paired monologues have no formal antecedent in the Latin text, and half of them are entirely invented by the Old French author; in this way, they are a decisive departure from the Latin original as well as a formal innovation in their own right. Piramus always speaks first and Tisbé replies, so that the couple is able to address each other and react to each other in speech, albeit not over extended exchanges. This insistence on the lovers’ speech indicates that for the Old French author, the crux of the story lies in the exposition of the couple’s ultimately tragic desire, while Ovid’s text specifically elides this exposition. The first time Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe are granted direct discourse in the Latin text, they speak in unison. Their monologue, a polished literary conceit, presents the couple as completely unanimous: no negotiation of any difference is necessary for them. The paired monologues of the Old French version dismantle this unity by portraying the negotiation Ovid conceals, and in doing so, lay bare the disjuncture of gender difference that Ovid’s lovers never have to confront. The Old French “Piramus” imagines the love relationship as a dialogue in which both partners articulate their separate feelings of desire and negotiate their differences in order to work toward a resolution. If such a resolution is never reached, the idealism of this valorization of speech nevertheless echoes that of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose concept of the unfinalizability of dialogue invites us to read “Piramus” as a text that uses dialogic poetics in order to attempt to unmask the experience of desire.

Ovid’s Lovers: The Elision of Dialogue

³ Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, 94.

Ovid's Latin text presents Pyramus and Thisbe as so undifferentiated that they speak their first monologue in unison. This monologue comes at a point that is crucial for both the Latin and the Old French versions, the discovery of the cracked wall that will allow the lovers to speak to each other. The slimness of narrative action in "Pyramus et Thisbe" already foregrounds many of the same problematics of desire and romantic love we will see in the Old French "Piramus," such as the unity or disjuncture of the couple, the role of gender difference, and, most importantly, the necessity – or elision – of dialogue. From the beginning of the Old French text, the adaptor foregrounds the ongoing repercussions of love and desire, lamenting in the prologue, "Hai, Amours, devant tes iex / Ne puet durer joenes ne viex..." ("Oh, love, before your eyes / Neither young nor old can resist").⁴ However, in Ovid's text, the force of Pyramus and Thisbe's love is an established given that requires little investigation. This contrast is palpable throughout both texts, and is especially marked in the two shared sets of crucial scenes: the lovers' discovery of the crack in the wall, and their deaths. Since the plots of the Latin and the Old French are both set into motion by the lovers' newfound ability to speak to each other, both versions portray the potential for communication between them; instead of a dialogue, however, the lovers in the Latin "Pyramus" speak in a univocal monologue, only speaking separately later in the text, once they believe themselves to be separated by death. Their shared monologue, as well as the narrator's framing of it, enacts a unanimity and simultaneity that will be dismantled in the Old French:

Id vitium nulli per saecula longa notatum
 (quid non sentit amor?) primi vidistis amantes,
 et vocis fecistis iter; tutaeque per illud
 murmure blanditiae minimo transire solebant.
 Saepe, ubi constiterant hinc Thisbe, Pyramus illinc,
 inque vices fuerat captatus anhelitus oris,
 "invide" dicebant "paries, quid amantibus obstas?
 quantum erat, ut sineres toto nos corpore iungi,
 aut hoc si nimium est, vel ad oscula danda pateres?
 Nec sumus ingrati: tibi nos debere fatemur,
 quod datus est verbis ad amicas transitus aures."⁵

This flaw, noticed by no one for ages,
 (what does love not perceive?) you lovers first saw,
 and you made it a passageway for speech, and through it
 sweet nothings used to safely pass with the tiniest of murmurs.
 Often, when they had come together, Thisbe here, Pyramus there,
 and in turns the breath from the mouth of each had been captured,
 "Hateful wall," they would say, "why do you stand opposed to us lovers?
 How great it would be, that you might fall for the whole of our bodies to be joined,
 or if this is too much, then might you part for the giving of kisses?
 And it is not that we are ungrateful: we acknowledge that we are in your debt,
 Since passage across to loving ears has been granted for our words."

⁴ "Piramus et Tisbé," ed. C. de Boer, lines 23-24. Old French citations taken from this edition unless otherwise noted; translations are mine.

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.67-77, trans. Frank Justus Miller.

Beginning with the narrator's address to the lovers in the second person plural ("vidistis," 68, "fecistis," 69), which implies that Pyramus and Thisbe discover the opening in the wall together, the couple is presented as a single cohesive unit, rather than two individuals. Credit for the discovery is shared, as is their inventiveness in using it to speak to each other. Love—as intimated by the narrator's interjected question, "quid non sentit amor?"—is thus a unifying as well as a motivating force. Paradoxically, however, their physical separation means that the lovers are in fact having parallel, not identical experiences, and this undermining of the appearance of perfect unity is underscored by the contrast between the connotation of togetherness of the prefix "con-" in "constiterant," and the explicit separation of "hinc" and "illinc." The lovers, two physically separate subjects declaiming with a single voice, can only merge their voices in a univocalic monologue, not a dialogue. Ovid here suggests an ongoing, evolving exchange of speech, yet does not report any truly directly; "transire" (70, 76) gestures toward a sense of exchange, but there is no sense of what the lovers might be saying beyond the phatic speech of the hopelessly infatuated, which hardly requires full articulation ("minimo murmure," 70). In this framing, what is important is only that the lovers are able to speak to each other, not the content of what they say. In this way, the crack in the wall acts as a channel for speech (69), words (76), and simply breath (72), allowing for communication, but nothing else: not the meaningful discursive negotiation of conversation, and certainly not, as the lovers lament, physical contact.

What is missing here—and what will be insistently supplied by the Old French adaptor—is the representation of dialogue, and, by extension, a narrative investment in representing lovers as separate speaking subjects. Ovid's lovers speak together in a way that specifically conceals any negotiation of meaning between them; any conversation, and indeed all hypothetical individual conversations between the lovers, is purposefully excluded and synthesized into this stylized, univocal monologue. The adverb "saepe" (71) and the use of the imperfect tense (70, 72) signal that this monologue is representative of the sum total of the lovers' conversation, a composite spoken tableau that describes their overall experience. It is more than a question of style, especially in the context of the Old French "Piramus." Dialogue, direct discourse between two speakers, allows for negotiation and redefinition of semantics and affect; even more importantly, in the case of the portrayal of love, dialogue between lovers requires both to articulate their own desire. This means necessarily including a distinct, autonomous female voice in the narrative. In this way, Ovid's elision of dialogue in this scene merges the lovers' subjectivities, erasing the possible differences between them and evading the question of gender difference. The Old French author will transform this literary conceit into multiple pairs of separate monologues divided equally between Piramus and Tisbé.

The Old French Couple: A Valorization of Dialogue

From Ovid's compact elision of dialogue, the Old French adaptor conjures an explosion of direct discourse in a deliberate exposition and exploration of a love relationship that takes place in speech, with the full participation of both partners. This emphasis on the couple's speech has not always been seen as such a break from Ovid's version. Anne-Marie Cadot, for example, sees the adaptor's turn toward direct discourse as part of the process of generic conversion inherent to medieval translation practice, whereby the generic markers of a "récit mythique" are effaced or de-emphasized, and romance features are added. In the case of "Piramus," she notes the text's temporal shift from a timeless past to "une réalité présente," and

the difference in length between the Latin and Old French versions.⁶ She initially presents the addition of the monologues as purely formal, simply one of the “facteurs d’amplification” that the medieval adaptor uses in order to convert Ovid’s mythological story into a romance text.⁷ Eventually, she briefly discusses the characters of Piramus and Tisbé, “infiniment plus complexes que chez Ovide,” maintaining that the monologues allow Tisbé to emerge as “un peu plus ‘compliqué[e]’: à la fois plus fertile en initiative, en ruses, en coquetterie, mais aussi plus craintive et impulsive,” and Piramus as “plus passif dans la passion.”⁸ Despite the extensive additions of direct discourse in the Old French version in the unique form of paired monologues, Edmond Faral actually denies in his comparative study of “Piramus” that the inclusion of direct discourse differs greatly from Ovid’s Latin version: in comparison with Énéas and Lavine’s monologues in the *Roman d’Énéas*, he states, “dans Piramus, les plaintes des deux personnages ont leur origine dans le texte d’Ovide, tandis que l’épisode des amours d’Énéas et de Lavine a été ajouté à un modèle qui n’en portait pas le moindre mention.”⁹

However, the paired monologues of the Old French “Piramus et Tisbé” mark a significant innovation from Ovid’s Latin version: they are a sustained valorization of dialogue. In order to accomplish this, the adaptor thoroughly recasts the narrative. This idealistic, almost optimistic rewriting, imagines a love relationship as depending on mutual conversation between two separate and differentiated gendered subjects and outlines a poetics of dialogue that emphasizes the dynamic relationality of romantic love and dialectic of language – that is to say, an idealism about relationality through language that echoes a quality of dialogue described by Mikhail Bakhtin. Writing about dialogue in the novels of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin describes “dialogue not as a means but as an end in itself”:

Dialogue here is not the threshold to action, it is the action itself. It is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of a person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is – and, we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well. To be means to communicate dialogically. When dialogue ends, everything ends. Thus dialogue, by its very essence, cannot and must not come to an end. ...Dostoevsky carries dialogue into eternity, conceiving of it as eternal co-rejoicing, co-admiration, concord. At the level of the novel, it is presented as the unfinalizability of dialogue, although originally as dialogue's vicious circle.

Everything in Dostoevsky's novels tends toward dialogue, toward a dialogic opposition, as if tending toward its center. All else is the means; dialogue is the end. A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence.¹⁰

This is a model of characters’ dialogue that is completely alien to that of Ovid’s “Pyramus et Thisbe,” for several reasons: first, the framing narrative(s) of the *Metamorphoses* mean that “Pyramus” is already imbricated in another level of dialogue between storytelling characters, while the Old French “Piramus” is apparently conceived of as a stand-alone text. Within “Pyramus” itself, Ovid avoids dialogue between characters entirely, and the action of the story

⁶ Anne-Marie Cadot, “Du Récit mythique au roman: étude sur Piramus et Tisbé,” 449-51.

⁷ Ibid., 451-2.

⁸ Ibid., 456.

⁹ Edmond Faral, *Recherches sur les sources latines des contes et romans courtois du moyen âge*, 21.

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson, 252.

is recounted by the narrator; his lovers' monologue, spoken in unison, may be made up of two voices, but it deliberately conceals an implied dialogue. The "co-rejoicing, co-admiration, concord" Bakhtin describes here requires two distinct voices in opposition – the very distinction which Ovid's text takes pains to smooth over. By breaking the shared Latin speech apart and granting it to the two separately speaking individual lovers, the Old French author reveals an investment in the dialogic, opening space for discord and resolution within the couple, and aspiring to represent the warm, living sense of relationality that dialogue can invoke.

Bakhtin's pronouncement that "to be means to communicate dialogically" rings true, too, for the Old French adaptor's invention and elaboration of Piramus and Tisbé's direct discourse. It is not only a formal transformation that this author effects, but a radical re-evaluation of the expression and development of subjectivity. "Piramus et Tisbé" is marked from the beginning by this gesture toward the dialogic. Even before the young lovers discover the cracked wall – that is, before they are able to speak directly to each other, and before the lovers speak in the Ovid – the Old French adaptor grants them a pair of monologues where they voice their longing for each other. These monologues, which make extensive use of twelfth-century tropes of lovesickness, have no precedent in Ovid's text, but are more significant than simply adding a courtly veneer to a classical narrative. The first pair of monologues allows Piramus and Tisbé, or forces them, to experience lovesickness both separately and differently. These monologues demonstrate the Old French author's interest in the interior experience of desire on the part of both partners in the romantic couple.

From *Parage* to Separation

The first pair of monologues in the Old French "Piramus and Tisbé" are two laments of lovesickness that show how desire, which initially seems to unite the couple in suffering, actually intensifies the differences between them. In contrast to Ovid's unified lovers, these monologues dramatize the separateness of the lovers, despite the courtly trope of *parage* that is invoked in the Old French version's introduction. Piramus and Tisbé are described as perfect equals, socially and aesthetically: "deus enfans / D'unes biautez et d'uns samblans" ("two children / Of the same beauty and the same appearance," 5-6). It is this very similarity – in age, rank, and appearance – , along with seeing each other frequently, that the narrator blames for their falling in love (17-22). Their suffering at being parted is described as mutual and in the same terms (115-44), yet almost immediately, their conventional *parage* is troubled. It is Tisbé who bears the punishment of imprisonment for their youthful feelings, not Piramus, and as their laments demonstrate, their suffering is not truly symmetrical. The conclusions of their laments are nearly identical, with both asking "li Dieux d'amour" (197, 298) to allow them to hold the other as long as they wish (198, 300), they open completely differently. Where Piramus poses a rhetorical question, "Soufferrai longues cest tourment?" ("Will I suffer this torment for long?" 151), that pertains to his specific situation, Tisbé begins with a far more expansive exclamation:

...con male ore
Fui nee!
Hé, Diex, con male destinee,
Con dure vie m'est donee! (221-24)

...at what a terrible moment

was I born!
O God, what a terrible fate,
What a hard life is given to me!

Piramus's lovesickness may be physically and emotionally totalizing, and his lament recapitulates many conventional symptoms of frustrated desire. Tisbé's suffering, however, is an indictment of her whole existence in a way that it is not for him. Already, the lovers' experience is different, even though they desire the same thing. Eventually, both lovers will refer to death in their respective laments, and the contrast between them highlights how different their experiences of lovesickness are, despite their similar conclusions.

Part of the contrast between the lovers is necessarily the difference of gender: Piramus, whose lament focuses on the ill physical effects of desire, infamously threatens to take Tisbé "by force," a jarring reminder of the male potential for sexual violation and violence. This moment has been read as a glimpse of the underlying brutality of desire for which the only resolutions besides love are rape or death; Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, for example, sees this as foreshadowing the text's later "*représentation crue et cruelle de la sexualité*," and Christopher Lucken reads this as an explicit revelation of "*l'union sexuelle à laquelle aspirent les deux amants*," where Piramus "*posera comme seule alternative à son amour, le viol et le suicide*."¹¹ However, the context of Piramus's desperation lends his wild cry a somewhat different valence:

Ou par enging ou par desroi
Feraï,
Tisbé, bele, que te verrai.
Sache, se par amour ne t'ai,
Que par force te ravirai,
Ou, se ce non, par toi avrai
La mort.
C'iert mon refuge et mon confort... (166-73)

Either with trickery or with mayhem,
I will make sure,
Tisbé, my beauty, that I see you.
Know that if by love I do not have you,
Then by force I will take you,
Or, if this cannot be, then from you I will have
Death.
This will be my refuge and my comfort...

This "threat" is just as much a threat to Piramus's own father, and is motivated not so much by the intensity of Piramus's desire to slake his physical desire as by his longing to simply see his beloved. It is this very juxtaposition – wanting to see Tisbé, threatening to take her by force – that renders the passage affectively and even logically incoherent; Piramus is desperately lovesick, not formulating a reasonable plan. His earnest but disorganized resistance against obstacles real and imagined could hardly contrast more with Ovid's lovers' polished, mannered

¹¹ Yasmina Foehr-Janssens, "*La discorde du langage amoureux. Paroles d'amour, paroles de femme dans les lais et les fabliaux (XIIe-XIIIe siècles)*," 134; Christopher Lucken, "*Le Suicide des amants et l'enseignement des lettres : Piramus et Tisbé ou les métamorphoses de l'amour*," 380.

reproach to the wall that stands between them. The “mort”/“confort” rhyme could be seen as an early foreshadowing of the lovers’ tragic ending, but also serves to indicate a certain melodrama in Piramus’s monologue. He is imagining death as a passive and individual relief, free of consequences; the tragic dénouement, where this rhyme will reappear, will lay out more fully the naïveté of this idea of death’s relationship to desire.

Tisbé’s suffering from lovesickness takes a different, more logically argued form than Piramus’s: like Piramus, she refers to death, but while his imagined death is individual and personal, hers is directly linked to the larger social repercussions of being a desiring woman. Addressing herself, Tisbé poses death as a violent, albeit preferable, alternative to the shame and censure that would inevitably follow her pursuit of Piramus:

Car onc feme de ton lignage
Ne fu reprise de putage.
Reprise
Ne serai je en nul guise.
Miex vueil estre cent fois ocise. (242-6)

For a woman of your lineage
Was never accused of such promiscuity.
Accused –
Never will I be, in any way.
I’d rather be killed a hundred times.

The death Tisbé imagines here is fantastically, violently overdetermined, and in this sense, she echoes a similar sense of desperation as Piramus does in his preceding monologue. But where desire muddles his reasoning, it sharpens hers: she sees clearly that her involvement with Piramus will be seen as “putage,” deserving of the harshest societal censure. This intrusion of the outside social world marks a key difference from Piramus’s lament, since nowhere does Piramus seem concerned with his social position or reputation. Already, we see that Tisbé’s imprisonment has different effects on both lovers, which Tisbé herself outlines as – at least in part – an effect of the most salient difference in a heterosexual couple, that of sex. While Piramus conceives of himself as a lover suffering from lovesickness, Tisbé understands herself as a woman responsible for upholding a family tradition of respectability, a fundamental difference that exacerbates her distress in the face of her lovesickness. The emergence of this problematic of sexual difference leads Yasmina Foehr-Janssens to read these two laments as exemplifying the discordance inherent to the *discours amoureux* of medieval romance. For her, female speech is necessarily shaped by the inescapable mandate that women fit their discourse into the “modèles attendus de répartition des rôles sociaux de sexe.”¹² In light of Bakhtin’s sense of the open, cooperative nature of dialogue, the separateness established by these initial paired laments looks less like discord and more like the exploration of a distance between two speakers that holds potential for dialogue. By rejecting the speaking-as-one unity of Ovid’s lovers, the Old French author opens up a space for negotiation and, eventually, invites the question of whether it is possible for such different subjects to achieve a Bakhtinian “co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord,” especially when one is grappling with societal and familial oppression in such a concrete, present way, and is also formally hemmed in by the paired monologues themselves.

¹² Foehr-Janssens, “La discorde du langage amoureux,” 128.

Tisbé's awareness of the social world makes the possibility of union with Piramus seem more fraught: she wrestles more torturously with her feelings of desire in her first lament, to be sure, but this ultimately galvanizes her into action and even motivates her to act in later scenes where Piramus either cannot or will not. In this first lament, she foreshadows one of the tragic elements of the ending, the paradoxical union-separation of the lovers' deaths; unlike Piramus, she imagines her death as punitive, and while he proposes death as the inevitable end result of the effects of unrequited desire, Tisbé immediately recoils from her imagined fate. Her mention of death reminds her instantly, and with great regret, of Piramus, and over the next fifteen lines or so, she turns away from her fear of censure in order to affirm the primacy of her love – and desire – for him. This vertiginous reversal transmutes her preference for death over the theoretical shame at losing her virtue into an insult to Piramus that can only be rectified by giving up that virtue voluntarily:

– Tisbé,
Ou as tu pris icest pensé?
Tost as Piramus oublié!
[–]Lasse, por quoi l'ai ge nommé?
Amis,
Onques a certes ge nel dis!
[...]
Tenez, sire, pour cest outrage
Ci vos vo ge mon pucelage.
Trop iere orains de fier corage! (247-58)¹³

– Tisbé,
Where did you get such a thought?
You've forgotten Piramus quickly!
– Miserable self, why did I name him?
Ami,
Of course I never said that!
[...]
Here, my lord, in exchange for that offense,
I grant you my maidenhood.
Just now I was too severe of heart.

Tisbé's horror at having momentarily placed the social world and its corresponding censure before her love for Piramus is an extreme that is posed as equivalent to Piramus's, but Tisbé's reversal is based on a much more concrete understanding of the limits of her situation – she is the one who is locked away, not Piramus, and so is already experiencing a foreshadowing of the censure she fears – and constitutes a real decision that takes place in stages in contrast to Piramus's wild hypothesizing. Piramus's experience as outlined by his monologue is painful and difficult, but the obstacle he is confronting, Tisbé's imprisonment, is straightforward, whereas Tisbé is reckoning with her imprisonment in conjunction with the impossible trap of *putage* versus *pucelage*. As she grapples with the implications of staying in love with Piramus,

¹³ De Boer's line 256, "Ci vos vo ge mon pucelage," is from MS C (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Hamilton 257, folios 15v-18v); Penny Eley takes R's more intelligible "Vous otroi ci mon pucelage" (Rouen, Bibliothèque municipale 1044 (0.44), folios 91r-96v).

she also introduces the enigma that will haunt the text to its end, that of the power of death to unify or separate. When she reprimands herself for her “fier corage,” she is superficially echoing the criticism of the courtly lover begging for *merci* from his lady, but more importantly, she is pointing out the rashness of wishing for death. What she realizes here is that dying would mean leaving Piramus alone, and so saying she would rather be killed means rejecting and abandoning him. In this moment, she makes the deliberate choice to stay with him, in dialogue and potentially in physical union; this choice will be tragically mirrored in the ending.

Tisbé apostrophizes Piramus with the straightforward statement, “Tenez, sire, pour cest outrage / Ci vos vo ge mon pucelage,” which is almost a performative utterance – in the context of the fragility of reputation, saying it may as well make it so – and in doing so, she articulates her own subjectivity in an astonishing way. This is a refusal to repudiate desire in favor of social stricture, as well as an affirmation of her agency: Tisbé thus refuses the division of woman that Luce Irigaray identifies as “deux ‘corps’ irréconciliables: son corps ‘naturel,’ et son corps valeureux socialement, échangeable.”¹⁴ When Tisbé chooses Piramus at the expense of her honor and familial reputation, she does so in the most irrevocable way possible, since losing her virginity means losing her value as a potential bride. She does so knowingly; as Yasmina Foehr-Janssens points out, Tisbé is aware that even speaking with Piramus would violate her chastity, and so I would argue that this moment has very little of the flailing desperation of Piramus’s mention of rape and death.¹⁵ It is not an empty threat, but the result of deliberation. Her monologue overall should be read, then, as more than the “débat moral” Foehr-Janssens sees it as,¹⁶ and by extension, we should consider that the Old French adaptor evinces more profound convictions about the lovers than a “un principe d’initiative féminine” in this pair of monologues.¹⁷

The Contingency of Dialogue: Affect and Gender Difference

In his rewriting of the lovers’ discovery of the cracked wall, the Old French author emphasizes the difficulties of intersubjective dialogue as he unravels Ovid’s lovers’ unanimous speech. Transitioning into and establishing dialogue will require a belabored narrative framework: the Old French adaptor’s reimagining of Ovid’s scene where the lovers speak as one emphasizes dialogue as well as nonverbal communication in a painstakingly detailed, almost phenomenological examination of the lovers’ discovery. The narrative setup in the Old French text elaborates on what is, in the Latin, a half-line declaration (“*primi vidistis amantes,*” 68), and transfigures it into a richly detailed portrait of two individual lovers on the cusp of achieving connection. In the Old French, this scene consists both of a *separate* realization that the wall is cracked, as well as a *process* of realization that is very definitely brought about by Tisbé, even without her speaking:

La crevace n’ert gaires grans
Et fu celee par mout d’ans,
De ci qu’Amours la fist trouver,
Vers qui riens ne se puet celer.

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, “Le Marché des femmes,” 176.

¹⁵ Foehr-Janssens, “La discorde du langage amoureux,” 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

Quel chose est ce qu'Amours ne sent ?
 Li dui amant premierement
 Aperçurent icel pertus :
 Primes Tisbé, puis Pirus.
 Tisbé trouva la creveüre,
 Prist le pendant de sa çainture,
 S'en fist outre le chief paroir,
 Que ses amis le puist veoir.
 Pirus vient de deporter,
 De ses dolours se conforter.
 Vait en la chambre, couche soi,
 Tourne ses iex vers la paroi,
 Garde, si aperçoit l'enseigne
 Que la crevace li enseigne. (321-38)

The crack wasn't large at all,
 And had been hidden for many years,
 Until Love, from whom nothing can be hidden,
 Caused it to be found.
 What is there that Love does not sense?
 The two lovers were the first ones
 To notice this opening:
 First Tisbé, then Pirus.
 Tisbé found the crack,
 And took the end of her belt,
 And placed it with the tip showing on the other side,
 So that her *ami* could see it.
 Pirus was just coming back,
 In order to find comfort from his pain.
 He goes into the room, lies down,
 Turns his eyes to the wall,
 Looks at it, and so sees the signal
 That the crevice is showing to him.

Here, the lovers are separate subjects, and the disjuncture between them is more and more pressing: if they are individuals, then they do not automatically know the same things at the same time, as Ovid's lovers apparently do when they make their simultaneous discovery. Individuated lovers, the Old French author demonstrates, *must* communicate, whether in speech or via signals. By portraying every moment of Tisbé and Pirus's discovery in minute detail, he is putting forth a model of the romantic couple as two participants, an actor and a reactor, in contrast to Ovid's two-speaking-as-one. And yet action and reaction appear almost endlessly complicated by the end of this passage, as the lovers' distinctness seems more and more like disjunction. We are far beyond the conventional medieval *parage* of the opening; these characters are both in love, but not perfect equals, and once again their difference is defined along gendered lines. Tisbé's agency and initiative drive the entire action of the scene, but her active participation is undercut at every turn: she can make a signal to Pirus, but then must wait for him to notice it, and then once he does, her agency is elided by the

“enseignement” of her signal being delegated to the mute, overtly vulvar “crevace,” not Tisbé herself.¹⁸ This rather obvious symbolism, which Lucken only sees as an indication of “la résonance sexuelle de la scène,” when combined with the grammatical shift that makes the *crevace* the agent instead of the damsel, nearly forces the question of male versus female desire.¹⁹ Piramus’s delay in understanding represents not only the potential for a sign to be misread or missed entirely, but also the possibility of erotic miscommunication: this passage suggests that if Piramus could have missed Tisbé’s signal, then perhaps he might also miss the cues that she desires him. Or, more ominously, might he not really be interested in those cues? His response to suffering from lovesickness here is self-contained – he returns in order to “se conforter” – and more physical than discursive; we see nothing of his inner monologue, for example. Martha Nussbaum, writing about models of the love relationship, points out how high the stakes of this kind of self-containment might be: love that “requires exchange and conversation,” which is to say, “a real live other person,” has very little to do with “agonies [that] go on in a lonely room.” She concludes, “To imagine love as a form of mourning is already to court solipsism; to imagine it as a form of laughter (of smiling conversation) is to insist that it presupposes, or is, a transcendence of solipsism.”²⁰ While the Old French “Piramus” focuses exclusively on the suffering, rather than the joy, of love, it nevertheless persistently returns to the importance of dialogue. The possibility of speaking with Tisbé depends on Piramus’s observation and interpretation of her signal; here, we see how contingent that observation might be, and thus how easily these lovers might not enter into dialogue. Tisbé’s discovery alone is not enough to open conversation between them; Piramus’s participation is necessary, too. Communication and understanding between the lovers might be contingent, or threatened, or difficult, but it is never entirely foreclosed.

Up to this point, Piramus and Tisbé’s speech has only gestured toward the dialogic – the pairing of their monologues has rhetorically indicated a statement and response, but they have not actually been speaking to each other. If, as in Bakhtin’s reading of Dostoevsky, this is a text in which “everything...tends toward dialogue, toward a dialogic opposition,” then we might expect the first moment that real dialogue between the lovers becomes possible to be joyful and constructive. Their dialogue, however, is undermined at its first conversational turn, and this scene becomes a portrayal of the difficulty – or even impossibility – of producing speech rather than the harmony Bakhtin describes. As a counterpoint to Ovid’s lovers, however, even the hiatus or temporary failure of dialogue also represents the Old French author’s aspiration to a Bakhtinian “co-rejoicing, co-admiration, con-cord.” The difficulty of beginning a conversation ultimately emphasizes the importance of the role of the reply and, therefore, Tisbé’s position in dialogue.

One of the idiosyncracies of the form of the paired monologues is that Piramus always speaks first, and as we see in this scene, this actually puts him at a rhetorical disadvantage. Although his opening lines to Tisbé are the first in the text that are addressed directly to either of the lovers, they are significant formally rather than affectively; that is, Piramus simply opens the dialogue. Once he finally sees the opening in the wall, he speaks immediately, without any framing from the narrator (“Voit le pertus, si dit itant...,” “He sees the opening, and then speaks as such,” 340), which continues the step-by-step description of his process of noticing and

¹⁸ *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle*, 1880-1895, s.v. “Crevace.”

¹⁹ Lucken, “Le Suicide des amants,” 380.

²⁰ Nussbaum, “Love’s Knowledge,” 280.

seeing Tisbé's signal, but gives no indication of his thoughts or feelings. His speech to Tisbé mostly expresses his relief at being able to have some contact with her: he spends almost half of the seventeen lines praising her for having discovered the crack, notes that they will now be able to communicate, and ends with a quick lament of lovesickness: "Hé, Diex, comme est sa vie dure / Qui longuement teulz mauz endure!" (346-7). In contrast, Tisbé's experience is more complex: we are afforded an almost redundantly detailed description that calls attention to her position as addressee, upon whom the successful reception of Piramus's speech depends, as well as her role as potential speaker. The first lines of narration after Piramus's complaint show Tisbé at attention, both listening and looking at him, with her eye up against the crack so that she can see his face: "La pucele de l'autre part / Est en escout et en esgart" (348-9). This emphasis on the successful reception of Piramus's speech is almost redundant, as if it needs to be absolutely clear that Piramus is only figuratively speaking to a wall. "En escout" also points to the possibility of failed reception – that Piramus's words might not have been heard, just as Tisbé's signal to him might not have been seen. This emphasis on successful reception calls attention to the weight of response in dialogue, and particularly to the role of the addressee/receiver who is called upon to reply, because despite Tisbé's obvious engagement in the conversation, she is initially completely unable to speak. Piramus's monologue requires a reply, and yet Tisbé is assailed by the physiological symptoms of lovesickness in such an overwhelming way that the pattern of the paired monologues – that is, the dialogic poetics invented by the Old French author – is held in suspense:

Parler vout, mais ele ne puet :
 Amor soudement la commuet.
 El premerain esgardement
 Fremist et sospire et esprent,
 Tressaut et trestremble et tressue,
 Taint sa color et si li mue,
 Porpense soi qu'ele li die,
 De soi meisme s'entr'oblie ;
 En tantes guises la destraint
 Amours, qui toutes choses vaint. (364-73)²¹

She wants to speak, but she cannot:
 Love all at once overcomes her.
 At first sight
 She shivers and sighs and burns,
 Flinches and trembles and perspires,
 Flushes and then pales,
 Concentrates on what she will say to him,
 She forgets about herself;
 In so many ways it grips her,

²¹ Emmanuèle Baumgartner points out that line 373 borrows Virgil's famous "Omnia vincit amor" from *Bucolics* 10.69, which she characterizes as "sans doute l'un des lieux communs les plus insistants du discours médiéval sur l'amour" ("Préface," *Pyrame et Thisbe, Narcisse, Philomena : Trois contes du XIIIe siècle français imités d'Ovide*, 8.) She sees this borrowing as situating the adaptor of "Piramus" within the context of clerical medieval translation; I would add that this line also contrasts with the prologue's reference to the inexorability of "Amour," which seems to be the adaptor's own (23-24).

Love, who conquers all things.

This chaotic, paradoxical cascade of lovesickness leaves Tisbé at a loss: Love, which had helped her find the means to speak with Piramus, now prevents her from speaking; her affective reaction, provoked by hearing Piramus's words, inhibits her own; she is unable to communicate this reaction to Piramus in any way even as she loses herself in thought about what she could or should say. For Ovid, love renders the couple eloquent as well as unified, yet here, Love seems so powerful as to almost work against itself and the lovers. More problematically, dialogue here is revealed as alarmingly contingent – attentive reception is not sufficient to guarantee a reply and the continuation of conversation. This passage seems to offer no way forward; Tisbé's feelings of desire and lovesickness spiral out of control, seeming to freeze time. The solution comes from Tisbé herself, however. Ultimately, she is only briefly lost in reverie, and brings herself back to the present moment: "A la fin s'est pourpensee / Et s'est un poi rasseüree" ("At last she thought it all through / And took hold of herself a bit" 374-5). The repetition of "pourpenser," very unlike the deflections of agency in the previous scene, credits Tisbé and her intelligence fully with her reply; she closes the spiral of intensifying affective overload with a conscious effort that reinforces her own subjectivity. Yet her speech will further complicate this exchange, underscoring the unruly nature of dialogue and its resistance to clear definitions and conclusions. From the very beginning of Piramus and Tisbé's dialogue, then, the Old French author foregrounds the quality of dialogue that Bakhtin calls "unfinalizability" and on the other hand its "vicious circle": the negotiation of meaning that takes place in speech actually does not, and perhaps cannot, result in the stabilization of that meaning. An endless multiplication of possible meanings, disagreements, and confusions could well seem like a "vicious circle," and yet, Bakhtin characterizes this – as the Old French author seems to as well – as a misinterpretation. What we see in the continuation of this scene is that there is an undeniable driving force behind dialogue, despite the pitfalls of intersubjective communication and the disjuncture of gender difference.

Tisbé's reply, when she is finally able to speak, is provocative and rhetorically complex: she begins with open defiance of her family, sharply critiques Piramus's complaint of lovesickness, and concludes with a wish for "confort" in shared speech, but only after – astonishingly – *silence*. Her address of Piramus as "ami" signals her intentions to him, and her refusal to be cowed by her imprisonment reinforces that she still loves him (lines 378-80). She continues, however, with a sharp rebuke, telling him that she was the one to find the crack because "qui plus aime plus voit cler" (the one who loves more sees more clearly, line 385). While she recognizes that he is suffering, she does not hesitate to describe her own experience as more intense:

Griefment vos oi desconforter,
Mes poi savez que est amer :
Encor vous en poëz joër !
A moi lessiez le doulouser,
Cui riens ne puet confort doner.
Joie ai changiee por plorer,
Por dolereus complains jeter,
Et leesce por gamentier,
Joie et delit por sospirer,
Soef dormir por grief penser. (386-95)

I hear your painful discouragement,
 But you know little of what it is to love:
 You can still get some joy from it!
 You leave me to do the sorrowing,
 Me, to whom nothing can give comfort.
 I have exchanged joy for crying
 And for making complaints of pain,
 And happiness for suffering,
 Joy and pleasure for sighing,
 Sweet sleep for painful reflection.

Tisbé, whose struggle with Love has just been described in detail, does not, as we might expect, encourage or agree with Piramus. Instead, her words are deeply ambivalent, with an edge of resentment – an extraordinary, and completely unexpected, departure from Ovid’s text. Where Ovid’s lovers possess only an aestheticized single voice until the end of the story, the Old French author shatters their unity in order to reveal two separate subjects who can and do disagree. Here, Tisbé’s disagreement, which seems to invite a sense of Bakhtin’s “vicious circle,” also insistently returns to the question of gender difference which the Old French author’s paired monologues have opened. Her claim of superior knowledge of love might be read as lovesickness-induced peevishness. Yet her dismissal that Piramus knows little of what it is to love, which obliterates the narrator’s initial evocation of *parage*, is perfectly, straightforwardly truthful: she really does know more about “que est amer,” as she has demonstrated at length in her first monologue. That is to say, precisely because of her status as a young, virginal woman, she fully understands the social repercussions of their love, has considered them deliberately, and made a decision, whereas Piramus has seemed simply to be a victim of lovesickness. Once more, the lovers seem to be at an impasse; their dialogue is in danger of degenerating into conflict without ever reaching “con-cord.”

