Dress rehearsal: Word play and narrative construction in *The Assembly of Ladies*

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In the erotics of theater, words are (theoretically) corporeal. They are up there for public scrutiny. The mind's eye echoes the mind's ear. *Words act*. They are elements of the scenic investiture affecting, synesthetically, light space rhythm pattern sound, but they also resound at the deepest level of the *mise-en-scène*, through self time memory consciousness as well. Mere words, true. Problematic to the last breath of being. The material elements of theater – like the body itself – situate us.[1]

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The few critics who have addressed the anonymous fifteenth-century poem *The Assembly of Ladies* have largely limited their inquiry to intriguing, but overly simplified, ultimately unanswerable questions: is the author male or female? Is the text "feminist"? Can its genre be defined as Chaucerian? Is the poem's primary concern with judiciary procedures or domestic courtly decorum? My conjectures to the above inquiries: likely female, and if so, "a remarkable woman";[2] reflecting women's writing, and after the influence of Christine de Pizan; appropriated as Chaucerian, though most probably not;[3]

[1] Herbert Blau, "Prescriptions of Theater: Words, Presence, Time out of Mind", *New Literary History*, 12:1 (1980), 128, emphasis mine.
[2] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition,* (New York: Oxford University Press, (1963), 249–250.
[3] Jane Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother: Women's Authority and Subjectivity in 'The Floure and the Leafe' and 'The Assembly of Ladies'", in *European*

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eruditely focused on the details of both, giving an "admirable picture of manners", in the words of C.S. Lewis. In fact, he alleges that "the detail of the poem shows powers akin to genius".[4] But these reflections only set the stage for the discussion below.

Like several other critics, Bradford Fletcher notes that *The Assembly* is not particularly well written. Fletcher asserts that the poem "is representative of a class of late medieval courtly love poems composed by writers who, for want of a better term, might be called amateurs". Though it does not qualify as "great poetry", Fletcher praises "its evident fascination with the details of court behavior and its frequent flashes of verbal sprightliness".[5] C.S. Lewis also locates the poem's redeeming qualities in the author's focus in "the stir and bustle of an actual court", cleverly using the terminology of dress to highlight his contention that "the poet [...] has no better vocation to allegory than fashion".[6] Though Lewis is underwhelmed by the author's use of allegory, he admires how the detail and "realism" of the language makes the reader "soon forget that it is a dream, or an allegory".[7] Clarifying the legitimacy of serious scholarship on this text, Ann McMillan asserts that *The Assembly* is unusual among all the dream-visions and garden of love poems from which it derives because it has a female narrator. She astutely summarizes this important phenomenon:

> Whole studies of dream and garden poetry use the collective pronoun 'he' for their dream-narrators without any need for qualification [...] whatever the topic, women narrators simply do not appear in the secular dream-visions – except for those in the [...] *Assembly of Ladies* [...] by contrast; rather than male sexuality and seduction, [the poem deals] with female sexuality and chastity.[8]

Cultures: The City of Scholars: New Approaches to Christine de Pizan, eds. Margarete Zimmermann & Dina De Rentiis, (Meuchen, DEU: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 248, 249. Web 26/06/2014.

[4] Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 249–250.

[5] Bradford Y. Fletcher, "The Assembly of Ladies: Text and Context", *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America,* 82:2 (1988), 230.

[6] Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 249, 232.

[7] Ibid. 250.

[8] Ann McMillan, "'Fayre Sisters Al'": The Flower and the Leaf and The Assembly of Ladies", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* 1:1 (1982), 29.

Building on many of these insights, though in a departure from those criticisms of the text for lacking proper aesthetics, or being too depressingly patriarchal, this analysis will apply performance theory to more thoroughly engage how the fluidity of the dreamscape in *The Assembly of Ladies* creates a theatrical medium that accentuates the corporeality of language. In other words, as the dreamer lies still, words float, act, take shape, and ultimately, clothe the participants involved. A public act of speech and writing, telling and retelling, *performing*, allows the female narrator to partially transgress the boundaries of male authority of which she tells and writes, this poem leads me to read it as if it were enacted on a stage, with roles played, and therefore mutable. In my analysis, I take into account the following themes that have emerged from my reflection on scholarship and the text itself: the oral frame and its interplay with the written word, gendered conventions, and sociohistorical context; the dream vision genre and its transgressive narrator; the all-female allegorical cast of characters occupying, performing male roles in typically male-dominated spaces; the fragmented nature of and composition of narrative; the allegorical and physical emphasis on costume; and the veil of allegory.

The corporeality of how this "booke" wrestles to come into being expresses female authorship and female performance. Through fragmented characterization, the use of "mottoes", and a self-conscious, complex, female narrator, *The Assembly* takes shape as an assemblage of female parts into a readable text. When the narrator instructs amidst the calling of 'voices' to "Rede wele my dreame", she presents an assemblage, a narrative that shows the readers its parts before a single subjectivity emerges (l. 756). Though she is mostly estranged from her "fellowship", a physical separation and discomfort reinforced by the geography of the garden, the narrator weaves together a "collective narrative", concluding it with the synecdochical joining of the sleeves. "[E]che of us toke other by the sleve, / And furth withal, as we shuld take oure leve" (Ll. 734–735). Not only does this image show how the women come together physically, but also points to the linking of their words. As I discuss, the allegory of clothing not only enacts the performative nature of the court proceedings, but also bears the very words, or "mottoes" that define the complaints and traits of the allegorical figures at play.

1. Unraveling the spatial and gender role maze

The narrator, identifying herself as a woman, or as Simone Marshall writes, "asserting her gender as a significant factor in her narration", describes the setting of the poem as one September afternoon.[9] Ladies are strolling the maze in a garden according to their fancy, walking two by two. They are evidently in the company of knights and squires. Instantly, readers align the high status of the knights with the ladies; one infers that the ladies are all of worthy character and part of the aristocracy. Marshall alludes to the spatial and temporal elements already presented, remarking that "the maze in a location for abrupt shifts in time" and that "autumn is specifically associated with transition", not courtly love.[10] As this paper makes apparent, this is not the only rupture with tradition. For Jane Chance, the timing spells contemplation and "the maze symbolizes the problem of female difference, women's subjectivity", namely "their confusion over direction [...] and over their social role".[11] When one of the knights questions the narrator's presence in the garden, he asserts that this maze is a closed space, invoking social status and gender.

