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**The Use of Courtly Language in *Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties***

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What we know about Marguerite Porete comes to us from the inquisitorial documents: she was a beguine from Hainaut.<sup>1</sup> There is no indication that someone else wrote the text of the *Mirouer* from the author's dictation, which gives us reason to believe she was well educated.

*Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties*<sup>2</sup> was written sometime between 1296 and 1306. While Godefroid de Fontaines, a scholastic at Paris between 1285 and 1306, gave his approval to the text, he also counseled the author to use caution in her expressions. The text received approval from two other lesser known orthodox churchmen as well.<sup>3</sup>

The approvals were not universally shared, however, and the text was condemned and burned in the author's presence at Valenciennes by the Bishop of Cambrai, with the warning not to disseminate her views under threat of being turned over to the secular arm. Apparently the author continued to promulgate her theology, for she was committed to the flames in Paris on May 30, 1310.

Marguerite wrote *Le Mirouer des simples ames anienties* in Old French and the work enjoyed fairly widespread popularity, for it was translated into Middle English, Italian, and Latin, and copies were made in Old French.<sup>4</sup> The *Mirouer* is a theological treatise which analyzes how love in human beings is related to divine love, and how by means of this relation the human soul may experience union with God in this life, without a mediary. The basic format of the text is a dialogue in the Boethian tradition among the allegorical figures of Reason,

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Love, and the Soul and the fundamental structure of the discourse is grounded in traditional Neoplatonist philosophy. Since the argument is articulated by means of the French courtly expressions, the *Mirouer* can be seen as a significant example of one way in which French courtly language was used to express Neoplatonist categories of religious experience and it is this aspect of the text to which I give attention.

I use the term 'courtly' as an indicator of the kind of language, concepts, and images we might expect to find in this treatise. Marguerite uses these courtly terms to describe a love-relation, but the nature of the relation discussed gives the courtly terminology a fresh twist. While the genre of literature called 'courtly' dealt with the love-relation of a man and woman, the *Mirouer* is concerned with an analysis of the love-relation between the soul and God. The former is attentive to very concrete matters; the focus of the latter is upon abstraction of a more speculative sort. I hope to show that Marguerite Porete uses the language of the courtly tradition as a vocabulary with which to describe and analyse both the soul's progress toward and the soul's experience of union with God.

The Prologue introduces the treatise with an exemplum that is purely courtly in its content. Here the author has clearly stated that she intends her readers to understand the ways of divine love by means of *l'amour du monde*, or courtly love.

*Here speaks Love:* Thus listen with humility to a little exemplum of love in the world and understand it as a parallel to divine love.

*Exemplum:* Once upon a time, there was a maiden, daughter of a king, of great heart and nobility and also of noble courage; and she lived in a far off land. So it happened that this maiden heard tell of the great gentle courtesy and noblesse of the king Alexander, and very soon her will loved him because of the great renown of his gentility. But this maiden was so far

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from this great lord, toward whom she had offered her love by herself, that she was able neither to see him nor to have him. Thus she was inconsolable, for no love except this one would be sufficient for her. When she saw that this faraway love, who was so close or within her, was so far outside of her, she thought to herself that she would comfort her melancholy by imagining some figure of her love, about whom she was continually wounded in heart. And so she had an image painted which would represent the semblance of the king she loved, an image as close as possible to that which presented itself to her in her love for him and in the affection of the love which captured her. And by means of this image with her other habits she dreamed of the king.

*Soul:* In truly similar fashion, speaks the Soul who had this book written, I tell you of such a thing: I heard tell of a King of great power who was by gentle courtesy and by very great courtesy of nobility and generosity a noble Alexander. But He is so far from me, and I from Him, that I do not know how to take comfort for myself. And for the sake of my memory of Him, He gave me this book which makes present in some fashion His love itself. But nevertheless I have His image, so that I might not be in a strange land and far from the palace where the very noble friends of this Lord dwell, those who are completely pure, refined, and free through the gifts of this King with whom they remain.<sup>5</sup>

The exemplum, a traditional way of presenting a treatise on love, and its parallel, referring to the relation of divine love and the soul, provide the terminological basis for this treatise. The courtly terms *courtoisie*, *largesse*, the images of the distant love, the noble friends of the king, the gifts of the beloved will all be pressed into service as Marguerite develops her thought.