Tisbé concludes, however, with a wish for the “confort” of conversation that offers a way to move on from her dissention and nuances the interplay of the love relationship and dialogue. In response to her overwhelming affective reaction that she is unable to articulate and her criticism of Piramus, she abruptly comes to the solution of taking a hiatus from dialogue:

Amis, ne puis or plus ester :
 Lermes me tolent l’ esgarder,
 Sospir me tolent le parler.
 Pensez demain del retourner.
 Plus a loisir porrons parler
 Et li uns l’ autre conforter. (396-401)

Ami, I cannot remain here anymore:
 Tears take away my sight,
 Sighs take away my speech.
 Think of coming back tomorrow,
 We will be able to speak more freely
 And comfort each other.

Although just a few lines earlier, she has described herself as finding comfort in nothing (line 390), she nevertheless anticipates a mutual comfort in future dialogue. She intends to *suspend*

dialogue with Piramus, not to withdraw fully from it; the conflict generated by the lovers' separate experiences is not so great that the possibility of exchange between them falters. Tomorrow, she imagines optimistically, dialogue will be easier ("plus a loisir") and more productive, moving toward the shared goal of "confort." If this is not exactly a Bakhtinian "co-rejoicing," it nevertheless attests to a kind of good faith in participating in the exchange of speech and the negotiation of meaning which reinforces the Old French author's valorization of dialogue. In the context of her whole monologue, which articulates hardly any affection besides her use of the term "ami," this conclusion appears to come out of nowhere. Its suddenness, however, hints at the particularly interdependent relationship the Old French author sees between love and dialogue. Tisbé's sudden good faith in dialogue must stem from her love for Piramus, as does her earlier repudiation of her preference for death (247-52). Addressing herself, she had refused the idea of death, which she figured as a definitive abandonment of her beloved, and here even in the face of anger and chaotic emotion she refuses to cut off dialogue with Piramus, in accord with Bakhtin's "When dialogue ends, everything ends." This is not simply an extension of the unfinalizability of dialogue, but an assertion that the love relationship requires two speaking partners, two more or less equal participants; in this way, this scene thoroughly disavows Ovid's model of a fictional simultaneity.

The hiatus of dialogue that Tisbé initiates reveals that the separation and individuation of the lovers is integral to the Old French author's conception of the plot: where in Ovid, the lovers agree together how and when to run away, here their plan is supplied by the dream Tisbé has after she asks Piramus to suspend their conversation.²² Overnight, Piramus's suffering is unabated, but the time Tisbé demands opens up the space for her to receive the dream, and thus to transmit the plan of escape. Speech once more is privileged over common understanding, and as in the discovery of the cracked wall, the Old French author delegates a major crux of the plot to Tisbé, albeit in a complicated way: Tisbé's dream both grants and undercuts her narrative agency, in that she articulates the couple's next steps, but the idea comes to her in a dream which she narrates the next day to Piramus (562-89), wherein dream-Piramus himself suggests it (558-74). The hiatus of dialogue in this scene ultimately works to foster it; however, the tragic dénouement will explore the failure of dialogue, which is particularly poignant for having been avoided here.

The Dialogized Dénouement

The ending of the Old French "Piramus" is richer, and more complex, than Ovid's because it carries with it not only the tragic deaths of the lovers but also the extremely fraught question of what happens to a dialogue that is foreclosed by death. If only one speaker is left, what is he or she to say? The Old French author intimates that Piramus's mistake lies in acquiescing too quickly to the end of dialogue, in addition to jumping to conclusions; Tisbé's role in the scene, however, attests to the Bakhtinian poetics of dialogue at work in the Old French text, and affirms one last time the optimism and humanism of the move toward the dialogic.

The Latin Piramus and the Old French Piramus fall prey to the same incorrect misunderstanding: when he arrives at the couple's rendezvous point, the fountain at Ninus's tomb, he sees what he believes to be incontrovertible proof that his beloved has been the victim

²² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IV.84-90.

of a lion. In the Old French, the proof is a veil that Tisbé has dropped upon seeing the lion. She escapes and hides, and the lion bites and steps on the veil, leaving it bloody. Piramus, almost suffocated by “ire / Et mautalens” (fury and rage, 706-7), is hardly able to express his wild desperation. He repeats the juxtaposition of *mort* and *confort* from his first monologue, initially deciding “La mort est mes mieudres conforz” (“Death is my best comfort,” line 740), but eventually concluding, as does his Latin counterpart, that since he is to blame for Tisbé’s death, his suicide is required to avenge her. His suicide is a result, then, of his immoderate grief but also of some kind of reasoning. This is the only speech in the Old French text that cannot really be understood as dialogic, or can only be read as hypothetically dialogic: Piramus, the speaker, believes that Tisbé is dead as well as absent, and so when he apostrophizes her, he is not anticipating a reply. In this way, his first apostrophe to her, “quel felonie / Qu’en tel guise estes perie!” (“what insanity, / That you died in such a way!” 722-3) is a rhetorical, not pragmatic, address. This may seem like a fairly subtle distinction, but it stands in surprising contrast to Tisbé’s monologue.

When Tisbé arrives and understands what has happened, she is granted a tour de force of dialogic discourse in the form of a long monologue and a direct address to Piramus. While Piramus believes her to be dead, and addresses her as such, Tisbé in fact understands from the moment she sees him that he is mortally wounded but not yet dead. The narration makes this clear, emphasizing Tisbé’s reception of the terrible scene: “Le jovenciel oit senglotir,” (“She hears the young man sob,” 815), and “Voit la guimple come il la touche / D’ores en autres a sa bouche” (“She sees how he touches the veil / And brings it at times to his lips,” 817-18). Her hearing and sight of her beloved in the throes of death, yet still showing his devotion to her, makes her lapse into a kind of self-narration, as if distanced by shock:

...je voi que il souspire!
 Je voi
 Que il travaille a mort por moi. (844-6)

I see that he is sighing!
 I see
 That he is in the throes of death for me.

Her knowledge that Piramus is not yet dead lends an uncanny cast to the monologue she speaks over his body, apostrophizing him in the second person as well as speaking about him in the third. This is the only instance of direct discourse in the whole text that problematizes reception to such an extent: Piramus may or may not be listening; he is about to die, but is neither really alive as a speaking, listening, and participating subject, nor really entirely absent or unhearing. The possibility of dialogue has therefore not yet been fully foreclosed, and so her despairing monologue, almost operatic in its breadth and drama, is therefore very different from Piramus’s: she voices not a solitary expression of grief, but grief with the possibility, however slim, of a listener. Yet subtending her entire monologue is the foreboding sense that their dialogue, whose contingency has already been established, is moving toward its end.

Although Tisbé has spurred Piramus to action throughout the earlier parts of the text, she now must react to his decisive act of suicide, and she does so in a way that underscores the dialogic model of the love relationship present throughout the Old French version. Upon seeing Piramus’s bleeding body, she faints from grief, then tears at her hair and clothes in a nondiscursive display of grief. Her first words confirm that she is going to kill herself with his sword, but then, surprisingly, she moves from grief to critique, explicitly attributing Piramus’s

suicide to his lack of restraint and his “corages fiers” (“impetuous heart,” 853). This is the same charge she had leveled at herself in response to her initial suggestion, in her first lament, that she would rather be killed than ruin her reputation (242-58). Piramus, she implies here, never had a similar realization, and so did not recant his rash wish for death; he has left her alone, a single voice bereft of dialogue. His mistaken interpretation, then, is not entirely to blame for his death. Rather, Tisbé seems to imply that his desperation was excessive, and unchecked by the kind of social awareness she has already demonstrated. This insight, however, cannot – and, according to Tisbé, must not – preclude her suicide. She is all too aware of her obligations as a lover as well as the possibility of Piramus listening to her, and she moves from criticizing him to criticizing herself. She apostrophizes Piramus:

Con faible amor, con povre foi
Avroie,
Amis, se je ne vous sivoie,
S’a court terme ne m’ocioie. (847-50)

What weak love, what scant loyalty
Would I have,
Ami, if I did not follow you,
If I did not kill myself with little delay.

However grief-stricken Tisbé may be, she does not see her suicide as an impulsive response to extreme affect, but an act of *amor* and *foi* that binds her irrevocably to Piramus. Her inclusion of “foi” here, both faith and loyalty, is telling; her death demonstrates her loyalty to her beloved – she cannot live without him, and will not love another – at the same time that it requires faith that she will be united with him in death. In the second half of her monologue, she repeatedly emphasizes that they will be together in death, even describing their deaths as one and the same: “S’en avra s’ame grant confort / S’andui morromes d’une mort” (His soul will have great comfort from it, / If we both die thus in the same death, 871-72). Yet, what little *confort* this is, in light of the text’s emphasis on the dynamic relationality of dialogue; the Old French author has presented the love relationship as being constituted through continued, evolving conversation, and so Tisbé’s idea of finding unity in the static silence of death seems both tragic and enigmatic. As Bakhtin writes, however, “a single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing,” and so it is difficult to imagine how their dialogue will be brought to a close or how the text could end in a satisfying way. Tisbé’s final act before dying is to make one last gesture toward the dialogic, so that Piramus’s voice joins hers once more. She addresses Piramus, calling upon him to look at her:

Adont s’incline la pucele,
Bese la plaie, si l’apele:
“Piramus, ves ci vostre amie.
Car l’esgardez, si ert garie.”
Li jovenciaus, la ou moroit,
Entr’oeuvre les iex et si voit
Que ce iere Tisbé s’amie
Qui l’apeloit toute esmarie.
Parler i veult, mes il ne puet,
Quar la mort, qui le tient, nel lait.
Mes tant a dit: “Tisbé, amie,

Por Dieu, qui vos remist en vie..."
 Atant se taist, ne puet plus dire,
 Puis la regarde, si sospire.
 Li cuers li part, si pert la vie;
 Cele lesse toute esmarie.
 Cil est mors et cele est pasmee.
 Diex, quel amour est ci finee! (890-907)

The damsel leans down,
 kisses the wound, and says:
 "Piramus, see here your *amie*.
 Look at her, and she will be saved!"
 The young man, there where he is dying,
 opens his eyes and sees
 that this is Tisbé, his *amie*,
 who is calling him despairingly.
 He wants to speak to her, but he cannot,
 For death, which has him in its grasp, does not let him.
 But he says this much: "Tisbé, *amie*,
 By God, who brought you back to life..."
 With that he is silent, he can say no more;
 Then he looks at her, and sighs.
 His heart leaves him, and his life is lost;
 He leaves her totally bewildered.
 He has died, and she has swooned.
 God, what a love has ended here!

Without punctuation, Piramus's dying reply is grammatically ambiguous; most editors mark it as a question ("Who brought you back to life?"), but in the context of "tant a dit," I prefer to read it as the beginning of a sentence that Piramus is unable to finish with his dying breath. "Por Dieu, qui vos remist en vie" is a full octosyllabic line, but it is interrupted by the narrator's "Atant se taist." In this way, Piramus's last line and a half of speech hangs in the air, stating nothing, concluding nothing, unable to ask for or elicit a reply. It emblemizes both the pathos of the scene, in that it confirms Piramus's complete incomprehension of the situation, and the incredible importance accorded to dialogue by the Old French author. At the moment of the lovers' demise, they are still attempting to speak to each other, separate subjects joined by their participation in dialogue.

Throughout the text, Tisbé has never failed to reply to Piramus, but here she remains silent. We could read this as somewhat pragmatic: if he cannot complete his sentence, then she cannot respond. Yet there is something dreadfully sad here in Tisbé's resignation to silence that goes beyond conversational norms or formal structures: it is as if she agrees with Bakhtin's "When dialogue ends, everything ends," and so restrains herself from even attempting to apostrophize Piramus in grief, the way he apostrophizes her upon believing her to be killed by the lion. Dialogue must end, her silence implies, if one speaker can no longer speak nor hear. Without another word, she picks up the sword and puts it through her chest. And so, in terms of the plot, the Old French author does not break with Ovid; his lovers' separate voices and their relationship built by dialogue does not result in a happy ending. What dialogue grants the

Old French lovers is an exploration of the articulation of desire and affect, and ultimately, a more complex and poignant ending.

With Piramus's last words, and the narrator's interjection, dialogue ends, or appears to. Indeed, there is no more direct discourse in the rest of the text. The Old French adaptor, though, follows Tisbé's every gesture with the same narrative attention as her discovery of the cracked wall, describing how she falls on top of Piramus's body in order to embrace him so that she dies face to face with him (very much like Tristan and Yseut in Thomas's version). In this way, "everything" does not end, even if dialogue does; Tisbé is able to arrange her death in the way she wants to, albeit silently. Praising her loyalty, the narrator describes, "Tant con li dure sens et vie / Se demonstre veraie amie" (As long as life and wits remain to her / She shows herself to be a true *amie*, 918-19). That is to say: as Tisbé slips into death, she remains her own individual, not (yet?) merged into a unitary couple, and she remains a specifically female subject.

There could be no more definitive rejection of Ovid's model of Pyramus and Thisbé's love. His lovers, who speak as one, are physically united in death as well; Ovid's version ends with the note that the lovers' ashes are combined into one urn. The Old French lovers, however, remain stubbornly individuated, and it is left ambiguous both how their bodies are commemorated and what kind of unity could be achieved in death. Tisbé concludes her last long monologue with the wish that their ashes be combined, but the text leaves us only with the image of the lovers locked in an embrace, as yet unmourned and unburied. This tragic but unresolved ending intimates that perhaps the unity demonstrated by Ovid's lovers is not only fictional but also deadly: it is not desire itself that kills, but the desire to be as one. Death here is the willful relinquishing of individual subjectivity expressed in speech. As we have seen throughout this text, for the Old French adaptor as for Bakhtin, "To be means to communicate dialogically." To love, the Old French adaptor suggests, also requires dialogue, and dialogue requires two individual subjects. His systematic dismantling of Ovid's lovers' aestheticized, univocal speech clears the way for two distinct, gendered characters to emerge from the Latin text. The formal innovation of the paired monologues allows Tisbé to develop a particularly striking sense of interiority and agency that seems to argue that romantic love requires two equal partners even as her speech and actions demonstrate how difficult, and ultimately fruitless, it is to grapple with the constraints of societal expectations. Gender difference, which ultimately thwarts the lovers' dialogue, and the contingency of speech can doom even the most mutual love, experienced by the most beautiful young nobles.

Reading "Piramus" as more than an example of the transformation of a classical text through medieval translation practice, and as an example of idiosyncratic formal and thematic innovation in its own right, nuances a conventional understanding of the origins of courtly love and speaks to the unexpected ideological investments undergirding what might otherwise seem to be "minor" romance texts. The earnest focus on expressing affect in "Piramus" does not remain front and center in romances written even a few decades later; however, facets of this kind of affective expression, which depends on separate speaking subjects, does have a continuation of sorts especially in romances that involve death. For this reason, I propose "Piramus" as a trace of an ephemeral subgenre of early French romance that privileges affect and direct discourse over irony and that engages with questions of unity versus gender difference in romantic love.

Coda: Waiting for Redemption

The ambiguity of the Old French “Piramus”’s ending is encoded in the text’s manuscript transmission, since the last lines vary widely between manuscripts. This is perhaps part of what makes the ending feel so ambiguous and unfinalized. One manuscript, Bibliothèque nationale de France 19152, transmits “Piramus” after an Old French verse translation of Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* and before a devotional text. Its closing lines, while obviously added by the compiler in order to better transition between worldly and religious love, also speak to the Bakhtinian sense of dialogue as unfinalizable and, perhaps, eternal:

Ditest amen chascon par non
Que diex lor face voir pardon
Et nos face redemption
Et nos otroit beneicon
Amen.²³

Say “amen” for each by name,
That God may grant them true forgiveness
And grant us redemption
And grant us blessing,
Amen.

This exhortation to the reader invites him or her to imagine a Christian afterlife for Piramus and Tisbé, an afterlife in which they have not yet been forgiven for their sins but in which they are not necessarily unworthy of that forgiveness, either. If they have been granted a continued – and *individual* – existence, then perhaps their deaths have not really been so final as they seemed; we might even imagine that, somehow, their dialogue has not been quite so fully snuffed out. Death stands in the way of their speech being reported to us, or perhaps the speech of the dead is far beyond our comprehension. Now, the responsibility to speak lies with the text’s reader, rather than the text’s characters. We are asked to open a dialogue with God, and to hope that His reply is merciful; just as the question of the tragic lovers’ salvation is still open, so is ours. This valorization of dialogue, even in the face of death, is optimistic; the Old French “Piramus,” has shown us how affecting speech can be, and how much depends on participating in its exchange.

²³ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 19152, fol. 101r.

II

“Que que li grevast”: Communication, Confusion, and Suffering in *Érec et Énide*

Sometimes [I think] that the idea that one person's mind is accessible to another's is just a conversational illusion, just a figure of speech, an assumption that makes some kind of exchange between basically alien creatures seem plausible, and that really the relationship of one person to another is ultimately unknowable. — Robert Pirsig¹

Quid pluribus opus est verbis? — “Mulier”²

If the author of the Old French “Piramus et Tisbé” imagines the love relationship as constituted by discursive negotiation and portrays the lovers as separate speaking subjects, granting them nearly equal space to speak, what, then, should we make of a romance like Chrétien de Troyes’s *Érec et Énide*, in which dialogue between the titular couple is conspicuously absent? Both of these romance texts are deeply concerned with, and seem to illustrate contrasting models of, love and desire: Piramus and Tisbé’s relationship is limited for the most part to speech alone; their desire is always unfulfilled, further emphasizing their effusive discussions of affect and the importance of expressing that affect in speech. *Érec et Énide*’s, on the other hand, is marked both by failures of spoken communication and an insistence on the materiality of desire, especially touch and sight; they are betrothed upon meeting for the first time and married quickly thereafter, all apparently without speaking directly to each other. Desire has a strange role in this romance, as the consummation of their marriage is described with a frankness rather uncharacteristic of Chrétien, and their subsequent overindulgence in sex triggers one of the central problematics of the plot. Expressions of affect in speech are sidelined and contained at every turn; *Énide*’s most revealing speech about her relationship with *Érec* is in fact not addressed to him at all, and the only time he gives voice to his appreciation of her beauty, he does so to a third party in the context of a chivalric contest. That *Érec et Énide*’s love is not, and perhaps cannot be, constituted discursively or dialogically raises profound interpretive questions. What does Chrétien’s valorization of a couple who cannot effectively communicate in speech indicate about his conception of the affective and ideological possibilities of romance texts and courtly love? And given how little insight we are offered into how *Érec et Énide* understand each other, what can, or should, a reader surmise about their love – and about courtly relationships between men and women more generally?

This chapter will explore how the kind of love relationship Chrétien outlines in *Érec et Énide* is a comprehensively different model than that of “Piramus,” one that is constrained by the limits and shortcomings of discursive communication instead of reveling in an idealistic

¹ Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, 299-300.

² *From the Letters of Two Lovers*, ed. Ewald Könsgen, trans. Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews, 227.

sense of conversation as collaboration and negotiation between equal speaking subjects. In this romance, the love relationship is inscribed in a social landscape that forecloses dialogue between lovers. Again and again, Chrétien underscores the gendered power dynamics inherent to courtly love: at moments, the presence of desire scrambles discursive and non-discursive communicative signals between men and women, and throughout the text, gender difference figures as an ominous disjuncture between male and female speakers. Yet a careful reading of the way Chrétien presents Énide demonstrates a sustained and nuanced interest in the problematics of female subjectivity in romance, which ultimately coheres into a portrait of how a woman might navigate a profoundly unequal and sometimes bleak societal landscape. The love relationship, in this romance, does not facilitate conversation between the lovers; what love can do, however, is allow lovers to temporarily, and tentatively, disturb or manipulate the social constructs that discourage men and women from understanding each other. While it is Énide who primarily undertakes these maneuvers, she is also represented as suffering at the hands of men, and as being at the mercy of courtly patriarchal norms; another aim of this chapter will be to investigate this apparent paradox.

Uncertainties about Énide's role in the romance, and how to interpret the enigmatic quality of Érec and Énide's relationship, are a hallmark of the body of scholarship about this text. Liliane Dulac sums up the wide, and sometimes confusing, array of writing on *Érec et Énide* with the assertion that "les mêmes problèmes ont été maintes fois repris, mais les solutions apportées sont souvent restées contradictoires."³ She explains this proliferation of criticism as a symptom of the modern reader's preoccupation with "l'intériorité supposée des personnages," which wrongly encourages scholars toward conjecture and projection. For Dulac, this romance is marked by "plusieurs formes de restriction de l'information," especially in the manipulation of perspective, and "un mode d'expression symbolique," not with the revelation of interiority or psychology.⁴ This reading is appealing in its clarity, since critics have tended to start from many different points of departure when attempting to explain the Érec-Énide relationship. For some scholars, such as Marc-André Bossy, Penny Sullivan, and Sara Sturm-Maddox, *Érec et Énide* is about idealized courtly lovers and the reproduction of courtly values; Sturm-Maddox concludes that the protagonists are an "optimal combination of feminine worth and knightly prowess," and Bossy describes them as "exemplary."⁵ Sullivan suggests that the romance is a kind of *bildungsroman* where Énide begins as a "diffident" young woman and develops into the "perfect consort of a ruler."⁶ Similarly, W.T.H. Jackson argues that while romance as a genre is usually animated by characters' speech, Érec and Énide's lack of conversation proves that, for Chrétien, true love is constituted by mutual trust rather than elaborate rhetoric. Implying that this couple is the truest of lovers because of their unusual silence is an excellent example of the contradiction Dulac observes.⁷ The formal and narrative aspects of the romance have been outlined by Norris Lacy, who underscores the importance of Chrétien's manipulation of perspective; he recognizes that Énide's point of view is focalized in the second third of the romance, and like Dulac, he sees Érec's interiority as being deliberately

³ Liliane Dulac, "Peut-on comprendre les relations entre Érec et Énide?", 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42, 47.

⁵ Sara Sturm-Maddox, "The Joie de la cort: Thematic Unity in Chrétien's *Érec et Énide*," 519. Also see Michel-André Bossy, "The Elaboration of Female Narrative Functions in *Érec et Énide*," 23-38; W.T.H. Jackson also sees Énide as Chrétien's "ideal lady" in "Problems of Communication in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes," 42.

⁶ Sullivan, Penny, "The Education of the Heroine in Chrétien's *Érec et Énide*," 321.

⁷ Jackson, W. T. H., "Problems of Communication in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes," 49-50.

obscured.⁸ Yet Lacy also ultimately remains focused on psychology and interiority. So while critics seem to generally agree on the elements that make this romance problematic, as Dulac notes, it remains difficult to reach satisfying conclusions about it.

I want to suggest that the withholding of speech and its associated complications of perspective represents more than a formal choice on Chrétien's part. Rather, withholding speech and complicating communication between Érec and Énide intrinsically calls attention to the gender dynamics of courtly society. At first glance, this troubles generic expectations about romance because, as Jackson observes, lovers' speech is part of what is characteristic about romance in contrast to other medieval genres such as epic. Beyond this formal generic marker, however, love monologue and dialogue in twelfth-century romance also seem to highlight female discursive agency and provide a venue for exploring female subjectivity. To present Énide as silent and as an ineffective speaker in the way that Chrétien does is thus surprising, especially in the context of love. Christiane Marchello-Nizia sees love discourse as a privileged site of communication, calling the dialogized avowal of love that develops in the twelfth century a "figure idéale de l'échange linguistique entre deux êtres," noting that "celle qui mène ce jeu, c'est en quelque égard la dame."⁹ Yet Énide's constantly problematized speech demonstrates that although female speakers may take the upper hand in certain circumstances, such as dialogues about love, the act of speaking alone does not guarantee female characters any degree of agency or control over the situations they find themselves in. I read Énide as a frustrated speaker – a female character whose words are overheard when she does not intend them to be, considered inappropriate, overtly ignored by male speakers, or simply silenced by narration – who troubles feminist models of female subjectivity in courtly texts.¹⁰ E. Jane Burns, for example, sees Énide as both the "heroine" of *Érec et Énide* and an alternate narrator; because Énide's "speech more staunchly resists colonization and appropriation, her constructed voice cannot be fetishized as easily as her fictive flesh," and so the romance as a whole can be read "as a tale of female voices speaking against [the male courtly] tradition of storytelling."¹¹ Yet Énide's speech fails to protect her or have her desired effect on a situation in myriad ways throughout the romance; her easily disregarded voice cannot express a systematic program of resistance.

Nor can Énide lead dialogue, even about love, in the way that Marchello-Nizia imagines. The defining ambiguity of this romance stems from the absence of discursive exchange between Érec and Énide. Direct discourse is not withheld elsewhere in the romance, in fact almost to the contrary: Érec and Énide's betrothal is arranged in a dialogue between Énide's father and Érec; Queen Guinevere plays a decisive and complex role in discussions at court; and many damsels in distress converse easily with Érec.¹² Yet before their marriage, there is not even a reference

⁸ Norris Lacy, "Narrative Point of View and the Problem of Érec's Motivation," 357-58.

⁹ Christiane Marchello-Nizia, "L'Invention du dialogue amoureux : le masque d'une différence," 230-31.

¹⁰ For example, Érec overhears Énide in the "mortel parole" scene I discuss later in this chapter, 2439-2760. Érec forbids her to speak once they leave the court, 2765-71, but when she sees danger, she warns Érec in five instances: 2827-52, 2959-3006, 3465-81, 3548-67, and 3761-65. She is ignored very pointedly by the Comte de Limors, 4709-4849, as discussed later in this chapter. (Old French citations and line numbers given in this chapter are from *Érec et Énide*, tr. and ed. Jean-Marie Fritz. English translations are my own.)

¹¹ E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*, 158.

¹² See 547-688 for Érec's conversation with Énide's father about the custom of the sparrowhawk which concludes with Énide being given to Érec; see 285-341 and 1755-1840 for the queen's deft handling of the

made to a conversation between Érec and Énide; their first reported dialogue takes place well after their marriage, and bears no resemblance to the emotionally charged, densely meaningful dialogues between lovers in other romances, including those that Chrétien composes elsewhere.¹³ And yet, ultimately, Érec and Énide are figured as a laudable, successful couple in varying degrees, from their initial *parage* to their final reconciliation in the “*Joie de la Cort*” episode, and of course in their final coronation as king and queen.

While it is possible to read Énide as being by turns “empowered” and “disempowered” over the course of this romance – empowered when she speaks, disempowered when she is objectified or the victim of violence – Énide’s, and the text’s, relationships to courtly ideology are not so straightforward. The portrait of female subjectivity Chrétien presents in *Érec et Énide* does not overtly critique the crushingly misogynist norms of courtly society, but does subtly create space for moments of comfort, reassurance, and tenderness. Although these moments do not or cannot coalesce into a comprehensive indictment of courtly values, they nevertheless are legible as what Ross Chambers would call “room for maneuver,” the way a single subject can engage in oppositional practice against a system of power. Individual oppositional practices are seemingly insignificant and rarely overtly rebellious, and as such, Chambers explains, they “do not really work against prevailing systems but, to the contrary, strengthen them by making them livable.”¹⁴ To read Énide as trying and not always succeeding to make her situation livable through a series of inventive responses invites us to read the romance as a whole as having a similarly complicated relationship to courtly structures of power. If *Érec et Énide* is a romance about finding “room for maneuver,” then, I argue, its main characters’ relationship is concerned with making that room. In this way, we must interpret Érec and Énide not as representative of the ideals of courtly society, but as particular individuals negotiating with and against those ideals; that is to say, their courtship and marriage is not a model for how a love relationship should work, but a case study of how even the most conventional relationship might exist uneasily within the conventions that govern it, and how lovers can or cannot communicate across the division of gender.

The signs of this negotiation are subtle, especially in the beginning of the romance before Énide speaks. Yet even her introduction into the narrative, often cited as evidence only of female objectification by the courtly gaze, shows a glimmer of her subjectivity, or the possibility of subjectivity. Initially, Énide is presented as a beautiful surface to be admired. After a detailed description of her scanty dress (402-10), an explanation of her exceptional grace and beauty (411-23), and an inventory of her features (424-36), Chrétien finally claims that Énide’s superior beauty means that her value lies in the visual pleasure she provides to others; she is “*cele por verité / Qui fu faite por esgarder*” (“she who, in truth / Was made to be looked at,” 438-9). While it is usual to describe romance heroines’ beauty, the outsized significance assigned to her appearance here combined with her extended silence for the next two thousand lines is quite striking. There could hardly be a clearer way to write the scene of a woman being

problematic “kiss of the white stag”; 4304-4372 furnish a good example of a straightforward dialogue between Érec and a damsel.

¹³ Chrétien’s love dialogues in his other romances are remarkably sophisticated and rhetorically interesting. For example: from *Cligès*, Fénice’s “*débat avec elle-même*,” on her feelings for Cligès, lines 4352-4510, and the dialogue between Fénice and Cligès in indirect and direct discourse where they reveal their loyalty to each other and make plans to act on their love, 5102-5335; from *Le Chevalier au Lion*, the Lady of Landuc’s “*tençon*” with the imagined Yvain, 1734-80; Yvain’s tricky dialogue with the Lady of Landuc where he reveals his love for her and they negotiate their marriage, 1960-2039.

¹⁴ Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*, 7.

treated as an object of exchange between men: Érec does not address a word directly to Énide until after their marriage, and in order to marry her he negotiates only with her father, a dialogue which takes place in front of Énide and is reported to the reader (631-678).

While Érec's interest in Énide is sparked by her beauty, and his enjoyment of her company is limited to visual appreciation, after her betrothal to Érec, Chrétien's narration hints at a mutual desire that is not expressed between the characters discursively. During the couple's journey to Arthur's court, Érec's desire is foregrounded: the more he looks at Énide, the more he likes her ("plus l'esgarde, plus li plait" 1483), not only for her beautiful exterior but also her courtly interior; she is "bele a demesure" as well as "Sage, courtoise, et debonaire" ("Wise, courteous, and well-bred," 1481). He is so pleased that he cannot help kissing her, and his scrutiny of her every feature continues for nearly ten lines (1485-93). Énide's reaction to his impetuosity and intense gaze is to reciprocate his gaze with equal intensity:

Mais ne regardoit mie mains
La damoisele le vassal
De bon huil et de cuer leal
Qu'il fesoit li par contençon. (1494-97)

But not one bit less
Did the damsel look back at the young man;
With just as sharp an eye and as loyal a heart
As he looked at her, each rivaling the other.

At this point in the romance, the role of the unnamed "damoisele," hitherto passive (following orders and being looked at), shifts ever so slightly. She is not purely an object to be admired; she can, in response to Érec's enthusiasm, instantiate a more symmetrical exchange of the gaze. It is not a perfectly reciprocal moment, since the reader does not learn what she sees. For Burns, this makes their "supposed equality...falter," but this is nevertheless the first moment that hints at Énide's own agency, and indicates that she is more than being "faite por esgarder."¹⁵ Moreover, her equally bold gaze intimates that vision can function as a vector of desire available to both male and female characters, and it softens the transactional, almost impersonal, quality of their engagement. Énide's return of Érec's gaze signals her consent to the marriage, as well as an enthusiasm for Érec that she only reveals to him at this point. (Her previous happiness at her betrothal is not especially personal.) If here Énide is not granted a fully realized, independent female subjectivity, she nevertheless evinces an ability to enjoy what makes her situation livable; the limited room for maneuver she has here is that Érec is handsome and accomplished, and she has not been married off to someone unappealing. The ease with which a woman might be forced into an unwanted marriage will be driven home later in the text, but in this scene, Énide is able to match Érec's interest in her in a refreshing, if brief, expression of desire. Romance texts' uncomfortable coercive and often violent sexual politics have been rightly pointed out by feminist scholars; Kathryn Gravdal, for example, sees courtly love discourse as a whole as indifferent to the question of female subjectivity. She broadly dismisses the possibility that male authors of medieval romance could represent a female perspective: even when such authors appear to be interested in a "discursive examination of inner states," she argues, "courtly discourse is a locus in which the feminine figures as an empty

¹⁵ Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak*, 168.

sign that can be filled with the reflections of masculine hegemony on itself.”¹⁶ While this suffocating self-reflexivity is certainly apparent in some romances, even the introduction of Énide as a non-speaking character reveals a more nuanced treatment. Over the course of the romance, I will argue, Énide’s perspective is focalized in order to portray the complexities of navigating courtly society as a woman.

From the Eyes to the Heart: Desire and Touch as Nondiscursive Communication

The absence of direct discourse between Érec and Énide limits the reader’s insight into two levels of interiority: the inner workings of the individual characters’ minds, but also, and no less importantly, the ways in which those characters negotiate (or fail to negotiate) meaning between themselves. Against the backdrop of this discursive vacuum, other avenues of communication or expression take on more importance; touch and physical sensation form a fundamental element of this romance, in addition to the gaze, as if in lieu of reported discourse, the characters of Érec and Énide are revealed through embodiment. Walter Ong’s model of communication as sensory and social brings clarity to Chrétien’s uneasy *conjointures* of speech, sight, and touch throughout this romance. For Ong, the senses have communicative value that is nondiscursive, or at least, not limited to the realm of the written. He sees sound in general, and especially in the form of human speech, as particularly crucial to forming relationships and illuminating interiority; because “the spoken word moves from interior to interior,” in Ong’s model, “communication is more inwardness than outwardness,” and, “to address or communicate with other persons is to participate in their inwardness as well as in our own.”¹⁷ By withholding conversation between Érec and Énide, then, Chrétien seems to disallow this kind of participation in the “inwardness” of the other; in this way, he calls the reader’s attention to the distinction of self and other, and how fraught breaching those distinctions can be. For Ong, however, communication is not limited to speech. Touch, in a slightly different way from sound and speech, invokes a complex set of perceptions that help define relationships: “touch...gives us an intimate sense of ourselves and of otherness simultaneously.”¹⁸ Since touch both gives and returns sensate information, it is a “reciprocating” sense – it necessarily implies relationality of some kind. Over the course of the romance, touch carries meaning in a variety of ways: Érec’s physicality is often portrayed actively and violently, via combat, whereas Énide receives sexualized touch from Érec and violent blows from the villainous Comte de Limors later in the romance. Both Énide and Érec are capable of expressing tenderness and reassurance through touch, too; part of the punishment of the quest sequence is Érec’s withholding of touch, and once he forgives Énide, she tends to his wounds herself in an intimate and proprietary way (5122-27) before they at last rekindle their physical/sexual relationship (5230-51). For this couple, physical contact is expressive in a way discourse cannot be.

Their wedding night exemplifies this emphasis on touch and the materiality of desire: neither speaks during this unusual passage, while the consummation of their marriage is described in detail very uncharacteristic of Chrétien and Old French romance more generally. The *nuît de nocés* scene supercharges touch with meaning, beginning with the couple’s mutual

¹⁶ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, 12.

¹⁷ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, 124-25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-2.

pleasure and ending with a focus on Énide alone. Chrétien's singular attention to the act of coitus here indicates his view of the fundamental ambiguity of the love relationship in courtly society: by making the physical consummation of their marriage more important than any discursive exchange they might have, he multiplies the possible meanings of the moment without privileging any. At the paradigmatic moment of physical union of husband and wife, Chrétien's narration implies that the couple's interior experiences are not the same; touch and pleasure do not help Érec and Énide establish shared meaning, and ultimately reify sexual difference as an obstacle to communication.