Like others in the poem, the knight mentions the narrator's pallor as setting her apart, and questions whom she is seeking. She responds: "I seyde ageyne, as it fil in my thought: / 'To walke aboute the mase, in certeynte, / As a womman that nothyng rought'" (Ll. 16–18).[12] In her reply, she not only recognizes his efforts to define the space as exclusive, but also cleverly appeases him by refusing to adopt a hierarchical position. She performs an unassuming role, a feminized one, setting the stage for her performance of the tale. Having disarmed his protectiveness over the typically patriarchal, male-dominated maze, she beckons the knight to abide and listen to the "playne of this matiere" (l. 28), a tale of women, told by women. Colleen Donnelly recognizes

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[9] Simone Celine Marshall, *The Female Voice in* The Assembly of Ladies*: Text and Context in Fifteenth Century England* (Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 12.
[10] Ibid. 20.
[11] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 256.
[12] All quotations and notes will be taken from, Derek Pearsall (ed.), *The Floure and the Leaf, The Assembly of Ladies, The Isles of Ladies* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963).

that the "poet has appropriated a patriarchal form to tell of *her* own experience".[13]

2. Dreamscape: Subverting the patriarchal dream

What ensues after the exchange with the knight marks the narrator's ultimate separation from the group through wandering in the garden, and falling into the dream state where she envisions the journey to the Court and the presentation of the bills. She describes her state as she initially reaches a secure and hidden spot in the garden:

> And as they sought hem self thus to and fro
> I gate my self a litel avauntage;
> Al for-weyred, I myght no further go,
> Though I had wonne right grete for my viage;
> So come I forth in to a streyte passage,
> Whiche brought me to an herber feyre and grene
> Made with benchis ful craftily and clene. (Ll. 43–49)

For McMillan, the narrator's exhaustion and separation connect to the uneven and inconclusive nature of the poem, its fragmentation; what's more, her uneasiness is explained as a reaction to the hardships experienced by contemporary women, which beset and overwhelm the narrator.[14] In a curious contrast to this sense of bearing the psychological weight of the fellowship, the narrator does not engage directly with her fellows, who are equally bewildered by this "earthly paradise" of "sunlight", "trees, a flowery meadow, rich fragrances and colors, birds' songs, breezes, and water in the form of a fountain or spring".[15]

Instead, she retreats, allowing the design of the maze to inspire and direct self-reflection once she reaches its center.[16] Marshall "suggest[s] that the maze is a purely literary construct", not a real place. If the maze is indeed an

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[13] Donnelly, Colleen. "'Withoute Wordes': The Medieval Lady Dreams in *The Assembly of Ladies*", *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval & Renaissance Association* 15 (1994), 38.
[14] McMillan, "'Fayre Sisters Al'", 33.
[15] Ibid. 28.
[16] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 19.

allegorical space, the narrator "reaches the centre before her companions [in order to] signif[y] for us [readers] a focus on literature and how women participate in literature".[17] This sets her apart for her authorial role, perceiving the narrative through dreaming, while performing in the dream-vision, and as narrator upon waking. By both embracing and challenging her difference from her companions in the garden, the narrator forms and performs her authorial perspective, shifting time and state of consciousness:

> A litel while thus was I alone
> Beholdying wele this delectable place;
> My felawshyp were comyng everichone
> So must me nede abide as for a space,
> Remembryng of many dyvers cace
> Of tyme past, musyng with sighes depe,
> I set me downe and there fil in slepe. (Ll. 71–77)

In these lines, the narrator speaks of a fellowship, but she is distant from it; not only does she precede the other women, creating a physical place and occupying it figuratively through her relationship to literature, but most importantly, she enters her dream state. In the context of the dream, the narrator introduces the allegorical figure Perseverance, describing the fictive woman in clothing embroidered with "remember me's", the same flower as in her garden of retreat, while mindfully enacting the roles of both dreamer and the performer-narrator. The flowers recall the function of memory in the telling and retelling of stories, as well as the interpretation of dreams, and point to the narrator's intentional reconstruction of her dream-vision. The characterization of Perseverance as "sad", "demure", and like the narrator, on her own, helps to distract the reader from how the narrator shapes her own role as author and participant:

> And as I slept me thought ther com to me
> A gentil womman metely of stature;
> Of grete worship she semed for to be,
> Atired wele, nat hye but bi mesure,
> Hir countenaunce ful sad and ful demure,
> Hir colours blewe, al that she had upon;
> Theyr com no mo but hir silf alon. (Ll. 78–84)

[17] Ibid. 18, 19.

The dreamscape in *The Assembly* gives the narrator's subjectivity a theatrical platform, where female lived experience is elevated, and expressed as a feminized linguistic performance that interrupts assumptions of male vocality and authority.

3. Wakeful dreamscape: Rehearsing and performing memory

Upon waking from her dream, the narrator follows suit with her authorial role: she begins to write, or in her words, "rehearse" what she has seen and performed in her dream. As Chance underscores, she does so immediately, without delay.[18] In order not to forget, she recreates memories through speech and writing. The fluidity of forms, which relates to the simultaneous focus on writing and performing builds on the use of the word "rehersyng". The definition of *rehersyng* in the *Middle English Dictionary* includes narrating or to give account. The narrator writes:

> 'Wher am I now?' thought I, 'al this is goon',
> Al amased; and up I gan to looke.
> With that anon I went and made this booke,
> Thus symply *rehersyng* the substaunce
> Because it shuld nat out of remebraunce, (Ll. 738–742, emphasis mine)

The narrator reports that the fellowship "thought we had out travel spent/ In suche wise as we hielde us content" (Ll. 732–733). Moreover, she has communicated her tale of performance to the listening knight, in itself a role reversal, and another transgression on her part. Woman as narrator, transmitter of the oral frame used to present the bills themselves, self-inserted author, specifically, writer – these are all fairly overt challenges to the traditional depiction or invisibility of female characters in fifteenth-century poetry, even in the wake of Christine de Pizan's *Cité des Dames*, where she "determine[s] that writing, inventing, and artisty are no longer a masculine or clerical preserve".[19] Thus, as Chance argues, women write, but in *The Assembly*

[18] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 256.
[19] Ibid. 250.

of Ladies, they "write" through dress, handsewn "mottoes" or "words", and embroidery, the oral delivery of their charges, and written individual complaints, feminizing the act of writing by expanding it to include skills relegated to women through law, force, and tradition. The interplay with poetics and performance and pushing the boundaries of women's roles through acts of narrating, orating and writing is transgressive.

Notably, the meeting between the narrator and the knight is neither sexual nor hostile. Instead, their exchange represents the coming together of the two sexes on a platform resembling mutual respect; the frame of the poem permits a knight, a male figure who is an insider to the labyrinthine garden, to listen quietly to a woman's words, moreover ones reporting of injustices done to women. Though the narrator proceeds with her tale, she positions herself as a naïve female, instead of aggressively displaying the authority and agency with she might be viewed. This is a conscious, tactical act, a sign of a savvy author: by appearing feeble and diminished, the narrator can disguise her transgression against roles, and as a result, to better perform them. For instance, when the narrator asks Perseverance whether men will accompany "them" on their journey, she says that "'nat one [...] may come among yow alle'" (l. 147). The narrator reacts almost in disbelief and questions why, although her own complaints against men contribute to the pallor and exhaustion (l. 20) remarked by the knight.

