

'This Mystique Show': Dryden and *The Flower and the Leaf*

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Dryden's translation of *The Flower and the Leaf* in his *Fables* (1700) has received comparatively little attention from critics.¹ This is perhaps partly because the medieval poem slumped in critical respect after 1878 when it was definitively declared not to be by Chaucer.² In contrast with Dryden's versions of Chaucer, Virgil and Ovid, it thereafter no longer presented critics with an obvious case of a great seventeenth-century poet responding to the work of an earlier master.

The Flower and the Leaf, now believed to be by a fifteenth-century woman, appeared in editions of Chaucer's works from Thomas Speght's 1598 edition.³ It has great charm: another aspect that probably came to count against the seriousness with which it was judged. There was also a long eclipse generally in the reputation of fifteenth-century literature that lasted until the 1990s—an eclipse beginning arguably as early as the mid sixteenth century. In the last century of literary criticism there were, until very recently, only a handful of fifteenth-century authors, either English or French, deemed to stand out above the general tenor of their century, such as Malory, Villon, or Skelton. And those few were valued primarily for succeeding in not being typical of what were perceived to be the weaknesses of the period.⁴

Yet *The Flower and the Leaf* attracted great esteem through most of the nineteenth century. Keats' sonnet 'The Flower and the Leaf', is the best-known of many indications of that esteem, and the poem was one of only two texts illustrated in the stained glass window erected to honour Chaucer in Westminster Abbey in 1868.

For the most part, it was acclaimed during the nineteenth century for its portrayal of Chaucer's delight in the fresh spring morning, an image of the Father of English Poetry that established him as akin to a Romantic or Victorian poet in his love of nature, and which gained intensity as the Victorian city changed the face of London and other cities.

The poem describes two retinues, the Company of the Leaf, dedicated to virtue, chastity, endeavour, and concern for lasting values, and that of the Flower, dedicated to beauty and the pleasures of the moment.⁵ Each retinue is associated with birds, the nightingale for the Leaf and the goldfinch for the Flower, and with a variety of trees and flowers. The knights of the Leaf compete in a tournament and the retinue relaxes under the shelter of a massive laurel tree. Honouring the Lady of the Leaf, her devotees dance, make music, revere the laurel tree, and then, hand in hand, the knights and ladies walk around it. The Company of the Flower now enter the meadow, singing and dancing, with their own Lady of the Flower, and they bow reverently before the daisy (a motif echoing Chaucer's Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, c. 1386, where women kneel to the daisy). They have no protection and when the sun becomes hot and a rainstorm follows they suffer, but the Company of the Leaf rescue them, feed, and heal them, under their protective laurel. This is a secular fable reminiscent in its basic pattern of the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Finally, the two companies ride away together. It belongs to a common medieval genre of the framed narrative: a central presentation, often allegorical or didactic, framed by one or more devices, the most common of which are a dream; entry into a garden, palace, or temple; or the motif (as here) of a hidden narrator overhearing or watching events, often from the shelter of bushes, a hedge, or a trellis.

The narrator, after the cavalcade leaves, asks a lady she meets – the traditional Dream-Guide who gives the explanations in dream poems of this type – what the meaning of this is. She says the Lady

of the Leaf is Diana and her followers are those who are 'steadfast'; the ladies of the Leaf are chaste and the men are brave (477-90). The knights of the Leaf include the Nine Worthies, Charlemagne's *Douzeperes*, and the Knights of the Garter (500-25). The Company of the Flower are those who love idleness and entertainment: they cannot endure long or survive adversity (535-65). The narrator is asked to choose which she herself will serve this year, the Leaf or the Flower (574), and chooses the Leaf. Then she returns to her home and decides to put her experience into writing.