As the *nuit de noces* begins, desire is phenomenologically identical for Érec and Énide. Chrétien's narration explains that both Érec and Énide have been waiting impatiently for this night, comparing them to a hunted stag and a famished hawk, and he emphasizes the passage of time between their meeting and their marriage, "Cele nuit ont mout restoré / De ce qu'il orent demoré" (That night they amply made up / For what they had delayed, 2083-84). When they finally are able to give free rein to their desire, they act together as a single unit, and the verb tense changes to the present to underscore the immediacy and urgency of the moment. In contrast to their mutual gazing earlier, which was described as first Érec looking at Énide, then Énide returning his gaze, all the verbs here are plural: they gaze simultaneously, they feel pleasure simultaneously, their hearts rejoice simultaneously. Yet none of these verbs imply reciprocity or exchange; Érec and Énide are simply having the same experience with each other at the same time. Their actions are mirrored, not interactive¹⁹:

Lor droit rendent a chascun mambre;
 Li huil d'esgarder se refont,
 Cil qui d'amors la voie font
 Et lor message au cuer envoient
 Car mout lor plait quanque il voient.
 Après le message des iauz
 Vint la douceurs, qui mout vaut miauz,
 Des baisiers qui amors atraient.
 Andui cele douceur essaient
 Et lor cuers dedanz en aboivrent,
 Si que a poignes s'en dessoivrent. (2086-96)

They give free rein to their whole bodies;
 Their eyes take their fill of gazing,
 Eyes which pursue the path of love
 And send their message to the heart,
 For they take great pleasure in all that they see.
 After the message of the eyes
 Comes the sweetness, which is worth much more,
 Of the kisses which attract love.
 They both taste this sweetness
 And let their hearts within them drink deeply of it,
 Such that they can hardly pull themselves away.

¹⁹ Burns also notes the lack of reciprocal verbs used to describe Érec and Énide's actions in a previous scene (*Bodytalk: When Women Speak*, 168-9).

This apparently effortless accord, and the immediacy and forward momentum of their first night together, is initiated by sight but is also grounded firmly in the pleasurable abandon of touch; it is a moment of release, where there is no longer any need to control their limbs (2086), their gaze (2087), or to limit the kissing that both slakes and inflames their desire (2095-6). The familiar Ovidian trope of the eyes leading the way to the heart pales in comparison to Chrétien's surprising description of kissing as compellingly pleasurable. This is kissing as foreplay, not a public kiss of feudal obedience or courtly tradition, nor the impetuous kisses Érec bestows on Énide right after their betrothal.²⁰ All through this passage, their pleasure is entirely equivalent, and their experience of desire is precisely the same. Yet the perfectly matched enthusiasm Érec and Énide have for each other here has nothing discursive about it: no dialogue between them will be reported for five hundred more lines. The silence is surprising. The generic expectations of courtly literature practically require love to involve some kind of speech; as Marchello-Nizia puts it, "langage et désir ont partie liée," since "l'aveu du désir amoureux est le préalable à son accomplissement."²¹ She characterizes the avowal of love as "le moment peut-être auquel tend tout le roman courtois," but what Érec and Énide's *nuit de nocés* shows is that in a more concrete sense, this – the freedom to feel unchecked desire for the beloved, and to have the opportunity to finally fulfill that desire – is a moment that can supplant an avowal. Here, desire is fulfilled without any previous verbal expression.

However, in this case, the couple's perfectly matched desire is sanctioned by its extremely precise social context: this is not the consummation of an affair, but of a marriage, and the meaning of the consummation of a marriage has very little ambiguity. The *nuit de nocés* both legitimizes their desire and gives them the permission to pursue it. In this context, the sexual act unifies them socially as a couple; Érec and Énide do not have to work to define the meaning that their touch carries, so perhaps it should not seem so unusual that they do not speak. Yet such unity would almost by definition be fragile and momentary, and indeed, it does not last. As kissing, "li premiers jeus," gives way to more, the focus of the passage shifts from the couple as a unit to Énide alone, and the primary sensation moves from pleasure to pain. The physical joining of intercourse in fact disrupts the couple's symmetry:

Et l'amors qui iert entr'aux deus,
 Fist la pucele plus hardie:
 De rien ne s'est acohardie,
 Tot soffri, que que li grevast.
 Ainçois que ele se levast,
 Ot perdu le non de pucele;
 Au matin fu dame novele. (2098-2104)

And the love that was between them both
 Made the damsel bolder:
 She balked at nothing,
 Allowed everything, whatever the cost to her.

²⁰ A prominent example of a "feudal kiss" would be the "baiser du blanc cerf" that King Arthur awards to Énide upon her arrival at court (1748-1839); this very public, performative kiss is described as courtly. Arthur also pledges his "amor" to Enide, "sanz vilenie, / Sanz mauvestié et sanz folage" (without baseness, / Without malice, and without extravagance, 1834-35). In juxtaposition with this scene, the *nuit de nocés* appears even more intimate.

²¹ Marchello-Nizia, "L'Invention du dialogue amoureux," 224.

Before she arose,
She had lost the name of damsel;
In the morning, she was newly a lady.

In the context of Chrétien's other works as well as many other contemporary romance texts, the detail of this consummation is remarkable.²² While Énide is the focus here, rather than the couple as a unit or Érec alone, she also, curiously, loses agency: it is "amors" that makes her bold, not her own initiative, and the verbs that follow show her withstanding and receiving action. She is no longer an equal participant in the delight of kissing, but neither is she "un pur objet d'admiration, d'amour ou de désir," in Dulac's words.²³ Although the reader has no access to Énide's thoughts, the perspective of her subject position is accented; the narrative field of vision narrows around her point of view. This focalization is a specific narrative choice that calls attention to the wider social constructs both characters are caught up in; in the specific context of the consummation of marriage, sex is not about personal desire but about its transformative potential. The precise definition of "amors" is usefully ambiguous, including various senses of passion, desire, and perhaps even the act of intercourse itself: earlier, "amors" is invited by the eyes (2088), and the phrase "baisiers qui amors atraient" could mean either that kissing invites the feeling of love or the escalation of sexual activity. So when Chrétien writes that it is "l'amors qui iert entr'aux deus" that makes Énide "plus hardie," it is important to keep the valences of "amors" in mind, in order to avoid an overly sentimental reading of this moment. These lines could mean that Énide was bolder because she and Érec loved each other so much, and/or because their desire for each other was so strong, and this ambiguity is only underscored by the verbs Chrétien chooses. While perhaps Chrétien does conceal the materiality of female suffering in other moments – as Gravdal argues –, "Tot soffri, que que li grevast" is clearly evocative, refusing to define what that "tot" is or how much, exactly, it pains Énide.²⁴ The wedding night is a rite of passage that is effortful for only one of the spouses, even with the fortification of affection and/or desire, and Chrétien makes little effort to gloss over the brutal pragmatism of the exchange value of virginity. This kind of touch, the prolonged penetration across the boundary of the self and the other, holds the potential to emphasize that otherness, and the shift from pleasure to discomfort signals how contingent or even illusory the apparent mutuality of shared touch might be. For Ong, the intimately reciprocating nature of touch means that it implies a "paradox," since "the sense which involves me most intimately also involves what is not me most inescapably," and a similar kind of paradox is at work here, too; we assume that what hurts, or costs Énide something, is pleasurable for Érec, but there is no implication of reciprocity or feedback in this passage.²⁵ For the brief, nondiscursive moment

²² See, for example, the clever rhetorical ellipses of Lancelot and Guenièvre's night together in *Charrette* (4680-86) and Fénice and Cligés's consummation of their love in *Cligés* (6260-64); the unromantically biological explanation of Soredamors's pregnancy, also in *Cligés* (2332-40); or even the extremely laconic description of Philomena's rape by Térée (838-39). Later in *Érec*, too, Chrétien will elide too frank a description of pleasure ("Dou soreplus me doi taisir," 5248). This happens elsewhere in twelfth-century romance, as well; for example, Marie de France mentions the "surplus" in her lai "Guigemar" ("Ensemble gisent e parolent/E sovent baisent et acolent;/ Bien lur covienge del surplus,/ De ceo que li altre unt en us," lines 531-34) and Thomas only alludes to Tristan and Yseult's pleasure in the Carlisle fragment ("Tuz lur bons font privément/E lur joië e lur dedit,/ Quant il pöent e jur e nuit," lines 82-4).

²³ Dulac, "Peut-on comprendre?" 43.

²⁴ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 13-15, 43-45, 52-53, 67.

²⁵ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 172.

of mutual desire enjoyed in their marriage bed before intercourse, Érec and Énide are simply two desiring subjects, undifferentiated from one another. But sexual difference threatens their equivalence and interrupts the communion of desire and pleasure, doing so not only with discomfort or pain but also with an invocation of the exterior social world. Only Énide's identity, neither her interior state nor anything about Érec, is transformed by the couple's *nuit de noces*: losing "le non de pucele," she can now be called a "dame" (2103-4). The enhanced social status that comes with the title of lady is her reward for the discomfort of what she "soffri."

The way this scene closes with Énide's perspective seems to lay the groundwork for Énide to become a speaking subject in the text, echoing the couple's first meeting by inviting the reader to consider this silent female character as having desire and agency of her own. Once Énide finally does speak, "parole" – hers and others' – becomes the disturbing force between Érec and Énide. Just as their wedding night shifts the narrative perspective to Énide by insinuating sexual difference as disrupting pleasure, the famous "mortel parole" scene, in which the couple converses for the first time, will allow Énide to express her point of view in words, but at the cost of that "parole" dividing the couple.

Énide's "mortel parole": Dialogue as disjuncture, "parole" as insidious

The scene of Énide's "mortel parole" is a crucial turning point in the romance: it triggers the central quest sequence of the plot, and it has most often been read for clues to understanding Érec's severe and confusing reaction to Énide's worry that she ruined his reputation.²⁶ When she repeats aloud the criticism she has heard others voice about Érec's withdrawal from tournaments, she unwittingly begins the couple's first, albeit unsuccessful, dialogue; instead of helping them understand each other, this dialogue further problematizes speech in the romance, driving Érec and Énide apart. Despite Érec's censure, critics are generally agreed that Énide is not objectively in the wrong, and that there is nothing inherently offensive in what she says: she is simply distraught to think that she is the cause of her noble husband's plummeting status at court.²⁷ Érec awakes to hear her weeping, demands to know why she is upset, and then reacts ambiguously, ordering her to dress in her finest gown without explanation. Part of what is so difficult about this scene is that Énide explains herself so effusively, while Érec's thoughts and motivations are almost entirely hidden. For Lacy, Chrétien ignores Érec's interiority "very scrupulously and systematically" in order to focus on Énide.²⁸ Dulac, rather surprisingly, finds the subtext of this scene perfectly clear, stating, "il est loisible au lecteur de reconstituer ce qui n'est pas dit"; but she also sees Érec's motivations as being intentionally withheld and cautions against trying to divine them, since hypothesizing "ne peut ainsi que multiplier les incertitudes au lieu de les dissiper."²⁹ This scene is significant, however, not for what it tells us about the characters – that is, not for how it helps us

²⁶ While this is Énide's own description, she does not articulate it until much later in the romance. In a soliloquy, she laments: "La mortel parole entochie / Qui me doit estre reprochie" ("The fatal, poisoned word / For which I ought to be reproached," 4641-42). I will discuss this soliloquy in the "Planctus" section below.

²⁷ See for example Glyn Burgess, *Chrétien de Troyes: Érec et Énide*, 49-51, and Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak*, 171-3.

²⁸ Lacy, "Narrative Point of View," 359.

²⁹ Dulac, "Peut-on comprendre?" 41-2.

understand Érec's reaction – but for the way in which it stages speech as contingent and problematic, and refuses to present dialogue as productive.

The supreme communicative possibilities that both Ong and Marchello-Nizia assign to dialogue seem entirely absent from the “mortel parole” scene. Once Énide's speech is finally reported, she speaks almost against her will, and does not intend to be heard; when Érec overhears her, he misconstrues her words, and refuses to accept her attempted explanations. The couple totally fails to negotiate meaning effectively, despite the brief opening of dialogue between them; instead of furthering communication, dialogue plunges both characters into uncertainty. For Énide, her “mortel parole” will be an onerous burden whose repercussions neither she nor the reader can entirely understand, to the point that she will re-narrate this scene later in the romance (4631-45). Her words fracture the touch-based unity that has so far constituted the couple's marriage, wresting them out of a nondiscursive relationship into a haltingly discursive one for which neither is prepared. Dialogue complicates rather than clarifies Érec and Énide's relationship, breaking with romance convention; when this couple enters into dialogue, it does not result in the relief of finally explaining themselves to each other, but in confusion that becomes increasingly muddled the more they converse. In this scene, Chrétien stages miscommunication in dialogue, opposing speech to touch.

As in the beginning of the *nuit de nocés* scene, the narrative focus shifts from the couple in perfect accord to Énide alone, but here, the interruption in unity is due to external factors. After she and Érec have enjoyed “maint delit” one morning (2472), she remembers the courtiers' criticisms, and it is this “parole” that initially breaks the couple's idyllic rest:

il jurent en lor lit,
Ou eü orent maint delit ;
Bouche a bouche entre braz gisoient,
Come cil qui mout s'entramoient.
Cil dormi et cele veilla ;
De la parole li membra
Que disoient de son seignor
Par la contree li plusor. (2471-78)

they lay in their bed,
Where they had enjoyed many pleasures;
They were lying in each other's arms, face to face,
As those who love each other very much do.
He slept and she stayed awake;
She remembered the words
That were being said about her lord
By many in the vicinity.

Once more, shared pleasure is troubled by individuation; despite their identical pose, indicative not just of physical intimacy but of great shared love, Énide's state of mind is so different from Érec's that she cannot sleep in his arms. Discourse – “la parole” – intervenes between them, separating Énide from Érec because she has heard what is being said while he has not. Already, speech and even hearing others' speech threaten the unity created by touch. Speech itself seems to be problematized as belonging to the external, social world, impinging on the private intimacy that exists between Érec and Énide; ultimately, the introduction of this “parole” into

their nondiscursive relationship will not only interrupt desire but also foreclose it until much later in the romance, when Érec brings the quest to a close.

“La parole” in this passage refers to what other people have been saying about Érec, but the same term is used by the narrator as well as the characters themselves to designate what Énide says a bit later in this scene. The narrator warns that Énide is about to speak “une parole” (2483), creating a destructive polysemy that will prove unresolvable throughout the rest of the scene if not the rest of the romance. The question of what it is that Énide says, and what it is that Érec reacts so negatively to, *seems* to be the textual problem at stake in the “mortel parole” scene. While Glyn Burgess identifies “la parole,” as a concept, as “a fundamental theme of Chrétien’s text,” in this scene, the ambiguity of what is meant by “la parole” is pointedly problematic: Érec and Énide cannot negotiate a private meaning of this broader social preoccupation.³⁰

Attempting to parse what Énide says versus what Érec hears, and why he objects to it, or what Énide thinks she has said to offend Érec, leads nowhere. This is an interpretive roadblock that goes deeper than the modern critics’ risk of psychologizing these medieval characters; it is an ambiguity that is woven into the text itself. This scene cannot and does not reveal a truth about the motivations of the characters or even necessarily the conventions of chivalry at play, but rather illustrates the danger of speech. The first dialogue between Érec and Énide frustrates every expectation of what a dialogue between lovers can or should accomplish; far from clarifying their feelings, or allowing the couple to understand each other better, or even really doing anything useful, speech begins in confusion and only begets more and more. The first dialogue between Érec and Énide figures speech as dangerously ambiguous, if not outright destructive.

As Énide remembers “la parole” of the court, she gazes at the sleeping Érec, and her contemplation of his beauty triggers tears of despair. As her tears fall onto his chest – a sweet and pathetic evocation of the visceral quality both of her despair and the closeness of touch she shares with Érec – she laments, describing his courtly qualities and how much she regrets dishonoring him, saying, “Ne[l] vousisse por nul avoir” (“I would not have wanted to do it for anything,” 2502). Then she addresses him, and it is only this tiny, decontextualized phrase that Érec hears in his sleep:

Lors li a dit : “Con mar i fus !”
A tant se tait, se ne dit plus.
Érec ne dormi pas forment,
Si l’a tresoï en dormant ;
De la parole s’esveilla,
Et de ce mout se merveilla,
Que si forment plorer la vit. (2503-9)

Then she said to him, “What a pity you were there!”
With that she was silent, and said no more.
Érec was not sleeping very deeply,
And so overheard her as he slept;
With that word, he awoke,
And wondered greatly at it,
For he saw how hard she was crying.

³⁰ Burgess, *Érec et Énide*, 51.

Énide's "parole" wakes Érec, but it is not the only information he receives: Énide's words are qualified by her tears, the uncontrollable bodily sign of her distress. This physical indication of suffering intensifies the significance of her "parole" for Érec, whereas in later situations in the romance, her tears will be ignored by other male characters. They are so important here because they unambiguously signal a break in the couple's unity, a break that is anticipated by the perspective shift during the couple's *nuit de nocces*. Énide's "Con mar i fus" might seem cryptic to Érec, but in conjunction with her tears, the phrase is ominous; what makes him *se merveiller* is the illegible combination of words and physical sign. He confirms that he has no idea what she is so upset about, and that he has only heard this last phrase, restating Énide's words:

Dites le moi, ma douce amie,
 Et gardez ne me celez mie,
 Por qu'avez dit que mar i fui?
 Por moi fu dit, non por autrui;
 Bien ai la parole entendue. (2515-19)

Tell me, my sweet friend,
 And be sure not to conceal anything,
 Why did you say it was a pity I was there?
 It was said for me, not for anyone else:
 I heard the words clearly.

Érec knows he has missed something: he has heard her "parole" of "Con mar i fus," but he does not know why she has said it, and why should he? However, Érec's assumption that Énide has said these words for him and "non por autrui" is mistaken. Énide is speaking to herself and for herself, because Érec is asleep. She does not intend to wake him, and her use of the second person is only a rhetorical apostrophe; there is no expectation that he will hear or reply. Érec has accidentally overheard a fragment of Énide's personal soliloquy of anguish, and his assumption that she must be speaking to him means that their dialogue begins in misinterpretation. It turns out to be a misinterpretation that cannot be resolved with more words: as a result of Érec's question, Énide frantically denies that she has said anything, then suggests that he must have dreamed that she said something (2522-24 and 2530-32), and Érec vaguely threatens her with punishment if she does not tell the truth (2534-35). She then explains herself for thirty-six lines, but to no avail; Érec does not react with understanding, but coldly orders her to get dressed in her finest clothes without explanation, which makes her believe he is going to send her into exile. Her initial panic that leads her to try to dissimulate, and her subsequent fear that Érec is rejecting her, illustrate the vertiginous stakes of speaking. Even though she does not intend to be heard, the words she will later call her "mortel parole" threaten to destroy the nondiscursive love she and Érec share ("La mortel parole entochie / Qui me doit estre reprochie" ("The fatal, poisoned word / For which I ought to be reproached," 4641-42). If her speech alone is problematic, dialogue is even worse, introducing an element of ambiguity and misunderstanding that only complicates the scene. The visceral intimacy they had enjoyed, fostered by touch, evaporates once the couple attempts to negotiate meaning in dialogue; speech not only interrupts but also forecloses the wordless communication via touch that had characterized their marriage. The nondiscursive world of desire, touch, and shared pleasure stands no chance against the ambiguities of words, and cannot foster further

understanding between Érec and Énide. Their initial dialogue disrupts the couple's unity – or the illusion thereof – which Érec renders nearly irreparable by refusing physical affection from Énide for the duration of their quest. The punishment of the quest is thus not only that Érec forbids Énide to speak, but also that he creates the condition that their relationship can only be carried out discursively.

Énide's entrance into speech does mark the refocusing of the narrative around her perspective, as noted by Lacy, but as an expression of the resistant potential of female speech following Burns, for example, it is anticlimactic.³¹ Nor does Énide's speech or the couple's dialogue provide a key to either character's motivations or interiority, a key that would explain and justify the ensuing events of the romance, as many scholars tend to assume. Rather, what Érec and Énide's first, disastrous dialogue enacts is an indictment of courtly discourse itself. These are two characters rendered illegible to each other by the sexual difference encoded in discourse, not corporeality. Unlike their *nuit de noces*, where sexual difference in its most literal physical form troubles the lovers' unity in a painful and threatening yet socially sanctioned way, here the gendered expectations of chivalry, which belong to the discursive realm and are enforced by speech, intervene to separate the couple from each other as well as from their shared enjoyment of physical pleasure. There is so little room for maneuver within courtly ideology, for both male and female subjects: this is a system in which Érec's lack of participation in chivalric life can be blamed on his own *recreantise* at the same time that it can also be blamed on Énide, for ensnaring him with her feminine wiles (2559-60), a logical inconsistency that is never interrogated. "Or estoie je trop a aise" ("I was too comfortable," 2586), Énide laments at the end of the scene, thinking Érec is about to exile her for her crime of speaking out, "trop m'amoit il" ("he loved me too much," 2591). She is right about their respective affective states, although she is wrong about the punishment Érec envisions; both lovers have grown too comfortable not engaging in the social world as it is constructed in speech. The consequences of stepping outside of the courtly expectations are the individual vilification of Érec and Énide, as well as – crucially – the interruption and foreclosure of the ineffable tenderness that is almost impossible to put into words, the trust and comfort that allows two individuals, however unlikely a match, to lie in one another's arms, "bouche a bouche."

Érec's "Death" and the Contingency of the Visual

The "mortel parole" scene marks the serious rupture between Érec and Énide that triggers the quest that makes up the remainder of the romance; Érec's apparent death ultimately brings about the couple's reconciliation and the conclusion of their adventures. This episode serves as a sort of dénouement of the whole romance: when Érec returns to consciousness after being mistaken for dead, he forgives Énide for her "parole," and the plot begins to resolve, moving toward an ending in which Érec inherits his father's kingdom and he and Énide are crowned king and queen. In terms of narrative structure, the sequence of Érec's death echoes that of the "mortel parole," since it includes another episode where Érec awakens while Énide is speaking and is very upset. However, the sequence as a whole is exceptional in the context of the rest of the text, as it is the only time where Énide negotiates the world alone. From the moment that Érec seems to die, she finds herself without protection and even without an interlocutor. By this point in the romance, Énide has also been established as a competent

³¹ Lacy, "Narrative Point of View," 357-9 and 360-1.

speaker, and while Érec lies as if dead, she speaks more than she does anywhere else in the text. The three hundred or so lines of this sequence therefore provide a rich opportunity to analyze Énide as a character and a speaker; but as with the “mortel parole,” this scene has most often been read for evidence about the plot.³² Yet Érec’s death, which ushers in a nightmarish parallel existence for Énide, temporarily allows Énide to act for the first and only time as an independent subject. While she believes herself to be definitively separated from her beloved, she gives voice to several monologues, the most important of which is her lament of grief. This monologue looks at first glance to be a conventional *planctus* (a type of monologue I will discuss more below), yet actually disguises a wish to escape entirely from courtly convention and ideology and expresses a *prise de conscience* of Énide’s own subject position.

The dramatic irony at play from the beginning of the sequence calls attention once more to the inherent complexity or impossibility of interpreting the visceral. As Érec returns from an earlier adventure, Chrétien’s narration describes his physical suffering in great detail, explicitly noting Énide’s incomplete perception of his state. Unlike pleasure, physical suffering cannot be shared between partners:

Mais la chalors qu’il ot le jor
 Et ses armes tant le greverent
 Que ses plaies li escriverent
 Et totes ses bandes tranchierent.
 Onques ses plaies n’estanchierent
 Devant qu’il vint au leu tot droit
 La ou Énide l’atendoit.
 Cele le vit, grant joie en ot ;
 Mais ele n’aperçut ne sot
 La dolor dont il se plaignoit,
 Que toz ses cors en sanc baignoit,
 Et li cuers faillant li aloit. (4584-4595)

But the day was so hot,
 And his weapons were so onerous,
 That his wounds were bursting
 And all his bandages were splitting.
 His wounds didn’t stop bleeding at all
 Before he came to the exact place
 Énide was waiting for him.
 She saw him, and was overjoyed;
 But she did not notice or understand
 The pain that was troubling him,
 Or that his whole body was soaked in blood,

³² The insistence with which Énide takes responsibility for speaking can easily be taken as evidence for what about her “parole” was wrong, and why Érec initiated the quest. Even Fritz, the editor of this edition, makes this mistake: describing a variant present in two manuscripts where Enide blames herself specifically for repeating what has been said, he asserts that this proves that “la parole est alors celle des amis d’Érec qui l’accusent de *recreantise*, et non celle d’Énide” (pg. 207). However, this line really only indicates what Énide herself thinks the “parole” signifies, not what Érec does – that is to say, the “reason for the quest” and the inherent confusion of the “mortel parole” scene is not clarified by this variant.

And his heart was about to fail him.

Énide's joy here makes for a queasy contrast with the gory specificity of Érec's wounds and how seriously his injuries are affecting him. Especially since Chrétien calls attention to the heat of the day, something that would ostensibly affect Énide as well, that she can overlook Érec's weakened, suffering state and only shows excitement at his return gestures to the disjuncture between them initiated by the "mortel parole" scene and deepened by their quest. Yet this is more complicated than it appears: although Érec's exhaustion is obvious to the reader, since he is returning from rescuing a knight from two giants, a battle that the giants themselves warn Érec will be an unfair match (4424-28), Énide is not aware of what he has been doing during his absence. Furthermore, if she cannot "notice or understand" the degree to which Érec is wounded, it is not due to her lack of observation: nearly all the verbs Chrétien uses have to do with sensation, not visual clues. Érec himself can certainly feel that "toz ses cors en sanc baignoit," but seen from the exterior, his wounds must be obscured by his armor. Although in their first meeting and during their wedding night, the gaze connects Érec and Énide, here it leads to more confusion; Énide can only interpret what she sees, and Érec cannot explain what is concealed by his armor. This is not simple misinterpretation on Énide's part, but a moment where sight fails to function as expected, and the sudden emphasis on its communicative limitations is destabilizing. It serves as a reminder that nothing about the gaze necessarily involves exchange, and that any accord founded in sight alone is contingent. This seems in line with Walter Ong's phenomenology of communication, which prizes speech over sight: for Ong, "Personal relations demand interchange of personal interiors, and, while vision can support and abet such interchange, it cannot of itself alone maintain the interchange."³³ This moment of crisis exposes the limitations of relying on exteriors and also calls into question the couple's previous reliance on sight as generative. In the context of the "mortel parole," Érec's invisible suffering signals the complete breakdown of communication between Érec and Énide: the "mortel parole" scene confirms the failure of dialogue between them, and here Énide can no longer even trust what she sees.

What seems to Énide to be the supremely legible visual cue of Érec's death is not so at all: when Érec falls, the narrator clearly indicates to the reader that he loses consciousness, but does not die. Énide's reaction instantly shifts from ill-suited joy to sincere, but mistaken, grief:

chiet pasmez con s'il fust morz.
Lors commença li duelx si forz,
Quant Énide cheoir le vit.
Mout li poise quant ele vit,
Et cort vers lui si comme cele
Que sa dolor de rien ne cele. (4601-6)

he fell as if he were dead.
Then Énide began to grieve,
When she saw him fall.
It is unbearable to her that she is alive,
And she runs towards him, as a woman does
Who does not hide her pain in the slightest.

³³ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 167.

The “con si” construction establishes the dramatic irony that will subtend the rest of the sequence, and will shift significantly the dynamics of Énide’s grieving. Érec’s apparent death opens up the narrative space for her to speak and act independently, dramatizing the ways in which a noble lady without a protector can or cannot advocate for herself within courtly society. That the reader knows all along that Érec is not truly dead, but is only temporarily absent from the action, focuses attention on Énide herself: not necessarily her “psychology,” as Lacy would have it, about which the reader can only hypothesize, but certainly her affective experience and her subject position as she herself articulates them. The dramatic irony shifts the reader’s perspective to focus on Énide’s grief and her performance thereof, so that the primary focus of the monologue she speaks to mourn Érec is the expression of her interior state rather than generating empathy in the reader – an unusual twist on the conventions of mourning.

Énide’s Planctus: Affect in Direct Discourse

Énide’s lamentation of Érec’s death belongs to a genre of monologue that would have been very familiar to a medieval reader, the *planctus*. Monologues expressing grief are found in the *romans antiques*, *chansons de geste*, various Old French adaptations of classical texts, and appear in earnest or ironically in many later romances.³⁴ Paul Zumthor defines the *planctus* narrowly as “un passage d’une chanson de geste, exprimant la douleur ressentie par un personnage en présence du cadavre d’un compagnon d’armes”; however, by Chrétien’s time, it seems generally to have been coded as a female genre of speech, exchanging its initial context of mourning warriors on the battlefield for that of ladies mourning their lovers.³⁵ The *planctus* is notable for its conventionality – Zumthor’s outline of the ten “motifs” they contain is accurate across literary genres – as well as for its unusual narrative status. It is a purely “lyric” monologue, in the sense that it expresses emotion and does not advance the plot or narrate a character’s reasoning.³⁶ This, along with its ancient literary origins, gives the *planctus* what Zumthor calls a “mode d’existence très particulier”: it is “lyrique par nature, mais inexistent hors d’un récit.”³⁷ I would argue that the *planctus*, as it appears in romance, also carries a sense of narrative futility. Being spoken by a living character to and about a deceased one means that not only is this a monologue that does not and cannot be heard by its addressee or subject, it is also a form of speech that never anticipates a response, no matter who or what its speaker apostrophizes.³⁸ That is to say, much like Énide’s first speech in the “mortel parole” scene

³⁴Space does not permit me to fully explore the complex genealogy of the *planctus*. Some scholars credit the *Roman de Thèbes*, *Enéas*, and *Alixandre* with bringing the *planctus* into Old French verse; see Michèle Perret, “Aux origines du roman, le monologue,” 214. Also see Aimé Petit, *Naissances du roman: Les techniques littéraires dans les romans antiques du XIIe siècle*. Paul Zumthor studies the *planctus* as part of the *chanson de geste* rather than the *roman antique* in two pieces, “Étude typologique des *planctus* contenus dans la *Chanson de Roland*,” and “Les *planctus* épiques.” However, all of these accounts give short shrift to texts like Ovidian adaptations, such as “Piramus” and “Narcise,” as well as to later romance authors’ interest in grief; Chrétien riffs on the *planctus* in *Charette* and *Cligès* as well as *Érec*, and Thomas’s Yseut mourns in monologue at length as well.

³⁵Zumthor, “Étude typologique des *planctus*,” 219; see Perret, “Aux origines,” 214-15.

³⁶See Michèle Perret, “Le Paradoxe du monologue,” 137-59.

³⁷Zumthor, “Les *planctus* épiques,” 62.

³⁸Énide, for example, begins by addressing God and Death (4612-14), then Érec (4631-37) and herself (4638-4645), before returning to God and Death (4649-57).

which gives voice to her worry but is not meant to be heard, it is a formal dramatization and externalization of affect that cannot open a dialogue.

The dramatic irony of Erec's apparent death and the formal particularities of the *planctus* complicate the pragmatics of Énide's speech; this is at once a moment of extreme candor, where Énide speaks without intending to be heard, but its sincerity is nevertheless based on her misprision of the situation. Furthermore, since the setup of this scene is so focused on Énide's point of view, it would be a mistake to read too much about Erec's motivations into her words. For example, the apparently straightforward assertion with which she begins – "De mon seignor sui homicide. / Par ma parole l'ai ocis" (I am the murderer of my lord, / By my words I have killed him, lines 4618-19) – turns into a hall of mirrors of questions about agency and culpability that might be debated ad infinitum. As such, her famous aphorism, "Ainz taisirs a home ne nut / Mais parlars nuit mainte foïe" ("Silence never harmed anyone, / But speaking does, many a time," lines 4624-25), must not be taken at face value. Penny Sullivan argues that Énide's monologue reveals her "transformation" as a result of the quest, and that the aphorism "shows that she is able to make her own assessment of when it is right to speak or keep silent."³⁹ However, the significance of Énide's *planctus* has to do with the depth of her despair and the overwhelming force of her grief; to read it for logical evidence misses the point of the convention as well as its specific deployment in this situation.

Only one element of this scene is simple: touch. Énide speaks the principal section of her *planctus* with Erec's head in her lap, a sweetly intimate gesture that both shifts the register of the passage and seems to comfort her so that she is able to speak (4628-29). This contact recollects the couple's previous shared pleasure, but implies an additional non-erotic tenderness. With the support of her physical contact with Erec, she tries to clarify what has happened in words, re-narrating the story of the "mortel parole" from her point of view. She begins with "con mar i fus," as if deliberately repeating it from her original lament next to the sleeping Erec, and goes on to enumerate his courtly virtues. The rest of her speech, however, is devoted to explaining her guilt in speaking the "mortel parole" and justifying her punishment:

"He!" dist ele, "con mar i fus,
Sire, cui pareil[z] n'estoit nus!
En toi s'estoit Beautez miree,
Proece s'iere esprovee,
Savoirs t'avoit son cuer doné,
Largece t'avoit coroné,
Cele sanz cui nuns n'a grant pris.
He, qu'ai je dit ? Trop ai mespris,
Que la parole ai esmeüe
Dont mes sire a mort receüe,
La mortel parole entochie
Qui me doit estre reprochie.
Et je reconois et outroi
Que nuns n'i a corpes fors moi ;
Je seule en doi estre blasmee." (4631-45)

"Ah," she says, "what a pity you were there,
My lord, whose equal has never been!

³⁹Sullivan, "The Education of the Heroine," 327.

In you, Beauty mirrored herself,
 Prowess proved herself;
 Wisdom gave you her heart,
 Largess crowned you,
 She without whom no one has great esteem.
 Ah, what have I said? I have made too great a mistake,
 For I let slip the phrase
 From which my lord received death,
 That fatal, poisoned word
 For which I ought to be reproached.
 And I recognize, and grant,
 That no one has fault in this but me;
 I alone ought to be blamed."

When Énide asks herself "qu'ai je dit?", she departs from the conventions of the *planctus*; while her praise of Érec fits into Zumthor's "fondamental" category of the "éloge du défunt," her rather lengthy explanation here is surprising.⁴⁰ At first glance, this reads as recapitulation of the events of the "mortel parole" scene. However, it is crucial to remember that neither Érec nor the narrator has ever explained the quest in any way. Énide is not repeating anything – her words, or anyone else's – here. Rather, she is offering yet another attempt at her interpretation of Érec's reaction to their failed dialogue. Chrétien's manipulation of the narrative point of view is so deft in this scene, however, that Énide's assumption of guilt reads as a definitive conclusion about the "real" meaning of their quest when it is anything but. Really, Énide's rationalizations only indicate the depth of her despair and guilt, and reinforce the unknowability of Érec's motivations rather than illuminating them. The narrative focus on Énide means, for Dulac, that "les décisions d'Érec et les premiers périls de l'aventure sont représentés tels que les perçoit Énide dans toute leur brutalité obscure."⁴¹ Énide's proposal that she alone ought to be held responsible for the "mortel parole" marks that obscurity at its deepest; Érec is entirely lost to her, and she is left to parse the meaning of their enigmatic quest alone.

The conventional form of the *planctus* as receiverless underscores Énide's solitude and also allows her to move beyond grief and despair; ultimately, she articulates a critique of her social position. Speaking only for herself – and, logically, only "heard" by the reader – Énide is able to reveal a clear-eyed understanding of the gendered power dynamics of courtly society in the way she decides to commit suicide. Marie-Noëlle Lefay-Toury sees Énide's wish to die at the end of her *planctus* as just another example of the way Chrétien stages his characters' contemplation of suicide without ever allowing them to finish the act.⁴² Sullivan sees it as a demonstration of "the depth of her affection for her husband."⁴³ While it is true that Chrétien frequently makes use of the trope of a lover's suicide after the death of their beloved, and that Énide is indeed thrown into a state of overwhelming grief by Érec's apparent death, her conclusion that she should die as well is remarkable for several reasons. Her process of

⁴⁰ Zumthor, "Étude typologique des *planctus*," 221.