When she has finished, the knight applauds the tale's worthiness, asks its name, and without exhibiting more concern, excuses himself from further encumbering the progress of its transcription, its assemblage from the narrator's memory. McMillan notes that, "dreams not understood, even by their own dreamers, are a staple of Chaucer's dream-visions. The disturbing nature of the dream, especially of its commentary on relationships between men and women, seems to have escaped her male listener".[20] Though she remarks that the knight's response shows his failure to comprehend what he has heard, the performative platform the poem creates is itself a gesture that begs to be decoded. In a sense, the knight performs an audience member's role, providing a frame for the show, leaving the scene at the show's end, possibly to process what has unfolded before him – the narrator's performance of her experience – or to give way to the creation of the written script.

[20] McMillan, 41. Here, McMillan indirectly attributes authorship to Chaucer, putting her in the "Chaucerian" camp of the debate about the identity of the poet.

4. Acting the part: Performance theory and the reinterpretation of roles

In its circular nature, reflected even in the shape of the arbor,[21] the dream vision genre as used in *The Assembly of Ladies* is similar to performance because they both hinge on the ability of language to represent things seen, unseen, and lost through multiplicity, simultaneity, and in a fluid space. Herbert Blau, in his analysis of performance, comments that "the theatre remembers [...] whether that other thing exists or not. [It is] only a dream remembered".[22] The crux of the dream poet's work, then, lies in the construction, the weaving of this memory. As the events in *The Assembly of Ladies* unfold, the narrator is present, only transferring them upon waking from her dream state, writing from memory.

Like theater, the actualizing force of the dream vision violates and confuses time and reality. How the play of words in a text is received by its audience is affected by the setting, the time and place of its occurrence, just as for the audience of a theatrical performance. Like narrators, viewers and readers are merely "constituents of the shifting, vulnerable to time". Blau asks, regarding "the reality we refer to in theater, does it exist before or after the fact made present? in the performance? [...] and did we put it there in the act of perceiving? or was it there before we looked, hiding or withdrawn".[23] On stage, as words are voiced, that which is out of sight becomes embodied and manifest. This is reminiscent of the oral frame of communication, used in *The Assembly*. The voice transforms itself to an image manifested from writing, which, in this space, precedes speech. History is preserved or recreated through imitation, rehearsal, and improvisation on stage, which amplifies the social and political involvement in poetics.

Blau notes that, "from the beginning, theatre has been concerned with the action of memory trying to remember a beginning". This bears a significant relationship to the role of the narrator in either pulling apart or threading and reinforcing the seams of history or past narratives with their words through narrative means, permanently etching him or herself as a commentator, one of the "auctorities" of language's past and future. Like the actor, the narrator is

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[21] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 250.
[22] Blau, "Prescriptions of Theatre", 136.
[23] Ibid. 132.

thus able to embody self, time, memory, consciousness, and desire. In this act of "improvisation", the unwritten is spoken or written, while the physical and spatial expression of memory is less focused on the past, and more on where to begin anew. In Blau's words, "memory is the desire of the not-accomplished, the reflex of desire itself, which is located on the stage of being at the *limits of consciousness* – the theatre in which all things come to be, *dreaming still*".[24] The dream vision genre creates a similar rupture in time and space where narrative "improvisation" takes place: past and present stand still in this moment between consciousness and sleep, when the dream narrator questions, highlights, rearticulates, redefines, and ultimately makes social commentary.[25]

Christine Chism traces a similar merger between past and present to alliterative romances that dramatize a revived past suspended "between a historic connection and catastrophic rupture".[26] Although my focus is on how this dream narrator imbues meaning in such a suspended rift, it is interesting to see how the ambidexterity of alliterative romances "energize contemporary issues by projecting them into [...] distant, vast, and spectacular historical theaters", much like the fluid landscape of the Middle English dream visions. Chism argues that the alliterative romances "explore a matrix of interests both local and national, both historic and contemporary, both political and transcendental, both conservative and innovative".[27] The work of the romances, how they seize historical rupture and continuity, resonates with the work of the dream visions identified in this analysis. Both genres enact what Chism calls "socially interrogative forces" to reconstitute specific binary rifts. In order to do so, the narrator's performance of her role engages, challenges, and attempts to subvert social dichotomies.

5. Enacting the court

The Assembly, and its inability to adjudicate or even fully articulate the bills of complaint presented before the court, is particularly valuable for its focus on

[24] Ibid. 141.
[25] For a longer discussion, see Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
[26] Christine Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 7.
[27] Ibid. 9.

the very physical nature of narrative construction, to use C.S. Lewis' words, "put into the mouth of a woman".[28] Significantly, this story not only originates in women's speech, but also flows from the hand of a woman through writing. Women gather as a collective to plead their cases in a symbolic court; the presiding Lady Loiaulte has charged the "felawes" "everichon" to come to her dressed in blue, and promised to hear their bills of complaint. In this way, she expects to appease the suffering of the women presenting them. In fact, the courtly exchanges in *The Assembly* engage the development of female discourse and present the opportunity to interrupt male authority through female enactment of roles usually filled by men. As Chance states, "it is legislature and justice, feminized".[29]

According to Donnelly, it would not be unusual for the eight allegorical figures who guide the narrator's journey[30] to have a role in legal courts, and that actually, all the named figures have a servile place in royal households:

> The figures' station in relation to the dream narrator positions them in roles of servitude [...] such role reversal is unusual in dream poems, where dreamers are generally presented as subservient to their allegorical teachers. In contrast to that tradition, the allegorical personages of this poem are not teachers but attendants, employed in Loiaulte's household and court of justice.[31]

While this reading supports my argument for the transgression of the text in depicting the roles of women, the fact that women perform every role, from "chaunceler" to "secretarye" to the judge, Lady Loiaulte herself, requires further examination. In Derek Pearsall's explanatory notes to the 1962 edition of *The Assembly of the Birds*, "chaunceler" is defined as "the usher in law courts whose station was the *ad cancellos*, the bars separating the public from the judges",[32] while the "secretarye" in *The Assembly* performed "administrative and clerical [tasks.] The closest parallel [to this role] is a legal one [...] with the work of the clerk of the King's Council", a position of relative importance and visibility.[33] Like the King's Council, "the court of Lady Loyalty was conceived of in rather vague and general terms, and was approached by suitors as 'the

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[28] Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 249.
[29] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 257.
[30] McMillan, "'Fayre Sisters Al'", 39.
[31] Donnelly, "'Withoute Wordes'", 40.
[32] Pearsall, 165, 507n.
[33] Ibid. 162, 337n.

supreme authority of the state, superior to the ordinary law and able to right wrongs of every kind'".[34] This understanding helps frame, if not fully explain, both the structure of the court, its representation by the narrator, and ultimately, the failure to deliver judgment that would openly dispute systems of patriarchy and female oppression.