Immediately following the courtly setting of

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the exemplum, we are presented with the topics of the treatise. First, the soul is stripped of sin by the grace of God in the first stage of seven as the soul strives for the fullness of her perfection. Moreover, the love which the author will discuss is the love that comes from God for us, love which accomplishes all things without harm to anyone. Third, Love herself, who is the divine love of God for creation and within the Trinity,<sup>7</sup> indicates that there are seven stages of noble being from which all creatures receive being. Love disposes herself to all the stages, so that the soul may indeed achieve the goal of fullness of perfection. Thus the treatise is concerned to demonstrate the process by which the soul attains the fullness of perfection, that is, Being itself, and the author intends to accomplish this task by using courtly terms, concepts and images.

At this point a brief summary of the seven stages of ascent to perfection is helpful.

*First Stage:* The soul is touched by grace and stripped of her power to sin, commanded by God to love him with all her heart and her neighbor as herself.

*Second Stage:* The soul abandons self in the mortification of nature to accomplish the counsels of Evangelical Perfection.

*Third Stage:* An abundance of love for the works of perfection boils up in the soul, creating a desire to multiply her good works. Since what is most prized in love is to give to the beloved what is most loved by the lover, the soul pulverizes her spirit, beating and bruising herself in order to enlarge the place where Love would want to be.

*Fourth Stage:* The soul is consumed in an ecstasy of love, in which she is deceived in thinking that God has no greater gift in store for her. But Love carries her higher, beyond herself.

*Fifth Stage:* The soul considers that God is Who is, from whom all things are; that in herself

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alone, apart from God, she is nothing, that her existence is only in the One from whom all things are. She sees that free will has been placed in her freely from the being of God who is pure Being, and that her will ought to be placed freely in its source in the same way in which it was given. At this point the will departs from its own will and renders itself back to God without retaining anything of its own.

*Sixth Stage:* The soul neither sees herself because of the abyss of humility into which she has fallen, nor does she see God because of his highest goodness. Instead God sees himself in her by his divine majesty which makes the soul transparent.

*Seventh Stage:* This stage cannot be described and it will be known only when the soul has left the body.<sup>8</sup>

The main focus of the treatise is the dynamic of the relations between the fourth, fifth, and sixth stages, and Marguerite makes use of courtly language to its fullest possibility in her effort to describe these relationships. Two moments in particular will demonstrate her use most clearly: the transitional point where the soul annihilates her will and moves into the fifth stage, and the moment when her distant love, the *Loingprès*, the *Farnearness which is the Trinity*, comes to her, creating the sixth stage.

*The fourth stage is an ecstasy of love, but it is an ecstasy in which the soul remains her created self, in which her will is caught up in its own ardent desire. Despite the delights and rapture of this stage, the soul has not yet attained the nobility of the souls who are in the state of willing nothing and are thus in the court of the Most High King. Such a state can be attained only by the annihilation of the will.*

*The process of annihilation begins when the soul comes to understand her nothingness according*

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*to the traditional Neoplatonist formula of polarity, in which what is predicated of God is negated for the soul, and, conversely, what is predicated of the soul is negated for God.<sup>9</sup> Thus the soul understands her wretchedness only insofar as she understands God's goodness, and what the soul understands of God's goodness is what she understands of her own wretchedness. God's goodness is the perfection of all things, and therefore God is who is, perfect Being itself, through whom all things are. The soul, considered in herself apart from God, is total wretchedness, and therefore she is not.*

*The process of annihilation proceeds as the soul ponders how she might please God whom she loves. In these considerations she ponders what her will would consent to, without turning back, in order for her never to have committed any misdeed against God's will or pleasure. This is the crucial moment of transition, for the most difficult, tortuous questions present themselves to her, as if God himself were confronting her, testing and pressing the limits of the soul's love for God.*

*... He might ask me how I would fare if I knew that He could be better pleased that I should love another better than Him. At this my mind failed me, and I knew not how to answer, nor what to will nor what to deny; but I responded that I would ponder it.*

*And then he asked me how I would fare if it could be that He could love another better than I. And at this my mind failed me, and I knew not what to answer, or will or deny.*