⁴¹ Dulac, "Peut-on comprendre?," 43.

⁴² Marie-Noëlle Lefay-Toury, *La tentation du suicide dans les romans du XIIIe siècle*, 95.

⁴³ Sullivan, "The Education of the Heroine," 327.

reasoning seems to offer a resolution to the interpretive questions about the “mortel parole” that have plagued the text so far, and she imagines her death in a very unusual way.

Énide begins her last monologue by defying Death, saying that she will find a way to die. She dismisses the potential of her own speech to help her, saying, “Ne puis morir por sohaidier, / Ne riens ne me vaudroit complainte” (“I cannot die because I wish it, Nor is lamenting worth anything to me,” 4658-59). She decides she must die by Érec’s sword, describing her death as a way to avenge his unjust death; this is the same reasoning Tisbé employs as she considers suicide to avenge Piramus’s. For Énide, suicide would not only offer the solution of ending her suffering from grief, but would also close the narrative circuit of wondering about Érec’s motivations. By taking responsibility for his death and framing her suicide as vengeance, Énide would resolve the narrative she has superimposed on these confusing events. But suicide is not only narratively expedient for Énide. Where the grieving speaker usually describes their intended death romantically or idealistically as a union with the deceased beloved, Énide is under no such illusions, ending her last speech with “Ja n’en serai mes en dangier, / N’en proiere ne en sohait” (“I will never again be subject to another’s might, / Nor obligations, nor wishes,” 4662-63). This conclusion is far more significant than imagining the “au-delà de la mort”; it is an ambiguous, but haunting, statement of self-determination that might imply a condemnation of marriage if not of courtly society more generally.⁴⁴ “Dangier” without any modifiers has a range of meanings, but in the context of courtly love, can signify the authority of marriage; the expression “être en dangier de quelque chose” can also mean “to be uncertain of something.”⁴⁵ So this line might mean that Énide never again wishes to be married to, or under the control of, anyone but Érec, or that she refuses to remain uncertain about when or if Death will come to grant her the peace she wishes. Regardless, this is a bleak comment on her immediate future: death will be a welcome release from the risk of another marriage, or at least, will put an end to her unbearable grief. While expressing a wish for death or an intention to commit suicide is not unusual in the *planctus*, here, Chrétien seems to have slipped a moment of more unsettling despair and willfulness into the conventional form. What Énide expresses here is not only the desperation of grief, but an utter hopelessness born of Énide’s awareness of herself as determined by the grinding structural subjugation of the social world around her. This hopelessness implies that without Érec, the social system within which Énide finds herself is unlivable: her marriage to Érec does not allow her to escape that system or to subvert it, but only to find room for maneuver within it. Alone, she will be subject to the wills of others who are less benevolent and less desirable.

The *planctus* often ends with the speaker’s own death, but Énide’s suicide is interrupted by the villainous Comte de Limors, whose *deus ex machina* entrance obliterates any sense of her agency or authority as a speaker. With this abrupt, graceless ending to Énide’s *planctus*, Chrétien deposes Énide as a narrator of her own social position: the rest of her speech in this

⁴⁴ Lefay-Toury, *La tentation du suicide*, 107.

⁴⁵ *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française, et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle*, s.v. “Dangier”: “Dangier exprime particulièrement la puissance maritale, et plus fréquemment cette puissance personnifié, le mari. C’est aussi, en matière d’amour, toute personne fâcheuse qui s’oppose à nos désirs.” However, Takeshi Matsumura’s *Dictionnaire du français médiéval* specifies “être en dangier de quelque chose” as “être incertain de quelque chose,” using line 4662 as the example. This would mean something like “I will never again be unsure of it, / Nor of prayers, nor of wishes”; Peter Dembowski translates 4662-63 as “Je ne dépendrai plus ni des caprices de Mort, ni de mes prières et de mes souhaits.” Although this definition shifts my reading somewhat, I still find that Énide’s conclusion gestures toward suicide as an act of will and self-determination.

episode will be vehement, articulate, and rhetorically complex, but when she discusses the implications of marriage much later in the text, she will describe it almost idealistically (6282-6310). However, the rest of this episode presents a comprehensive portrait of just how terrible a marriage could be, introducing the *comte* as a dark foil for Érec and encouraging a retroactive reading of Énide's concluding words as her endorsement of being under Érec's dominion. The conclusion of her *planctus* seems to prefigure the marriage she is about to be forced into – a marriage to a cruel man who openly cares nothing about her preferences or individuality – and once more valorizes the relationship between Érec and Énide, no matter how enigmatic it may seem from the reader's perspective at this point in the narrative.

The Refusal of Dialogue: Violence, Subjugation, and the Presence of the Voice

The Comte de Limors episode is Énide's most difficult trial of the quest. All seems to be lost: Érec appears to be dead, Énide is forced to marry a brutish stranger, and her discursive objections meet only with dismissal and violence. If the "mortel parole" scene presents the failure of dialogue, the Limors episode shows a male refusal to engage in dialogue with a female character. What the *comte's* treatment of Énide shows is that speaking is not enough to ensure female agency; even within reasonably courtly parameters, a female speaker can simply be ignored by a male listener if what she says is disagreeable to him. Overall, speech is incredibly fraught throughout this episode, with every character's speech pragmatics confusingly troubled; by the end, the significance of the sound of a voice in distress is valued over the words that voice articulates, suggesting the ultimate powerlessness of discursive force in the face of the physical.

In addition to troubling the significance of speech, this episode also calls courtly societal expectations for both men and women into question by presenting a kind of shadow version of courtliness. It is not, as some authors have implied, that the Comte de Limors is simply uncourtly; it is that his treatment of Énide mostly does obey the letter of the laws of chivalry.⁴⁶ As a foil to Érec, Limors initially remains within the sphere of courtliness, exposing its oppressive power dynamics, and it is this vexed relationship to courtly ideals and values that makes him so unsettling. His entrance on the scene ushers in a nightmarish inversion of all the elements of Énide's relationship to Érec: here, Énide's beauty marks her out for abuse, not admiration; mutually pleasurable touch between partners disappears, replaced with violence and force; consensual, pleasurable marital sex shifts to the open threat of marital rape.⁴⁷ In relation to Énide, Limors both is and is not courtly, and this episode ultimately suggests that

⁴⁶ See, for example, Sara Sturm-Maddox, who describes the *comte* as "a violent example of the determination to have the lady he desires at any cost," opposing him to "the general courtly mode" ("Joie de la Cort, 524) and Peter Dembowski, who wryly notes that "les intentions du comte sont loin d'être pures" ("Érec et Énide: Notice," 1062).

⁴⁷ As Kathryn Gravdal indicates, although rape does not figure in to the "images of valor, courtliness, and gentility" that romance evokes, rape is nevertheless very present in the genre: "What has rarely been said is that rape (either attempted rape or the defeat of a rapist) constitutes one of the episodic units used in the construction of a romance. Sexual violence is built into the very premise of Arthurian romance. It is a genre that by its definition must create the threat of rape" (*Ravishing Maidens*, 42-43, emphasis Gravdal's). In Enide's case, the threat of rape is even more chilling because of its juxtaposition with the previous *nuit de nocces* scene, and because marital rape was not recognized as a crime under twelfth-century canon law (see *Ravishing Maidens*, 8-9).

courtliness itself is similarly ambivalent, as we see that the same societal mechanisms that elevate Énide's status can also work against her.

Limors himself explains the gender and power dynamics of courtly marriage to Énide, not so much proposing marriage as informing her of his decision to marry her:

Confortez vos, ce sera sens:
Dex vos fera lie par tens.
Vostre beautez, qui tant est fine,
Bone aventure vos destine,
Car je vos recevrai a fame,
De vos ferai contesse et dame:
Ce vos doit mout reconforter.
Et j'en ferai le cors porter,
S'iert mis en terre a grant honor. (4693-701)

Pull yourself together, that will be sensible:
God will make you happy in time.
Your beauty, which is so exquisite,
Destines you for good fortune,
For I will take you as my wife,
And make of you a countess and a lady:
This should comfort you greatly.
Also, I will have the body taken away,
And have it interred with great honor.

The *comte's* understanding of marriage is both accurate and laughably incomplete: accurate, because Érec and Énide's marriage could be described in much the same way, but incomplete, because Limors is oblivious to the visceral intimacy that love and desire might create between two subjects. There is no narration of his appreciation of Énide's beauty, only what he says to Énide, and it seems redundant to point out that there is also no narration that indicates how she looks at him. The first lines she speaks to Limors – "Tel duel en ai, n'en puis plus dire, / Mais poise moi que ne sui morte" ("I am grieving so, I cannot say any more, / But it pains me that I am not dead," 4684-85) – give an unambiguous sense that neither mutual love nor desire are possible between them. Although it is true that Énide's beauty has led her to make an advantageous marriage with Érec, and in that sense her beauty will make her a queen, Limors's view of marriage has none of the justifications of Érec and Énide's relationship. First, Érec's social elevation of Énide is framed as fitting because of their shared beauty and similar *corages* which indicate perfect *parage*; in this way, Érec's rank is never figured as the defining reason that Énide loves him.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Limors is a count, where Érec is the son of a king; it is thus both cynical of Limors and unwittingly somewhat ridiculous to offer his rank as something that would "reconforter" Énide. Really, Énide's widowhood has no affective reality for him whatsoever. He proposes disposing of "le cors," referring to the unconscious Érec as a lifeless object to be gotten rid of, as if it, or he, had never been beloved by Énide. Or rather, by offering to inter Érec's body "a grant honor," he shows a very limited understanding of her grief. But

⁴⁸ C.f. 1500-12, where Érec and Énide's mutual contemplation is retroactively justified and explained by Chrétien's description of them as being "d'une matiere" and "d'igal corage"; their *parage* is both aesthetic and moral.

there is nothing in Limors's entrance that indicates that he is a man who envisions sleeping peacefully in his lady's arms, "bouche a bouche."

Énide rejects Limors in the strongest possible terms, but her objections are as unimportant to him as Érec's body. She feels herself to be so deep in grief as to be unreachable by any kind of persuasion:

Sire, fuiez!
Por Deu merci, lessiez m'ester;
Ne poez ci rien conquerer.
Rien qu'en porroit dire ne faire
Ne me porroit a joie traire. (4704-08)

Go away, sir!
For the love of God, leave me be;
You can win nothing here.
Nothing that you could say or do
Could possibly bring me joy.

This is a rejection of Limors's very presence, as well as an eloquent testament to the depth of her suffering. Yet in response, the count turns away from Énide, not to leave her but to address his men; her refusal does not succeed in getting him to leave her alone, or in engendering any sympathy in him. Rather, her rejection results in the count's withdrawal from dialogue. As Énide rejects his advances, he denies the very notion of her subjectivity: anything Énide says is subordinated to her beautiful exterior, the sign of her desirability (courtly and sexual) that to him seems incontrovertible. That Limors's visual appraisal of Énide obliterates any sense of her preferences or agency is clear even to the count himself, who openly admits to objectifying her. (Similarly, he will not dissimulate his intention to rape her later in the episode.) When he turns away to address his men, he gives them instructions on what to do next, and explains:

voudrai la dame esposer,
Mais que bien li doie peser,
C'onques mais tant bele ne vi,
Ne nule mais tant ne covi. (4715-18)

I intend to marry the lady,
Even if it should be disagreeable to her,
For never have I seen a more beautiful lady,
Nor one who I have desired more.

It is not that Limors misinterprets the visual, but that he willfully disregards the signals that would contradict him; he understands the courtly phenomenology of desire, in the way that the sight of beauty inspires desire in the viewer. But his desire is jarring juxtaposed with the mutual gaze Érec and Énide shared after their first meeting. That scene showed an ideal outcome of the way beauty and the gaze might function in a courtly setting: when Érec scrutinized Énide's beauty, she looked back at him, and their equal *corages* granted this apparently purely visual relationship greater meaning. The Comte de Limors's gaze is not like Érec's at all, however. He overtly and unhesitatingly interprets Énide's beauty as making her marriageable even against her will, and without her returning his gaze. Énide's refusal is not illegible to him, it just has no bearing on his desire and intention to possess her. Vision, and the

assessment of beauty, make Énide into “a surface, a non-interior” with “the status of a thing, a mere object,” in Ong’s words, and reveal what it really means for a woman to be “faite por esgarder.”⁴⁹ This silent dismissal echoes and nuances Ong’s reading of vision’s potential to dehumanize; if “Speech establishes the specifically human relation that takes the edge off the cruelty of vision,” then withholding address while maintaining awareness of beauty would *emphasize* that cruelty.⁵⁰ This denial of her subjectivity retrospectively confirms the significance of her suicide as an expression of agency: her lifeless body, run through with Érec’s sword, would have told an unmistakable story of devotion and grief; and as she understands it, her death would have protected her from submitting to anyone else’s will. When the Comte de Limors and his men interrupt her suicide attempt, Énide loses the opportunity to determine how her body is read by the courtly gaze.

In addition to withdrawing from dialogue with Énide, Limors also seems incapable of responding to her appropriately, either escalating his demands or disengaging from her. Even the most basic negotiation of meaning is impossible without two willing speakers, and so Énide and Limors cannot really be said to be in dialogue; they are paratactically speaking at each other, not responding to each other. In this way, Énide’s status as a speaker seems quite unstable; during this episode, Énide speaks more frequently and with more force than she does anywhere else in the romance, and yet she is both ignored and excluded from dialogue by Limors. For the reader, however, the strange pragmatics of the episode as a whole subtly endorse Énide as a speaker and undermine Limors. Even the count’s name – after the conclusion of this episode, he is revealed to be Comte Oringle de Limors – ironically references the power of Énide’s words (5066-69). In her *planctus*, she had apostrophized Death, lamenting that “Morz” was delaying out of spite (4650-52). This is simultaneously felicitous and infelicitous, as the Comte de Limors, Count Death, does eventually arrive and, in a grimly hilarious turn, interrupts her suicide. Literally, the *comte* is just a man who has heard the sound of her distress from afar, but Énide does succeed in summoning a version of “Morz” with her desperate grief. Énide as a speaking subject, then, wields some kind of power or agency; she signifies and conjures “Morz” at the same time, in a mostly-felicitous speech act. Or, even more literarily, the name Comte de Limors might be read as a play on a “conte de li mors” – a tale of death.⁵¹ In this way, Énide’s summoning of Death works on a literal and a symbolic level.

In contrast to Énide, the dramatic irony that Érec’s death is only the appearance thereof skews the reader’s perspective on Limors’s speech. Losing patience with Énide’s continued grief, the count sneers at her,

Certainnement poez savoir
Que morz hons par duel ne revit,
Onques nuns avenir ne vit. (4790-92)

Surely you must know
That a dead man cannot come back to life because of grieving;

⁴⁹ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ This is particularly interesting in the context of the famous lines in Chrétien’s prologue where he describes his story as “un conte d’aventure / Une mout bele conjointure” (a tale of adventure / A beautiful composite, 13-14). This episode, as well as the marriage of Limors and Énide certainly seems like a *conjointure* of life and death – and the forced marriage, along with Énide’s refusal to eat and her subsequent successful rescue/escape, seems to allude to another “conte de li mors,” the myth of Persephone.

No one has ever seen it happen.

While this seems to be another objectively true statement from the count, like his observation about Énide's beauty allowing her to make a good marriage, it, too, is both accurate and incomplete. The finality of death is a given; Érec cannot be helped by Énide's grief, and so her stubborn despair is pointless. By denying Énide's overwhelming grief, Limors is invalidating Énide's subjectivity in another way, and also underscoring the tenuousness of her current position. Her marriage – in terms of her love for Érec as well as the social position their union brought her – has been erased by Érec's death as if it never existed. And yet the reader knows Érec is not dead, and that the count's confidence here amounts to nothing but buffoonish posturing. More to the point, in Limors's attempt to denigrate the usefulness of Énide's grief, he unwittingly calls attention to the force of her affective expression: Énide, who could not die herself from wishing it, more or less *will* bring Érec back to life – or at least, back to consciousness – with her grief. He awakes at some point during her last monologue of this episode, which she speaks in open defiance to the count. Although the Comte de Limors strikes her and threatens her, she remains a fierce verbal foe.

While this episode began with the problem of visual interpretation, its dénouement depends on the reception and accurate interpretation not of speech but of sound and the affective information the voice can convey. The monologue during which Érec awakes is not only about grief – that is, it is not the kind of tearful lament Énide speaks during the *planctus* scene. Rather, it is a bitterly despairing attempt to insult the count's resort to violence, as well as an expression of regret. Énide is pushed to this extreme after Limors marries her by force; when he orders her to eat, she refuses, saying she will neither eat nor drink until she sees Érec, “qui gist sur ce dois,” (who is lying on that table, 4812) eat as well. This seems to be, as Lefay-Toury points out, another suicide attempt⁵²; it also plays on the dramatic irony that Érec will soon be eating and drinking again, unbeknownst to Énide or the *comte*. In response to Énide's stubborn insistence on her own agency, Limors strikes her in full view of his barons, who immediately criticize him for this act of “vilenie” (4827). The count refuses to be cowed, and exclaims, “La dame est moie et je [sui] suens, / Si ferai de li mon plesir” (“The lady is mine and I am hers, / I will do with her as I please,” 4832-33). He means not only that he will strike her if he so chooses, but the phrase “faire son plesir” also indicates that he has no compunction about raping her. According to Kathryn Gravdal, Old French texts use “periphrasis, metaphor, and slippery lexematic exchanges, as opposed to a clear and unambiguous signifier of sexual assault,” which is to say, there is not a medieval term that correlates precisely to the modern concept of rape; however, since Gravdal cites “*fame esforcer* (to force a woman), *faire sa volonté* (to do as one will), *faire son plaisir* (to take one's pleasure), or *faire son buen* (to do as one sees fit)” as examples of these expressions, this declaration of Limors's might indeed be read as relatively “clear and unambiguous.”⁵³ It is this barely-concealed rape threat, in conjunction with another blow, that forces Énide to the rhetorical extremes of her last monologue, and reveals the paradox of how women are treated by courtly ideology: marriage is both a mechanism of social elevation and protection, and a locus of sexual violence. Misogynistic silencing and rape are just as much a part of this society's imagination as are eloquent female speakers and erotic agency, and these poles are not mutually exclusive, but co-exist, however uncomfortably. The quest has already shown how contingent Énide's comfortable situation with Érec is, but the

⁵² Lefay-Toury, *La Tentation du suicide*, 94.

⁵³ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 2-3.

Limors episode illustrates just how easily the courtly surface can be scratched in order to reveal the violence within.

To read “Si ferai de li mon plesir” as a rape threat also lays bare the gender divisions of the final scene in the Castle of Death. Énide and Érec are profoundly separated at this point in the narrative, not only by the appearance of death but also by their gender-coded states of abjection. Sara Sturm-Maddox alludes to this division, describing the Limors episode as “the low point of their fortunes...the knight unable to defend his lady, while her beauty provokes in Limors a response quite opposite to that of courtly expectations.”⁵⁴ We can be more specific: Énide and Érec are entirely defeated by Limors by the time Érec awakes, but in separate, gender-specific ways. While Érec has at least not been defeated in combat, he has succumbed to his wounds and is assumed dead; it is not just that he cannot defend Énide, but that he is absent from the scene, unaware that she needs defending until he hears her upbraiding Limors. Énide’s beauty has caught the wrong kind of courtly attention, and she has been married against her will to a man inferior in both rank and behavior to Érec; Limors has assaulted and humiliated her in front of an audience and will almost inevitably rape her. It is difficult to imagine more complete annihilations of the courtly identities of a lady and a knight. Their suffering is not and cannot be shared or exchanged; the couple is fixed to opposite poles of the stark gender divide of courtly society. The way they fight back against Limors is accordingly gendered: Énide defies Limors discursively by imagining her literal physical destruction, and Érec reacts with lethal violence, showing his instincts as a warrior. The last resort of defense for a lady is speech; for a knight, it is combat.

In this way, the resistance Énide shows to the *comte* goes beyond what Burgess calls “physical bravery.”⁵⁵ Rather, her last monologue is a discursive assault, aimed at metaphorically disarming Limors through sheer force of contempt. Énide has been addressing him politely as “Sire,” but now she calls him “fel,” using *tu*. She returns his physical insults with verbal ones:

“Ha! fel,” fait ele, “moi que chaut
Que que tu me dies ne faces?
Ne crien tes copx ne tes menaces.
Assez me bat, assez me fier!⁵⁶
Ja tant ne te troverai fier
Que por toi face plus ne mains,
Si tu orendroit a tes mains
Me devoies les iauz sachier
Ou [tres]toute vive escorchier.” (4838-46)

“Ah, villain,” she cries, “what does it matter to me
What you might say or do to me?
I fear neither your blows nor your threats.
Hit me, strike me as much as you like!
I will never think you so cruel
That I would do any more or any less for you,

⁵⁴ Sturm-Maddox, “Joie de la Cour,” 524.

⁵⁵ Burgess, *Érec et Énide*, 73.

⁵⁶ For this line, I am using Foerster’s punctuation to reflect the imperatives. (See *Kristian von Troyes: “Érec und Énide.”*)

Whether right now with your hands
You were to pluck out my eyes,
Or skin me alive.”

Énide’s resolve is impressive, and is staged as such. Limors’s blows are intended to inspire obedience through fear, but Énide professes to be neither afraid nor impressed. In their first meeting, she had told Limors that nothing he did could bring her joy; now, nothing he does could frighten her, no matter how vicious. What he had intentionally ignored – her interiority, agency, subjectivity – in order to marry Énide by force still resists him and remains inaccessible to him. Her invocation of violence has two effects: first, by articulating a hypothetical violence far more gruesome than what she has already suffered, she short-circuits the *comte*’s real violence, leaching it of its shock value. Furthermore, the gruesome torture she imagines once again calls attention to the importance of the material body in this romance. Gravdal argues that “The ultimate effect of romance ‘ravishment’ is to shift the gaze away from the physical suffering of the female body to the chivalric dilemmas of men,” but in this contemptuous monologue, Énide herself directs the reader’s attention to the possibility of ghastly suffering.⁵⁷ There is nothing erotic in the images of dismemberment Énide proffers, and yet, she does not choose them randomly: she singles out for destruction the eyes, which generate desire by sight, and the skin, which registers pleasurable touch. Even destroying the physical parts of her that channeled her love for Érec will not break her will, either by making her obey Limors or by getting her to set aside her grief.

Énide’s vehement rejoinder to Limors sets in motion a swift, wordless series of events, and marks the beginning of the end of the narrative focus on her perspective. Immediately after her monologue, perspective shifts to Érec in a kind of textual jump cut, so that Limors’s reaction to Énide’s words is elided. This evokes an utter conclusiveness to Énide’s speech; it is easy to imagine that Limors is dumbfounded. Yet suddenly it is Érec who is focalized, and he wakes at the sound of Énide’s voice, much in the same way that Limors was alerted to Énide’s distress by the sound of her cries of grief (4672-74). Unlike the “mortel parole,” where Érec hears Énide’s last phrase as he comes out of a light sleep, Érec’s awakening is less defined, and he almost immediately takes stock of the situation accurately. That he is able to instantaneously understand the essential message of Énide’s speech without registering to any of her words could almost be read as a remarkable moment of discourse, for once, not complicating communication between them.

Entre ces diz et ces tençons
Revint Erec de paumoisons,
Ausi con li hons qui s’esveille.
S’il s’esbahi, ne fu merveille,
Des genz qu’il vit environ lui ;
Mais grant duel ot et grant ennui,
Quant la voiz sa fame entendit.
Dou dois a terre descendi,
Et trait l’espee isnelement ;
Ire li done hardement,
Et l’amor qu’a sa fame avoit. (4847-60)

⁵⁷ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 15.

In the midst of these words and arguments,
 Érec returns from his faint,
 Just as a man who wakes up [from sleep].
 It isn't surprising that he is astonished
 By the people he sees around him;
 But he is deeply grieved and worried
 When he hears the voice of his wife.
 He comes down from the table,
 And quickly takes his sword;
 Anger gives him boldness,
 As does the love he had for his wife.

Érec emerges from unconsciousness gradually, relying on his own observations to situate himself: first he realizes he is among strangers, and then he notices Énide's voice, with a jolt of emotion. Half-conscious, he cannot participate in the swirl of rancorous dialogue happening around him, which only reaches him impressionistically. The meaning of the heated words that the count, his barons, and Énide are exchanging is secondary to the simple sound of his wife's voice, which conveys her suffering so effectively that it generates grief in him as he hears it. All of the communicative force that direct discourse might have in this moment is transfigured into an almost instantaneous, nonverbal flash of affective understanding. Her voice may as well be wordless; it is the tone that indicates the danger and the immediacy of the situation to Érec, and reminds him of his love for her. In Ong's model of communication, "Sound is more real or existential than other sense objects," but its supreme communicative potential is human speech; for Érec and Énide, sound is enough to fully wake Érec and bring about the end of their terrible trial at last.⁵⁸ This is a crucial moment for understanding the way communication and exchange work in Érec and Énide's relationship; the seamlessness of the way meaning is conveyed through sound confirms the effectiveness of visceral exchange between them, however much discursive negotiation is fraught with misunderstanding.

Nowhere in the romance is Dulac's description that "Érec n'est que force et resolution" more apt.⁵⁹ He reacts with impeccable instincts for combat, dismounting from the table, taking his sword in hand, and striking Limors with a mortal blow that splits his skull practically in one motion (4859-62). And yet, he is not without interiority: what lends him the ability to act with such decisive force is the grief and worry evoked by Énide's voice, and his resolution is spurred on by anger and love. This glimmer of interiority, however, only serves to justify the lack of reflection with which he kills Limors, not, apparently, to renew his connection to Énide. That Érec slays Limors specifically "Sanz desfiance et sanz parole" (literally, "without a formal challenge and without a word," 4861), however, is very strange, given the romance's emphasis on the importance of courtly conventions and on what is said. The term "desfiance" only appears one other time in *Érec et Énide*, about eight hundred lines earlier when Érec and Énide come across Keu, who does not recognize them and treats Érec with insulting rudeness. Érec upbraids Keu for holding onto his horse's reins in an attempt to get him to reveal his identity, saying, "Sanz desfiance m'avez pris; / Je dis que vos avez mespris" ("You took hold of me with no warning; / I tell you, you have done very wrongly," 4025-6). Yet there is no suggestion of courtly fault when Érec slays Limors with no proper warning. Limors's unambiguous villainy

⁵⁸ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 117.

⁵⁹ Dulac, "Peut-on comprendre?", 42.

might excuse Érec, but I want to suggest that Énide's vituperation serves the same function that Érec's knightly "parole" would. Her discursive act metaphorically disarms the *comte*, setting the scene for Érec to physically, and wordlessly, finish him off.

Énide's status as a speaker remains in question at the end of the Limors episode; like the end of her *planctus* where she inadvertently summons the *comte*, the episode's conclusion initially seems to position her as more powerful as a producer of sound than as a participant in dialogue, since it is the sound of her voice, not her words, that incite both Limors and Érec to action. In addition, after Érec awakes, he and Énide apparently do not speak at all, and she is almost entirely returned to silence: her reaction to Érec's apparently miraculous resurrection is omitted; during their escape, she is only portrayed in action, gathering Érec's lance for him (4882) and mounting the horse they leave on (4899). While her assistance of Érec shows the couple working in tandem without either negotiation or confusion, as if danger spurs them to a unity of action, the ending overall might be read as the re-inscription of Énide as a non-speaking character. Or, as Sullivan puts it, this conclusion might indicate that "At this point, the education of the heroine is complete"; having withstood the *comte*'s advances, she has proved herself to be a fitting spouse for Erec.⁶⁰ However, it is Erec's wordlessness, his attack "Sanz desfiance," that nuances these readings: if Énide's "parole" stands in for Érec's – if her fierce monologue serves as sufficient warning to Limors such that Erec does not need to speak before killing him – then the tension between female speech and female silence that has driven the plot thus far is suddenly resolved, or transfigured. For the first time, Énide's speech does not undercut Érec's prowess, but actually enables it. It is this moment where the gender difference between them suddenly resolves into a dyadic symbiosis that finally allows their quest to come to an end.

Double Reconciliations: Touch as Communication

The escape from Limors ultimately brings about Érec's forgiveness of Énide, and the resolution of their quest. But the "apology" Érec offers Énide cannot suffice to resolve the deep divisions produced by the quest as a whole or by the Limors episode, where the couple is separated by death itself as well as gendered experience. Given the nature of their relationship, where the visceral has been so much more effective than the discursive for conveying affect, it is logical that Érec's words to Énide might not be entirely successful. Indeed, part of what this resolution scene affirms is the supremacy of touch in the couple's relationship. But the ineffectiveness of Érec's apology is significant in and of itself. It is easy to read this, as Moshé Lazar does, either as Érec's refusal to discuss his motivations for the quest, or as Chrétien's refusal to make a neat conclusion to this section of the narrative.⁶¹ However, Érec's ambiguous, unconvincing apology marks the first and only time he endeavors to explain his motivation for the quest, and its awkwardness raises the question of whether perhaps it is not that discursive exchange is problematic for the couple, but that it is problematic for Érec. His attempt to explain himself, comfort Énide, and reassure her of his love in a compact twelve lines is just that: an *attempt* to communicate with Énide. That he is nowhere near as skilled a speaker as Énide emphasizes once more the intrusion of gender difference into the couple's exchange, but

⁶⁰ Sullivan, "The Education of the Heroine," 327.

⁶¹ Moshé Lazar, *Amour Courtois et "fin'amors" dans la littérature du XIIIe siècle*, 209.

it also indicates his renewed willingness, however brief, to engage in dialogue, a possibility that he has forbidden throughout the quest.

In remarkable contrast to Énide's multiple narrations of the "mortel parole" scene, Érec cannot or will not articulate a full account of what has happened, or his perspective on events; while Énide tries at multiple points to make sense discursively of what has happened and why, Érec's tone is conclusive, but his words are uninformative.⁶² Rather than illuminating his own interiority, he states his current feelings and decisions, informing Énide of the new situation. In this way, his decision to bring the quest to a close seems just as arbitrary as his decision to embark on it; as a whole, his speech does nothing to clarify the enigma of the quest that Énide, and the reader, has been pondering. He says to Énide:

Ne soiez de rien esmaïe,
Q'or vos ain plus que ainz ne fis,
Et resui certains et fis
Que vos m'amez parfaitement.
Tout a vostre commandement
Vuil estre des or en avant
Si con je estoie devant.
Et se vos m'avez rien mesdite,
Je le vos pardoin et claim quite
Et le forfait et la parole. (4916-25)

Do not be bewildered by anything,
For I love you more than I ever did,
And in turn I am certain and sure
That you love me perfectly.
I wish to be entirely at your command
From this moment on
Just as I was before.
And if you have spoken wrongly,
I forgive you, and consider you exonerated,
Both for the crime and for the word.

Érec gets off to an awkward start by telling Énide just to stop worrying about what has happened, echoing Limors's earlier, menacing, suggestion to her, "Confortez vos, ce sera sens" (4693). One assumes that Érec's use of the imperative here could hardly be much more effective than Limors's. Even his reassurance of his love rings a bit hollow; in the text thus far, Érec has never made a declaration of love, so it is impossible to compare his previous love to the love he now espouses. Similarly, his assertion that he is now certain of Énide's loving him "parfaitement" sounds unimpressive, since that has been very clear from the very beginning of the crisis, both to Énide herself and from the perspective of the reader. It is his wanting to be at Énide's "commandement," though, that rings most hollow and makes this speech so difficult to parse. How is Érec understanding power here? In a way, he has never been under Énide's power – in fact, when her father gives her to Érec, he says, "Tot a vostre commandement / Ma

⁶² Énide voices her interiority in monologue at least four times: at the end of the scene where she utters what she later calls her "mortel parole," 2585-606; at the beginning of the quest, 2778-90; during the first night of the quest while she stays awake to stand guard, 3095-114; and during her *planctus*, 4617-63.

fille bele vos present" (675-6). But, on the other hand, the entire "mortel parole" crisis has been occasioned by the court's perception of Érec as being too involved with his wife. Érec almost seems to be saying that now that they have had a good streak of reputation-building adventures, they can go back to bed as they did before. Worse, his forgiveness seems vague, still leaving open the definition of what exactly the "parole" in question was. So, as a whole, Érec gives an unsatisfying explanation, an insufficient reassurance, and an unconvincing apology.

However, to read this monologue without its framing, as it usually is, strips it of its full affective content. Érec's words are not of primary importance; rather, they supplement his touch. Chrétien's narration introduces Érec's monologue with his physical gesture:

Érec, qui sa fame en porte,
L'acole et baise et reconforte :
Entre ses braz contre son cuer
L'estraint et dit: "Ma douce suer..." (4911-14)

Érec, who is taking his wife away,
Holds and kisses and comforts her:
In his arms, against his heart,
He holds her and says, "My sweet sister..."

Here we see that touch, like words, can be addressed. Érec's contact with Énide is not exchanged, but directional: he embraces and kisses her, and she does not return his touch. The elaborate solicitousness of Érec's gestures indicate an attempt to communicate tenderness and affection, and even to imply his forgiveness, before he even speaks, setting the stage for Énide to understand what he says or perhaps even to disregard it as less important. The verb "reconforter" comes back again, but this is real comfort, not the earlier cynical reasoning of the *comte* or even the rather overly violent imagery Érec will use later before Joie de la Cour. Before his monologue, Énide's reaction is not indicated, but once he has finished speaking and kisses her again, the reconciliation is shown to be successful:

Or n'est pas Énide a malaise,
Quant ses sire l'acole et baise,
Et de s'amor la raseüre. (4927-29)

Énide is no longer ill at ease,
When her lord holds and kisses her,
And assures her of his love.

The reassurance Énide receives is both verbal and physical, but Érec's speaking interrupts his touch, and it is only after being embraced once more that Énide's "malaise" is soothed. Even the verb "raseüre" here, with its connotation of tangible re-strengthening, recalls the significance of physical contact. Érec's affectionate, unidirectional touch recalls his kissing her after their betrothal, and replaces the count's violent force against Énide. Real *reconfort* is physical and requires love, and could never be earned through threats or abstractions such as rank, as Limors would have had it. Érec's apology, then, is only anticlimactic without the context of its presentation and reception; the real work of reconciliation takes place through touch, which has never failed the couple, and the emphasis on touch means that Érec's words need fulfill no more function than a gesture toward dialogue. In this context, "la parole" could

be read so broadly as to lose its importance: Érec forgives Énide for the “forfait,” the offense she has committed, as well as the “parole,” which might mean everything she has said since being forbidden to speak, or even her ability to maneuver discursively so adeptly. His spoken apology may represent an effort to clarify the state of their relationship, but it also serves as a good-faith effort to participate in dialogue, despite how fraught discursive communication has been for the couple.

Énide orchestrates a similar overture of reconciliation after Érec’s apology, clinching their tactile reconciliation and evincing a kind of intimacy and trust across gender lines that seems nearly miraculous after the terrible separation of Érec’s apparent death. Shortly after Érec makes his apology speech, the couple meets with a knight who nearly kills Érec, but is revealed to be their friend, Guivret. At Guivret’s castle, Érec and Énide rest, and she takes care of Érec’s battle wounds. Her jealous insistence carries its own dense meaning, showing that she accepts Érec’s forgiveness while allowing her to atone for her own part in their quest:

Son seignor desarme et devest,
Si li a ses plaies lavees
Et essuies et bendees,
Car autrui n’i lessa tochier.
Or ne li set que reprochier
Érec, qui bien l’a esprovee :
Vers li a grant amor trovee. (5124-30)

She disarms and undresses him,
And washes his wounds,
And wipes and bandages them,
For she would not let another touch him.
Now Érec has nothing for which to reproach her,
He who has tested her thoroughly:
He has found great love for her.