Each bill, "a statement of complaint and a prayer for redress [...] was the initiatory action and the distinguishing feature of all procedure in equity; it is only semi-legal in form [and] tends to be vague in point of fact but vehement in presenting the enormity of the offence (as in *AL*)".[35] According to Pearsall, the use of "semi-legal parlance, [...] loosely related participles, [...] the same choked and circuitous movement and convoluted syntax", all point to the poet's familiarity with "the stricter legal sense" of a bill, and his or her "attempt to imitate legal procedure".[36] For C.S. Lewis, *The Assembly of Ladies* is a "realistic presentation, in some degree satiric, of the contemporary legal world", like John Roland's *The Court of Venus*.[37] The bills themselves lack cohesion, aside from their general demonstration of women's woes in the period as delivered through feminized speech: broken hearts, unfulfilled promises, unrewarded virtue, sadness, instability, ungratefulness, and labor in vain.[38]

One complaint illustrates the double entendre of the loosely legal framework through which women perform the courtly roles of petitioners: "C'est sanz dire", "it goes without saying", or "my case speaks for itself" (l. 627).[39] This can serve as an encompassing summary of the burdens of women and reiterate women's authority; conversely, its lack of precision can mask the details of the problem, and prevent it from being fully articulated, or addressed. Through the narrator exerts such effort to maintain the judicial allegory, which is successful to an extent, the magnitude of women's problems and concerns are only alluded to, rather than emphatically represented. Marshall comments on "the deliberate ambiguity in the meaning of the complaints, emphasising the indistinct characteristics of the female speakers [...] [T]his ambiguity is then replicated in the narrator's unusual behaviour in

[34] Ibid. 161, 325n.
[35] Ibid. 161, 325n.
[36] Ibid, 161–162, 325n. See also, Marshall, *The Female Voice*, and Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother".
[37] Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 293.
[38] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 257.
[39] Pearsall, 168, 627n.

the assembly".[40] Through lack of resolution, a delay in judgment, the legal framework does not resolve the bills, which stymies the completion of the transgression made possible by *The Assembly* itself, and its proactive, differentiated narrator.

Besides depicting the legal procedure in a manner quite historically accurate, the narrator also obscures the ladies' complaints to promote the transition between courtly poetry's traditional encyclopedic approach to the female-male encounter, and the narrator's feminized innovation: a self-authored, individual confrontation capturing the vast social concerns of women. By turning female denigration into condensed, encyclopedic templates, delivered in a repetitive manner, with the same phrasing, the poet makes readers want to simply subsume all these stories into one, if that. The listener and reader are discouraged by the actual complaints, in a manner that Marshall argues is the result of self-conscious female authorship: "The women's bills are shown to be repetitive and unoriginal [and while they] signify the female voice, that does not fit into the boundaries of masculine literary conventions".[41] Nonetheless, the history entailed in these encyclopedic versions is important, as it marks a visible point in the development of the female written voice and content, in the tradition of Christine de Pizan.[42]

6. Solitude, fragmentation, and the weaving of "Assembly"

Perseveraunce, one of eight allegorical figures who guide the narrator's journey to the castle of Pleasant Regarde,[43] highlights the solitary nature of the narrator's quest in several instances. She gives her an escort, a woman of wise and discreet conduct, Diligence. It is Diligence, not other "felawes", who provides the narrator with companionship and direction when Perseverance leaves the narrator "al alone" (l. 190). Perseverance's reason for leaving is to inform the other women of the plan of action, "to yeve warnyng in many dyvers place to youre felawes", something that the narrator herself might have done herself (Ll. 142–143). A third allegorical character, Countenance, voices

[40] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 62.
[41] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 63.
[42] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 248.
[43] McMillan, "'Fayre Sisters Al'", 39.

the concern of the knight, openly asking "'Yowre felawship, where bien they now?'" (l. 296), to which the narrator answers:

> 'Forsoth,' quod I, 'they bien comyng echeone,
> But in certeyne I knowe nat where they be.
> At this wyndow whan they come ye may se;
> Here wil I stande awaityng ever among,
> For wele I wote they wil nat now be long.' (Ll. 297–301)

Aware that others are coming to the Court, but not knowing exactly where they are, she stays cautious, preferring to wait. As the tale unfolds, the narrator relies on the allegorical Remembraunce and Avisenesse to provide the opening for the entrance of the ladies and gentlewomen. Instead of forthcoming interaction with other female characters throughout the poem, the narrator distances herself from the society of her peers, her "felawes", and thus, performs her narrative role while questioning the possibilities for social conglomeration.

In the dreamscape, the narrator partially overcomes her sense of isolation by speaking to other women, contravening her difference and separation from them while continuing to articulate the storyline. In so doing, the anonymous female narrator creatively reassembles the narrative, yet the reader is part of the collective that interprets and explores its meaning. These participants receive, "read", and cocreate the allegorical presentation; authorship includes readers as coauthors. Through this "collective narrative", the text extends far beyond the class of ladies and gentlewomen whose complaints are accounted for in the bills delivered to the Lady of Loiaulte. In fact, this democratization of narrative construction begins with the characterization of the narrator and her transgressive agency in the poem: even though she is distinguished as an outsider, does not bear a motto, and herself presents no bill, it is she who not only bears the petition, but is also briefed on the organization of the court. This emphasizes the protest of the narrator against social norms and structures, perhaps the legal system itself, even while she performs her own role in the text. Not only does she participate in the court, transcribe its proceedings from memory, but in so doing, also enables this important "collective narrative".

The poem enhances the narrative's communal value and the ease with which it can be appropriated and expanded by inviting the reader into a habitable space, a stage for the narrative. Engaging a productive energy, this

galvanizes interpretive activism by the reader and audience. Likewise, the dream narrator also navigates the wastelands, the abyss of meaning that such a narrative creates. This fragmentation thus characterizes the "collective narrative": the synecdochical parts referred to in this analysis represent disintegrated allegorical pieces, forever estranged from a transitory past.[44] However, these fleeting versions of the past also point to possibilities where narrative construction questions or reaffirms memories through performance. By assembling self and society through participation in authorship, even through disappointingly unclear bills, the audience mirrors the processes and vulnerabilities involved in mining a complete narrative from fragmented visions.