The poem uses two literary conceits that were already well-established. One is the praise of the daisy ('marguerite' in French), used in several fourteenth-century poems to honour a woman called Margaret.⁶ The other is the allegory of the Flower and the Leaf. This may have been an elegant game of motifs and allegiances cultivated by courtiers: the earliest reference is by Deschamps, and, like the daisy worship, it is a motif that appears in *The Legend of Good Women*.⁷ While the Leaf in the medieval text clearly represents more admirable virtues than the Flower, the Company of the Flower is not condemned: its weakness is merely that its lifestyle and priorities are not proof against vicissitudes. Dryden, however, makes the Company of the Flower symbolic of vice and cowardice. He redirects the text into didacticism. The vision is called 'a moral show' (599). Dryden increases the martial vocabulary and introduces not just greater moral differentiation between the two retinues but enmity. Rivalry, opposition, and contention enter into his depiction of other motifs besides the companies. This more antagonistic conception of the subject matter is probably one reason why *The Flower and the Leaf* attracted Scott. He mentions its tournament in *Rokeby* (6, xxvi), and uses quotations from Dryden's version for chapter mottoes in *Ivanhoe* (chapter 9) and *Old Mortality* (chapter 44), in contexts where enemies are in contest with each other.

While Dryden's translation often represents faithfully the content and even the spirit of his original, he also changes and adds

material, and brings new themes into texts. Some changes connect his *Flower and the Leaf* with its new context, the *Fables*. His opening lines, compared with the original, illustrate typical links of this type:

Now turning from the wintry Signs the Sun
 His course exalted through the Ram had run:
 And whirling up the Skies, his Chariot drove
 Through *Taurus*, and the lightsome Realms of Love,
 Where Venus from her Orb descends in Show'rs
 To glad the Ground, and paint the Fields with Flow'rs,
 When first the tender Blades of Grass appear . . .

(Dryden, *The Flower and the Leaf*, 1-7)

When that Phebus his chaire of gold so hie
 Had whirled up the sterry sky aloft,
 And in the Boole was entred certainly;
 When shoures sweet of raine discended soft,
 Causing the ground, fele times and oft,
 Up for to give many an wholesome aire,
 And every plaine was clothed faire.

(*The Flower and the Leaf*, 1-7)

Both poets' lines recall the beginning of *The General Prologue*, but Dryden's more overtly, and his fertilizing showers are female whereas Chaucer's were male. The medieval poem's rain, sweet and fertile, remains rain; Dryden makes it Venus, and the earlier poet's pleasant earthy smell of the ground in spring disappears. The introduction of Venus connects with a major theme in the *Fables*: the goddess of Love is presented as a life-force at several other points, and Dryden's reference to Venus initiates an insistently active, personalised, and sexualised treatment of the spring, continuing even more dramatically in lines 8-19, where buds, blooms, and the spring months burst with life as 'the green Blood' (11) dances in their veins.⁸ Themes of cosmic harmony and

Pythagorean philosophy run through the *Fables*. In *The Flower and the Leaf* Dryden sometimes describes the narrator's delight in natural scenes in terms of the life-force, exhaling from the souls of the living plants and transferring joy to the soul of the observer: for example, in lines 16-18, 95-101.

Dryden's allusion to winter, line 1, links back to the previous fable, *Ceyx and Alcyone*, which ends with the Halcyon birds breeding in the Autumn and Dryden's description of Alcyone as 'A wintry Queen' (496). Similarly Chauntecleer, line 33, looks forward to *The Cock and the Fox*.

As in his other translations, heroic diction transmutes the text frequently into a more elevated, mythologised, and generalized mode. The lines above give us not just an extra deity, Venus, but intimations of regality in 'realms' and 'Orb'. The change from the Rhyme Royal stanzas to couplets makes additions easier, and Dryden adds material and alters his medieval texts more freely than his classical ones. He said, responding to contemporary contempt for Chaucer as a 'dry, old-fashion'd wit, not worth reviving', that Chaucer's primitive style of writing needed some polishing ('a rough diamond') and that,

[I] have often omitted what I judg'd unnecessary, or not of Dignity enough to appear in the Company of better Thoughts . . . and added somewhat . . . where I thought my author was deficient and had not given his thoughts their true Lustre, for want of Words in the Beginning of our Language.⁹

Classical names ('Eurus', 'Philomel', 'Elysium', etc.) are introduced and a vocabulary wrought with nominalization and Latin echoes achieves a classical discourse absent from the original. A good example is this:

The vanquish'd Party with the Victors join'd,

Nor wanted sweet Discourse, the Banquet of the Mind,
 Mean time the Minstrels play'd on either side,
 Vain of their Art, and for the Mast'ry vy'd.
 The sweet Contention lasted for an Hour,
 And reach'd my secret Arbour from the Bow'r.
 The Sun was set; and Vesper to supply
 His absent Beams, had lighted up the Sky

(Dryden, *The Flower and the Leaf*, 431-38)

The original has:

And then, full lustily,
 Even by the herber where I was sitting,
 They passed all, so pleasantly singing
 The it would have comforted any wight.
 But then I sie a passing wonder sight.

For then the nightingale, that all the day
 Had in the laurer set and did her might
 The whol service to sing longing to May . . .

(*The Flower and the Leaf*, 430-37)

This illustrates what Dryden meant by enhancing a 'true Lustre' deficient (as he saw it) because Chaucer lived and wrote before Humanism had brought a wealth of Latinate diction and idioms into the national poetic language. Classicising additions here include 'nor wanted', 'sweet contention', and 'Vesper'.

This extract, only describing music-making, illustrates Dryden casting narrative into a more aggressive, oppositional, mould. The oxymoron 'sweet contention' replaces pleasant singing that would comfort any creature; what Dryden designates the 'Victor' and 'vanquish'd' had ridden home together in the original in friendly fashion, singing on their way. The tendency to sharpen oppositions and produce clear-cut distinctions is pervasive. Without knowing the author had been a woman, Dryden, in increasing antagonistic

opposition, was masculinizing a feminine narrative in which two groups were different but not in competition and the stronger, more mature, group nurtured the weaker one.

Wordsworth (a competitor in translating Chaucer, we should remember) said Dryden executed his *Palamon and Arcite* 'with great spirit and harmony' but lost 'much of the simplicity, and with that of the beauty, and occasional pathos of the original'.¹⁰ Dryden's verbal refashioning, however, is never cavalier. It is itself complex in its tones and modes, often delicately responsive: certainly not mere imposition of classicisation. Where the medieval extract above describes the nightingale singing a service, the 'whol' liturgy appropriate for ('longing to') worshipping May (like a saint's day honouring St May), Dryden employs in a delicately double sense both the word 'Vesper' – evening and the service of Vespers – and the word 'officious' which has the senses 'busy' and singing a Divine Office. A small example, but the attentive reader soon becomes aware that this first real practitioner of descriptive and analytical criticism of English literature is engaged in continual dialogue, line by line, one poet with another, with the his predecessor's composition. Though Dryden makes something new of *The Flower and the Leaf*, he does this on the basis of the finest type of close reading.

Heightening the poem's martial dignity he increases the prominence of the laurel. He expands the description of the Order of the Garter (545-54), perhaps honouring the Duke of Ormonde, a Garter Knight to whom (with his Duchess) he dedicated the *Fables*. The action of the tournament is sharpened in two directions: Dryden increases the sense of Fortune and of fluctuating success and failure, a favourite theme of his. He reformulates the original friendly tournament in adversarial, military terms: we have 'Squadrons', a 'Field', a 'Warlike Train', a 'Fight', with 'Victors' and 'fainting Foes to shameful Flight compell'd', for example, in lines 289-305; the knights of the Leaf become 'Chiefs returning from the Fight', 310. This adversarial precision contributes to

increased didacticism: the two retinues represent opposed moral outlooks. When Dryden gets to the knights of the Flower they are no longer just cheerful pleasure-lovers whose ill-prepared *al fresco* party gets spoiled by weather, but (lines 561-6)

those Nymphs and Knights
Who liv'd in slothful Ease and Loose Delights:
Who never Acts of Honour durst pursue,
The Men inglorious Knights, and Ladies all untrue . . .