Énide performs the service of a squire by disarming Érec, echoing their first meeting where she stabled his horse, but now her touch has the valence of the intimate, deeply involved attention that only a lover can provide. The gendered implications of her touch are dizzying. For one thing, that Érec could allow Énide to take care of him in this way demonstrates profound trust. Mary Frances Wack describes how greatly “physical strength, autonomy, and bodily wholeness” were “valued by knights...[and] also deeply ingrained in their sense of self and of their desirability”; it would be easy to imagine that no knight would allow his beloved to see his vulnerability without serious consideration.⁶³ Furthermore, these combat wounds are heavily coded as masculine: after an earlier skirmish that ended up bringing the knights together as friends, Érec and Guivret bind up each other’s wounds “par amor et par franchise” (3919), using their own shirts as bandages. The contrast between violence and care here is so jarring that Chrétien remarks on it himself, noting “Onques de si fiere bataille / Ne fu si douce dessevraile” (“Never from such fierce battle / Was there such a sweet separation,” 3917-18). There is indeed something startlingly sweet about these two combatants, equally adept at inflicting injury and unable to disarm each other, pausing to acknowledge the mutual pain they now share. Énide of course does not participate directly in combat in this way, and so her

⁶³ Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries*, 171.

treatment of Érec's wounds is unidirectional and calls attention to the contrast of gender difference: the kind of violence Érec's body is subject to is specifically masculine, and at the same time, he has been wounded in order to protect her. Although Énide has been physically threatened, the violence she might suffer is sexual and private, not publicly chivalric. The Comte de Limors striking her does not publicly improve her reputation, and her stoic defiance only has the ability to impress Érec, who may or may not have been able to notice it. Her bandaging of his wounds in particular recalls his suffering right before the Limors episode, where "totes ses bandes tranchierent" (4586), unbeknownst to Énide. Yet this is not the terrifying confrontation with the weakened, wounded male body that Énide experiences as she sees Érec fall as if dead; here, his wounds are manageable, able to be repaired with her loving touch, and she does not flinch from their gory reality. Her touch, aimed at making his body whole, ends up restoring the strength of their love: painstakingly caring for Érec's wounds enacts a kind of emotional alchemy, divesting both of them of any remaining resentment and reminding Érec of his love for her. This is a powerful moment of reconnection that discourse could not make happen.

It is also a moment that Érec himself could not make happen. This second round of touch which helps repair Érec's body, restore his love for Énide, and resolve the separation of gender difference is entirely of Énide's doing. In comparison with Érec's embrace of Énide during his apology, it is much more complex as well as far more unusual; a wife attending to her husband's wounds is startlingly intimate, where a husband embracing his wife is commonplace. This reconnection is Énide's most masterful instance of creating room for maneuver, and she does so in this scene for both herself and Érec. By insisting that she be the only one to touch Érec, she creates a space outside of courtly convention where her touch can heal both literally and figuratively, and which transcends the dichotomy of male violence and female suffering with intimate, tender, and – importantly – nonsexualized, affectionate touch. That Énide is the author of this nondiscursive but nevertheless communicative interlude, juxtaposed so closely with Érec's appeal to touch, suggests a kind of canniness at maneuvering within patriarchal courtly expectations to which she has access because of and not in spite of her subject position as a woman.

Coda: Pleasure and Difference

In the concluding section of this chapter, I will look at three moments of conclusion that help mark the end of Érec and Énide's quest: their sexual reconciliation, Énide's narration of the quest at the end of the "Joie de la Cour" episode, and Érec's narration of the quest to King Arthur in front of his court. Like Érec's apology, each of these moments leaves questions unanswered, and what I want to suggest is that the ultimate significance of the quest is ambivalent; that is, Chrétien allows the quest to mean different things for Énide and for Érec. However, this difference does not disrupt their unity as a couple, but rather serves to strengthen it, leading them to their ultimate elevation as king and queen of Érec's inherited kingdom.

After the paired instances of reconciling touch, Érec and Énide finally are able to navigate desire once more. When they engage in sexual activity for the first time since abstaining during the quest, it is presented as a reward for a lesson learned, rather than a threat to either's reputation. Rather than simply pleasurable, sex here is figured as its own kind of communication, which carries an agreed-upon meaning that must be translated for the reader;

in this scene, Érec and Énide do not speak to each other for us to witness, but the general sense of their interaction can be conveyed:

Or sont nu a nu en un lit,
Et li uns l'autre acole et baise ;
N'est rien nule qui tant lor plaise.
Tant ont eü mal et ennui,
Il por li, et ele por lui,
Or ont faite lor penitance. (5240-45)

Now they are naked together in the same bed,
And the one holds and kisses the other;
There is nothing that pleases them so much.
They had had so much pain and grief,
He for her, and she for him:
Now they have completed their suffering.

At last, touch and pleasure are again mutual. No speech is exchanged between Érec and Énide; this is yet another instance of the way in which inexact and inscrutable touch must function as a form of communication in the absence of discursive negotiation. As in the couple's *nuit de nocés*, pleasure and sexualized touch brings relief, but now, it is the more ambiguous relief of reconciliation rather than the straightforward fulfillment of desire. In this moment, the suffering of the quest is understood to be shared, or at least equivalent; it is no longer Érec testing or punishing Énide, but an ordeal they have undergone together. While it is not clear whether this is the couple's agreement, or Chrétien's narrator's commentary, it is important to note that Érec and Énide are united at once by pleasure and by some kind of mutual understanding.

The act of coitus itself takes on a new meaning in this scene, which is also shared. Unlike the *nuit de nocés*, intercourse can only be referred to coyly when it causes pleasure rather than pain, but it still carries meaning. Chrétien abruptly pulls the curtain closed on this scene with "Dou soreplus me doi taisir" ("I should be quiet about the rest," 5248), although he makes sure to clarify, that as a result of this "soreplus," "Or ont lor amor refermee / Et lor grant dolor obliee" ("Now they have reaffirmed their love / And forgotten their great suffering," 5249-50). Intercourse, once a trial to be endured that transformed Énide alone, or a lascivious pleasure the couple overindulged in, now works to bring Érec and Énide together and carry them forward. Their reciprocal pleasure results in their equal forgetting of the difficult, painful trial they have endured together, and from this point on, the couple will act in perfect harmony; this scene marks the definitive conclusion of their reconciliation.

However, once out of the privacy of the marital bedchamber, their quest takes on a different meaning for each of them. After the "Joie de la Cour" episode, Érec's last combat of the romance before returning to Arthur's court, Énide speaks at length with her cousin about her marriage. This is her last monologue of the text, and like Érec's apology, it seems like it should offer more clues than it does as to how to interpret the events of the romance. She speaks of her love for Érec, and his love for her (6282-6310). Then, Chrétien's narration reports that she tells the story of the quest, but her articulation of the story is glossed over. This demurral, however, does not silence her – rather, it signals the importance of her role in the romance as a whole:

Bien li raconte l'aventure,

Tot mot a mot, sanz nul relais ;
Mais a raconter le vos lais,
Por ce que d'ennui croist son conte
Qui deus foiz une chose conte. (6314-18)

She recounts the adventure well,
Everything, word for word, leaving nothing out;
But I will leave off telling it to you,
Because he who tells the same story twice
Only adds boredom to his tale.

While Énide is a skilled, accurate storyteller, her retelling can be elided because we have already heard the story she is telling. With this, Chrétien confirms that most of the romance we have just heard has indeed focused on Énide's perspective, because it is Énide's story; we do not need to hear it again the way she would tell it, since it would give us nothing new. He is far more ironic in describing Érec's retelling to Arthur and his court:

Ses aventures lor reconte,
Que nule n'en i entroblie.
Cuidiez vos or que je vos die
Quex acoisons le fist movoir ?
Naie ; que bien savez le voir
Et de ce et de l'autre chose,
Si con je la vos ai escluse. (6468-74)

He recounts his adventures to them,
Such that he forgets none of them.
Do you think that now I will say
What reasons made him take off?
No; for well you know the truth
About this thing and that other thing,
Just as I have disclosed them already.

Érec is not telling the shared story of his quest with Énide, but of his own adventures; where with Énide's retelling, Chrétien had referenced the "conte," here he reminds the reader of the "voir." Érec is not lying, necessarily, but is he telling the whole truth? The story he tells is about all the skirmishes he has won, finishing with the story of Comte de Limors (6480-87), and at the end, he requests that Arthur allow Guivret to remain at court with him. It is not a story about the nuances of intersubjective communication, but about purely chivalric exploits which showcase the valor of Érec and his companion-at-arms. As Burns would have it, it is "a *conte* about men from which women are absent."⁶⁴

Chrétien's rhetorical question preceding Érec's retelling is a wink to the reader that signals not only that he does not wish to repeat himself, but also that this is his last chance to clarify, and he refuses to. If we already know the truth, he implies, it is because we already understand Énide's version of events, and her attempts to elucidate Érec's obscurity are the most narrative guidance Chrétien will ever give. Énide is not the "real" narrator of *Érec et*

⁶⁴ Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak*, 164.

Énide, and Chrétien's endorsement of her perspective does not amount to a sweeping valorization of female speech; these separate, parallel retellings do not upend the entirety of the narrative that has come before them. What the differences between *Énide's* and *Érec's* stories illustrate is that women and men cannot help but be shaped by the gendered expectations of a sharply divided society, but that that divide need not be devastating. Despite the different narratives they assign to the quest, *Érec* and *Énide* remain unified, however inscrutably, by the nondiscursive elements of love and desire.

In many other twelfth-century romance texts – most notably the Tristan legend, which will be the subject of my next chapter – love serves to open discursive expression for female characters, and the ideals of the love relationship are represented by conversation between men and women. *Érec et Énide* presents a different version of love. This seemingly dark, strange romance portrays the inner workings of love as fundamentally unknowable and contingent, both to the couple themselves and to a reader. Yet this unknowability need not be read as entirely pessimistic, and must not be, because love allows those partners to create room for maneuver within courtly societal expectations that hold men and women apart from each other. If in this text, courtly society looks particularly grim for female characters, it is in part to highlight those moments when *Énide* manages to evade its strictures. Chrétien portrays not only the unrelenting patriarchy of courtly values and the unfreedoms afforded to both genders but also – no less importantly – the fumbling, sincere, deeply private attempts of his characters to maneuver in and around those constraints in order to find the “*joie et délit*” he unusually describes in detail. Those attempts are inevitably informed by gendered restrictions and are not always readily visible to the modern reader. But for a modern reader who is, quite rightly, trained to read medieval literature only for its systems of oppression, I want to propose a reading of *Érec et Énide* that uncovers the fleeting moments where its protagonists grasp at human connection beyond, and outside of, the extremely determined social context that seeks to define and limit even the most intimate relationships. That *Érec* and *Énide* never really arrive at a fully articulated mutual understanding – or that their newly reconciled relationship is never fully represented to the reader – does not mean that they have failed in their attempt; rather, it attests to the power of the courtly interdictions in regard to gender difference and affective and discursive expression. These interdictions do remain in place at the end of the romance, unable to be shaken by individuals. The optimism, or hopefulness, of this romance lies in the room for maneuver that *Énide* especially is able to navigate. Chrétien suggests, almost despite himself, that intersubjective communication is possible across the gender divide, and that it requires trial and error and a willingness to move beyond the discursive. There is room for maneuver in texts that appear conventional or canonical – and even within marriage, the most conventional relationship in romance. This elusive openness is a quality we must be alert to when reading Chrétien, and early romance in general, if we are ever to understand the refinements and ambiguities of this unruly genre.

III

“Assez en ay or dit a sage”: Reception and Evocation in the Fragmented Tristan Legend

Ce qu'on a pu dire ici de l'attente, de l'angoisse, du souvenir, n'est jamais qu'un supplément modeste, offert au lecteur pour qu'il en saisisse, y ajoute, en retranche et le passe à d'autres... (Le livre, idéalement, serait une coopérative : « Aux Lecteurs – aux Amoureux – Réunis. ») – Roland Barthes¹

Where the previous two chapters have investigated the speech and dialogue of couples who struggle to make themselves understood and to understand each other, this chapter will focus on Tristan and Yseut, whose overwhelming love is, at least in part, demonstrated by their remarkable ease in communication. Where Píramus and Tisbé struggle to communicate in the midst of a situation that is hostile to their love, and where Erec and Enide's mutual opacity causes them to work almost at cross-purposes over much of their romance, once Tristan and Yseut fall in love, they are consistently allied with each other against the rest of the world. While their faith in each other occasionally falters, the difficulty is only temporary, and arises only when they are separated; when they are together, their loyalty is indefatigable and their bond unbreakable. Even apart, they remain linked in an almost supernatural way, to the point that in the dénouement of Thomas's version, Yseut describes their love as granting them a kind of telepathy: “De tel manere est nostre amur,” she says in despair as a storm bears down on the ship that is supposed to bring her to Tristan, “Ne puis senz vus sentir dolor.”² This extradiscursive sense of understanding does not replace speech, however, and in many episodes, the lovers are portrayed as verbally gifted. Scholars have often noted Yseut's extraordinary discursive agility and the unusual amount of agency her speech affords her – for example, in Bérroul's version of the Tristan legend, her clever misdirection of her conversation with Tristan when the lovers are surprised by Marc spying on them, and her orchestration of the public oath of loyalty to Marc. So, too, have they drawn attention to Tristan's cunning deceptions in speech, for instance in the truthful fictions of the *folies* of Oxford and Berne. Between themselves, verbal communication takes on a different valence: speaking to each other, Tristan and Yseut do not use dialogue to dissimulate, but to remind, recall, and re-narrate the primacy of their love. For this couple, dialogue is an intimate and often playful interweaving of associations that only rarely aims to exchange or negotiate meaning; in this way, their underlying understanding of each other sets their private speech apart from their public speech, and also bends the formal expectations of what dialogue does in romance. Tristan and Yseut's speech to each other relies very little on the explicit pragmatics of dialogue, and instead emphasizes evocation over denotation. When they speak, or send messages, to each other, what

¹ Roland Barthes, “Comment est fait ce livre,” in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 9.

² “Our love is such that/I cannot feel pain without you,” Thomas d'Angleterre, *Tristan et Yseut*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, lines 3065-66.

is highlighted is successful – even seamless – reception, the ability of the other to intuit all that is not said as well as to understand what is.

This evocative quality is difficult to pin down, and as a result, instances of direct or reported discourse between Tristan and Yseut can appear enormously fraught: exhaustively glossed for no apparent reason, repetitive, or even precious. This is the case for the three texts I will analyze in this chapter. In Marie de France's "Chèvrefeuille," Tristan ostensibly sends a message to Yseut, but this message is described and re-narrated in so many different ways that what he "really" writes has been debated by generations of scholars. In Bérout's version, after Tristan and Yseut decide to return to court from the forest, they have nearly the same conversation about their parting twice, about a hundred lines apart. The couple's avowal of love in the Carlisle fragment showcases wordplay, not love, in a way that many scholars have read as self-consciously literary. These fragments of the Tristan legend reveal an attention to the ways in which meaning can be shared through evocation, and to the cooperation between interlocutors that perfectly successful reception entails. This model of communication, I argue, encapsulates the ideal of love put forth by the Tristan story: a unity so all-encompassing that it eventually leads to the lovers' deaths, and also, no less importantly, a delight in shared understanding that is expressed in the transmission of evocative messages. It is this pleasurable sense of shared understanding that separates the twelfth-century Old French verse Tristan tradition from other romance texts of the period that also emphasize communication between partners as an integral part of the love relationship. The dialogues the couple participate in, and the messages they send to each other, emphasize the role of reception without assigning that role to either lover exclusively; they are both equally adept at understanding the other. In this way, because communication between Tristan and Yseut requires both of their attention and understanding, the Tristan legend seems to propose a model of desire that enables two subjects to define themselves in relation to the other without one's will superseding the other's, resulting in an intriguing and unusual near-equilibrium. Unlike the texts in previous chapters, the Tristan tradition does not problematize gender difference as an impediment to communication. This is not to say that gender difference is entirely effaced, but that within the couple, their experience of love and desire unites instead of separates them. When dealing with the outside world, the lovers are constrained by their unequal gender roles as well as by their difference in social position (Yseut as queen, Tristan as knight); overall, however, the legend imagines extraordinary love in the form of extraordinarily direct, nearly unmediated, communication.

Yet the narrative which extols this ideal of communication perfected by love is not accessible to modern readers in its entirety, because the material transmission of the Old French verse Tristan texts is fragmented. There is no complete, extant Old French verse Tristan; what remains are pieces of longer texts broken up more or less arbitrarily, and a few atomized episodes. The "piteux état" of the manuscripts, as Christiane Marchello-Nizia phrases it in her introduction to the *Pléiade Tristan et Yseut*, exerts its own "fascination"; she notes that despite the existence of the expansive thirteenth-century prose version of the Tristan story, "ce sont ces bribes, ces fragments qui au siècle dernier ont séduit les érudits, puis le public."³ To call the pieces of text that have come down to us not only "fragments" but also "bribes" – as in, the scraps and leavings given to beggars, insignificant remnants – and to speak of fascination and seduction, is to gesture toward an aesthetic experience of reading that depends upon seeing the

³ Christiane Marchello-Nizia, "Introduction" to *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, xiii.

text's status as both damaged and charming, impoverished and alluring.⁴ It is to treat these texts purely as philological fragments which, as Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy describe in their famous discussion of the fragment in German Romantic writing, have "la valeur de la ruine." Like an architectural ruin, the philological fragment is evocative, meaning it gestures toward a lost whole that works on two almost paradoxical levels: "ce qui par là se trouve à la fois rappelé comme perdu et présenté dans une sorte d'esquisse (voire d'épure), c'est toujours l'unité vivante d'une grande individualité, œuvre ou auteur."⁵ The mechanism of evocation reveals the tension and movement between the present part and the past whole. The philological fragment can only gesture backward in time to this lost whole, calling attention to the complete text's lost-ness while also standing in as representative of it. This may be an interesting, and even generative, way to read a fragmented literary tradition; however, to read the Old French verse *Tristan* this way exclusively risks stripping it of some of its narrative power, and missing any effects of evocation that might remain in the extant texts. If the extant *Tristan* fragments are only treated as philological fragments – literary ruins – then they can only pose philological questions. The efforts to explain, reconstruct, and hypothesize about the complete versions of now-fragmented texts, so thoroughly explored by scholars from the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, attests to this limitation.⁶

In a formal sense, too narrow a focus on the ruination of the *Tristan* texts eliminates the possibility of investigating the nuances of how this narrative tradition was read and understood by medieval audiences and authors. It flattens out the difference between the *Tristan* fragments that were produced by accidents of transmission – the *material* fragments – and the *narrative* fragments, the short episodes that were intended to portray only pieces of the *Tristan* story. This distinction is crucial, as the extant Old French verse *Tristan*'s narrative fragments indicate that the *Tristan* legend was treated as episodic at least some of the time. For example, in Marie de France's "Chèvrefeuille," Marie briefly gestures toward the entirety of the story, but conceives her *lai* as a self-contained vignette. In a similarly episodic way, the *folies* of Berne and Oxford treat *Tristan*'s disguised return to the court as a stand-alone adventure, albeit in slightly different manuscript contexts.⁷ In her analysis of "Chèvrefeuille" as fragmented, Kathryn Gravdal convincingly illustrates the limitations of modern literary approaches, noting dryly that "certain medieval texts are theoretically unintelligible," that is, they do not conform to narratological conceptions of how a story can or should be told, despite being demonstrably "well-received and understood in the Middle Ages."⁸ She argues an episode like

⁴ *Trésor de la langue française : Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)*, s.v. "Bribe." This also has a third, figurative meaning of "savoir très fragmentaire, connaissances rudimentaires."

⁵ Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'exigence fragmentaire," in *L'absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, 62.

⁶ Joseph Bédier's 1905 *Le "Roman de Tristan" par Thomas: Poème du XIIe siècle*, which I discuss in a later section, is my primary example of the effort to reconstruct Tristanian texts. However, Félix Lecoy's famous article, "Sur l'étendue probable du *Tristan* de Thomas" appears in 1988; the interest in reconstruction clearly does not end after the turn of the century.

⁷ See Mireille Demaules's notes on the manuscripts, "La Folie de Tristan: Version d'Oxford" in *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, 1325-6 and "La Folie de Tristan: Version de Berne" in the same volume, 1343-44. The *folie* d'Oxford follows a fragment of Thomas, whereas the *folie* de Berne is part of a manuscript that Demaules describes as "une petite bibliothèque ambulante qui semble refléter le répertoire d'un jongleur" (1343).

⁸ Kathryn Gravdal, "Fragmentation and Imagination in the Old French *Tristan*: Marie de France's 'Lai du Chievrefoil,'" 69.

“Chèvrefeuille” contains enough references to the broader Tristan narrative that “it is not necessary to invoke the existence of an otherwise unknown original and perfect version” — that is, the episode stands on its own as a self-sufficient literary work, and must be read as such.⁹ I would take this further: seeing the Tristan texts as defined by their fragmentation risks being limited by the perspective of a modern reader, who understands all these pieces as incomplete, while the context of the *folies* and “Chèvrefeuille” imply that the narrative must have appeared episodic or modular to a twelfth-century audience in addition to its now-lost “complete” forms.

Yet the idea of the fragment’s evocation of a larger whole cannot be dismissed, not because of any frameworks for understanding the modern fragment, like Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s, but because of a key concept for approaching medieval literary texts, Paul Zumthor’s *mouvance*, which was first articulated in his 1971 *Essai de poétique médiévale*, and further elaborated in terms of the part-whole relationship in the later “Intertextualité et mouvance.” For Zumthor, every individual medieval text is based on a “modèle,” and texts are not successions of imitations of these models but belong to a “tradition.” He specifies, “Si l’on pose en principe...que tout texte actualise des virtualités préexistantes, le terme de *modèle* désigne ces virtualités comme telles.”¹⁰ Thinking of the virtual narrative behind a text is already a useful idea for the Tristan tradition, removing the pressure to find or imagine a definitively reconstructed whole text to fit around a fragment. But Zumthor goes further. In his understanding of the virtual model and the actual text, each individual text is itself a fragment that evokes the model: “Actualisé dans le texte, le pré-texte virtuel y manifeste un dynamisme connotatif qui lui est propre: quel que soit le dessein dénotatif du texte, un univers traditionnel s’y trouve ainsi évoqué.”¹¹ In textual traditions such as those of *fine amour* and the *matière de Bretagne*, “la puissance allusive, connotative en est proprement illimitée,” whereas — or perhaps by extension — any individual text can only grasp at a fraction of its virtual model: “le texte...est et ne peut être que fragment. L’actualisation par cela même qu’elle provient d’un *faire* — ne peut porter que sur une partie du vaste ensemble virtuel, de sorte que ce que le texte dit n’a de sens complet que reversé dans la totalité des discours de la tradition.”¹² Denotation, which might seem to appear to be the most important part of any written text, turns out to be only a jumping-off point for connotation and evocation; this calling-out and calling-up is limitless, for Zumthor, within the boundaries of literary and cultural history. Limited by the instance of its writing, the text cannot hope to represent everything in the virtual whole, and can only fall short of its model. This is not a value judgement on the insufficiency or brokenness of the medieval text, but an innate characteristic of narrative: the actual evokes the virtual, but cannot hold the entirety of the virtual all at once. Zumthor’s valorization of evocation is even more sweeping in the context of a textual tradition of fragments, vignettes, and episodes like that of the Old French Tristan: focusing on evocation frees critical attention from the preoccupation of reconstructing a whole text, and underscores the uniquely unruly traits of this group of texts, making these qualities (which Françoise Barteau describes as “le caractère obstinément rebelle” and “la polysémie obstinément scintillante”¹³) into features rather than flaws.

⁹ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰ Paul Zumthor, “Intertextualité et mouvance,” 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Françoise Barteau, *Les romans de Tristan et Yseut: introduction à une lecture plurielle*, 6. Interestingly, Zumthor somewhat obliquely derides this work in his article “Médiéviste ou pas”: “La chance de survie...de nos études réside dans une remise en question de la proximité médiévale...afin de fonder un intérêt pour ce déjà-vécu comme tel. On l’oublie parfois, dans l’enthousiasme de tentations rénovatrices,

This model of an imagined back-and-forth between the actual and the virtual also echoes and draws out the enthralling fiction at the core of the Tristan legend: that of the couple who holds between them the entirety of their love. It is not just the perfection of their love that makes Tristan and Yseut's relationship so exceptional, it is also its completeness: they are wholly devoted to each other, entirely in sync with each other. Yet in terms of the time they spend together, their love, like the textual tradition that enshrines it, is fragmented and interrupted. The actual gestures toward the ideal, falling short every time, at least on the earthly plane.¹⁴ And so the question I want to pose in response to Zumthor's theorization of the relationship between the text and its virtual model, in the context of the Old French verse Tristan, is in what ways do these fragments, material or narrative, gesture toward the virtual whole? On a basic formal level, the three fragments and vignettes I will read in this chapter – "Chèvrefeuille," the lovers' return from the forest in Béroul, and the Carlisle fragment – all mark their belonging to the larger Tristan narrative by gesturing toward the plot of the whole story and/or summarizing previous events. That is to say, despite the arbitrary material fragmentation of Béroul's version of *Tristan*, and the truly "piteux état" of the Carlisle fragment, these texts nevertheless reveal an episodic organization despite their inclusion in much longer literary works. What is at stake here, formally, is not only the question of the accidental "fragment philologique" but also of the episode: while both depend on evocation and require careful reception, the episode evinces a distinction of literary genre, or subgenre. The episode makes use of evocation as a narrative strategy; it calls on the reader's knowledge of the Tristan story and relies on that knowledge to contextualize the importance of the episode.

In this chapter, I will argue that the mechanisms of interweaving knowledge of the whole narrative with the moment of the episode at hand – that is, the poetics of evocation – mirror those at work in the instances of communication between Tristan and Yseut. That evocation emerges as so fundamental, on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels, to the Tristan legend illustrates a profound and enduring preoccupation with the relationship between the discursive world and the affective one. When Tristan and Yseut privilege evocation over denotation at every turn, their dialogues and messages echo the movement between the part and the whole mentioned by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, and elaborated by Zumthor: speech, for Tristan and Yseut, functions like a textual fragment in that it evokes a virtual whole. What they strive to evoke in each other is no less than the full understanding of their love, a poetics of evocation that is not limited to the discursive, but aims for the affective. In the three episodes I will examine, both the form of the episode and the dialogues or messages at their centers attempt to bridge the gap between wordless affect and what is written. The poetics of evocation, as it is used as an authorial strategy in these Tristanian episodes, and as it is deployed by the lovers themselves in dialogue and through messages, are shown to be a powerful lens for understanding as well as experiencing large, unruly narratives. At the same time that these texts are interested in the literary limits of how love can be described, however, and how the right narrative strategies might make otherwise incomprehensible emotion understandable, they also reinforce the immediacy and potential of speech and intuition over the complications of the written. In this way, this tradition makes known the incompleteness of

écartant les exigences propres du discours historiographique. Telle 'lecture multiple' du roman de Tristan débouche sur un amalgame de contrevérités et de truismes, tout est dans tout, perspective moins universelle que millénariste," 317.

¹⁴ Cf. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Shaping Romance: Interpretation, Truth, and Closure in Twelfth-Century French Fictions*, 34-35.

the discursive, in the way that affect can never be fully represented by writing or even by speech; thus evocation is a crucial part of the communicative potential of affectively charged texts. Reading for a poetics of evocation reveals “Chèvrefeuille” as a text that foregrounds an extratextual flash of understanding rather than, as scholars have usually assumed, a purely discursive problem. Similarly, the lovers’ parting as they leave the forest in Bérout’s *Tristan* illustrates how subtly affect informs and even supersedes dialogue, and the sublime dialogic complicity showcased by the Carlisle fragment shows how even a small amount of surviving text can expand our understanding of an entire tradition.

“Tutes les lettres i conut”: The Reception of a Message in Marie de France’s Tristanian *lai*

While Marie de France’s *lai* “Chèvrefeuille” has so often been discussed because of the infamous problem of the message Tristan inscribes on a hazel branch, I will suggest that this question of writing and reading is not in fact the main interest of the text. Rather, the enigma that drives the *lai* is one of reception and evocation, which becomes clearer if we read “Chèvrefeuille” as a deliberately Tristanian episode rather than a stand-alone *lai*. The idea that “Chèvrefeuille” explicitly problematizes discursive exchange is deeply engrained in the critical tradition. Its lack of narrative action – the entire storyline is that Tristan returns from exile in order to see Yseut, and succeeds in doing so – and its brevity – at only 118 lines, it is the shortest of Marie’s *lais* – seem to foreground how Tristan lets Yseut know of his arrival as its central interpretive problem. At first glance, this instance of communication appears straightforward: Tristan strips a hazel branch, carves letters into it, and leaves it for the queen to notice as she rides through the forest. When she sees the stick and its letters, she immediately recognizes it as Tristan’s, and stops so that they can meet in private. The complication of “Chèvrefeuille” appears in Marie’s explanation of Tristan’s physical signal; she specifies that Yseut recognizes “tutes les lettres,” (“all the letters,” 82)¹⁵ but leaves it ambiguous as to what those letters are, or what message they spell out, even as she spends almost twenty lines relaying the “summe de l’escrit,” the sum, or meaning, of what is written (61). To many modern readers, Marie’s layered re-narration of Tristan’s message makes “Chèvrefeuille” seem like a tantalizing logic puzzle that begs the question of what exactly Tristan inscribed on the hazel wood. Proposing a solution to this problem leads to readings of the *lai* that tend to overemphasize its investment in reported discourse and reading, a situation that is complicated even further by variations between the two extant manuscripts. An overly literal approach, however, obscures the aesthetic achievement of this text, which attempts to portray not the literal mechanics of Tristan’s written message, but an instance of the kind of exchange and understanding that characterizes the couple’s unique love. It is an evocative *lai*, referencing a larger Tristan narrative without elucidating it, whose apparent complications outline an attempt to clarify the lovers’ instant understanding.

The passage that concerns Tristan’s message constitutes about a third of the *lai* (lines 51-82), and seems at once laboriously explicit and ambiguous. It is preceded by a short introduction and a quick situating of this episode within the larger narrative: having been exiled, Tristan misses Yseut, and so returns to Cornwall to see her. He plans to intercept her as

¹⁵ Old French citations are taken from Jean Rychner’s edition, in *Les Lais de Marie de France*, unless otherwise noted; translations are mine.

she passes by on a journey through the countryside. As he waits for her, he prepares his signal: he strips a hazel branch and writes on it with his knife for her to see. Marie first reports that Tristan writes his name,¹⁶ describing this as an agreed-upon signal between the lovers that Yseut will recognize; she then relates Tristan's message in indirect discourse for fourteen lines, including both an explanation of Tristan's actions, and the botanical comparison of the honeysuckle (which gives the *lai* its name) and the hazel from which it cannot be separated. The signal phrase "Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit" and the following relative pronouns have given some critics the impression that Marie is reporting the actual text of Tristan's message, beginning in indirect discourse and moving into free indirect discourse:

Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit
 Qu'il li aveit mandé e dit
 Que lunges ot ilec esté
 E atendu e surjurné,
 Pur espïer et pur saveir
 Coment il la peüst veoir,
 Kar ne poeit vivre sanz li. (61-7)

This was the sum (meaning) of the message (writing)
 That he had sent and said to her
 That he had been there for a long time,
 Waiting and staying,
 In order to watch and to find out
 How he could see her,
 For he could not live without her.

Marie ends the passage with a couplet in free direct discourse that summarizes the honeysuckle-hazel comparison, and could be read as Tristan addressing Yseut directly: "Bele amie, si est de nus: / Ne vus sanz mei, ne jeo sanz vus!" ("Beautiful *amie*, it is thus with us: / Nor you without me, nor I without you!", 77-78). In the notes to his edition of "Chèvrefeuille," Jean Rychner takes Marie's movement from indirect discourse to free direct discourse as unsurprising: he points out that in other *lais*, for example "Milon," she uses "du style indirect, puis du style indirect libre, pour rapporter le contenu d'un message." He continues, "Si elle passe ici pour finir au style direct, c'est que ces deux vers forment le trait, le cœur de sa nouvelle."¹⁷ Many critics do not see this passage as so straightforward, in part because of the "Ceo fu la summe" phrase, and in part because even the least complicated details of the text can be interrogated in order to produce widely divergent readings.

Overwhelmingly, readings of this *lai* – including Rychner's – focus on the denotative, not evocative, nature of Tristan's message, without reaching many satisfying conclusions.¹⁸ In interpreting Marie's glosses of Tristan's message, three general categories of hypothesis emerge:

¹⁶ "Une codre trencha par mi, / Tute quarreie la fendi. / Quant il ad paré le bastun, / De sun cutel escrit sun nun" ("Chèvrefeuille" ed. Rychner, lines 51-54); "He cut a hazel tree in half, / then he split it and squared it off. / When he had prepared the stick, / he wrote his name on it with his knife."

¹⁷ Rychner, *Lais*, 277.

¹⁸ Keith Busby's article "'Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit' (*Chevrefeuille*, line 61) again," which I will discuss later in this section, is a notable exception: he writes that this *lai* "derives its poetic intensity precisely from the fact that its content and its language are largely connotative and not denotative. It does not especially matter whether the poem 'makes sense' as that phrase is traditionally understood" (2).

first, that Tristan writes his name only, as Marie initially states in line 51¹⁹; second, that Tristan writes everything that follows “Ceo fu la summe de l’escrit” (sixteen lines of text, including the final couplet)²⁰; third, a kind of hybrid hypothesis where Tristan writes his name and the final “Bele amie” couplet, but without the intervening indirect discourse.²¹ To push the interpretive possibilities of this passage even further, scholars have suggested two additional elements that could be at play: a letter or previous communication between Tristan and Yseut, sent in advance of his arrival and indicated by line 62 of the Harley manuscript, “qu’il li aveit mandé e dit,” and the chance that Marie may have been referring obliquely to the Irish writing system of Ogam, which might allow for a long message to be compressed into a small number of symbols that would fit on a hazel stick.²² Additionally, some critics have suggested unusual readings of individual words; for example, Ana Maria Valero argues that “nun” in line 51 should be read as a derivation of the Latin “nuntio,” so that this line actually *confirms* that the entire message is in fact inscribed on the hazel stick.²³ There is something dizzying about so many interpretations being wrung from so few lines of text, without any sense of getting closer to a conclusive reading.

Close reading of medieval texts is usually to be encouraged: writing about the extant fragments of Thomas’s *Tristan*, David F. Hult critiques scholars who devote “little attention to the letter of the text”; in a similar vein, Rychner subordinates “la question de la vraisemblance” to “l’interprétation littérale” as he concludes his discussion of the passage of “Chèvrefeuille” under analysis here.²⁴ But in the case of Tristan’s message to Yseut, too narrow a focus on “the letter of the text,” either in terms of what the “letter” is and/or what is literally present in one specific passage lead to wildly different solutions for the textual puzzle “Chèvrefeuille” apparently presents. One end of the literality spectrum might be represented by the clever proposal William Sayers makes in his elegantly informative article “Marie de France’s ‘Chievrefoil,’ Hazel Rods, and the Ogam Letters ‘Coll’ and ‘Uillenn.’” He suggests that what Tristan writes is a visual pun combining the Ogam letters that symbolize “hazel” and “honeysuckle.”²⁵ Yet, Sayers admits, “The original learned wordplay... would not have come down to Marie,” although he maintains that “some knowledge of the Irish writing system is apparent in the *lai*.”²⁶ For Sayers, the key to understanding the text requires another language

¹⁹ Leo Spitzer, “La ‘Lettre sur la baguette de coudrier’ dans le Lai du *Chievrefueil*,”; Jean Frappier, “Contribution au débat sur le lai du Chèvrefeuille,” in *Du Moyen Age à la Renaissance : études d’histoire et de critique littéraire*; Roger Dragonetti, “Le Lai narratif de Marie de France : Pur quei fu fez, coment e dunt.”