*Yet again, He asked me what I would do and how I would fare if it could be that He would will that another love me better than He. And again my mind failed, and I knew not what to respond, no more than before, but still I said that I would ponder it. And this I did, and I told Him of my thoughts.*

*I told Him that these three things were far more difficult than what had been said before.*

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*And [I was] in the distress of my pondering how it could happen that I might love another better than He, that He might love another better than me, that another might love me better than He. And there I fainted. For I could respond nothing to these three things, nor deny, nor refute. Again and again He assailed me for a response. For as long as I was at ease and loved my self along "with" Him, there was nothing I could do for myself, nor could I have calm in myself. I was held in bondage, and I could not move. No one knows this if he has not been tested in this way. So I could have no peace until He had my response. I loved myself so much along "with" Him that I could not respond from loyalty. If I had not loved being "with" Him, my answer would have been immediate and loyal. And suddenly He demanded my answer, if I did not wish to lose both myself and Him, on account of which my heart suffered great distress.*

*... Certainly I have never spoken a word about it. The heart alone has this battle. It is the heart who responds in the anguish of death that it would wish to depart from its love by which it has lived, if it thought that by so doing it could live longer. But instead it would thus be that it could will this only by willing its own will. And so I answered and said to Him:*

*Response to the three questions: "Lord, if it were possible that the things said above, which are in question, ought to be so eternally, as well as in truth of fact, I will say to you, by you and for your sake, what I would will for the sake of your love.*

*... you would will these three things which have been so grievous for me to bear and swear. And I know without*

*doubt that your will would will it without diminishing your divine goodness, and I would will this without willing, anything further. And thus, Lord, my wall is killed in saying this. And thus my will is martyred, and my love is martyred: you have guided these to martyrdom...."* [10](#) page 98

*The driving force of this moving soliloquy is Love, and dilemmas of love are traditional in the courtly genre. [11](#) In courtly fashion, the strength of the loyalty of the lover to Love is tested, and the loyalty Marguerite refers to is the loyalty to the pursuit of the divine life to which the soul is called by divine Love, who is God. On the one hand the soul's love desires its own pleasure by pleasing her beloved, God. Yet the desire of this earthly, desirous love for its own pleasure finally forces this love into the contradiction where it would be willing to abandon its object if that would somehow allow love to live longer. And yet the contradiction is clear; desirous love cannot exist without its object. Thus this soul's love is turned upside down, so that, in order for love to continue to exist, such love must love only for the sake of loving, without any thought for what is received in return, not even the pleasure of pleasing the beloved. The soul's desirous love, by the strength of its own ardor, is transformed into the flowing, outpouring love which is Divine Love herself. In this transformation the soul is emptied of all will and desire, and the soul moves into the fifth stage. The emptiness of the fifth stage can only be filled by the goodness of God, which is the fullness of the soul's perfection. This filling occurs on divine initiative alone, and when it occurs, the divine approach moves the soul briefly into the sixth stage where God sees himself in the transparent soul. The "Ravishing Farnearness" comes to her in a dazzling light through an aperture which opens and quickly closes, offering in a flash the gift from the Trinity which is the vision of what her eternal glory will be like. [12](#) Afterwards the soul has no conscious awareness of the vision, she only knows she has been filled with the divine life of peace, and she falls back to the fifth stage. Marguerite describes the circumstances of this filling in terms*

*which are thoroughly courtly.*

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*[Reason]: O God! O God! What is this creature saying? She is now for all purposes completely beside herself! But what will my children say? I do not know what to say to them, nor how to respond to excuse this.*

*Love: True, these are astounded, well astounded, for they are so far from the country where one has such practice in order to possess the heights. But those who are from the country where God lives, these are not astounded at all by it.*

*Soul: Not at all! If it please God, this would be a mark of crudity, and I will say to you and show you how by an exemplum. If a king should give one of his servants who loyally served him a great gift, by which gift the servant would be eternally rich, without ever doing any service again, why would a wise man be astounded by this? Without fail, he must not be astounded by it at all, for in doing so he would blame the king and his gift and the liberality of the gift.*