Middleton shows how Dryden's *Knight's Tale* incorporates a perspective from the English factional politics of his own lifetime, and he introduces into this text a distinct theme of loyalism and service to the Monarch.¹¹ The knights of the Leaf are not simply industrious, sober and steadfast as in the original poem, but (lines 547-54) Royalist,

Our England's Ornament, the Crown's Defence,
In battle brave, Protectors of the Prince
Unchang'd by Fortune, to their Sovereign true,
For which their manly Legs are bound with Blue,
These, of the Garter call'd, of Faith unstain'd,
In fighting Fields the Lawrell have obtain'd,
And well repaid those Honours which they gain'd.

The women of the Leaf gain grandeur too, especially their Lady, who is described more majestically than her medieval equivalent (176-200), perhaps in compliment to the Duchess of Ormonde. She is even said to have an element of 'Godhead shining in her Face' (183). Fawns come out of the forest in rapture to hear her sing. The ladies' chastity is more stressed. Watching them dance in a ring the narrator says 'Somewhat aw'd I shook with holy Fear' (206). Dryden's ladies, even more than his knights, show how this text by a medieval woman, in a genre – the allegorical framed vision – completely out of fashion in his lifetime, prompted him to create a

text that, perhaps precisely because it was anomalous by the genre expectations of his own age, did not simply recreate the original composition, in a heroic, epic style (though it does that), but diversified into a rich variety of discourses and worlds.

These include the mystical, fairy, and ethical. The narrator's experience at times resembles a contemplative vision. Rather than a specifically religious revelation, what causes her awe and 'holy Fear' is a vision of human ideals: the masculine and feminine forms of honour – chivalry and chastity – in a pristine and perfect state. The experience Dryden describes has affinities not only with the long-established classical tradition of the philosophical and spiritual advantages of rural peace, far from the madding crowd, but also – more originally – with what might be called a proto-Romantic concept of solitary moments of ecstasy, in what Dryden calls 'a spot of ground'. The narrator becomes rapt while sitting alone in the grove, listening to the nightingale, and drawn into a realm of heightened mental awareness unknown in the world,

The grove echo'd, and the Valleys rung;
 And I so ravish'd with her heav'nly Note
 I stood intranc'd, and had no room for Thought.
 But all o'er-pour'd with Ecstasy of Bliss,
 Was in a pleasing Dream of Paradice . . .

And what alone did all the rest surpass,
 The sweet possession of the Fairy Place;
 Single, and conscious to my Self alone,
 Of Pleasures, to th'excluded World unknown,
 Pleasures which no where else, were to be found,
 And all *Elysium* in a spot of Ground.

(117-21, 140-45)

With her profound 'Intranc'd' state of a consciousness that lies beyond Thought, and with 'all Elysium' found in a rural moment of

'Paradice', Dryden seems here to be inspired by his fifteenth-century predecessor to a complex of ideas and expressions that, with slight changes in the period vocabulary, would not seem out of place in one of Wordsworth's 'spots of time' (perhaps Dryden inspired Wordsworth).¹² While the original, like many framed narratives of its type, never specifically labels the central vision a dream, Dryden – as it were – fills this absence with this passage describing a transport into an ecstasy born of both response to nature and spiritual benefit from leaving 'th' excluded world', a spiritual state which seems to allow the self, in its consciousness, to touch Edenic or infinite realities.

Dryden rationalises (the term seems the right one) this experience in his narrative as Fairyland. This use of English fairy folklore, here and in his *Wife of Bath's Tale*, has its own importance, as discussed below, but the moment of ecstasy 'in a spot of Ground' has deeper affinities besides fairy enchantment. There is a kind of nature mysticism here, together with awe at a moral revelation. The narrator talks of 'The secret Moral of this Mystique Show', 460.

The Company of the Leaf do not represent a single moral: endeavour, industry, endurance, fidelity, and chastity are all elements in the approach to life they symbolise. Binary oppositions with the Company of the Flower indicate what virtues the Leaf represents as what the poet states specifically about its meaning. This company of the Leaf are those whose moral outlook and lifestyle are proof against change or adversity, who have calm stability untouched by the upsets of passion, and are motivated by desire for honour (the laurel), which keeps them on the paths of duty. They represent a cluster of assumptions ('duty'? 'maturity'? 'honour'?') various but potent in its appeal. As in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the two symbolic elements in the vision stand for general attitudes to life rather than single virtues. Dryden's introduction of fairy associations symbolises an element – innocence – that lies at the core of what the text (the original but