²⁰ Namely Rychner, “Notes,” and Gertrude Schoepperle, “*Chievrefoil*”; also Maurice Cagnon, “*Chievrefueil* and the Ogam Tradition.”

²¹ Ana Maria Valero, “El lai del Chievrefueil de Maria de Francia.” Overall, see Demaules, “Note sur le texte et sur la traduction,” 1301-04, for a thorough *précis* of the state of “Chèvrefeuille” criticism up to 1995. Richard Trachsler, in his article, “Tant de lettres sur un si petit *bastun*: Le *Lai du Chèvrefeuille* devant la critique littéraire (1200-2000),” provides an overview of Chèvrefeuille scholarship that contextualizes its critical trends within the history of medieval literary studies.

²² The hypothesis of a letter sent by Tristan in advance of this meeting (noted by Busby, 10) is an interpretation I find a bit far-fetched at best and that Jean Frappier calls “antipoétique” in the context of the *lai* (“Contribution au débat,” 41).

²³ Valero citation (108), cited by Rychner, “Notes,” 277.

²⁴ David F. Hult, “Thomas’s *Raisun*: Désir, Vouloir, Pouvoir” in *Shaping Courtliness in Medieval France*, 109, and Rychner, “Notes,” 279.

²⁵ William Sayers, “Marie de France’s ‘Chievrefoil,’ Hazel Rods, and the Ogam Letters ‘Coll’ and ‘Uillenn,’” 7, 9-10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

with its own writing system – a language and writing system from which Marie must have been considerably removed – and the Old French “letter of the text” is actually informed by letters from an unrelated alphabet.

On the other end of the spectrum, the solution proposed by Mireille Demaules, in her edition of “Chèvrefeuille” for the Pléiade *Tristan et Yseut*, illustrates the philological danger of an overinvestment in putting an end to the question of what Tristan writes once and for all. Choosing the Harley manuscript (manuscript *H*) to work from, as most editors have done, she rejects its line 62, “Qu’il li aveit mandé e dit,” instead adopting line 62 of manuscript *S*, which reads “Qui fu el baston que j’é dit.”²⁷ This might be translated as “This was the meaning of the writing / Which was on the stick, as I mentioned,” instead of “That he had sent and said to her.” Demaules justifies this choice by citing the Norse translation of this *lai*, which seems to be based on *H* with the exception of the line in question, which “semble corroborer la leçon de *S*.” She then hypothesizes that the scribe of manuscript *H*, working from the same model as *S*, was not familiar with Ogamic writing, and so found it unrealistic that the entire message could be written on the hazel stick itself. Thus, “soucieux du sens produit par le texte,” he purposefully changes both lines 62 and 109 to create a meaning that is “plus vraisemblable” but also “plus banale,” since “mandé et dit” must certainly refer to a previous letter from Tristan.²⁸ It is only possible for Demaules to make this problematic, and frankly arbitrary, editorial choice because she is reading “Chèvrefeuille” both in the most literal way imaginable and as a fragment – a Romantic ruin of a text –, whose literary function is to represent that which has been lost.²⁹ To treat a medieval text, extant in two manuscripts, as a ruined object in need of repair is, in my view, a profound misprision of what the work of a modern reader faced with a medieval literary text should be. It is not even necessary to agree with Zumthor that “Ce que nous percevons, en chacun des énoncés écrits...c’est moins un achèvement qu’un texte en train de se faire; plutôt qu’une essence, une production” in order to see that Demaules’s style of philological troubleshooting refuses to acknowledge anything beyond the realm of explicit discursive representation, and that doing so does a degree of violence to the work.³⁰ For reading “Chèvrefeuille” too literally in this way means disavowing the role of intuition, extradiscursive communication, and especially evocation. To read a Tristanian text in such a way seems especially egregious, given the legend’s emphasis on the exceptional, almost uncanny, understanding that Tristan and Yseut’s love grants them.

²⁷ London, British Library, Harley 978, fols. 171d-172d. and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, N.a.fr. 1104, fols. 32b-33a; Demaules, “Note,” 1301. In fairness, Demaules does include a transcription of ms. *S* in her notes, so that the serious reader can compare them.

²⁸ Demaules, “Note,” 1304-05. I would add that this kind of manuscript variation is perfectly understandable in the context of the different endings of the Oxford and the Berne *folies*, for example; the author of the Oxford *folie* is more interested in the role of the voice in recognition, where the Berne author is more interested in the idea of testing Yseut’s love. These two texts, however, have rightly been treated as separate versions stemming from different authorial visions; the two manuscripts of “Chèvrefeuille” should be similarly treated. See Bruckner, “Truth in Disguise: The Voice of Renarration in the *Folie Tristan d’Oxford*.”

²⁹ Trachsler has an interesting take on this editorial intervention: “Très vraisemblablement, Mireille Demaules a eu entièrement raison de corriger,” he begins, but admits, “il est possible de défendre plus systématiquement qu’elle ne l’a fait la leçon de *S*” (“Tant de lettres,” 25). He argues for a reconsideration of ms. *S*, and for its reading that “le message était gravé en entier sur le bâton” (30).

³⁰ Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale*, 73.

Yet, it might be argued, Marie herself has a rather literal approach to interacting with texts. In her famous prologue to the *Lais*, often taken as her programmatic statement on reading and writing, she invites the reader to analyze the text, “la lettre” itself:

Custume fu as anciëns,
Ceo testimoine Preciëns,
Es livres que jadis faiseient
Assez oscurement diseient
Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
E ki aprendre les deveient,
K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
E de lur sen le surplus mettre.³¹

The custom among the ancients,
as Priscian testifies,
was that in the books they would write,
they would speak quite obscurely
in order that those who were to come after
and study them
might gloss the letter
and from their own learning, put in additional meaning.

It is usually assumed that Marie’s literary aesthetic, too, involves an intentional authorial withholding coupled with a readerly responsibility to examine and interpret; this seems readily apparent when reading the other *lais*, in which Marie’s narration often leaves out explanations and backstories.³² In the context of “Chèvrefeuille,” the prologue might make Tristan’s message appear to be another example of Marie offering the reader the opportunity to “gloss” something “obscure.” However, I want to suggest that the usual processes of writing, interpretation, and the production of meaning – as outlined by Marie herself or by modern critics – do not work as expected in this *lai* because, for once, it is Marie who is glossing Tristan’s *lettres*, not the reader who must gloss Marie’s.

The signal phrase of line 61, “Ceo fu la summe de l’escrit,” upon which many other readings has hinged, provides several clues to Marie’s gloss. First, the word “escrit”: where the word “lettres” invokes writing or even literature, “escrit” is slightly different in that it can mean “writing,” i.e., what is written, but also “inscription.” This line is nearly always translated as “This was the meaning of the writing,” which is to say, “This was what Tristan wrote.” Substituting “inscription” gives a much more coherent sense to the whole passage: “This was the meaning of the *inscription*” gestures toward the telegraphic nature of certain kinds of letters that are meant to evoke meaning as much as provide it. The inscription at the base of a statue, for example, might be abbreviated but call up a host of significances without needing to spell them out. In this way, just changing the translation of “escrit” takes pressure off of Tristan’s carved letters to contain an entire message; it adds weight to Leo Spitzer’s assertion, for

³¹ Marie de France, “Prologue,” ed. Rychner, lines 9-16.

³² For example, Marie’s extraordinarily economical explanation of the practical considerations of lycanthropy at the beginning of “Bisclavret,” or her silence on the workings of the magical ship in “Guigemar,” among many other such moments.

example, that “il n’y avait sur la baguette de coudrier comme *lettre* que le nom ‘Tristan.’”³³ The idea of an inscription also recalls the evocative nature of a textual fragment, described by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in the context of Romanticism: “bien loin de mettre en jeu la dispersion ou l’éclatement de l’œuvre,” they write, the fragment “inscrit sa pluralité comme exergue de l’œuvre totale, infinie.”³⁴ Tristan’s name, carved into the hazel wood, serves as an *exergue* – an inscription that presents and explains, as an epigraph does – here not for a literary work but for the affective totality of his and Yseut’s love; its purpose is to remind her of him. The “summe” of the inscription is instantaneously available to Yseut, not because she reads its entire text on the hazel stick, but because the symbol of Tristan’s name triggers her understanding of what he means to tell her.

Even as Marie seems to insist on the content of Tristan’s message, she intimates that it is Yseut’s reception of Tristan’s signal, not Tristan’s composition thereof, that is of paramount importance. Yseut’s initial reaction to the hazel stick is extraordinary, and nearly identical in the two manuscripts: “tutes les lettres i conut” in H, “Totes les lettres reconnut” in S (82 in both). She does not read what is written, but recognizes and knows the letters; the text of what is spelled out is beside the point. There is no pragmatic information to be gleaned from the hazel stick, and the “lettres” do not resolve into a word or words: it is not only that the content of the message seems to be elided here, but also that there is no indication of interpretation on Yseut’s part. While Tristan writes his name (“escrit son nun,” line 54) and his carving is referred to as “l’escrit” (61) and “ceo qu’il aveit escrit” (109, Harley; “le bastun qu’il ot escrit,” Paris), Yseut never reads or interprets. Her interaction with the *bastun* moves seamlessly from sight to understanding: “Le bastun vit, bien l’aparceut, / Tutes les letres i conut” (81-2). That Yseut does not read (or “déchiffrer,” as in Demaules’s translation) Tristan’s letters must mean that the significance of the carving is evocative, not denotative; the problem this *lai* poses, or the mystery it seeks to bring to light, is thus one of reception. It is Yseut’s instantaneous appraisal of the hazel stick in her path that requires interrogation, not Tristan’s preparation of the message; it is Yseut’s reaction that requires our gloss.

In a literary text, where words are implicitly assumed to create meaning through reading and interpretation, letters that can be understood without necessarily being read seem to indicate that there must be another operation at work, something that surpasses or escapes literary expectations. Leo Spitzer suggests that Yseut’s ineffable reaction marks the trace of love as a kind of catalyst. In his view, the letters of Tristan’s message are simply Tristan’s name, and he explains the rest of Marie’s description as the presentation of the message’s effect, not its content: “c’était à Yseut de découvrir le sens du message et c’est l’amour seul qui, Tristan le sait, aiguïsera l’intelligence de l’amante, au point de lui faire découvrir l’image du coudrier et du chèvrefeuille.”³⁵ This image of the entwined plants that cannot be separated, he says, is contained in Yseut’s mind and not in the writing of the message itself; love acts to supply or supplement the meaning of Tristan’s physical signal so that as Yseut recognizes Tristan’s name, she is able to intuit the deeper meaning of his message. Jean Frappier, responding to Spitzer, also sees this as a moment that illustrates a kind of phenomenology of interpretation facilitated by love; seeing the hazel stick “répand dans le cœur de la reine l’illumination de la joie, lui fait tout comprendre comme dans un éclair, lui remémore la force vitale de l’amour qui l’unit à

³³ Spitzer, “La ‘Lettre,’” 84.

³⁴ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “L’exigence fragmentaire,” 69.

³⁵ Spitzer, “La ‘Lettre,’” 84. His repetition of “découvrir” here is odd, as this doesn’t seem like a moment of discovery or uncovering, but again, simply recognizing and knowing.

Tristan.³⁶ Love sharpens Yseut's powers of perception so that the sight of Tristan's signal initiates a flash of understanding. For Spitzer, this flash reconnects the separated lovers with a kind of telepathy, and it is this sudden access to a shared understanding that is marked by Marie's shift from indirect to direct discourse. The "Ne vus sanz mei" couplet, then, indicates "un passage, dans l'âme de l'amante sensible, d'un message intellectuellement compris à un message parlant à ses oreilles: c'est l'amour qui évoque la voix de l'amant."³⁷ The significance of the direct discourse here is not only a way for Marie to indicate, as Rychner puts it, "le trait, le cœur de sa nouvelle"; rather, the couplet brings with it the full, vital force of the voice. The evocative potential of Tristan's inscribed signal is affective and sensorial, not only discursive; Yseut might *think* of the meaning of the hazel stick, but she *hears* her beloved's voice. Love, which offers a privileged access to this visceral, unmediated understanding that requires receptivity and not the work of analysis, might then be opposed to, or at least barely connected to, the discursive work of reading and interpretation. That is to say, Tristan's letters in and of themselves are of little importance; if what he carves into the hazel stick is merely a signal that is only comprehensible to Yseut because of the intervention of love, then no words are really necessary.

If these letters are evocative, not denotative, then Marie's renarration of Tristan's message, which might appear inelegantly exhaustive, actually serves to take on a straightforward denotative function by explaining what exactly has been evoked. The phrase "Ceo fu la summe" supports this: far from being a unique way to describe a written message, Keith Busby convincingly demonstrates that this phrase would have been immediately recognizable to an Anglo-Norman audience as a formula of clarification. In the Anglo-Norman verse religious texts he cites as evidence, "ceo fu la summe" is a straightforward way to solidify oral speech into written text: the phrase "is employed not only in connection with messages, but frequently to refer to the written record of an oral act; the writing bestows authority...on the word."³⁸ While Tristan's letters are not spoken, they are ephemeral, and so against this intertextual backdrop, "Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit" indicates a translation from the carved inscription that inspires Yseut's understanding into the more durable form of verse. Instead of complicating Marie's presentation of Tristan's message, this reading of line 61 opens up the possibility that, in fact, Marie as the narrator is performing interpretive work on the reader's behalf; it's Tristan, not Marie, who is writing *oscurement* here, and what needs to be glossed is not Marie's description of the message but the message itself. Marie's full authorial explanation is necessary because otherwise, the flash of understanding that passes between Tristan and Yseut – immediate, intuitive, and having nothing to do with the interpretation or negotiation of meaning in language – would be invisible, even illegible, to the reader. Read in this way, Marie's gloss from line 61, "Ceo fu la summe," to line 78, the end of the "Si est de nus" couplet, explains both what Tristan intends when he carves his name, and also, at the same time, what Yseut understands when she sees it. This reading emphasizes the importance of the "Si est de nus" couplet and the image of the honeysuckle, which underscores Marie's title for the *lai*.

The interpretive stakes of "Chèvrefeuille" are, then, much higher than a question of awkwardly reported discourse. Rather than the legible, concrete content of Tristan's message, what this *lai* aims to portray is the nature of the understanding between Tristan and Yseut, which is shown by Yseut's seamless understanding of Tristan's signal. Marie's condensation of

³⁶ Frappier, "Contribution au débat," 45.

³⁷ Spitzer, "La 'Lettre,'" 85.

³⁸ Busby, "'Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit,'" 9.

Tristan's intention and Yseut's understanding into one moment enacts the kind of synchronous complicity that marks their relationship from the moment they simultaneously fall in love. That is to say, the narration of Tristan's message showcases not the interpretive potential of love in general, as Spitzer would have it, but the incredible ease of exchange particular to the Tristan tradition and the love it celebrates. "Chèvrefeuille" attempts to take a snapshot of the perfection of intersubjective communication enabled by a supernatural love, and it is only by reading this *lai* not as an outlier within the collection, but as gesturing outward to the Tristan constellation of texts, that Tristan's message – and by extension, Yseut's reaction – begins to make sense. With "Chèvrefeuille," Marie does not pose a logic puzzle with a correct answer, she makes a place for herself as a Tristanian author. Even as she seems to recount such a tiny vignette, she nevertheless inscribes her *lai* in the larger Tristan narrative in two ways: by portraying a quintessentially Tristanian moment of communication, and also by alluding, albeit economically, to the rest of the story.

The episode is evocative in the same way a "complete" text is, in that it refers to a virtual whole; if, for Zumthor, "tout texte actualise des virtualités préexistantes," and that any single text "ne peut porter que sur une partie du vaste ensemble virtuel," the episode intentionally limits the amount of the virtual whole it will represent, positioning itself as a microcosm of a larger narrative.³⁹ An episode, unlike an accidentally detached fragment, makes explicit the relationship of the part to the whole. "Chèvrefeuille" is the only one of Marie's *lais* that gestures to a larger narrative tradition, and it does so so efficiently that Gravdal notes that its reader "could have pieced together the essential narrative of the Tristan story."⁴⁰ Marie's references to the larger Tristan narrative not only characterize "Chèvrefeuille" as a Tristanian episode, they also imply a more widespread understanding of the Tristan legend as episodic or modular, with enough room to contain extra vignettes here and there. Her résumé of the narrative outside the scope of her text establishes her knowledge, showing that she is qualified as a storyteller as well as activating her audience's familiarity with the Tristan legend. Pared down to the absolute essentials of love, suffering, and shared death, this bare-bones summary shows a mastery of the material in Marie's ability to distill it down, as well as serving as an invitation to the audience, perhaps, to *gloser la lettre*:

Plusur le m'unt cunté e dit
 E jeo l'ai trové en escrit
 De Tristram e de la reïne,
 De lur amur ki tant fu fine,
 Dunt il eurent meinte dolor,
 Puis en mururent en un jur. (5-10)

Many have told and recounted to me
 And I have found it in writing,
 Of Tristan and the queen,
 Of their love which was so noble,
 From which they experienced much suffering,
 And then died from it on a single day.

³⁹ Zumthor, "Intertextualité," 10-11.

⁴⁰ Gravdal, "Fragmentation and Imagination," 73.

What Marie does in this *lai* is insist on Yseut's reception of Tristan's message, as well as the reader's reception of her own; her situation of "Chèvrefeuille" as an interlude in Tristan's exile activates the reader's knowledge of the whole story. For Gravdal, this *lai* emphasizes the crucial role of the reader or listener's understanding and participation: "Where does the syntax of Marie's narrative exist?" she asks rhetorically, answering, "it is the listener, the medieval audience, that creates a coherent design from the fragments offered by Marie's text."⁴¹ This is not limited to "Chèvrefeuille," but is indicative of a much wider phenomenon; "the medieval text," she concludes, "is the product of a creative dialectic that depends on the imagination of the audience as surely as it relies on the activity of the poet."⁴² It is precisely this additive, collaborative sense of reading that Marie herself describes in her "Prologue," when she writes of future readers who might "gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre."⁴³ What the act of reading requires is both interpretation and, perhaps more importantly, a willingness to participate. Like Yseut, the reader must be alert to clues in her path and must be ready to put these clues into action. The flash of understanding that passes between Tristan and Yseut via the *bastun*, however, is singularly theirs, and Marie's careful reporting of the inscription emphasizes how opaque it might otherwise appear.

"Mot est dolens qui pert s'amie": The Episode as Narrative and Affective Structure in Bérroul's *Tristan*

In this section, I will offer a close reading of the episode of Bérroul's *Tristan* where the lovers decide to leave the forest and return to court. Although this sequence has been neglected by recent scholarship, it is a rich and strange example of the importance afforded to evocation in the Tristan legend; like "Chèvrefeuille," the lovers' return is an episode, but unlike Marie's *lai*, this episode is part of a longer text which ostensibly recounts a version of the whole Tristan story. Bérroul's text has come down to us as a fragment from a single manuscript, and has often been read more for what is missing or lost than for what is extant. A renewed focus on the narrative craft of the episodic form reveals a conception of the work as easily toggling back and forth between the part and the notional and elusive whole. This episode, which calls attention to itself as such, showcases written and spoken communication, seeming to juxtapose the complex negotiation of official written correspondence with Tristan and Yseut's uncomplicated face-to-face dialogue. However, when that dialogue is repeated in different circumstances, it takes on different connotations even though what the lovers actually say has hardly changed. This apparent repetition suggests a sensitivity to and an interest in the way affect can be expressed in speech, and in the way it exceeds the discursive.

At about the center point of Bérroul's version of *Tristan*, the lovers' interlude in the forest of Morois comes to an end. Having escaped to the forest after Marc's attempt to punish them both by being burned at the stake, they live for some time there, until the love-potion they had both drunk by accident reaches its time limit. Introducing this sequence, Bérroul pauses to explain:

Seignors, du vin de qoi il burent
Avez oï, por qoi il furent

⁴¹ Ibid., 71.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Marie de France, "Prologue," ed. Rychner, lines 15-16.

En si grant paine lonctens mis :
Mais ne savez, ce m'est avis,
A combien fu determinez
Li lovendrins, li vin herbez :
La mere Yseut, qui le bolli,
A trois anz d'amistié le fist. (2133-40)⁴⁴

My lords, you have heard about the wine they drank,
For which reason they were condemned
To such great suffering for a long time:
But you do not know, to my mind,
For how long was intended
The *lovendrins*, the infused wine:
The mother of Yseut, who brewed it,
Made it to last for three years of friendship.

These lines mark the beginning of a new episode of Béroul's story, a narrative that seems, as Daniel Poirion asserts in his edition of the text, "progresse[r] par une succession d'épisodes parfois répétitifs," defining an episode as "une unité narrative qui correspond au *dit*, au *lai*, au petit poème lyrico-narratif entrant dans le répertoire des chanteurs ou conteurs bretons." In the lines I have just cited, we might read, as Poirion does, one of the "signes qui nous aident à distinguer ces unités," in this case, the narrator's use of a "formule d'appel" to announce the new episode and its contents "comme dans un titre."⁴⁵ While Poirion assigns some importance to this episodic structure, noting, "des effets de symétrie et d'opposition entre épisodes donne un rythme au poème," that is about as far as his interest in the episode goes.⁴⁶ I want to suggest that the subtlety with which Béroul treats transitions is already apparent in these introductory lines, and that he is similarly already exploiting the narrative usefulness of the episode. At the same time that this opening invites its receiver to think back to previous episodes, it also surprises them into re-evaluating the whole of the previous narrative. Béroul apostrophizes his audience, first telling them what they have already heard about, and then revealing that, in fact, their understanding has been incomplete. The whole time they have been hearing about Tristan and Yseut's "grant paine" caused by the *lovendrins*, they have not known that its duration was limited, and this information has been intentionally withheld from them. The meaning and intensity of all the lovers' suffering, all of their adventures, and all of their narrow escapes necessarily shift with the addition of this new information about the impermanence of the *lovendrins*. My aim here is not to hypothesize about the quality of that shift, but to point out how cleverly and economically Béroul brings it about: within the space of five lines, Béroul gestures to an expansive overview of previous episodes, potentially evoking the following: how Tristan and Yseut came to drink the wine, and its effects; the various ways in which the lovers have suffered as a result, which comprise many episodes including the previous one about their life in the forest; why Yseut's mother made the *lovendrins* for her in the first place; perhaps even

⁴⁴ Béroul, *Tristan et Yseut*, ed. Daniel Poirion, in *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia. Old French citations will be from this edition; translations are mine.

⁴⁵ Daniel Poirion, "Notice: Béroul, Tristan et Yseut" in *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, 1132.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

how Yseut came to be married to Marc, or Tristan's role in winning her hand and bringing her to England. Even if an audience had never heard Bérout's version, this introduction would serve as a primer to it. In this way, if Bérout's text has come down to us "amputé,"⁴⁷ "déchiré," or "coupé," it nevertheless conserves a trace of its whole because of its episodic structure.⁴⁸

This introduction of the *lovendrins* and its history shows how intentionally and carefully Bérout maintains a sense of the whole narrative in its individual episodes, and gestures to the sophistication – and even the paradox – of the episode. For, as Poirion notes, the episode is associated with short narrative forms, that is, short works which recount single episodes, while I am insisting on the episode's belonging to a much larger and more expansive narrative, and signaling that belonging. In the context of the Romantic fragment and collections of fragments, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy explore the apparent contradiction of how a part can gesture to a whole: "La totalité fragmentaire...ne peut être située en aucun point : elle est simultanément dans le tout et dans chaque partie. Chaque fragment vaut pour lui-même et pour ce dont il se détache. La totalité, c'est le fragment lui-même dans son individualité achevée."⁴⁹ For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the fragment's relation to the work does not constitute a paradox, but a kind of evocative simultaneity that they call "co-présence": the fragment is both finished and unfinished; a separated piece from the whole and a whole work in and of itself; representative of a real or imagined whole, and representative only of itself. In the abstract, this might seem to have little to do with the episodic organization of Bérout's text. But thinking about the episode as its own self-sufficient fragment which, by its very nature both gestures to the larger narrative and should be taken seriously as a literary work in its own right, reveals the sophistication of Bérout's text – a sophistication which is obscured by an idea of the episode as a simplistic narrative unit. In the episode of the lovers' return from the forest, Bérout explicitly situates the sequence within the larger work three times, first in the introduction and then later in two more extended renarrations of previous events. Later in the episode, his interest in the poetics of evocation goes even further: he also encodes an apparently repetitive dialogue between the lovers with complex affective connotations, thereby alluding to less discursive elements of the Tristan legend.

This sequence's intricate plot seems itself to be mediated by retellings and renarrations, since a third of the episode is devoted to transmitting the message to Marc that Tristan and Yseut wish to return to court, and Tristan and Yseut take leave of each other twice in dialogue. An outline of the events of the episode, which I will define as beginning with line 2133, "Seignors, du vin de quoi il burent," and ending with the description of Tristan's life staying with Orri after he has returned Yseut to Marc, lines 3026-28, will show how carefully Bérout lays out the substance and the crafting of that message, and how tightly he interlaces the past and the present, in terms of structure of the Tristan narrative and its affective currents. After the *lovendrins*'s power wanes, both Tristan and Yseut lament the social positions and duties they have left behind; Tristan's monologue (lines 2173-78) seems to be delivered alone, but Yseut speaks directly to Tristan (lines 2211-16), and her lament opens a dialogue between them. In this conversation about leaving the forest, they agree that they wish to return to court, even though they do not wish to part. Tristan suggests that they try to reach an agreement with Marc for their return and asks Yseut for help in deciding out what to do; she brings up the

⁴⁷ Marchello-Nizia, "Introduction," xii.

⁴⁸ Poirion, "Notice," 1127.

⁴⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "L'exigence fragmentaire," 64.

hermit Ogrin, whom they have met before, and who they know wants them to repent. Tristan agrees:

O le conseil de maistre Ogrin,
Mandon au roi nostre talent
Par briés sanz autre mandement. (2282-84)

With the advice of Master Ogrin,
We will transmit our wish to the king
By letter, without further message.

It is not just that Tristan thinks that Ogrin will help them, but specifically that he will help them get their message to Marc in writing (“Par briés”) and without complications (“sans autre mandement”). Tristan is correct; once both he and Yseut have explained their situation and asked for Ogrin’s help, he assures the couple that God will pardon them if they repent truly, and suggests making their case to Marc in writing:

Por honte oster et mal covrir
Doit on un peu par bel mentir.
Qant vos conseil m’avez requis,
Gel vos dorrai sanz terme mis.
En parchemin prendrai un brief :
Saluz avra el premier chief. (2353-58)

To remove shame and hide the sin
One should graciously lie a little.
Since you have asked for my advice,
I will give it to you without limitation.
I will take down a letter on parchment:
It will have greetings in the beginning.

In these six lines, Ogrin announces his desire to help the lovers with all the rhetorical prowess he can muster: he will write them a properly addressed formal letter in which he will lie for the sake of expediency, “par bel.” The next three hundred lines or so provide an exhaustively detailed account of the mechanics of letter-composing, -writing, and -receiving, which emphasizes the text of Ogrin/Tristan’s letter at the same time that it foregrounds the importance of narration. Brian Pitts describes the letter as “a skillful rearrangement of truth,” characterizing its retelling of Tristan and Yseut’s past as a means of “salvag[ing] their lost identity, and, ultimately, their status as lawful subjects of the king.”⁵⁰ But the business of the letter’s composition and reading is more complex: for one thing, over the course of these three hundred lines, the letter and the history it narrates are described twice, and for another, the scrupulous attention afforded to the way the letter’s message passes between readers and listeners contrasts sharply with the ease of communication between Tristan and Yseut themselves. Furthermore, Ogrin’s letter sets in motion an intricate play of voicing which calls attention both to reception and to enunciation.

⁵⁰ Brian Pitts, “Writing and Remembering in Bérout’s *Roman de Tristan*: The Role of Ogrin in the Second Hermit Episode,” 5.

Overall, the letter section of this episode means that before Tristan and Yseut discuss the terms of their parting with each other, they are already ensconced in a thicket of sending, receiving, and negotiating meaning. The message of the letter, as Ogrin narrates it, seems simple: in free indirect discourse, Ogrin describes how he will say, writing in Tristan's voice, that Tristan is in the forest with the queen, and that he is willing to return Yseut if Marc is willing to forgive her. Tristan will also offer to prove his innocence in a judicial duel, which, Ogrin notes in an aside to Tristan, is safe because no one at court has equivalent skills in combat. Ogrin continues, retelling the story of how Tristan and Yseut came to stay in the forest and how Tristan brought Yseut to be married to Marc in the first place (lines 2375-96). Then, he says, after Tristan has proven his loyalty, Tristan will offer to serve Marc, or leave for another court. Tristan agrees, but asks Ogrin to request that Marc reply by letter what he would like to do, so that no more complications or issues arise (2411-27). Ogrin writes the letter, and Tristan delivers it to Marc by hand (2449-70), specifically refusing to speak at length with Marc, who calls after him, "Por Deu, beaus niés, ton oncle atent!" (2473). Marc wakes his chaplain, who reads the letter aloud, first to him (2510-20), and then to his barons; the entire text of the letter, as spoken by the chaplain, is reported (2552-2618).⁵¹ The barons discuss Tristan's proposal, and Marc has his chaplain write a letter in reply saying that Tristan is not welcome back at court, but that he should bring Yseut as soon as possible (2621-48). The letter is written and left in the requested place, Tristan picks it up, and Ogrin reads it to Tristan and Yseut. Only then, once they have received word that Marc wants to go forward with Yseut's return, do the lovers discuss how they will part; Tristan suggests that they should exchange *drüerie*, and they do. On the day of Yseut's return, they repeat this conversation before Tristan relinquishes Yseut to Marc. Once Yseut is in Marc's possession, Marc dismisses Tristan, and he leaves, claiming that he will go to serve another king, but he really returns to the forest to stay with Orri, another forest-dweller. The episode does not conclude with Tristan's departure, but goes on for about seventy-five more lines, describing the ceremony of Yseut's return, and Tristan's stay with Orri.

This episode is built upon a double repetition: two retellings by third parties of part of the Tristan story, and then two conversations between Tristan and Yseut. Both of these sets of repetition call attention to the role of context in the process of message-sending; the two retellings of part of the Tristan story show how the same events can mean different things depending on how they are retold, and who is listening. A brief example of this shift is the mention of Marc's earlier attempt to execute the lovers. As Ogrin talks Tristan and Yseut through the letter he will write on their behalf, he suggests that Tristan should offer to prove their innocence in a judicial duel. This will be acceptable to Marc, he argues:

Ce ne puet il metre en descort:
 Qant il vos vout livrer a mort
 Et en feu ardoir, ...
 Il ne voloit escouter plait. (2375-79)

⁵¹ The text of the letter, as Pitts summarizes, gives a much more detailed account of previous events than Ogrin and Tristan had discussed: "Tristan went to Ireland (2558); Tristan won Iseut by slaying the dragon (2559-61); Tristan brought Iseut to Cornwall (2562); Marc married Iseut (2563); Slanderers turned Marc against Tristan and Iseut (2565-80); Marc sought to destroy Tristan and Iseut (2581-84); Iseut escaped execution (2585-88); Tristan also escaped by jumping from the chapel (2589-90); Marc gave Iseut to the lepers (2591-92); Tristan rescued Iseut from the lepers (2593-96); Tristan and Iseut fled to the forest (2597-99); Marc offered a reward for the couple's capture (2600-03)" (ibid., 4-5).

This cannot dissatisfy him;
When he wanted to put you to death
And burn you in a fire, ...
He did not want to hear pleas.

Marc's previous reluctance to listen to arguments on the behalf of the lovers, Ogrin thinks, will mean that he is amenable to judicial combat. Rhetoric, he implies, will only get the lovers so far. This frank reminder of the previous episode's events casts Marc in an unflattering light; he was not reasonable enough to allow the lovers to argue their case, but he will be just reasonable enough to agree to Tristan's offer. Ogrin's calculation here plays on a certain idea of justice, and is also deeply pragmatic, intimating that Marc can be outmaneuvered. This retelling provides a sense of continuity between episodes: the events of the previous episode can be mobilized in the present one.

The text of the letter read aloud to Marc and his barons, however, presents this same part of the story in a very different way. First, we are listening to highly mediated discourse. Instead of Ogrin speaking directly to Tristan and Yseut about events they have been involved in, in this scene, Marc's chaplain is reading aloud a text which has been composed by Ogrin in Tristan's voice. It is a much more formal setting, and the phrasing of the letter appropriately reflects that. Second, the intent of the retelling has changed; where it was more of an oral "rough draft," here the retelling takes on argumentative force, reminding the court of Tristan's prowess and insisting on the lovers' unfair treatment. After Tristan's letter suggests that he take an oath in front of the king and the court, it continues on with the offer of a trial by combat:

Se je ne l'en puis alegier
Et en ta cort moi deraisnier,
Adonc me fai devant ton ost
Jugier : n'i a qui je t'en ost.
N'i a baron, por moi plaisier,
Ne me face ardrë, ou jugier.
Vos savez bien, beaus oncles, sire,
Nos vosistes ardoir en ire...

a grant tor

Li voliez doner la mort. (2575-82, 2587-88)

If I cannot exculpate her [Yseut] from the accusation
And exonerate myself in the eyes of your court,
Then have me judged by your warriors:
There is no one I would ask you to exclude.
There is no baron, for the sake of destroying me,
Who would not have me burned, or condemned.
You know well, dear uncle, my lord,
How you wanted to burn us, in anger...

it was very wrong

That you wanted to put her to death.

The letter proposes, as Ogrin had, that Tristan could take an oath, and if that is not acceptable, then he could fight to prove the couple's innocence. But the letter does not suggest the single combat that Ogrin had seemed to allude to: here, Tristan offers that all Marc's knights could

fight him at once. It is still a serious offer, but now with a valence of hyperbole. The letter encourages Marc to remember his actions toward Tristan as well as their family and social relationship, apostrophizing him as “beaus oncles” and “sire”; it attributes Marc’s attempt at executing Tristan and Yseut to anger, not reason, and this reframing emphasizes the time that has elapsed between the couple’s escape and the present moment, implying that now Marc will be able to reflect on his actions. Ogrin did not mention Marc’s anger initially, perhaps because Tristan and Yseut needed no reminder of it. Here, though, it serves to redistribute culpability to Marc, for having acted unreasonably because of his rage, as well as to absolve him: his anger was a temporary state, but now, with some distance, the situation can be reconsidered. The letter again insists on Marc’s wrongness in contrast to Tristan and Yseut’s innocence, an argument that does not appear in Ogrin’s speech. In this way, the letter is more than “a skillful rearrangement of truth,” it also demonstrates a rhetorical shift between the two retellings. When Ogrin recounts Tristan and Yseut’s own story to them, he is confirming its facts and anticipating how to put them together into an argument; the letter he writes uses the same events to advocate for the lovers’ cause. If Ogrin cannot persuade Marc in writing that Tristan and Yseut are innocent, he can at least try to persuade him that he has been in the wrong. These two letters mark not a simple repetition, but the active evocation of previous plot elements: both of the audiences for this letter, the reader and Marc and his barons, are being asked by Tristan and Ogrin to recall previous events, and to make sense of the earlier narrative. This insistent inclusion of the earlier narrative means, somewhat paradoxically, that the episode can stand alone as its own work; like “Chèvrefeuille,” this episode shows how it is tethered to a larger narrative tradition, but is also intelligible as its own, shorter, story.