*Courtesy: And I will tell you in what and by what. Because a wise man is not astounded when one does what is fitting. Instead he praises and values and loves this. And if he would be astounded by it, he would show in this that this would not be proper to do. But the heart that is villainous and of little wisdom does not know, because of a lack of discernment, what honor or courtesy are, nor about a gift of a noble lord. And so he has great astonishment.*

*Truth: This is not astounding; one has the reason why within him, as you have heard.*

*Nobility of the unity of the Unencumbered Soul: For God's sake, why is anyone astounded who has discernment within him, if I say great things and new things, and if I have through All, by All, in All my full sufficiency? My lover is great who gives me a great gift, and so He is*

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*all new and gives me a new gift. And so He is fertile and full of abundance of all the blessings of Himself. And I am pregnant and full and abundantly full of the abundances of delights from the flowing goodness of His divine goodness, without seeking it through pain nor through the peddling of pain's remedies, which this book describes.*

*Soul: He is and this satisfies me.*

*Pure Courtesy: Without fail this is right. It is appropriate for the Lover, since He is of valor, that He*

*satisfy His beloved by His goodness.*

*And so she holds her Lover and she says:*

*Soul: I hold Him, for He is mine. I will never let Him go. He is in my will. Come what may, He is with me.*

*It would be a lack in me if I should be astounded.* [13](#)

*Courtly terms are employed to describe the nature of the gift of the Godhead to the soul, the attitude of those who do not understand the nature of the gift and its giver, and the reaction of the recipient, the soul. The gift of the Godhead is the fullness of the perfection of the soul, namely perfect Being itself, which is bountiful and overflowing goodness, l'abondance de tous biens, without limitation. The gift is evidence of the lavish liberality of the giver, the largesse of God.* [14](#) *The attitude of those who do not understand the nature of the gift is evidence of a small and petty heart, le villain coeur. Such a heart has little wisdom and will never know the nature of honor and courtoisie. The soul, however, experiences from the gift such total satisfaction that a created thing could never be sufficient for her. The divine initiative, in giving the gift of the presence of the Trinity, has lifted her into the realm of Being itself; and so she is filled, pleine, pregnant, with the fertile, plein, goodness of the Godhead. And Courtoisie, the relation of divine love to the loyally loving soul, understands with divine knowing*

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*how this is so. The embrace is complete, and the soul holds her Lover tenderly, in the sense that He now wills within her without the soul's willing anything apart from Him.*

*With these few examples we can see that Marguerite Porete has made use of courtly language to express Neoplatonist categories of the relationship between the human and the divine. She presses and stretches the concepts of the courtly genre to analyze how the soul might be intimately related to and experience union with the divine life of the Godhead, and to explore who God is that this should be so. In Marguerite's hands, the traditional courtly terminology takes on deep theological significance as she works to show us what it is like to loyally love the God who is Love Incarnate.*



## Notes

1. Paul Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis Neerlandicae* I (Ghent, 1889-1906), "Anno 1310," pp. 63-65, #37-39; 155-60, #164-66.
2. All texts and references are based on the edition prepared by Romana Guarnieri, ed., *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pieta* IV (1965), pp. 513-635. Translations are my own.
3. These approvals are preserved in all the MSS of the Latin, Italian and English translations. For the Latin, see Guarnieri, ed., *Archivio* IV (1965) pp. 638-39. For the Middle English, see M. Doiron, *Archivio* V, pp. 249-50.
4. See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 71-73.
5. Chapter 1, ed. p. 521.

*Icy parle Amour*: Or entendez par humilité ung petit exemple de l'amour du monde, et l'entendez aussi

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pareillement de la divine amour.

*Exemple*. Il fut ung temps une damoyselle, fille de roy, ae grant cueur et de noblesse et aussi de noble courage; et demouroit en estrange pais. Si advint que celle damoiselle oït parler de la grant courtoisie et noblece du roy Alixandre, et tantost sa volenté l'ama, pour la grant renommee de sa gentillesse. Mais si loing estoit ceste damoiselle de ce grant seigneur, ouquel elle avoit mis son amour d'elle mesmes, car veoir ne avoir ne le povoit; par quoy en elle mesmes souvent estoit desconfortee, car nulle amour fors que ceste cy ne luy souffisoit. Et quant elle vit que ceste amour loingtaigne, qui luy estoit si prouchaine ou dedans d'elle, estoit si loing dehors, elle se pensa que elle conforteroit sa masaise par ymaginacion d'aucune figure de son amy, dont elle estoit souvent au cueur navree. Adonc fist elle paindre ung ymage qui representoit la semblance du roy qu'elle amoit, au plus pres qu'elle peut de la presentacion dont elle l'amoit et en l'affection de l'amour dont elle estoit surprinse; et par le moyen de ceste ymage avec ses autres usages songa le roy mesmes.