The narrator's multiple roles – her ability to walk actively, and maintain both a bird's-eye and an interior view of her fellowship – actually facilitates the unification of the images presented. The narrator "mediates our experience of the text, but resists interpretation through a single lens, because she does not function as a unified character".[45] This dispersion of viewpoint not only complicates the narrative, and highlights the particularly transgressive role and actions of the anonymous female narrator; it also is an appropriation of the typically male dream narrator role and a move toward individuated authorship. Her mediation of the dream allows the reader to move across narrative frames. The creation of the "booke" becomes the mimetic vehicle where readers can partake of the dream vision through the very process of its writing, its passing from the oral frame to the written. This passage from orality to textuality takes place during "an historical period in which written and oral agreements co-existed", with neither considered the superior or more authoritative, though the written was "innately masculine in nature".[46] The instructions for proper womanhood are transmitted orally in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, to be discussed shortly. *The Assembly*, on the other hand, utilizes orality to express displeasure while figuring as more provocative the gesture of a specifically textual connection, as seen from the literal joining of sleeves as the women depart. I read the individual sleeves as symbolizing the words of the poem, conjoined to form phrases, sentences, stanzas, and finally the complete poem, which challenges male textual authority by dressing this

[44] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 258.
[45] Wendy A. Matlock, "'And Long to Sue It Is a Wery Thing': Legal Commentary in *The Assembly of Ladies*", *Studies in Philology* 101:1 (Winter 2004), 22.
[46] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 62.

authorial process in the guise of fashion and uses female actors to perform it. Further complicating the landscape of linguistic traditions and choices, Marshall goes on to comment: "the poet demonstrates that both legal and poetic language have cause to utilise empirical and emotional modes of communication in different circumstances".[47]

In *The Assembly*, the social agency of language, as expressed through the reading of the bills, reinforces the idea of the "collective narrative", while providing a natural link to performance theory, and its application to the dreamscape and the use of allegory. The magnitude of words, how they act, attempts to capture a collective identity – in this case, one of veiled suffering expressed by individual or allegorical entities – retold from the fragments of memories belonging to a single narrator. The telling of the tale, mediated through the dream vision, serves to provide a performative platform where a lady is able to present her thoughts in a non-threatening way to a male figure. The poem purports to address the theme of truth and loyalty of women and the neglect and unfaithfulness of men. Though "the trappings of allegory are retained [...] the true interest of the poets lies elsewhere, sometimes in satire, sometimes in amorous dialectic, and often in mere rhetoric and style".[48] This allegory is placed in the framework of a dream, where justice takes on a womanly shape.[49] The five ladies and four gentlewomen who seek redress at the court of Lady Loyalty, voice their collective distress, then deliver their particular complaints in writing, and in ways that reveal the gendered nature of this performance, in sewing, embroidery, and fashion. Considering dresses as text, a reading of these women is imperative to how readers surmise narrative opportunities offered through speaking garments, to again evoke the image of the women's connected sleeves.

7. Dressing the part

The maiden petitioners are represented via their mottoes, which could be read to expose the injustices committed against them, but are ultimately too pliable to be read either as affirmation of independence and autonomy, or alignment to male misogyny. Most notable about them is that they enable the airing of

[47] Ibid.
[48] Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, 251.
[49] Chance, "Christine de Pizan as Literary Mother", 257.

women's complaints through "words", as they are alternately called. Their open-endedness provides the narrative space where an everywoman's story could be written – a universal tale more focused on construction than resolution. Contrasted by more ambiguous mottoes such as "Une sans chaungier", and "C'est sanz dire", others briefly state virtues that women must adhere to if they be chaste, silent, and obedient, for instance, "Entierment vostre", "En dieu est", "Sejour ensure", and "Bien monest".[50]

The fourteenth-century poem, *What the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, is an illustration of the expected behavior and attributes of contemporary women. Marshall indicates that the idealized masculine rules and virtues the poem contains actually resemble the names of the women who inhabit Pleasant Regarde and partially comprise *The Assembly of Ladies*. These names act as a "series of masculine regulations to be imposed upon women in which rules of external behavior are prescribed to impact upon the internal state of mind".[51] Since, in poetry of the period, masculine expectations for women's behavior are also projected onto their thinking, the instructions for proper womanhood are often delivered and modeled by female figures. The matriarchal figure in *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, the latest translation of the Codex Ashmole 61 version of *What the Good Wife Taught her Daughter*, is one such example. Occupying 209 lines of the text, the matriarch provides binding instructions for how wives can be in servitude to their husbands, and more generally, good citizens: treat the poor with kindness, attend church, and stay away from practices of ageism or idleness. She asserts:

> My dere doughter, of this take kepe.
> If any man profer thee to wede,
> A curtas ansuer to hym be seyde,
> And schew hym to thy frendys alle.
> For anything that may befawle,
> Syt not by hym, ne stand thou nought
> In sych place ther synne mey be wroght.
> What man that thee doth wedde with rynge,

[50] Pearsall, notes. "One without changing", "It needs no words", "Entirely yours", "In God is (my trust)", "Rest Assured", "Well advised".
[51] Simone Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors, and the Veiling of Cupid's Martyrs: Gendered Space in *The Assembly of Ladies*", *Philological Quarterly* 84:2 (Spring 2005), 169.

Loke thou hym love aboven all thinge.
If that it forteyn thus with thee,
That he be wroth and angery be,
Loke thou meekly ansuer hym,
And meve hymn other lyth ne lymme,
And that schall sclake hym of hys mode;
Thank schall thou be hys derlyng gode. (Ll. 26–40, emphasis mine)[52]

These directives premise wifehood as the defining characteristic of a virtuous woman, as conceived in its sociohistorical context. Although the allegorical companions share the names of patriarchal virtues – Discrecioun, Remembraunce, Attemperaunce, to name several – *The Assembly* subtly criticizes this compartmentalization of female behavior and traits by presenting synecdochical virtues – splintered women walking to and fro (l. 43). Most of their mottoes reasonably suit the rules of being a good woman; conceptually, a woman might figure as only one of the virtues, but is not sufficient for an authentic female character, especially not one of such high social standing and "trowthfulness" as the ladies assembled in the Lady of Loiaulte's court. Thus, it is quite possible that each woman is not "real", but represents a single feminine virtue, performing it in the theater of the court.