While the rhetorical shift between Ogrin’s conversation with Tristan and Yseut and the letter that is read at court marks a move from private, informal agreement to public, formal persuasion, Tristan and Yseut’s doubled conversation before their parting also exemplifies a shift from the private to the public, but under the aegis of a completely different model of communication. Rather than the official, written *brief* that passes through many hands before reaching its addressee, Tristan and Yseut deal in the immediacy and transparency of speech. Even the messages they anticipate sending after their separation are oral, and do not involve the kind of discursive maneuvering evident in Ogrin’s letter. The juxtaposition of these contrasting models of communication is underscored by Tristan’s refusal to speak with Marc as he delivers the letter, even though Marc wants so much to talk to him that he calls after him three times. Just as they negotiated the terms of Yseut’s return with Marc, Tristan and Yseut must agree with each other on the terms of their separation. Where the *brief* invoked the past, Tristan and Yseut’s conversation summons up the future. Unlike the social and political concerns of Yseut’s return, which have life or death consequences, between themselves, Tristan and Yseut must negotiate at once the practicalities of how they will communicate once they are separated and the unspoken, unspeakable question of whether they will continue to love each other. This tacit question has hung in the air from the beginning of the episode, when Béroul first explained the end of the *lovedrins*’s three-year term; in the lovers’ parting conversations, which ostensibly define the *drièrie* they are exchanging, they are also negotiating and alluding to affect which they decline to address directly. James A. Schultz, writing about the role of secrecy in courtly love, notes that “the moment of parting is, of course, a moment of sadness...and many tears are shed. But it is also a moment of renewed commitment.”⁵² The way that Tristan and Yseut part here bears this out, albeit not entirely explicitly.

⁵² James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, 141.

The couple's first discussion of the gifts they exchange is fairly straightforwardly discursive. After they receive Marc's letter, Tristan reacts first with anguish – "Dex !," he exclaims, "quel departie ! / Mot est dolenz qui pert s'amie" ("God! What a parting! / He who loses his amie is greatly pained," 2681-82) – then with resignation, telling Yseut that it must be done. He proposes that they give each other "drüerie," pledging that nothing will keep him from sending her messages, and asks her what she would like. Yseut replies "o grant sospir" (with a deep sigh, 2694) that she wishes to keep Tristan's hunting dog, Husdent, and tells him that she will give him "un anel / Un jaspe vert a u seel," (A ring / with a seal of green jasper, 2707-8). Giving Tristan the signet ring is Yseut's own idea, but in doing so, she responds exactly to his assertion that he will continue to send her messages (2689-91), since the ring will facilitate that process. It is quite striking that this is not a plain ring, like Marc's wedding ring, or even a ring with gems, like the emerald ring Marc had given Yseut⁵³; it is a ring with a seal. Signet rings have already appeared twice in this episode, as both the letter written by Ogrin on Tristan and Yseut's behalf (2431-32), and the one written by Marc's chaplain for him (2645), are sealed, and Ogrin's ring is particularly emphasized: "Qant il out fait, prist un anel, / La pierre passot el seel," (When he had done so, he took a ring, / And passed the stone over it to seal it, 2431-32). The seal, then, bestows authority and security on a written message. Pitts notes that seals were used in this way at courts in the twelfth century, but that it would have been unusual for "an isolated religious" like Ogrin "to possess the latest secular device"; he suggests that Bérout's emphasis on the two seals merely calls attention to the parallels of the two letters.⁵⁴ However, Yseut's gift to Tristan nuances the previous appearances of the other signet rings. Applied to letters, presumably with wax, Ogrin's ring and Marc's chaplain's both produce a seal, which is a symbol of written authority. Yseut's signet ring, in contrast, serves as a symbol itself: she explains that the ring will guarantee the authenticity of any message or instructions Tristan might send her, and warns Tristan, "Certes, je n'en croiroie rien, / Se cest anel, sire, ne voi" (Surely, I will believe nothing about it, / If I do not see this ring, my lord," 2716-17). Shigemi Sasaki notes this difference from the rings used for letters: in Tristan's case, "l'objet, lui-même, servira à authentifier les paroles du messager, mode de transmission le plus ordinaire."⁵⁵ While sending a personal message via messenger is indeed historically "ordinary," in contrast with Ogrin's letter to Marc, Yseut's ring has the interesting effect of emphasizing what is spoken and present over what is written and delivered.

The ring's use as a symbol, moreover, also marks it as working in a particularly Tristanian way: its seal, that is, its carved design that would differentiate it from other signet rings, is totally superfluous. Yseut will not use the image or design of the seal as an identification, but the entire object. Similar to the hazel branch carved with a message in "Chèvrefeuille," this ring is supercharged with symbolism, but its "technology" is extremely simple: it is an instrument of evocation. As Spitzer says of Tristan's hazel branch, "le signe a toujours opéré le même miracle, – car l'amour lui-même opère ces sortes de miracles...et les amoureux le savent d'avance."⁵⁶ In this scene of exchange, the couple seem to prove how well

⁵³ These rings figure prominently in the previous episode, where Marc finds Tristan and Yseut asleep, and he exchanges his sword for Tristan's and his own ring for Yseut's emerald one.

⁵⁴ Pitts, "Writing and Remembering in Bérout's *Tristan*," 7. He explains that Bérout's inclusion of the letter seals emphasizes "balance, continuity, and thematic resonance at a pivotal juncture of the romance," but fails to take Yseut's gift, which introduces a third ring with a seal into the episode, into account.

⁵⁵ Shigemi Sasaki, "L'émeraude d'Iseut et le jaspe de Tristan," 383.

⁵⁶ Spitzer, "La 'Lettre,'" 84.

they understand this “miracle”; Yseut herself explains the ring’s affective resonance beyond its communicative function:

Mais, por defense de nul roi,
Se voit l’anel, ne lairai mie,
Ou soit savoir ou soit folie,
Ne face ço que il dira,
Qui cest anel m’aportera,
Porce qu’il soit a nostre anor :
Je vos pramet par fine amor. (2716-22)

But, in spite of any king’s prohibition,
If I see the ring, I will not refrain,
Be it wisdom or folly,
From doing whatever he will tell me,
Who brings me this ring,
Provided that it is to our honor:
I promise you this out of *fine amor*.

The presence of the ring will allow Yseut to defy royal power – not only Marc’s power as her husband, but as her king – and is inextricably linked to an idea of “anor,” and to her *fine amor* for Tristan. Earlier in the episode, Yseut had told Ogrin that she loves Tristan “de bone amor / Et com amis, sanz desanor,” (“with real love, / And with friendship, without dishonor,” 2327-28) apparently meaning that their physical intimacy has ended. What remains, however, as she makes clear here, is a different kind of “anor”: a residual loyalty between them, which does not have to do with a sense of reputation that would be seen from the outside. To promise “par fine amor” underscores not only the remaining presence of love, but also its positive qualities; where “bone” had seemed to imply a purity of emotion that no longer interferes with Yseut’s marriage to Marc, “fine,” the same adjective Marie uses to describe their love in “Chèvrefeuille,” here seems to recall intensity. If, as Yseut had explained to Ogrin, she and Tristan are no longer in thrall to physical desire – “De la commune de mon cors / Et je du suen somes tuit fors” (From the commingling of my body / and I from his, we are wholly free, 2329-30) – the “fine amor” she swears by nonetheless transcends social constraints.

Yseut’s second explanation of the ring elucidates its affective charge more clearly, and reveals that it is not meant only to keep lines of communication open between the separated lovers, but also to serve as a private signal of emergency and a guarantee of physical presence. With this ring, Yseut promises Tristan that she can be summoned, not merely contacted. This dialogue takes place just before Tristan and Yseut reach Marc and the court. Tristan turns to Yseut and reminds her that she has his dog, Husdent, and asks her to take care of him, saying “S’onques m’amastes, donc l’amez,” (“If ever you loved me, then love him,” 2780). He also requests that, if he should ask her to do anything, she do it (“Se je vos mant aucune chose / ...Dame, faites mes volonteiz,” “If I bid you do something / ...My lady, do as I wish,” 2789, 2791). She replies that she will, and again explains the significance of the ring, which he is now wearing:

Par cele foi que je vos doi,
Se cel anel de vostre doi
Ne m’envoiez, si que jel voie,
Rien qu’il deïst ge ne croiroie.

Mais, des que reverrai l'anel,
Ne tor ne mur ne fort chastel
Ne me tendra ne face errant
Le mandement de mon amant,
Solonc m'enor et loiauté
Et je sace soit vostre gré. (2792-2802)

By the fidelity that I owe you,
If this ring from your finger
You do not send me, so that I see it,
I would not believe anything that he might say.
But, as soon as I see the ring,
Neither tower, nor walls, nor fortress
Will hold me such that I would not immediately do
The bidding of my lover,
In accordance with my honor and loyalty
Provided that I confirm that it is your will.

The essential meaning of this explanation is exactly the same as the first: when Yseut sees the ring, she will do as Tristan bids her. Here, though, the stakes have changed; her defiance will no longer be limited to the discursive – a vague royal decree –, but will extend to the physical and logistical. The meaning of line 27, “Ne tor ne mur ne fort chastel,” is ambiguous; it seems to signal first that Yseut is ready to escape from court before she even returns there, and that she already anticipates that Tristan will request that she leave to meet him. But we could also read this in a more figurative way: regardless of the royal architecture within which she finds herself constrained, she will nevertheless defend her freedom to act as she pleases. The effect, though, is similar. Despite her returning to fulfill the role of queen, Yseut belongs to Tristan, both by *fine amor*, and, here, by “foi.”

The dramatic stakes of this conversation, too, have changed: Tristan and Yseut are speaking to each other openly for perhaps the last time, and yet, they are also within sight of Marc. It is the last moment that Yseut has to make her feelings clear to Tristan, and she does so in several ways. She begins, “Par cele foi que je vos doi,” a much more explicit statement of their relationship than she has previously uttered, and she speaks not of their shared honor but of her own “enor et loiauté.” This is a promise that their love will remain unbroken even as they are separated; the ring is merely a symbol that can trigger the entirety of Yseut’s “foi” and “loiauté.” Above all, that she refers to Tristan as “mon amant,” the fourth time that term appears in Bérout’s text and the only time either she or Tristan use it themselves.⁵⁷ It stands out against the discussions of “bone amor,” “fine amor,” and “amistié” as surprisingly overt. To call Tristan her “amant” does not necessarily mean that her repentance to Ogrin, where she says that she loves Tristan “com amis,” (2328) is false; this is a moment of truth, but not one that invalidates what she has previously said with intention and apparent sincerity. Rather, her connection of “foi” and “loiauté” with the name “amant” makes clear the intense, almost desperate feeling of this moment, and intimates how extreme her dread of leaving Tristan must be. Even the barely-euphemistic “ami,” which she and Tristan usually use to address each

⁵⁷ The previous three instances of the term “amant” are: Tristan and Yseut as the dwarf sees them (738); when Marc finds Tristan and Yseut asleep in the forest (1829); as they arrive chez Ogrin (2291).

other, would be too elliptical. This effort to make affect as clear-cut as possible, especially in the heightened context of the lovers' parting, reaches beyond the present episode to allude to the lovers' deaths, their final parting. Although Bérout does not mention the ending of the legend in his extant text, any reader with a grasp of the overall story would feel the resonance of this parting scene with the wrenching tragedy of Tristan and Yseut's separated, shared deaths. Especially in combination with Yseut's promise that she will not be held by any buildings, this repeated dialogue nearly prefigures the ending of the broader Tristan narrative, where Yseut will be summoned by Tristan's messenger to leave court in order to save his life. While Sasaki sees the ending foreshadowed by the green jasper ring itself, asserting that, "[i] le texte de Bérout] se termine comme les versions existantes," the appearance of the ring "en marque la fin, puisque, falsifié, le message joint à cette gemme amène la mort du héros."⁵⁸ But as we see in both of Yseut's glosses of the ring, the real function of the ring is not necessarily to guarantee authenticity. Rather, what the ring guarantees is the activation of Yseut's love for Tristan – it works by evocation, not by identification.

Where Marie, as I have argued above, attempts to elucidate a flash of intersubjective understanding so perfect it would otherwise be incomprehensible, Bérout calls attention to two moments of nondiscursive communication between Tristan and Yseut, but without glossing them. At the very last moment before Tristan leaves, what Schultz calls "the erotics of parting" suddenly breaks through the formality of the official exchange. Repeating his letter's offer to Marc, Tristan asks if he might be allowed to remain at court. Marc, together with his barons, refuses, and Tristan knows it is time for him to leave. He and Yseut have not spoken to each other since reaching Marc and the assembled audience (2843-44), and after she thanks Tristan for bringing about her return, she will not speak again in this episode. If the couple does speak to each other at this point, it is not reported; however, something evidently passes between them as Tristan says his goodbye:

De la roïne congié prent ;
 L'un l'autre esgarde bonement.
 La roïne fu coloree,
 Vergoigne avoit por l'asemblee. (2913-14)

[Tristan] takes leave of the queen:
 They look intensely at each other.
 The queen blushed;
 She felt abashed, because of the entourage.

The visceral shock of this mutual gaze stands in astonishing contrast to whatever formulae of saying farewell they may have just spoken. To look at one another "bonement" in public and in front of Marc is surprisingly brazen, but her blush is somewhat ambiguous: she is shy, or embarrassed "por l'asemblee," a term which might mean a gathering of people, but also either

⁵⁸ Sasaki, "L'émeraude," 384. She also proposes that the thematic unity provided by the symbolism of the emerald and the green jasper helps restore a sense of the overarching structure of Bérout's version of the Tristan legend, "malgré l'état fragmentaire dans lequel elle nous est parvenue"; this seems to me to go a little too far, but it is interesting to consider the importance of these two objects which are so invested with meaning.

union, as in a marriage, or coupling, as in sexual intercourse.⁵⁹ This line could thus be interpreted in at least three ways: that Yseut is uncomfortable having this intimate moment with Tristan in front of so many people; that she made uncomfortable by having slept with Tristan; or even that she is uncomfortable returning to her marriage. As we have seen with “anor,” “vergoigne” could also have the ambivalence of shame in regard to her social role and reputation, or to her love for Tristan. Yseut is designated here not by her name but by her title, so it is Yseut as queen who blushes; she is not ashamed of Marc but of Tristan. Yet the queen cannot resist looking back at her lover with the same frankness as he looks at her, with a shared gaze that inadvertently, and publicly, affirms the continuation of their relationship. We have seen how, in *Erec et Enide*, the gaze can engender desire; the look Tristan and Yseut share here evinces a far more knowing eroticism and has much higher stakes.⁶⁰ This look and Yseut’s blush are emblematic of the paradox of love relationships that must be kept secret. Schultz describes the secret love dynamic as oscillating between the poles of putative secrecy and public reputation: “Just at the moment when they should part...the lovers cannot restrain their passion.”⁶¹ Yseut and Tristan have made the decision to part, but their last look irresistibly attests to their inability, or refusal, to sever their connection. The look “seals” their parting, guaranteeing their continued love more convincingly than the physical sign of Tristan’s ring with the seal, and representing the persistence of their shared understanding. The *lovendrins* may have worn off, but this last look shows that Tristan and Yseut still share a profound connection.

Although Yseut’s blush alludes to the public nature of her parting from Tristan, it is only Yseut’s self-consciousness that really intrudes on the magnetic gaze she shares with Tristan, since hers is the only reaction reported by Béroul’s narration. And, despite her blush, she does not redirect her eyes as Tristan turns to leave. Rather, she looks after him, apparently without shame:

Vers la mer vet Tristran sa voie.
 Yseut o les euz le convoie;
 Tant con de lui ot la veüe
 De la place ne se remue. (2929-32)

Tristan makes his way toward the sea.
 Yseut was following him with her eyes;
 As long as she had him in sight,
 She does not stir from that spot.

Despite her consciousness of the public setting, at the moment that their connection has just been officially severed, Yseut cannot or will not look away. The lovers can be parted, but, her gaze implies, their shared understanding will never cease. The force of her gaze effects a hiatus in the action of the scene: it is a moment of absolute stillness, a refusal to fall back into step with the rest of the court. The public context makes this moment awkward as well as poignant; “Tant con de lui ot la veüe” is a relative length of time that only Yseut can determine. Marc and the entourage might be ready to leave, might even be impatient for her to come along, but until

⁵⁹ Anglo-Norman Dictionary, online, s.v. “Assemblée,” and *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècle*, 1880-1895, s.v. “Assemblé.”

⁶⁰ See chapter II, pages 25-27.

⁶¹ Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, 142.

Tristan is out of sight, Yseut does not belong to them. She is no longer in the forest with Tristan, but she is not yet fully back at court with Marc. Earlier in the scene, Yseut had described herself as “*mot boneüree*,” thanking Tristan for arranging her “*grant fin*” (2841-42); here, she does not cry, but her ambivalence is palpable despite her fortunate situation. Although Tristan, earlier in the episode, gave the reader a glimpse into his interiority – “*Mot est dolens qui pert s’amie*” – the exact nature of what Yseut feels in this moment is obscured. The lady who loses her *ami* suffers, too, but in silence. There is nothing to be said: she and Tristan have said all they can to one another, and he is already too far away to address. Nor does the narrator attempt to explain her gaze: it is a tableau that evokes, that resonates, rather than explains.

It is precisely this lack of explanation that makes this moment so rich in evocation. With little access to Yseut’s interiority, the meaning of her gaze is determined only by its object – and by the reader. Her fixed focus on the departing Tristan is a cipher that invites interpretation; it is as if Bérout, echoing Marie de France, is writing *oscurement* so that the reader can “*de lur sen le surplus mettre*.” So at this juncture in the narrative, with the lovers’ future seeming to hang in the balance, what “*surplus*” might a reader supply from their “*sen*,” their overarching sense of the whole story? We might gloss Yseut’s gaze as expressing something affective: regret, grief, apprehension. Or we might read the scene as a whole as one of poignant solitude: despite the crowd of people around her, Yseut’s fixed, wordless gaze on the departing Tristan briefly isolates her, as if Tristan is leaving her alone. This sense of Yseut’s separation from the surrounding social world occurs in many other Tristanian episodes, for example, the *folies* where she is disconcerted and unable to laugh at the disguised Tristan’s too-accurate storytelling. But the idea of Yseut being left by Tristan resonates, too, with the tradition’s tragic *dénouement*. When Tristan dies first, he leaves Yseut briefly alone before she joins him in death. Then, too, will he be beyond the reach of her voice, but she will speak to him in grief anyway. At this moment of parting, which does not have the permanence of death, affect persists beyond the discursive. How this unexplained, and perhaps inexplicable, affect fits into the rest of the story is, in Kathryn Gravdal’s terms, “the artistic responsibility – and pleasure – of the interpreting imagination.”⁶² What Tristan and Yseut are able to communicate to each other with just a look is enough to make her visibly blush, and the mute stare she addresses to the departing, unaware Tristan manifests the “renewed commitment” of parting that Schultz describes, even more eloquently than her parting words and more immediately than the exchange of *driüerie*. Since this last moment of one-sided connection is left undefined, it is potentially evocative of all the affect the reader might ascribe to it, and invites a sense of the “*co-présence*” of the overarching narrative into the episode.

Fantastic Transmission: The Carlisle fragment, and what dialogue can do

Where “*Chèvrefeuille*” and Bérout’s return from the forest episode marshal evocation as a narrative strategy to link the episode to a notional “whole story,” and characterize Tristan and Yseut’s love as granting them unusual communicative abilities, Thomas d’Angleterre’s portrayal of the couple’s avowals of love takes these subtleties of evocation and understanding to their limits. Attested to by the famous Carlisle fragment, this amazing dialogue revels in the contingency of speech and reception, staging Tristan and Yseut’s uncanny shared

⁶² Gravdal, “Fragmentation and Imagination,” 71.

understanding by means of a play on words too-often deemed a “conchetto.”⁶³ This term’s somewhat pejorative connotations of literariness or a kind of aesthetic over-reaching unfairly characterize this passage as a bit of precious wordplay.⁶⁴ In this section, however, I want to take Thomas’s use of polysemy seriously as a conversational gambit in order to show how beautifully the dialogue unfurls the joy of speech shared by two partners who already perfectly understand each other – a joy that, for Thomas, is indicative of and constitutive of love itself.

The Carlisle fragment exemplifies what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call the “fragment philologique” that confers “la valeur de la ruine” on a text.⁶⁵ The text of the fragment cannot be so easily separated from its material condition, since its reception has been so far largely determined by its dramatic discovery. To borrow Christiane Marchello-Nizia’s term, the Carlisle fragment is indeed a “bribe”: cut down to form the endpapers of a late thirteenth-century Latin cartulary, these remnants were discovered by chance in the early 1990s by Michael Benskin in the Cumbria Record Office in Carlisle, and soon identified as part of Thomas d’Angleterre’s version of *Tristan*.⁶⁶ The material condition of the indifferently preserved fragment has been much discussed. Ian Short, for example, rather lyrically describes the Carlisle fragment as “l’un des survivants du naufrage textuel et codicologique qui a réduit le poème anglo-normand de Thomas à l’état d’épave,”⁶⁷ and more soberly as a “débris de reliure.”⁶⁸ Walter Haug calls the text “desperately mutilated,”⁶⁹ and Gérard J. Brault laments the fragment’s “très mauvais état,” asserting that some of the text is so damaged that “l’on est en droit de se demander si, dans ces cas, on en sait plus long qu’auparavant.”⁷⁰ The impulse to represent the fragment’s damaged state is so strong that editors include photographs of its battered pages in two published editions.⁷¹ As Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy suggest in their discussion of the philological fragment, this emphasis on the fragment’s near-ruined state means that the Carlisle fragment at once stands as a monument to what is lost and gestures to a fuller imagining of what Thomas’s version of *Tristan* might have been like. And, as Marchello-Nizia’s use of the word “bribe” implies, there is a certain pathos to the Carlisle fragment: to the scholar of medieval literature, the scene preserved by these pages is a priceless relic, but by the

⁶³ See Joseph Bédier, *Le “Roman de Tristan” par Thomas*, vol. 1: 146; his term is widely taken up by later scholars.

⁶⁴ *Trésor de la langue française : Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle (1789-1960)*, s.v. “Concetti”: “Expressions subtiles et affectés, traits d’esprit parfois d’un goût douteux, que l’on rencontre dans une œuvre littéraire ou dans une conversation.”

⁶⁵ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “L’exigence fragmentaire,” 62.

⁶⁶ Marchello-Nizia, “Introduction,” xiii; for a full codicological and paleographical account of the fragment, as well as a diplomatic transcription, see Michael Benskin, Tony Hunt, and Ian Short, “Un nouveau fragment de Thomas’s *Tristan*”; for a more succinct synopsis, see Ian Short’s “Note sur le texte et sur la traduction” in *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia), 1211-14.

⁶⁷ Ian Short, “Notice: Thomas, *Tristan et Yseut*: Le fragment inédit de Carlisle,” in *Tristan et Yseut : Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia, 1208.

⁶⁸ Benskin, Hunt, and Short, “Un nouveau fragment de Thomas’s *Tristan*,” 290. Short, who edited the text of the fragment and wrote the article, credits Benskin with the discovery of the fragment and Hunt with its identification.

⁶⁹ Walter Haug, “Reinterpreting the *Tristan* Romances of Thomas and Gotfrid: Implications of a Recent Discovery,” 48.

⁷⁰ Gérard J. Brault, “L’amer, l’amer, la mer: la scène des aveux dans le *Tristan* de Thomas à la lumière du fragment de Carlisle,” 215.

⁷¹ Benskin, Hunt, and Short, “Un nouveau fragment,” 295-96;

time the cartulary was being bound, the codex to which Thomas's text belonged was worthless as reading material and was quite literally scrapped. The happenstance of its survival is even more sensational than that of the *Epistolae duorum amantium*, the putative early letters of Abelard and Heloise, in part because no concerns about the fragment's authorship have been raised, and in part because of the sheer randomness of its preservation.⁷² Haug rightly calls the Carlisle fragment "a discovery about which a literary historian could not have even dared to dream,"⁷³ echoing Short's assertion that "il serait difficile de surestimer l'intérêt pour le médiéviste."⁷⁴ And yet the sense of excitement and promise the fragment elicits has led, since its discovery, not to an efflorescence of innovative re-readings of Thomas's version, but to a certain re-focusing on Tristanian literary genealogies, as if the most important questions the fragment could answer have to do with reconstructing Thomas's original or judging the relative value of his adaptors.

The article that first presented the Carlisle fragment shows how foundational Joseph Bédier's "reconstruction," a "laborieux et minutieux travail d'érudition" – and by extension, the desire to rebuild a demolished textual tradition – still is to modern Tristan scholarship.⁷⁵ Short positions the fragment as a posthumous consolation to Bédier, whose efforts to reconstruct Thomas's version of *Tristan* "lui offrait la possibilité cruellement tentante de s'approcher de son but sans jamais l'atteindre," and who suffered "un bref instant de désespoir" as he outlined the "capitale" scene of Tristan and Yseut's avowals of love.⁷⁶ It is this scene, which Bédier laments as "à jamais perdu," that the Carlisle fragment contains. Short not only contextualizes the fragment by quoting Bédier's reconstruction at length, he also traces the ways in which its text contradicts and confirms Bédier's hypotheses about the *philtre*-avowal-wedding sequence.⁷⁷ In its initial revelation to the scholarly public, then, the Carlisle fragment is presented as valuable for the questions it can resolve and the debates it can put to rest; it provides hard evidence and a satisfying conclusion, clarifying what had been thought would remain ambiguous "à jamais." Short's impulse to rehearse a Bédieran response to the discovery of the fragment is an understandably poignant homage to a great scholar, but it also, perhaps inadvertently, reinforces the primacy of reconstruction and completeness to the study of the Tristan tradition. For although he concludes with an invitation to other scholars to continue investigating the text, observing, "Il reste évidemment beaucoup à dire sur l'intérêt littéraire du fragment de Carlisle, dont le texte aussi est loin de nous avoir livré tous ses secrets," critical attention has, regardless, focused on comparing the fragment to other works rather than the text of the fragment itself.

This tendency to compare seems to be due at least in part to the strange coincidence that the Carlisle fragment transmits a scene that was known to scholars far before its discovery: it is the scene of Tristan and Yseut's mutual avowals of love, which takes place on the ship taking

⁷² In the first chapter of *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), Constant J. Mews recounts the transmission of what he hypothesizes is the only record of Abelard and Heloise's love letters from the initial phase of their affair: in 1471, a scribe identifying himself as Johannes de Vepria excerpted a letter collection he probably found in the library at Clairvaux, preserving a sort of outline of the correspondence. As with the Carlisle fragment, the sense of something so precious being saved from oblivion by chance is quite appealing; however, the authorship of all of Heloise's correspondence is so fraught that it is not as easy to believe this story.

⁷³ Haug, "Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances," 45.

⁷⁴ Benskin, Hunt, and Short, "Un nouveau fragment," 290.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 314-17.

them both to Cornwall from Ireland, after they have mistakenly drunk the *philtre* prepared by Yseut's mother. It is adapted by Gottfried von Strassburg in his Middle High German version of *Tristan*, in which he identifies Thomas as his model; although Bédier famously calls this scene an "infidèle et avenante copie," scholars generally accepted Gottfried's adaptation of the avowals as reliable, often citing his version in the place of Thomas's lost original.⁷⁸ This practice begins with Bédier's own reconstruction, but continues well into the twentieth century: for example, Marchello-Nizia quotes Gottfried's adaptation of the dialogue in her 1988 article on the avowal of love in dialogue.⁷⁹ Chrétien de Troyes borrows the wordplay alone of Thomas's avowals – the polysemic play of "l'amer," whose syllables could signify "aimer," "l'amour," or "la mer," or several of these at once – in his romance *Cligés*.⁸⁰ So perhaps it is because of a sense of familiarity with this scene that so much scholarship has focused on re-establishing the Carlisle fragment's influence on other works. In a similar vein to Short's outline of how the Carlisle fragment confirms or corrects Bédier's hypothesis, Marchello-Nizia uses it to correct and advance her own argument about the development of the dialogized avowal, claiming that the Carlisle fragment confirms Thomas as the inventor of the Old French love dialogue⁸¹; Haug argues for the "striking modernity" of Gottfried von Strassburg's adaptation of the dialogue, which constitutes its "highest and final version," in comparison to Thomas's text from the fragment⁸²; Alison Finlay references the Carlisle fragment just to confirm the disinterest in the positive emotions of love shown by Brother Robert's version of *Tristan*.⁸³

In addition to the assumption of familiarity with the avowal scene, Bédier's dismissal of Thomas's poetic exploitation of the polysemy of "l'amer" as a "conchetto" seems to have tainted perceptions of the dialogue as self-consciously literary, and perhaps not particularly meaningful. Gottfried's adaptation and Chrétien's echo do little to dispel this: because Gottfried is writing in Middle High German, the polysemic possibilities of "lameir" are limited by his readers' unfamiliarity with Old French, even though he cleverly incorporates the term into his text. His version thus inevitably simplifies Thomas's original dialogue. Chrétien, on the other hand, really does use the wordplay as a conceit; when he plays on the meanings of "l'amer," it reads more as a literary in-joke than anything else. These differences are especially clear in comparison to the lines in Thomas where Yseut defines "l'amer" and Tristan puzzles over them – very fortunately, the first full lines preserved by the Carlisle fragment:

Cum bien crēus[tes] vus, amis.
 Si vus ne f[u]ss[e]z, ja ne fusse,
 Ne de l'amer rien [ne] sēusse.
 Merveille est k'om la mer ne het
 Qui si amer mal en mer set,
 E qui l'anguisse est si amere !
 Si je une foiz fors en ere,

⁷⁸ Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, vol. 1: 150; see Gottfried von Strassburg, trans. Hatto, 198-204.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. Collet and Méla, lines 541-63; also see Giovanna Perrotta's comparison of Thomas's and Chrétien's depictions of lovesickness, "'C'est costume d'amur de joie avoir après d'olur': La fenomenologia amorosa in alcuni passi del *Tristan* e del *Cligés*," *Interfaces 2* (2016): 164-88.

⁸¹ Christiane Marchello-Nizia, "Une nouvelle poétique du discours direct : Le *Tristan et Yseut* de Thomas."

⁸² Haug, "Reinterpreting the *Tristan* Romances," 55.

⁸³ Alison Finlay, "Intolerable Love: *Tristrans Saga* and the Carlisle *Tristan* Fragment."

Ja n[’i] enteroie, ce quit. (39-45)⁸⁴

As well you believed, *ami*.
If you had not been [here], I would never have been,
Nor would I have ever known anything of *lamer* (love/the sea/bitterness).
It is astonishing that people do not hate the sea
When they encounter such bitter illness on the sea,
And for whom the pain is so bitter!
If I ever managed to free myself from it,
I would never go back to it, I think.

No translation could do justice to the layerings of meaning Thomas calls up here. While he is not the first author to exploit the phonetic resonances of “*lamer*,” as Maurice Delbouille indicates, his playing on these words is remarkable for its deftness, and for the way he delegates this virtuosity to his characters’ direct discourse.⁸⁵ Yseut’s lament is intelligible in any way Tristan might choose to interpret “*lamer*,” for she is correct that without Tristan, she would know nothing of the sea – if Marc had not sent Tristan to win her for him, she would have stayed in Ireland – or of love. Walter Haug sees this speech as evidence for Thomas’s “psychological” take on the lovers’ situation, especially Yseut’s “confused impetuosity or impetuous confusion.” It is the “tension between desperate confusion and soothing comfort” that gives rise to her using “*lamer*” in this way.⁸⁶ Thomas is certainly capable of portraying such tension – Yseut’s monologue addressed to Tristan as he is dying and she is delayed by a storm is an excellent example – but here, Yseut is poised, not anguished. She is using “*lamer*” thoughtfully. It is not quite that she, as Finlay suggests, is “decorously equivocating about her feelings,” or at least, this is not the only possible reading of this passage.⁸⁷ What is missing thus far is tone, for although she speaks of “*anguisse*,” the ensuing dialogue with Tristan implies that Yseut is also being at least a little playful. Whether she articulates a line like “*Merveille est k’om la mer ne het*” in real surprise or with archness, her somewhat abrupt conclusion, “*ce quit*,” drops responsibility for interpreting “*lamer*” correctly onto Tristan’s shoulders. There is something lightly funny about this invitation, or command, to interpret correctly: it invokes a sense of what Bédier might call “*préciosité, esprit courtois*,” which is not unique to Thomas but

⁸⁴ Thomas d’Angleterre, “*Tristan et Yseut: Le fragment inédit de Carlisle*,” ed. and trans. Ian Short, in *Tristan et Yseut: Les premières versions européennes*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia. Old French quotations from the Carlisle fragment are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted; brackets are Short’s, and translations are mine.

⁸⁵ Maurice Delbouille, “Le premier *Roman de Tristan*,” 282-83. Delbouille notes that there is a hint of this wordplay in the Oxford and Berne *folios*, two separate plays on sea/bitter and bitter/love in Eilhart von Oberg’s version of *Tristan*, other examples in the *Roman d’Enéas* and the *Lai de Narcisse*, and adds that “le jeu de mots sur *mare-amare-amarum*” already existed as “un *conchetto* latin très répandu dans les écoles” and was therefore “développé,” not invented, by a French author.

⁸⁶ Haug, “Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances,” 50. Francesca Gambino maintains that Yseut’s anguish is not only psychological but also relates to the physical discomfort of being confined to the ship; see “Su alcuni nodi testuali del *Tristan* de Thomas,” *Romania* 133:3-4 (2015), 432-33.

⁸⁷ Finlay, “Intolerable Love,” 212. Brault also points out that her use of the term “amis” is “en apparence innocente,” but ultimately works to “intensifier l’équivoque” (“*L’amer, l’amer, la mer*,” 218-20.)

represents “ce tour general d’imagination et de sensibilité.”⁸⁸ It is the “sensibilité” of this dialogue that the Carlisle fragment nuances by leaving this room for light-heartedness.

Tristan’s response sheds light on the tone of Yseut’s challenge of “lamer”: in both Thomas’s and Gottfried’s texts, Tristan now pauses, and his thoughts are related in free indirect discourse. In neither version does he panic, although Haug describes the polysemy of “lamer” as leaving him “at a loss,” somewhat at the mercy of this “semantic riddle.”⁸⁹ The Carlisle fragment reveals Tristan’s consideration to be a magnificent poetic interlude, which dazzles with alliterative chiasmus at the same time that it specifies the interpretive possibilities of “lamer” very precisely:

Tristran ad noté [ch]escun dit,
Mes el l’ad issi forsvëé
Par “l’amer” que ele ad tant changé
Que ne set si cele dolur
Ad de la mer ou de l’amur,
Ou s’el dit “amer » de “la mer”
Ou pur “l’amur” diet “amer.” (46-52)⁹⁰

Tristan had taken note of each word,
But she had thus thrown him off
With “l’amer,” that she had changed so much,
That he does not know if this pain
Comes from the sea or from love,
Or if she says “amer” about “the sea,”
Or for “love,” she says “amer.”