*L'Ame*: Semblablement vrayement, dit l'Ame qui ce livre fist escrire, au tel vous dis je: je oÿ parler d'ung roy de grant puissance, qui estoit par courtoisie et par tres grant courtoisie de noblece et largesse ung noble Alixandre; mais si loing estoit de moy et moy de luy, que je ne savois prandre confort de moy mesmes, et pour moy souvenir de lui il me donna ce livre qui represente en aucuns usages l'amour de lui mesmes. Mais non obstant que j'aye son image, n'est il pas que je ne soie en estrange pais et loing du palais ouquel les tres nobles amis de ce seigneur demourent, qui sont tous purs, affinés et franchix par les dons de ce roy, avec lequel ilz demourent.

6. The image of distant love, *amour de lonh*, originating from Provence, was traditional in French courtly language by 1200. The work of Jaufré Raudel (fl. mid-12th c.) contains clear examples of this concept.

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7. Chapter 21, ed. p. 541.10-16; chapter 112, ed. p. 605.35-606.2.

8. Chapter 118, ed. pp. 610-13.

9. See Boethius, *De consolacione philosophiae*, IV.2 prose.

10. Chapter 131, ed. pp. 629.22-630.24.

... il me demendoit comment je me contendroie, se ie savois qu'il luy peust mieulx plaire que j'amasse aultruy mieilx que luy; et adonc me faillit le sens, et ne sceu que respondre, ne que vouloir, ne que escondire, mais je respondi que je m'en conseilleroie.

&nbps;&nbps; Et après, me demanda comment je me contendroie, se il pavoit estre qu'il peust mieulx aultruy amer que moy. Et ycy me faillit le sens, et ne sceu que respondre, ne que vouloir, ne que escondire.

Oltre plus, me demanda que je feroie et comment je me contendroie, se il pavoit estre qu'il peust vouloir que ung aultre que luy me amast mieulx que luy. Et pareillement me faillit le sens, et ne sceu que respondre, nientplus que devant, mals je dis tousjours que je m'en conseilleroie; et ainsi le feis je, et men conseillay a luy mesmes. Et luy dis que ces trois choses estoient moult fortes envers celles de devant. Et dis en esbahissement de pensee comment se pouroit il faire que je amasse mieulx aultruy que luy, et qu'il amast mieulx aultruy que moy, ne que ung aultre m'amast mieulx [que] luy. At la je deffailli; car je ne peu a nulle de ces trois choses repondre, ne nyer, n'escondire. Et toutesfoiz tousjours me rassailloit il pour avoit response. Et rant estoie aise, et me amoye "avec" luy, que je ne povoy pour rien me contenir, ne avoir en moy maniere: j'estoye tenue en destroit, par quoy je n'aloie pas l'ambleure. Ce ne sceut nul, se il n'a essayé ces poins. Et toutesfoiz ne peu je avoir paix, se il n'avoit de moy response. Je me amoye tant "avec" luy, que pour ce je ne povoye de liger respondre; et se je n'eusse amé estre avec luy, ma response e[us]t esté breve et ligere. Et toutesfoiz m'esconvint il respondre, se je ne vouloie perdre et moy et luy, pour laquelle

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chose mon cueur souffroit grant destresse.

... Certes je n'y parlay oncques mot. Le cueur tout seul fist de luy ceste bataille, qui respondit en angoisse de mort, que il se vouloit despartir de son amour, dont il avoit vesqu, et bien cuidoit qu'il en deust plus longuement vivre; mais puisque ainsi estoit que par comparaison il pouroit ce vouloir, et qu'il convient vouloir tout son vouloir, je respondi et dis ainsi a luy:

*Responce aux trois questions devant dictes* "Sire, se il estoit possible que les choses dessusdictes, qui sont en demande, deussent estre parmanablement aussi bien en verité de oeuvre, comme elles sont en demandes, je vous diray de vous, et pour vous, que je vouldroie pour l'amour de vous.