Much like costume in the theater, clothing acts as allegory, stitching meaning by way of visual articulation through synecdochical significance. Like allegory, costume has the ability to become a metonymic disguise or a fully articulated text. An actor's clothing or lack thereof is integral to demarcating meaning in a performance. Clothing, a physical gesture, speaks. Susan Crane argues that "[a] chronicle's account of a courtier's disguising offers only mediated access to a historical moment, but its very mediations – its explanations of the behavior, its economy of representation, its judgments – constitute a generically shaped *discourse of identity*".[53] Using a study of the performance's "material register", where identity and clothing reflect how self-conception intersects with self-presentation, she traces the uses of clothing in the courts of the Hundred Years War. In embroidered mottoes and other heraldic marks of identity, Crane explains that "talking garments" functioned both to conceal the body and to reveal a character, an ambiguity that both

[52] All quotes will be taken from "How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter", ed., George Shuffelton in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008).
[53] Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 1. Emphasis mine.

draws attention to the corporeal function of language and parallels the content of the bills presented in *The Assembly*.[54]

8. Unity and discord: Women's work and women's words

To present before the Lady of Loiaulte, the women are asked to dress all in blue, each with a motto on her sleeve. This monochromatic attire masks the differentiation among the women based on individuality, supporting the notion that the women in the garden are performing the roles of women, or virtues, rather than being authentic women. Although she wears blue, a symbol of truthfulness, fidelity, or chastity, depending on the source, the narrator does not wear a motto.[55] This constitutes one of her transgressive acts, and denotes a characteristic that steps outside of the traditional female roles within courtly love poetry and the dream-vision genre. McMillan argues that the narrator's refusal to wear a motto indicates "her sense of differentness and apartness from the other" allegorical women in the text.[56] Though she agrees that the narrator may so object to the masculine values the mottoes express, Marshall also sees this act as contravening the "architectural and social boundaries of Pleasaunt Regarde",[57] leading to her exclusion and distancing from a means of communication.[58] Wendy Matlock also views the narrator's refusal as a transgressive move, but for her the narrator's motivation is that she is unwilling to comply with the court's prescribed rules.[59]

I concur with the identification of transgression, best framed by Marshall: "Pleasaunt Regarde emphasises exclusion rather than inclusion", involving "a series of boundary transgressions". It is specifically "*her willingness to transgress* [that] causes her to be isolated from the inhabitants of the castle and from her companions".[60] While these scholars examine the narrator's transgression, their analysis differs most notably in that Matlock suggests the connection to the written word and its use as a mode of expression within this constructed

[54] Ibid. 1–28.
[55] Evans, 42. See also, Pearsall 170.
[56] McMillan, "'Fayre Sisters Al'", 39.
[57] Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors", 171. Also, Marshall, *The Female Voice,* 49.
[58] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 48.
[59] Matlock, "'And Long to Sue'", 31. Matlock also argues that her refusal could also be a criticism of wealth and refinement displayed at court.
[60] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 34.

narrative, while Marshall claims that because the narrator cannot represent herself using a feminine voice, the possibilities for self-expression within the narrative are limited.[61] Evans and Johnson also note the restrictions placed on the women by the device of the mottoes, but they assert that,

> the function of the mottoes is also ideological, in that they emblematise, in stark terms, the codes of conduct which shape these women's lives and the limited positions available to aristocratic women in a dominant male culture. [...] The subjectivity of the narrator, then, becomes a focus for the (mild) questioning of a particular form of late medieval femininity which is simultaneously constructed with the text and exposed as a construction.[62]

Notably, Donnelly contends that the narrator "will take up the pen rather than a needle to record her experience and make a book, thereby adopting for female uses a normally masculine mode of expression".[63] This reading highlights the narrator's act of refusal, aligning it with the reversal of gendered roles through the choice to write. Here, again, the narrator challenges, rather than limits narrative scope, specifically through exploring linguistic corporeality.

To build on the common ground of scholarship, while underscoring Evans and Johnson's point about the particular transgressive agency exemplified by the narrator, I argue that the choice not to wear a motto relates to her earlier efforts at maintaining solitude, carving out an individualized space for reflection and creation. For Donnelly, the motto's absence is an attempt at anonymity, which opens up the space of "authorship". Through refusing to wear a motto, the narrator asserts that despite her separation, she is part of the collective: the blue costume worn by women regardless of their social standing serves to blur the identities of the ladies and gentlewomen. Barrat, Chance, and Marshall agree that "the narrator, without a motto, is [...] identity-less", a choice performed on the courtly stage, and then again, in the narrative's reconstruction. She manipulates her own persona as narrator – facing exclusion and imposing self-exclusion.[64] Simultaneously, she crafts the

[61] Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors", 179.
[62] Evans and Johnson, "The Assembly of Ladies: A Maze", 188.
[63] Donnelly, "'Withoute Wordes'", 51.
[64] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 48.

narrative itself, probing the possibilities of female narrative through a presentation that enables the "universality of her voice and dream".[65]

The fact that the women are not clearly described as they enter the court of Lady Loiaulte reinforces the narrator's separation from them. Her depictions of them are nondescript – she traces their movements through their feet: jumping rails, walking inward and outward, pictured far behind, far forward, and walking in all directions at once, in pairs:

> Som went inward and went they had gon oute,
> Som stode amyddis and loked al aboute;
>
> And soth to sey som were ful fer behynde
> And right anon as ferforth as the best;
> Other there were, so mased in theyr mynde,
> Al weys were goode for hem, both est and west.
> Thus went they furth and had but litel rest,
> And som theyr corage dide theym so assaile
> For verray wrath they stept over the rayle. (Ll. 34–42)

The particular choice of words reflects the women's individual frames of mind, literally multi-faceted and fragmented. They are introduced individually and thoroughly using the mottoes, but only once "Perseveraunce has shifted her narrative sufficiently into the interior of her castle, suggesting a further, interior, psychological space has been entered into. Furthermore", Marshall comments, "the presence of women in the interior space of Pleasant Regarde specifically equates spatial interiority with femininity".[66]

It is important to note that the medieval organization of households, roles, and power relied on strict hierarchy, with titles for each station denoting associated duties. According to this, women were charged with the inner, or local, the loosely framed private realm, while men ruled the outer household, its scope, affairs with other entities, in other words, the public stage. Many of the legal roles in the text have counterparts within the household: position of "chaunceler", for instance, also existed in the domestic sphere, where he "supervised the running of the household and the estate".[67] Marshall asserts that "the concept of the 'inner household' being the exclusive domain of

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[65] Donnelly, "'Withoute Wordes'", 46.
[66] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 35.
[67] Pearsall, 165, 507n.

women is particularly present" in *The Assembly*. She goes on to suggest that "female spaces, both lay and religious, are both subject to the same masculine authoritative conventions".[68] The male control mentioned even stretched to the definition of women's work: "masculine authority deems embroidery and tapestry to be female activities, thus by practising such activities, the women condone masculine authority".[69]

Interestingly, Mª Beatriz Hernández Pérez links embroidery to effective writing. Although she eventually finds that the delay in judgment shows women acquiescing to male authority, part of her argument also supports the transgressive power of women's work, even as constructed by men and the patriarchal authority over means of communication. She states:

> embroidery occupied precisely that category of the external and material. Indeed, it not only concealed meaning, as letters could do, but furthermore, it amplified and embellished any surface. Embroidery magnified and exaggerated the superficial excellence of the material and the visual; it was the surface of surfaces, the top of the costume, the ultimate outer layer displaying its own formal beauty and accuracy as a unique and essential value, belittling any other virtue.[70]

The narrator views embroidery, like the wearing of a motto, symbols of captivity that she does not engage. Despite her choice not to engage these means of communication, and thus exclude herself from full participation, the narrator details with painstaking attention the dress, symbols, mottoes – the "words" the women wear – emphasizing the utmost importance of these elements in the recreation of the court and to its proceedings.[71]

However, even in interaction with the women's words, complete access to their meaning is complicated by language's indefinite representation of the sign and the signified. Spoken word and meaning as represented by the bills is disparate because "the voiced self [...] is already an image, worded, *before* it is heard; that is, subject to the interior 'writing'".[72] The narrator's role, then, articulates interiority, what she is hearing and "writing" as the poem unfolds.