even more his own) celebrates in the Company of the Leaf: a realm, above all, of radical innocence, rediscovered for both knightly honour and female chastity. The white-clad ladies and knights of the Leaf are 'Servants to the Leaf, by Liveries known / Of innocence' (504-505); the narrator is given mystic 'Charms and Sigils' to defend herself 'Against ill-tongues that scandal innocence' (606-607). Although the original Dream-Guide prays the narrator will be protected from the 'crueltie' of 'Male Bouche' (580), her meaning is only partly the same as Dryden's protection from calumny. The medieval text was probably as much concerned here with misogyny and the position of the female author as with the reverential concept of 'innocence' at the heart of Dryden's vision. 'Male Bouche' had become commonly, in fifteenth-century poems dealing with feminism and love, a name for Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* and the literary antifeminism it enshrined. The medieval woman poet is being given a prayer to help her brave the attacks of misogynists against her, as much as a talisman to protect her 'innocence' from moral scandal. In the late medieval period, feminist writing and a distinctly moralising redirection of courtly amorous motifs go together in an innovative feminism and the *Flower and Leaf* is part of this late medieval movement to reclaim an area of literature for women, through holding up a virtuous form of courtliness and what we might term a version of the 'New Man' ideal. The highly moral glamour of the Company of the Leaf belongs to this particular literary movement: a rewriting of *cortois* amorous writing. The prayer for protection from Male Bouche therefore goes with the medieval narrator's own expression, as a woman writer, of apprehension and modesty about how the book she is about to present to the public will be received.

The links between texts in Dryden's collection of *Fables*, and the principles underlying their ordering, have proved an intriguing question for critics. *The Flower and the Leaf* has thematic links with many other items. Earl Miner pointed to the series of tales concerned with dreams, from *The Cock and the Fox* with its debate

about dreams, through *Honorius and Theodore* and *Ceyx and Alcyone* to the *Flower and the Leaf*.¹³ Dryden's praise of chastity links it to the two of the latest of the tales in the *Fables*, which similarly celebrate manly sobriety and hard work, and female chastity and virtue: *The Character of a Good Parson* and *The Monument of a Fair Maiden*. Simple country life and integrity, untempted by luxury or pleasure is a theme shared with *Baucis and Philemon* and the description of the country woman at the beginning of *The Cock and the Fox*. Like *Palamon and Arcite* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale* it is a tale of chivalry, and all three texts raise moral and philosophical questions about knightly honour, the position of the warrior in the ethical scheme of things, and manly virtue.

Dryden's final sections make clear how far he moralized the medieval original, and also illuminate a more general didactic purpose in his *Fables*. The Dream-Guide approves of the moral aptitude her pupil has shown in learning from the vision (lines 600-601):

What profit I had made,
Of mystique Truth, in Fables first convey'd.

The translations in Dryden's collection are envisaged as 'fables' in the moral sense as well as in the sense of short ancient tales.

A general theme of love and war runs through many and, more particularly, contrasting models of heroic masculine identity and the lessons to be drawn from them. *Palamon and Arcite*, *The Flower and the Leaf*, *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and *The Cock and the Fox* offer knighthood in several modes: noble and heroic in the first two poems; Arthurian but deeply flawed in the second (where, however, a lesson about true nobility is learned). *The Cock and the Fox* offers mock-heroic treatment of a would-be heroic chivalric male, the vainglorious cock Chauntecleer. As the poet of *Absolon and Arcite*, and *The Hind and the Panther*, Dryden was obviously