... puisque vous vouldriez, sans nul si, ces trois choses qui m'ont esté si greuves a porter et a octroyer, et je savois sans doubte que vostre vouloir le vouldroit sans vostre bonté divine amenuser, je le vouldroie, sans jamais plus rien vouloir. Et ainsi, sire, ma volenté prent sa fin en ce dire; et pource est mon vouloir martir, et mon amour martire: vous les avez a martire amenez ..."

11. Andreas Capellanus, in *De amore*, Bk 1.6, and in his description of the *casus amoris* in Bk 11.7, deals with somewhat similar themes.

12. Chapter 61, ed. pp. 568.22-569.11.

13. Chapter 86, ed. p. 587-88.

[*Raison*] He Dieux! he Dieux! dit Raison, que dit ceste creature? C'est maintenant pour tout esbahir! Mais que diront mes nourriz? Je ne leur savroie que dire, ne que respondre pour excuser cecy.

*Amour*. Voire, merveilles sont ce, dit Amour, bien merueilleuses a eulx; car ilz sont trop loing du pays ouquel l'en a tel usage, pour avoir haultesse. Mais ceulx qui ce sont, et qui du pays sont, esquieulx Dieu vit, ceulx mesmes n'en ont point de merueille.

*L'Ame*. Non dea! se Dieu plaist, dit l'Ame Enfranchie, ce seroit ung point de villennie; et vous diray et monstreray comment, par exemple. Se **page 105**  
ung roy donnoit a ung de ses servans, qui loyaulment l'a servi, ung grant don, duquel don le servant soit a tousjoursme riche, sans jamais service faire, pourquoy se esmerveilleroit ung sages horns de ce? Sans faille il ne s'en devoit point esmerveiller, car en ce blasmeroit le roy et son don et l'enfranchi de ce don.

*Courtoisie*. Et vous diray, dit Courtoisie, en quoy et de quoy. Pource que ung sages homs ne s'esmerveille point quant l'en fait ce qu'il appartient que l'en face, ainçoys loe ce et prise, et ayme; et se il s'en esmerveilleoit, il monstreroit en ce, que ce seroit ce qu'il n'affiert mie a faire. Mais le villain cueur et pou sage, qui ne scet par faulte de sens qu'est honnour ne courtoisie, ne de don de noble seigneur, a de ce grant esmerveillance.

*Verité*. Ce n'est mie merueille, dit Verité, il a bien en luy le pourquoy, ainsi comme vous avez oÿ.

*Noblesse de Unité de l'Ame*. Hee, pour [Dieu], dit Noblesse d'Unité de l'Ame Enfranchie, pourquoy se esmerveille nul qui sens ait en luy, se je di grans choses et nouvelles choses, et se j'ay par tout, de tout, en tout ma plaine souffisance? Mon amy est grant, qui grant don me donne, et si est tout nouveau, et nouveau don me donne, et si est plain et assovy d'abondance de tous biens de luy mesmes; et je suis plaine et assovy, et habondamment remplie d'abondances de delices de l'espandue bonté de sa bonté divine, sans la querir par paine ne par halage en ses assovyemens, que ce livre devise.

*L'Ame*. Il est, dit ceste Ame, et ce me assovyst.

*Pure Courtoisie*. Sans faille c'est droit, dit Pure Courtoisie. Il affiert a l'amant, puisque il est a la value, qu'il assovisse de sa bonté son amy. Et adonc tient elle son amy et dit:

*L'Ame*. Je le tiens, dit elle, car c'est le mien. Je ne le lesseray mie aler. Il est en ma volenté. Adviengne ce qu'il peut advenir, puisqu'il est avec moy. Ce seroit donc faulte a moy, se je me esmaioie.

**14.** Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, 16729-16746, uses similar language to describe God: "... la

volenté debonnaire, large, cortoise, sans envie, de toute grace raemplie...." (Poirion, ed. Paris, 1974).