Here, Tristan is characterized as a good “reader,” and Yseut as a nimble speaker: he is paying good attention, but she has nevertheless misled him with her use of “lamer” and its shifting meaning. In an effort to clarify Yseut’s speech, Thomas introduces the unambiguous “amur,” rhymed in its first appearance with “dolur” to emphasize its “-ur” ending as well as the link between love and suffering that will eventually seem emblematic of Tristan and Yseut’s story. Yet the rapid-fire repetition of “de la mer”-“de l’amur”-“amer”-“la mer”-“amur”-“amer” of lines 50-52 reveals nothing about Tristan’s understanding of what Yseut means, only his understanding of its semantic possibilities. He wonders if she does mean love (53-54), but then asks her what kind of physical discomfort she is feeling. He would like her to define “amer,” because, he explains, “deus mals i put l’en se[n]tir, / L’un d’amer, l’autre de puür” (“One can suffer two pains from it, / One bilious, the other nauseating,” 57-58).⁹¹ This is an almost pedantically literal question, one that is not interested in eliminating semantic possibilities, but in diagnostics: is Tristan, stupefied by the grave implications of Yseut possibly being in love

⁸⁸ Bédier, *Le Roman de Tristan par Thomas*, vol. 2: 53: “ni Chrétien, par un coup de son génie, n’a inventé la courtoisie, ni Thomas la préciosité.”

⁸⁹ Haug, “Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances,” 48.

⁹⁰ In “Un nouveau fragment,” Short says of the edition that its aim is to be “avant tout lisible,” 298; in the case of lines 50-52, the diplomatic transcription he provides reveals how much this polysemy is visually represented at the level of the letter: “Ad del amer ou del amur / Ou sele dit amer del amer / Ou pur lamur diet amer” (302).

⁹¹ To translate this as “bile” means that Tristan is actually playing on a *third* meaning of “amer”; see Short’s “Notice,” 1208.

with him, simply asking the most straightforward question he can, or is he playing along with her here, adopting the placid seriousness of a doctor who only wants to prescribe the correct remedy? His flourish of the entirely un-literary medical term “puir,” juxtaposed with his repetition of Yseut’s “amer” seems to indicate the former. By being so literal, Tristan is actually being a little silly, too. That Yseut immediately brushes aside the possibility of “puir” – “Cel mal que je sent / Est amer, mes ne put nient” (This pain that I feel / Is bitter, but is not at all nauseating, 59-60) – confirms how incongruous this suggestion is, and therefore, how funny it might be.

In contrast with the Carlisle fragment’s dialogue, there is little room for playfulness in Gottfried’s translation; he faithfully transmits the original wordplay – indeed, the French word itself – but his version, betraying its literary ingenuity, reads as straightforwardly earnest:

“Lameir,” [Isolde] said, “that is my affliction,
lameir that burdens my mouth,
lameir it is, that causes me pain.”
 When she said *lameir* so often,
 [Tristan] reflected and considered
 weightily and acutely
 the meaning of the word itself.
 Thus he began to conceive,
 that *l’ameir* was “love,”
l’ameir “bitter,” *la meir* “sea”:
 its meaning seemed to him a multitude.
 He forgot about the third one
 and asked about the other two:
 he kept quiet about love,
 the patroness of them both,
 their hope, their desire;
 he spoke of “sea” and “bitter” ...⁹²

Regardless of his audience’s knowledge of French, Gottfried’s inclusion of the foreign *l’ameir* immediately marks this passage as self-consciously literary; it is “precious” in a way that Thomas’s is not, both because the layer of linguistic mediation between the speakers and the readers is emphasized, and because Tristan and Isolde’s interaction is more focused on resolving the ambiguity of *l’ameir* as a signifier. Here, Isolde neatly lays out the problem for Tristan: she describes *l’ameir* as causing three symptoms, and although Tristan feels this word could have “a multitude” of definitions, he only considers three. Logically, each of these does not work equally well, because Isolde’s complaint has so little room for ambiguity. Thomas’s Yseut is less straightforward, speaking for much longer (well over eight lines) and in a more elliptical way. Thomas underscores Yseut’s rhetorical prowess, where Gottfried’s Isolde merely speaks somewhat cryptically. Similarly, Gottfried’s Tristan is interested in “the meaning of the word itself”; Thomas’s Tristan may be “forsvëé,” but he meets Yseut’s challenge while leaving open the possibility that he understands they are playing a game. In Gottfried’s version, this

⁹² Unpublished translation by Jenny Tan of Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan und Îsolt*, ed. August Closs, lines 11990-12010. See also Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan with the “Tristran” of Thomas*, trans. A. T. Hatto, 199.

passage of the avowal scene serves as a lovely moment of suspense, but without the scintillating vivacity of Thomas's.

Despite his simplification of Thomas's subtleties, Gottfried crucially transmits both the wordplay of *l'ameir* and the form of the lovers' avowals. Their dialogue does not unfold in exactly the same way, but it remains a conversation between them. However, when Chrétien borrows Thomas's *l'amer* in *Cligès*, he does so in third-person narration. In this passage, Queen Guinevere is observing a young couple who are in love with each other, but too shy to admit it. They are all sailing from England to Bretagne for a tournament, and she notices classic signs of lovesickness like blushing and sighing, but attributes this to seasickness:

Mes la mers l'engigne et deçoit
Si qu'en la mer l'am[e]r ne voit,
Qu'en la mer sont et d[e l']amer vient
Et amers est li maus quis tient,
Et de cez trois ne set blamer
La reïne fors que la mer,
Car li dui li tierz li encusent
Et par le tierz li dui s'escusent
Qui dou forfeit sont entechié. (549-57)⁹³

But the sea tricks and deceives [the queen]
So that she does not see love at sea,
Because they are at sea, and it comes from love
And is bitter is the pain that holds them.
From these three the queen does not know which to blame,
Except the sea,
For the two accuse the third in her eyes,
And by the third, the two,
Who are stained by their misdeed, excuse themselves.

Although this passage more or less follows the same sequence as Thomas's dialogue, first interweaving multiple uses of *l'amer* and then attempting to clarify its meaning, the only effect of this polysemy is to amuse a reader who is familiar with Thomas. This passage plays no role in the romance's narrative, and grants no new information; in fact, given that Guinevere will correctly identify these same symptoms about a thousand lines later as those of lovesickness, and eventually bring about the young couple's betrothal, it is entirely irrelevant to Chrétien's text.⁹⁴ The polysemy itself is reduced to an almost nonsensical wordplay, arising only from the phonetic resonance of "la mer" and "l'amer." While this passage focalizes Guinevere, it really expresses the narrator's perspective, and dispenses with even the admittedly rather flimsy pretext of misunderstanding *l'amer* due to its ambiguous usage. In this way, when Chrétien uses *l'amer*, it really does read as a "conchetto" – delightful to the reader who recognizes the

⁹³ In lines 550 and 551, I have substituted a variant noted by editors Charles Méla and Olivier Collet from B.N. fr. 1420, in order to emphasize the link between Thomas's text and Chrétien's; see *Cligès*, ed. Charles Méla and Olivier Collet, 306-7. Méla and Collet's edition is based on B.N. fr. 12560, and they give these lines as "Si qu'en la mer l'amor ne voit, / Qu'en la mer sont et d'amer vient." This version seems to indicate that the scribe who copied this manuscript might not have understood the play on "l'amer."

⁹⁴ See *Cligès*, lines 1581-91 and 2241-2315.

intertextuality at play, but empty of any greater significance. The superficiality of the borrowing is noticeable even at the level of versification; while “Qu’en la mer sont et d[e l’]amer vient / Et amers est li maus quis tient,” echo Thomas’s lines, Chrétien seems uninterested in getting the same kind of alliterative payoff that Thomas does. His characteristically complex syntax returns toward the end of the passage, in the way he juxtaposes “encusent” with “s’escusent,” for example. But these instances of simply putting “la mer” and “l’amer” together in the same phrases have little to do with Thomas’s dizzying, yet exact, concatenations of “amur” and “amer.” With couplets like “Ou s’el dit ‘amer’ de ‘la mer’ / Ou pur ‘l’amur’ diët ‘amer,’” Thomas enacts Tristan’s possible confusion, and catches the reader up in it. The delight of the Carlisle fragment’s dialogue is based not only in recognition of wordplay, but in how far Thomas pushes the polysemic possibilities of *l’amer*, and how cleverly he represents confusion while maintaining visual and aural clarity. Thomas’s wordplay is not superficial, as Chrétien’s is, and his virtuosity does not emphasize its own literariness, as Gottfried’s does. His polysemy prepares, and builds up to, a quintessential expression of what Marchello-Nizia calls “cet accord des cœurs et des corps auquel mène le roman courtois”: the reciprocal avowal of love.⁹⁵

A mutual avowal that takes place in dialogue is actually fairly rare in twelfth-century romance, as Marchello-Nizia points out; revelations of love more often are made in monologues to a third party, or explained in narration.⁹⁶ For Marchello-Nizia, early love dialogues in romance texts reveal “non pas tant que deux êtres s’aiment, mais que *le dire de l’amour est d’abord affaire de langage, accord passé par deux locuteurs sur les signifiés.*”⁹⁷ Using her framework, we might read Tristan and Yseut’s avowal in the Carlisle fragment as significant because of its representation of a quintessential element of the romance genre; because of its exceptional form; and/or because of its endorsement of a certain linguistic consciousness. These elements are all at play in this dialogue, especially the sense of dialogue as a negotiation of meaning between two speakers. But the most stunning feature of the text of the Carlisle fragment, the really sensational thing for which it should be most famous, is its attempt to portray the dynamic affective relationality of the avowal – that is, its own centering of how “deux êtres s’aiment,” and what perfect love might look like from the outside. As Tristan and Yseut conclude their linguistic negotiation, finally putting to rest what “amer” means, they also finally reveal their feelings to each other. What is denoted in this conclusion is inextricably linked to its affective connotations, and it is these connotations that Thomas emphasizes just after the dialogue ends. He says of the lovers that “ambedeus sunt en espoir” (both are hopeful, 75). Short translates this as “tous deux vivent en espoir,” explaining, “les amants sont dans l’expectative.”⁹⁸ To “live in hope” is necessarily to live in an affectively charged state; it is this state that Thomas’s lovers’ linguistic negotiation portrays and, eventually, resolves.

Despite the resolution of what “amer” means, Tristan and Yseut’s “avowals” nevertheless retain a certain coy relativity, as neither lover says “je vous aime” directly. Yseut’s reticence can be explained, at least in part, by her gender: Marchello-Nizia shows that in many love dialogues in early romance, it is the woman who responds to a man’s declaration of love, and her response is “toujours” “une distorsion entre ses paroles et ses sentiments,” which she ascribes to social pressure, paraphrasing the female response as “je ne peux vous dire que je

⁹⁵ Christiane Marchello-Nizia, “L’Invention du dialogue amoureux,” 225.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 224-227.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 230, emphasis Marchello-Nizia’s.

⁹⁸ Thomas, *Tristan*, ed. Short, 125, 1216.

vous aime, respectons les codes.”⁹⁹ In the dialogized avowal, however, she contends that “celle qui mène le jeu, c’est en quelque égard la dame,” and indeed, here it is Yseut who begins the dialogue by introducing the *l’amer* polysemy, and it is she who pushes the dialogue to its conclusion.¹⁰⁰ After she brushes off Tristan’s question about whether she feels bilious or nauseated, she says of the pain she feels, “Mon quer anguisse e pres le tient,” (61), which might sound like a description of a real medical symptom. But, she concludes, “tel amer de la mer vient: / Prist puis que [je çäen]z entray” (this bitterness-love comes from the sea-loving: / It overtook me since I have been aboard, 62-3).¹⁰¹ This is as close as she can come to an explicit avowal, and she does so by contextualizing the ambiguous *amer* with its location in her “quer,” and its onset during their journey on the sea. In sum: what pains her is *amer*, but it is not a nauseating suffering, it is afflicting her heart, and it started after she set off at sea. If Tristan were truly lost, it seems unlikely that this would be enough to convince him that she means “amur” when she says “amer.” But, with smooth immediacy, “Tristran respont : ‘Autretel ay. / Ly miens mals est del vostre estrait’” (Tristan replies, ‘I have the same. / My own pain is of the same source as yours,’ 64-65). The initial simplicity of this line is breathtaking after the rhetorical cartwheels that have preceded it. “Autretel ay,” Tristan says, completing the couplet Yseut has opened, reshaping her “tel amer” into “autretel.” It is a perfectly relative avowal, an affective deictic that at once shows he has understood and stops short of saying what it is that he understands; it is at once intimately reciprocal without giving much away, and electrifyingly contingent.¹⁰²

It is only in his last lines of direct discourse that Tristan will pin down the meaning of *l’amer*; he continues to play on its polysemy as he ostensibly explains what he means by “Autretel ay”:

L’anguisse mon quer amer fait,
Si ne sent pas le mal amer ;
N’il ne revient pas de la mer,
Mes d’amer ay ceste dolor,
E en la mer m’est pris l’amur.
Assez en ay or dit a sage. (66-71)

Anguish makes my heart bitter/makes my heart love,
Although I do not feel this pain to be bitter/the pain of love;
Nor does it come from the sea/from love,
But it is from bitterness/loving that my suffering comes,
And on the sea, love has overtaken me.
I have said enough for a smart listener/speaker.

⁹⁹ Marchello-Nizia, “L’invention du dialogue amoureux,” 226, 230.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 229-30.

¹⁰¹ Again, Short’s diplomatic transcription reveals the profound ambiguity of this line: “tel amer del amer vient” (Benskin, Hunt, and Short, “Un nouveau fragment,” 302).

¹⁰² The particular resonance of “autretel” as marking a relative identity is worth noting here: as Claude Buridant explains, “autretel” is a compound that “associe les deux éléments formant couple en signifiant ‘tel d’autre part’...Il souligne qu’entre deux éléments est repérée une identité relative de même genre, de même nature, grâce à *tel*, rappel de caractérisation, et *autre*, marque de confrontation” (*Grammaire nouvelle de l’ancien français*, 153).

Tristan adopts Yseut's terms as his own, speaking of the way anguish is afflicting his heart, and the source of the pain. And then, in line 70, he breaks the pattern by saying "amur" instead of "amer." As in Thomas's earlier narration, absolute clarity is provided only by the *dolur/amur* rhyme, again with "dolur" followed by "amur." This rhyme will be repeated, with the order reversed, in Thomas's later observation that "c[è] est custome d'amur / De joie avoir après dolur" (it is the way of love, / To have joy after suffering, 86-87). Here, however, it is Tristan, not the narrator, who is tasked with this crucial clarification. He makes explicit what Yseut did not, or could not, playing with the polysemic possibilities of her *l'amer* until he substitutes another word altogether, the word that corresponds to the correct definition. By using her terms before making himself clear, Tristan demonstrates not only that his feelings are in line with Yseut's, but also that he can express it in the same way she does. Yseut does not "mène le jeu" alone; rather, Yseut and Tristan co-create in conversation the terms of their love. Yseut offers *l'amer*, and Tristan returns it with an intentionally wrong-headed spin, trying to elicit her clarification. She does clarify, but barely, and so he brings the exchange to a close with the final "amur."

Tristan's last line, with its sly nod to the necessary *sagesse* of both speaker and listener, confirms the dialogue's playfulness and collaboration: there is still a sense of gravity here, of course, because both parties certainly understand, as does the reader, that falling in love will not bring them joy for long. But, from this dialogue until their arrival in Cornwall, Tristan and Yseut will experience "flawless happiness," as Haug puts it, uninterrupted by worldly concerns.¹⁰³ It is, as far as we know, the only purely joyful period they enjoy. Spitzer calls the lovers' interlude in "Chèvrefeuille," which is barely described by Marie, "une rare éclaircie dans la noire forêt de la douleur et des tourments."¹⁰⁴ The text of the Carlisle fragment provides us with another, brighter *éclaircie*: in a flash we cannot see, due to its loss or because Thomas leaves it undescribed, Tristan and Yseut fall in love. But what ensues is not simply joy: the fragment's dialogue is the trace of that simultaneous, magical, accidental *éclair*, in which Thomas draws out an avowal of love into a conversation where both speakers play at misunderstanding each other. The dialogue extends the pleasure of this moment for the reader as it represents, with speech, the collaborative dynamism of an impossibly perfect love, based on a shared understanding so uncanny it can only be evoked. Intersubjective communication, realistically, cannot function as seamlessly as it does for Tristan and Yseut. And yet: the complication of *l'amer* leads us through the tangled thinking-together of an exchange as momentous as a life-changing – life-shattering – avowal of love. It guides us to savor the relief of Tristan's final "amur," even as we suspect that no real confusion exists; it creates for us, for the split second of two syllables, a sense of the unearthly relief and complete understanding that defines Tristan and Yseut's love.

Conclusion: Fragmentation and "le sens du miracle"

I began this chapter with the concept of *mouvance*, and with the question of how the Tristanian "fragments" I proposed to read gesture toward a virtual whole. Zumthor's assertions that "le texte...est et ne peut être que fragment," and that the text evokes the "dynamisme connotatif" of the "pré-texte virtuel," "quel que soit le dessin dénotatif du texte,"

¹⁰³ Haug, "Reinterpreting the Tristan Romances," 52.

¹⁰⁴ Spitzer, "La 'Lettre,'" 88.

constitute a framework that is ultimately extremely difficult to articulate, and, I think, poses a methodological quandary too vast to fully address¹⁰⁵: if the virtual whole can never be fully expressed by any individual text, then there is always something that exceeds a work's boundaries, but is somehow, nonetheless, gestured toward. In this way, Zumthor asks the scholar to read with great attention, alert for that which is only marked in the text by its absence. How to trace the evocative potential of a medieval literary work without projecting the concerns of one's own time and subject position onto it is a delicate balance. (Zumthor himself wonders in a later article, "Écriture-lecture, lecture-écriture... Comment le médiéviste n'entendrait-il pas sa propre voix?"¹⁰⁶) As my reading of "Chèvrefeuille" explores, however, there are also methodological risks involved in focusing too narrowly on "la lettre," and in assuming that a text's meaning is limited to what can be expressed discursively. To miss, as so many scholars have done, Yseut's intuitive flash of understanding in "Chèvrefeuille" is to lose sight not only of the evocative power of the literary work in general, but also of the role of evocation in the Tristan tradition. Tristanian texts, such as "Chèvrefeuille" and the Bérout's episode of the lovers' return to court, use evocation in order to show their belonging to the broader Tristan narrative, and to harness their audience's knowledge of the virtual whole in order to contextualize the episode at hand. Evocation is crucial for communication between Tristan and Yseut themselves, too; even when the lovers speak to each other, the connotation of what they say is often more important than its denotation. This is especially evident in the dialogue of the Carlisle fragment, but is also remarkable in Bérout's version of *Tristan*.

The real gesture toward the virtual whole lies in these moments where a text draws attention to Tristan and Yseut's shared understanding, which cannot effectively be described discursively, but must be alluded to, or enacted: Yseut's flash of understanding, the look that passes between Tristan and the queen, and the marvelous interweaving of signifiers in dialogue before the couple have become lovers, all attest to the mystery and the magnificence of the love they share, an affective fullness that cannot really be elucidated. Conspicuously absent from their interactions with each other is gender difference: this is not, as James Schultz suggests, because gender "does not matter in the ways we think it should," or that "sexual difference does not matter"¹⁰⁷; elsewhere in the Tristan tradition, the social constraints prescribed by gender certainly do influence the narrative, especially at its end. Rather, it is because only exterior circumstances ever intervene to separate the lovers; communication between them is transparent, unimpeded by gender difference, misunderstanding, or the confusion of desire, as is the case in "Piramus et Tisbé" and *Érec et Énide*.

The question of evocation is simultaneously one of methodology and of aesthetic orientation, calling attention to and problematizing the modern reader's position in regard to the text as an object of study. For what evocation requires of the reader is participation: perhaps background knowledge, but certainly a spark of intuition or imagination. These Tristanian texts ask the scholar to make use of philological approaches to serve this imagination, rather than to invalidate or ignore it. As such, they invite the same kind of re-evaluation of approach with which Leo Spitzer concludes his reading of "Chèvrefeuille." To understand such a text, he writes, it is necessary to "prendre au sérieux" unfamiliar techniques of meaning-making, and, "s'il traite d'œuvres médiévales, le critique moderne devra apprendre ce que le moyen âge a si

¹⁰⁵ Zumthor, "Intertextualité et mouvance," 10.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., "Médiéviste ou pas," 320.

¹⁰⁷ Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, 27-28.

bien connu: le sens du miracle.”¹⁰⁸ This sense of miracle is a sense of transcendence, and a sense of the sublimely evocative poetic potential of the literary text. And the stakes of this readerly sensitivity involve nothing less than the function of literature itself: “Dans notre civilisation,” Spitzer explains, “la poésie, de par l’évocation d’autres mondes créés ou suggérés par notre imagination, est une libération, grâce à laquelle nous pouvons nous échapper du monde que nous sentons peser sur nous.”¹⁰⁹ It is this “libération” which the Tristanian fragments I have discussed in this chapter reference, and attempt to effect: a poetic miracle that allows us to imagine an impossibly perfect love, and to delight in it.

¹⁰⁸ Spitzer, “La ‘Lettre,’” 89.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

Conclusion

The Modern Reader, Listening

Ce n'est pas seulement besoin de tendresse, c'est aussi besoin d'être tendre pour l'autre... nous revenons à la racine de notre relation, là où besoin et désir se joignent.
– Roland Barthes¹

In the introduction to *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, Kathryn Gravdal quotes Helen Hazen's description of the modern genre of romance in which she lists some paradigmatic moments of such stories: "I hope to read romances forever," Hazen begins, describing a narrative that begins with "Flowers with a fond note from an anonymous admirer," continues on with "a light touch on my silk-covered arm," and finishes with "rape, ah, rape." This last item, Gravdal asserts, is the trace of "the medieval romanticization of ravishment," "that which blurs the distinction between seduction and aggression."² In this conclusion, I want to push back on this line of filiation between medieval and modern romance: to read our modern assumptions about desire and violence into medieval literature, I will suggest, is to remain ignorant of naturalized but harmful modern narratives of desire, and also to remain blind to the relational possibilities and ideals of an earlier historical period.

In the preceding chapters, I have made a case for reading medieval romance in a way that does not gloss over the often-brutal treatment of women in the twelfth century, but that also makes space for surprising moments of tenderness or intimacy between male and female partners. By arguing that the importance of direct discourse to the romance genre is both formal and affective, I have proposed lovers' speech as a privileged site of understanding between male and female subjects, and outlined the ways in which nondiscursive communication can supplant or supplement conversation. What I am aiming for, overall, is a new approach to reading romance which combines broad theoretical and social perspectives with close reading, and which depends on a certain sensitivity to stylistics as well as to the moments of feeling encoded in the text. As these three chapters have shown, this approach opens up aspects of romance that have often been overlooked, misread, or discounted. In Chapter One, I identified a commitment to and belief in the relational potential of dialogue in the Old French adaptation of "Piramus et Tisbé," a text whose expansive use of direct discourse has not until now been considered revelatory or even particularly interesting. In Chapter Two, I showed how that what has often struck modern readers of *Érec et Énide* – the psychological opacity of the protagonists – actually distracts from exploring the text's investments in the problematics of communication between men and women, and the way a female subject might navigate courtly society. Finally, in my analysis of the fragmented Tristan legend as episodic and evocative, I illuminate several instances of discursive and non-discursive communication, showing how this textual tradition problematizes and extols the transmission of messages, whether they are transmitted by official letters or in a single look shared between lovers.

¹ Roland Barthes, "Tendresse," in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, 265.

² Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law*, 14.

If medieval romance “blurs the distinction between seduction and aggression,” in Gravdal’s words, the previous chapters show that this is not the only – and not even the dominant – feature of its portrayals of love and desire. Romance is deeply invested in staging and explaining contact and exchange between men and women in ways that are not always entirely legible to the modern reader. An example of this might be the unexpected scene which takes place in *Érec et Énide* after the end of the couple’s quest: Énide takes care of Érec, disarming him and cleaning the wounds he has received during many skirmishes (5124-30).³ On her own initiative – not out of necessity, or custom – she performs the service of a squire for her husband and refuses to let anyone else touch him, implying an unusual interplay of vulnerability, attention, and protectiveness across gender lines that is difficult to define. Énide’s affectionate, intimate service is neither the loving, sexualized touch the romance depicts between husband and wife, nor the collegial, frank care a squire might provide; rather, it belongs to some other category of tenderness. This kind of affectionate touch is not limited to female characters, either: Tristan frequently reassures Yseut, for example. Two half-lost lines from the beginning of the Carlisle fragment seem to show that he does so before they are even lovers: “...quer cil l’adeseit / ...pur conforter” (...for he touched her / ...to comfort, 3-4). These two examples of touch that is intended to heal or to comfort are just as much a part of the way medieval romance depicts love as are more overt scenes of seduction or sexual aggression.

In the present historical moment, it is not easy to conceptualize the love relationship between men and women as a space that is “pur conforter.” This difficulty begins with the way desire is assumed to be gendered in the first place in the twenty-first century. In *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, James A. Schultz discusses “heterosexuality” as a modern concept that hinders modern scholars’ understanding of medieval texts. Focusing on lovers in Middle High German verse romance, he writes that although “Nowadays heterosexual attraction is usually assumed to depend on the evident difference between male and female bodies,” that difference is simply not marked in the ways we expect in medieval literature. Rather, it is courtliness itself, “the nobility of the body, visible as radiant beauty,” that “provokes love, while the sex of the body, not visible, does not.”⁴ Attraction is not a free-for-all in medieval texts, of course. “Somehow,” Schultz notes wryly, lovers “manage to keep themselves straight,” but they perhaps “should not be called heterosexuals but aristophiliacs.”⁵ The basic assumption that men and women are attracted to each other because of *difference* rather than *sameness* already warps the modern scholar’s view of what happens between men and women in medieval romance. For instance, Chrétien’s initial descriptions of Énide, as well as his emphasis on the *parage* between Érec and Énide, are easy to read as purely conventional; however, in light of Schultz’s explanation of courtly attraction, these descriptions seem much more nuanced. A reading such as E. Jane Burns’s description of Érec’s lingering contemplation of Énide as “omit[ting]...those traits that mark her inferior social status” so that Énide’s beauty narcissistically “reflects only those aristocratic qualities that resemble his own,” becomes much less damning if we consider Érec as an “aristophiliac,” looking precisely for those “aristocratic qualities” because that is the way attraction is encoded in this courtly setting. By denaturalizing and de-familiarizing “heterosexuality” in this way, it might even be possible to reconceptualize Énide’s beauty as having more complex courtly significance than objectification. It is not that patriarchy and misogyny are absent from the twelfth century; it is, however, important to

³ I discuss this scene in Chapter II, pages 53-54.

⁴ James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, 83.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28, 83.

distinguish how, in the twelfth century, these systems of oppression functioned independently from twenty-first century ideas of heterosexuality.

To read heterosexuality into romance means projecting modern narratives into a medieval genre. This is problematic for many reasons, but especially because modern conceptions of heterosexuality – both popular and intellectual – are so overwhelmingly negative. For example, as Kadiatu G. Kanneh points out, “Feminism’s response to heterosexuality has repeatedly been to dismiss it, to criticize it as a neutral or normalizing area, as a threat to women, as akin to capitalism and male dominance.”⁶ Such dismissal and criticism is readily apparent in feminist scholarship on medieval romance, as I have discussed, and it forecloses the possibility of understanding, or perhaps even perceiving, any positive or constructive elements in the genre’s portrayal of love. If, as Kathryn Gravdal puts it, “Courtly discourse is a locus in which the feminine figures as an empty sign that can be filled with the reflections of masculine hegemony on itself,” then any intimation of positive affect in the love relationship must only be another facet of the mystification courtly literature operates.⁷ Contemporary narratives about heterosexuality in popular culture can be, incredibly, even more negative, tending to assume an antagonism between men and women, or at best an uneasy truce between them: take, for example, the many approaches to dating that treat romantic relationships as manipulative competitions with rules, winners, and losers.⁸

These ideas of male/female pairing are actually undercut by the insistent presence of *confort*, which echoes through most of the texts I have discussed in this dissertation. *Confort* is part of what love requires and makes possible: for example, Tisbé describes herself as “Cui riens ne puet confort doner” (“One to whom nothing can bring comfort,” 390), but she also desires the *confort* of dialogue, suggesting to Piramus, “Plus a loisir porrons parler / Et li uns l’autre conforter” (“We will be able to speak more freely, / And comfort each other,” 400-401). Remember, this couple is speaking to each other through a crack in the wall that separates them: “conforter” here is not a euphemism for the relief of requiting desire, although that is one of its meanings; here, it is also an expression of the pleasure and reassurance of speaking with the beloved. In the Oxford *folie*, when Yseut thinks that Tristan has died, she exclaims, “Lasse! Jameis ne averai confort” (“Alas! I will never again find comfort,” 968). This is almost exactly what she says after Tristan’s death, at the end of Thomas’s version: “Amis, amis, pur vostre mort / N’avrai ja mais pur rien confort” (“*Ami, ami*, because of your death / I will never again

⁶ Kadiatu G. Kanneh, “Sisters Under the Skin: A Politics of Heterosexuality,” 432.

⁷ Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 12. “Mystification” is Roberta Krueger’s term; she defines it as the process by which Chrétien de Troyes “embellishes and partly obscures the stark realities of men’s power over women and dresses them up so that they appear benign and even beneficial”; this makes it possible for women readers to critique as well as enjoy his romances (*Women Readers and the Ideology of Gender in Old French Verse Romance*, 35).

⁸ For example, Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider’s *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1995); Neil Strauss’s *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005); or even Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg’s *Modern Romance* (New York: Penguin, 2015), which explores current attitudes toward online dating. We might also consider the literal gamification of relationships in reality shows such as the “The Bachelor” franchise, on air since 2002, or the UK’s “Love Island,” which first aired in 2005, then was revived in 2015 and has been on air since then, and whose American version premiered in July 2019.

take comfort in anything," 3243-44).⁹ *Confort* is something that one lover grants to the other; it is a sweetness, or tenderness, that has to do with intimacy but not necessarily with sex. In the same way that the medieval Latin *dilectio* and *diligere* can be used to evoke sexual pleasure or a more holistic pleasure, *confort* is a contingent and loaded term.¹⁰ Yet it is nevertheless recognizable: Chrétien doesn't use the word in his narration of Énide dressing Érec's wounds, but her insistence on caring for Érec seems to refer back to a sense of this kind of comfort.

It is especially important that *confort* be legible to the modern reader, because it is not only sought and granted by romance protagonists, but is also something that a romance might expect its reader to be looking for. At the close of his version of *Tristan*, Thomas claims that *confort* is one of the aims of the text. In the astonishing *envoi* in which he dedicates his work to "tuiz amanz" (all lovers, 3280), he reports that he has written the romance "Pur essample" (As an example, 3290)¹¹ in order that lovers derive pleasure from it, adding:

Et que par lieus poissent trover
Choses u se puissent recorder.
Aveir em poissent grant confort
Encuntre change, encontre tort,
Encuntre paine, encuntre dolor,
Encuntre tuiz engins d'amur. (3293-98)¹²

And in places may they find
Things that they might remember by heart.
May they have great comfort from it
Against change, against wrong,
Against pain, against suffering,
Against all the traps of love.

The instances of *confort* between protagonists I have detailed above might seem marginal to the larger trajectories of their respective narratives. But here, Thomas foregrounds *confort* as central to his literary project. The mechanics of this readerly comfort, or consolation, are left up to the reader; Thomas does not explain, either in this conclusion or in the extant text, where this comfort is to be found, or how best to extract it from the story. He has taken us as far as he can. Much like the variant ending of "Piramus et Tisbé" that asks the reader to pray for the titular couple, Thomas's *envoi* seems to collapse the temporal distance between the text and its reader. In this way, his conclusion is not an instance of authorial "gaucherie," but something stranger and more powerful.¹³ He envisions his reader as not only a lover but an unhappy one, and he hopes that his text will provide a sustaining force, the affective transfer of *confort*, whose mechanism now seems mysterious. (We might read for pleasure, but who reads – or would

⁹ The rhyme of "confort" and "mort" occurs in Yseut's earlier monologue several times (3059-60, 3095-96, and 3109-10) as well as in Tristan's last words (3193-34); it is also notable in two of Piramus's monologues, see pages 7-8, 17.

¹⁰ See Constant Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*, 135-38.

¹¹ Thomas d'Angleterre, *Tristan et Yseut*, ed. Christiane Marchello-Nizia.

¹² Ian Short points out that the Sneyd fragment, which transmits the "long ending" of Thomas's *Tristan*, actually continues for at least twelve more (illegible) lines after this. See "Un nouveau fragment," 318-19.

¹³ Emmanuèle Baumgartner and R.-L. Wagner, "'As enveisiez e as purvers': Commentaire sur les vers 3125-3129 du *Roman de Tristan* de Thomas," 527.

admit to reading—for consolation?) It is an indication of Thomas's good faith in the ability of the reader to find this *confort*, as well as an affirmation of its importance to romance.

Perhaps Thomas does not specify the kind of comfort a reader might derive from his text because the "engins d'amur" are constantly shifting over time, or because every reader might wish to be consoled in a different way. However, there is a gesture toward comfort in the Carlisle fragment that reads as nearly universal. After Tristan and Yseut's playful, collaborative avowal in dialogue, they enjoy their love to the fullest extent before arriving in Cornwall.

Thomas comments:

Delitablè est le deport
Qui de sa dolur ad confort,
Car c[è] est custome d'amur
De joie avoir après dolur. (85-88)

Delightful is the pleasure
For someone who finds comfort (consolation) for their suffering,
For this is the way of love:
To have joy after suffering.

This is the brightest, most expansive moment of happiness and satisfaction in all of Thomas's extant text, and he opens it up to the reader: the *joie* and *confort* Tristan and Yseut experience are not a feature of their magical love, but are also available to us. The same principles apply to our loves as to Tristan and Yseut's, Thomas seems to say, and in this particular way, love is very simple: after suffering comes joy. The comfort Thomas affords Tristan and Yseut, and offers to the reader, does not outweigh or cancel out future suffering. It does not even last for long. But what it does do is inscribe something in Thomas's text, and perhaps in medieval romance more generally, that is more earnestly idealistic than "rape, ah, rape": a relief, a consolation, which requires dialogue, or at least mutual participation. The hope of *confort* is not what medievalists are trained to read for in romance, but it is the golden thread that loops through it nonetheless. To dismiss *confort*, or to gloss over it, means refusing the possibilities of communication and connection that love can provide in speech and/or touch. Such a refusal impoverishes our understanding not only of medieval romance, but also of difficult contemporary questions about the ways men and women love and harm each other, and the future possibilities of enacting positive change. Taking medieval *confort* seriously might allow us to think more concretely about what cultural critic Nora Samaran calls "nurturance culture," which she proposes as a corrective to modern Western "rape culture." "To completely transform this culture of misogyny," Samaran writes, "men must do more than 'not assault': they must develop what she calls "nurturance skills," in order "to heal themselves and others the same way we expect women to be nurturers."¹⁴ How much easier would it be to take stock of, in Samaran's words, "the great patriarchal distortions of the human spirit" if we were sensitized to earlier attempts to do so?¹⁵ Or—better yet—if, in tracing the history of such a project, we could find some of its idealism already present in the twelfth century?

¹⁴ Nora Samaran, *Turn This World Inside Out: The Emergence of Nurturance Culture*, 18-19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

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