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[68] Marshall, *The Female Voice,* 42–43.
[69] Ibid. 48.
[70] Mª Beatriz Hernández Pérez, "Distortions of the Chaucerian Tradition in *The Assembly of Ladies*", *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval English Language and Literature,* 11 (2001–2002), 38.
[71] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 47.
[72] Blau, "Prescriptions of Theatre", 129.

Discerning the significance of the object or motto on clothing is all the more involved. The visibility of signs situates identity, but that visibility is made complex because the wearer's desires – although placed on the physical surface for public use and consumption – are partial (a mystery), thereby resistant to full disclosure or scrutiny.[73] As Crane shows, if emblematic clothing can be read as an assemblage of experiences, some chronicled, others not, then complete readings are dependent on survival of the text in full, like a manuscript. At the same time, recalling the function of the "collective narrative", meaning is also made from the narrator's, then the reader's interpretation of visual representations. If one's identity, the assemblage or gathering of one's experience, is tied to articles of clothing, it is imperative to link the "text" of dress and fashion with that of narrative performance and construction, especially when the narrative attempts to question or draw attention to the status quo, as *The Assembly* so clearly does.[74]

9. Under the veil: The dubious success of allegory

Unlike Chaucer's male narrator in the *House of Fame*, who attempts to manipulate historical narrative, the woman relating *The Assembly* does so as though they are mere stereotypes, allegorical figures. The narrator in *The Assembly* negotiates the formulaic depictions of age-old tales through a veil. The women's tales are partially hidden by a "fyne umple", allowing for them to become fragmented references to the stories that came before, templates for authors and readers, or as I argue, calls to cowrite their newly edited versions. Chaucer repeatedly delves into and gets caught in long-winded narratives in *Anelida and Arcite* and *The Legend of Good Women*. In a nod to authorial tradition, the poet of *The Assembly* begins in a similar manner, but ultimately truncates, fragments, and shortens it, providing a synecdoche of grievance in this excerpt:

> Wheron was graven of storyes many oon:
> First how Phillis of wommanly pite
> Deyd pitously for the love of Demephon;
> Next after was the story of Thesbe,

[73] Crane, *The Performance of Self*, 17–20. Also Evans, *Dress in Mediaeval France*.
[74] Joan Evans, *Dress in Mediaeval France* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 42.

How she slowe hir self under a tre;
Yit sawe I more how in pitous case
For Antony was slayne Cleopatrace;

That other syde was how Melusene
Untriewly was disceyved in hir bayne;
Ther was also Anelada the quene
Upon Arcite how sore she did complayne;
Al these storyes wer graven ther certayne
And many mo than I reherce yow here –
It were to long to telle yow al in feere.

And bicause the wallis shone so bright
With fyne umple they were al over-spredde
To that entent folk shuld nat hurt theyr sight,
And thurgh that the storyes myght be redde. (Ll. 456–473)

The narrator admits that more stories were shared, "many mo than I *reherce* yow here", but time is limited. The narrator has other concerns: she seeks to document the process of seeking justice.

The Assembly's veil of allegory, its duality and elusiveness, forces the narrator to encounter the images of forlorn women of the early romances. The collage of stories on Lady Loiaulte's wall-of-women-deceived mimics the assemblage of women who present their case to the court. In other words, the women depicted as victims of love on the wall echo the nine women in the hall, a cunning method through which the narrator creates allegorical selves for the allegorical characters within the poem itself. The narrative she reconstructs then becomes representative of other women as a synecdoche of their lives. Writing on the wall serves a similar purpose in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, showing how these subtexts bear relevance to the creation of new narratives and innovating in methods of composition. In the *House of Fame*, in the Temple of Venus, the narrator recounts the story of Dido and Aeneas. Both the Ovidian and Virgilian interpretations of the tale are evoked. The male narrator questions the authority of both texts as he chooses language to reinterpret and posit his artistic literary truth. By calling attention to the "mediation of the observer/transcriber and the text he claims as his source",

the narrator "assumes [some] authorial privileges".[75] Jacqueline T. Miller acknowledges that "[t]he wavering and ambivalence that characterize the narrator's efforts to assume full authorial rights over the text also restrain and betray that effort; and they indicate that such a position is as untenable as subservience to an outside source seems to be".[76]

As I propose, however, piercing the veil and baring the mystery is not *The Assembly*'s trajectory. Instead, the narrator questions the status quo and formulates a narrative, both calling attention to and offering possibilities for a narrative performance that provides context and makes an experience textual. Marshall asserts that

> The veil of umple demonstrates an awareness of the veil of allegory, but it is not the same thing as *integumentum*. The purpose of *integumentum* is to discover the truth of a text; it is a means of interpretation that allows one to reveal what lies underneath the narrative. Yet the umple veil does the exact opposite. It is, in every way possible, a feminine version of *integumentum*, except in its resulting effect. The umple conceals the stories beneath it, it does not reveal them.[77]

To capture meaning from this narrative, I suggest focusing on the narrator's choices, their sociohistorical context, and their performative nature in terms of a process, versus the resolution of complaints or completion of *The Assembly*. As Donnelly states, the poem offers "veiled commentary on and criticism of the events, powers, and ideologies of the day".[78] Her investment in the legal process, then, does not mean that she is only invested in a sort of legal redemption. Let us remember that she delivers no bill of her own, however voices her personal reflection on the process in the following lines:

> Nothyng so lief as death to come to me
> For fynal end of my sorwes and peyne;
> What shuld I more desire, as seme ye –
> And ye knewe al aforne it for certeyne
> I wote ye wold, and for to telle yow pleyne,

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[75] Jacqueline T. Miller, "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*", *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, 17:2 (Fall 1982), 107.
[76] Miller, "The Writing on the Wall", 108.
[77] Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors", 181.
[78] Donnelly, "'Withoute Wordes'", 37.