going to be attracted to this mock-heroic beast epic. Portraying the *General Prologue* Parson, Dryden was turning to an alternative model of masculine identity. All four poems, together with *Ceyx*, show male heroes in relation to powerful women, either a female instructor or a woman to whom the man owes complete devotion. Dryden adds didacticism both to *The Flower and the Leaf* and to his *Wife of Bath's Tale*: Arthur's condemnation of a rapist to death, for example, in his version is contrasted with the laxness of courts of more recent periods; this is a king devoted to his marriage vows, whose poets do not have to 'debauch the Stage' to please their monarch (61-68). It matches Dryden's insistence that the knights and ladies of the Leaf are enrolled in the liveries of innocence. Though it may at first, to a modern reader reared on C. S. Lewis's *Allegory of Love*, seem to belong conventionally to a medieval tradition of 'Courtly Love' visions, *The Flower and the Leaf* can be seen, as suggested above, rather as part of a distinct new movement in late-medieval visions towards an exploitation, by proponents of feminism and Christian heterosexual family values, of traditional courtly motifs and the discourse of erotic poetry, in order to champion women and marriage. These two reformist purposes, feminism and ethical approaches to sex, go together in a certain strand in late medieval courtly literature exemplified by Christine de Pizan, Martin Le Franc, and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. Dryden's more explicit didacticism is, in its own terms, therefore perhaps responsive to a pervasive, if not overt, ethos in his female predecessor's composition.

Besides sharpening the didactic import, and refashioning *The Flower and the Leaf* as one of the heroic narratives in the *Fables*, Dryden's other major addition was his transformation of the knights and ladies into fairies.¹⁴ Many added details create this theme. It is heralded early when the narrator sees little paths through the grove forming narrow mazes apparently made by fairy feet (57). The knights in the tournament are described as like a swarm of bees (218-20). While the effect is partly that of a

Homeric simile, adding grandeur, this also disconcerts: are these full-size knights or tiny creatures? A banqueting bower magically rises up 'with suddain seats adorn'd' on the meadow (425-26). The arbour was made for Oberon (79). The medieval poem's green symbolism becomes the green of the fairies. They have their own secret world within the world we see, though usually invisible, and there they 'with Green adorn our Fairy Bow'rs' (500). Asking what was 'The secret Moral of the Mystique Show', the narrator learns it was 'a Fairy Show': humans whose souls are not ready immediately after death for 'upper Light' are kept down on earth as fairies for a time, resembling the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, itself, of course, a period of self-improvement. Normally they 'reign by Night alone, / And posting through the Skies pursue the Moon': they dance and revel by moonlight, but once a year are allowed daytime revels in honour of May (480-95).

Dryden's narrator wanders back to her bed at dawn, 'Bewilder'd in the Wood till Dawn of Day' (611). In making her experience last only till dawn (whereas the original had her returning next day at nightfall) Dryden makes it more into a dream. References such as those to the maze-like paths, Oberon, this bewildered wandering through the woods, and the night-long dream time-scale, suggest *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, perhaps an acclimatization of the medieval vision mode to a literary discourse more within his own sense of mainstream literary tradition, just as Miltonic echoes modernize and regularize (increase the 'true Lustre') of the mock-heroics of *The Cock and the Fox*. By the end of the seventeenth century, the allegorical love vision had lapsed out of the consciousness of writers and readers as a living genre; it was Shakespeare's play that most obviously provided a paradigm within which a dream of chivalry and love, seen in a secluded 'herbere' could be reformulated by a modern poet. This incorporation of the world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is facilitated because Dryden visualises the action as a play or pageant, with the narrator sitting and watching as a spectator.

Three times he calls it a 'show', lines 460, 481, 599; the goldfinch's song is 'her Performance' (115). Dryden's age had lost the secular dream or vision as a current mode for composition, apart from satiric or parodic use. The original presented the participants as full human beings, because the genre convention makes it possible for the medieval poet to depict a scene that lies liminally between symbolism and realism; Dryden seems to feel the need to place a barrier between the narrator and what she sees, constructed as the boundary between human and fairy. It also divides present and past: the creatures she sees are, in a sense (though the word is not used), ghosts—ghosts from a heroic age of honour (480-568).

Shakespeare's play with its folkloric Puck also conforms with Dryden's evocation of a traditional rural 'merry England' discourse. Dryden (lines 496-97) refers to the benign assistance that the elves give humans, as creatures living round the edge of human habitations, in folklore:

All Courteous are by Kind; and ever proud
With friendly Offices to help the Good.