> Without hir help that hath al thyng in cure
> I can nat thynk that it may long endure;
>
> And for my trouth, preved it hath bien wele –
> To sey the soth, it can be no more –
> Of ful long tyme, and suffred every dele
> In pacience and kept it al in store;
> Of hir goodenesse besechyng hir therfor
> That I myght have my thank in suche wise
> As my desert deservith of justice. (Ll. 694–707)

Once the bills are each read, Lady Loiaulte answers the "felawes" collectively, in a conventional, nearly dismissive reply: she recognizes that these complaints are a mere synecdoche of a larger unrest and dissatisfaction, but "she thought it to moche in hir entent" to reply to the "felawes" individually (l. 711). This indicates that the poet does not use the poem to directly challenge male and female roles by delivering judgment. Instead, the poem's fragmentation attempts to put these roles in conversation with each other, in the narrator's conversation with the knight, the conversations among women, and the proceeding of the court. Evans and Johnson see the possibilities in this "new" narrative although it offers little vindication. They argue that

> attention to the historical contexts of the *Assembly of Ladies* – to its writers, readers, literary traditions, shaping circumstances – realigns the text and offers us a work which hovers on the edge of critique, which is cautious [...] about its position but which opens up a distinctively female space for the exploration of gender relations. The equivocal authorial voice allows for the deconstruction of historical and ideological categories, revealing the possibility that courtly women are not 'naturally' submissive, uncomplaining or incapable of protest at the strictures of their social world.[79]

Through the process documented, Lady Loiaulte does not vindicate the wrongs to which the women testified, however incompletely; she notes that their complaints are valid, but delays justice:

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[79] Evans and Johnson, "The Assembly of Ladies: A Maze", 190.

> We have wele sen youre billis by and by
> And som of hem ful pitous for to here.
> We wil therfor ye knowen this al in feere:
> Withyn short tyme oure court of parlement
> Here shal be holde in oure paleys present,
> And in al this wherin ye fynde yow greved
> There shal ye fynde an open remedy,
> In suche wise as ye shul be releved
> Of al that ye reherce heere triewly.
> As of the date ye shal knowe verily,
> Than ye may have a space in your comyng,
> For Diligence shall bryng it yow bi writyng. (Ll. 717–728)

Matlock argues that the delay in judgment offered within this poem has historical context, and that the "inept" and "uncooperative narrator" is a reflection of the legal system. She argues:

> When the poem's irresolution is considered in conjunction with the contemporary legal system's delays – a problem of real-life petitioners in actual courts – it becomes clear that fictional court suffers the same imperfection. In this context, the disjunction between the idealized presentation of the court and its failure to dispense justice is jarring, and the poem leaves the discontinuity unresolved. Lady Loiaulte's justice is as burdensome and ineffective as her fifteenth-century counterparts'; the fantasy court is no more successful than real ones.[80]

This points both to irony and to realism, as used by the poet, as well to the ultimate weakness of the allegory of the court. Interestingly, Matlock sees delay as a necessary evil as it establishes a system of petitions that offered litigants an opportunity to repeatedly engage with the legal system, decreasing the likelihood of violence between both parties.[81] The poem's weaknesses limit outright narrative conflict, yet the women receive catharsis from lodging their complaints and contribute to a narrative more substantial than that of historical victims etched on a wall.[82]

Some readers tread through this awkward, fragmented dream, yet receive little or no reprieve for the negative they have taken in as a participating

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[80] Matlock, "'And Long to Sue'", 22.
[81] Legal delays are discussed at length in Matlock, who cites the Whilton dispute as an example. See Matlock 24–27.
[82] Donnelly, "'Withoute Wordes'", 51.

audience. Certainly, the delay in judgment, although realistic, is a blow to the transgressive potential of the court, maybe a disguised critique of the legal system, and potentially represents the compliance with the patriarchal and male order of power. What is also substantial and unfortunately overlooked, is one argument to the contrary: that a female narrator partakes in the courtly process, seeks justice through her participation in it, and recreates orally and textually all of the roles those real life processes entail – her performance in her role. The collection of words, whether expressed through sheaths of cloth or leaves of a manuscript, and however ineptly "embodying" the injustices committed against them, can be used to give voice to the voiceless.[83]

The skilled and complex female narrator recreates her experience and her dream not for her own use, but for "her feyre sustres al" (l. 370). This, as well as the title itself, "La semble de Damea", creates a locus of female fellowship, a woman-centered universality, where pen and needle, the public and domestic, are given some leverage as a corporeal language. Rather than focusing on the irresolution of the text, its allegorical vacuity, its stereotyped narrative, I reiterate that it is indeed replete with possibilities, rather than inept. In response to spatial, temporal, and sociohistorical location within patriarchal frameworks, transgression defines the narrator's actions. Initially, she presents *her*self as narrator; second, she maintains her separation from the ladies and gentlewomen attending the Court of Loyalty until her dream state, and even then some, arguably to get authorial distance and "hang" the veil of allegory; next, she enters Pleasant Regarde, reaching the final destination ahead of her companions; fourth, she conspicuously does not wear a motto, or formally present a complaint; and lastly, she consciously recreates and performs the narrative by writing it upon waking. Through exploring physicality, performance, and investment in self-preservation orally and textually, this poem engages ideas of female writing itself as a form of protest.

In the words of Marshall, "the narrator's frustration lies in the fact that, as a woman, femininity should not be a constraint" to her participation, performance, or retelling of the journey.[84] She weaves together words, and the "words" of others, intersecting self-conception with self-presentation and self-articulation, exposing the concerns and suffering of women, and transgressing her restrictions. Her oral rehearsal of her "booke" for the knight is a dress rehearsal for word play – narrative construction that enables the creation of a

[83] Marshall, *The Female Voice*, 48.
[84] Ibid. 48.

female literary space, written and woven, etched both on fabric and paper. It acknowledges the tradition of its literary precursors – the encyclopedic attempts to document the stories of forlorn women, such as Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* – but suggests that these accounts unwittingly celebrate the disempowerment of women.

A marked contrast, *The Assembly* gives readers an insight into the performative role of female narration, opening the space to conscious self-insertion and fragmented authorship. This newly woven space outside of social norms can admit, hear, and eventually offer visions of social justice that more profoundly engage women's agency and needs. While it shows that authorship enlists a communal response and often promises social implications, such as the capacity to create new means and forums of expression, more conducive to the aims, experiences, and voices of the narrative's creators, the public act of writing as protest can emerge from an individual narrative, a single voice speaking on behalf of many. Though justice is not served, the Court of Lady Loiaulte is to be reread, relived, and performed anew, searching for new textual ruptures and the possibilities for articulated, feminist social change.

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