He infused fairy traditions also into the opening of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Here Chaucer had compared the succubi, supernatural beings who raped women who wandered incautiously into wild places, with the lascivious habits of wandering friars. By developing this folkloric element, with a vision of benign beliefs in a now lost England, Dryden may be, as with his decision to champion Chaucer itself, presenting the medieval Catholic culture which the modern world has lost as a benevolent world which is more compatible with, and continuous with, contemporary English society than protestant contemporaries would credit ('their general characters are still remaining in Mankind, and even in England,' as he famously claims of the Canterbury pilgrims).¹⁵ Perhaps his Catholicism led him to change the emphasis in the Wife's tale,

adding a lengthy description of country folklore about elves and altering the figure of the lewd cleric who is a danger to women away from friars to a randy old parson – an Anglican sexual monster rather than a Catholic one. His expansion on elvish matters includes introduction of a fairy couple, ‘The King of elfs and little Fairy Queen’ replacing Chaucer’s lone Fairy Queen. These are the elves, goblins, and Robin Goodfellows of English village tradition, dancing on village greens in fairy rings by moonlight (4-11), skimming off the cream in dairies and leaving payment. Dryden records the custom of hanging up mint to encourage them. The modern ‘swain’ sees no elves or goblins walking at night.

Thematically Dryden’s introduction of fairy folklore into both *The Flower and the Leaf* and *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* adds to the national celebration in the translations in the *Fables*. Folklore references, like the country customs in his opening to *The Cock and the Fox*, belong to a recurrent theme of the simple life in the *Fables*, seen also in the choice of *Baucis and Philemon*. But in Dryden’s introduction of specifically English details, whether in folklore, cottage habits, or meals, there is more: a cultural fusion of classicism with native tradition. It appears when he adds to the description of the laurel, under which the Company of the Leaf shelter, the English, unexpectedly homely and realistic picture of this enormously spreading tree providing shelter from April showers for a flock of sheep. The ‘Lustre’ Dryden is attempting to give, or rather to bring out of the medieval text, is not just an imposed classicisation. It involves, as all good classicisation does, an accommodation of the classical to vernacular literary tradition (as does Ben Jonson’s mixture of native Robin Hood tradition with pastoral modes in *The Sad Shepherd*).¹⁶ As with Dryden’s use of Miltonic echoes to forge his own English mock-epic style for *The Cock and the Fox*, and his evocations of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, there is a conscious merging of a Latin with native English literary language and mythology. Perhaps it was the potential for such a rich combination of styles and

worlds, a potential to transcend eras and cultures, that Dryden meant when he described himself as producing a translation that would bring out that true lustre that the medieval texts he chose already themselves possessed.

Far from being a negligible item among the *Fables* or a text which won its place only by its subject-matter of love and arms – a pale if delicate shadow of the more robust examples of heroic writing – perhaps *The Flower and the Leaf* and its unfashionable genre gave Dryden an opportunity for experiment that crossed contemporary expectations of genre, style, and even sensibility. The courtly vision had become an empty – or an open – genre, by which I mean that it could be taken in new and hitherto untrodden directions. One fact emerging from study of Dryden's version is that he was not attempting antiquarian mimicry: he was not reproducing the effects of a medieval poem. He redirects the piece, most obviously in casting the actors as fairies, and the freedom the empty generic canvas gave him to experiment is illustrated in his flights of entirely original eschatology, where souls of the just which are not ready for perfect light spend aeons wandering as benevolent elves and dancing in the light of the moon. The allegorical dream poem as a genre had dwindled by the late seventeenth century into being a vehicle for pornography or satire. Its next creative flowering would be with the Romantics and Victorians. This paper suggests that the vision in the green grove provided a literary location, free from specific expectations, for an evocation of nature mysticism closer to the Romantics than to contemporaries' generic expectations of pastoral.

Dryden's addition of philosophical themes to his Chaucerian translations reflects his conviction that Chaucer could hold his own with the classics in his scientific wisdom: he asserted Chaucer's knowledge of astronomy equals Ovid, for example, in the Preface to the *Fables*. While one unifying themes in the *Fables* is the philosophical model of a living cosmos infused by the power of Love (Venus), the use of religious register we find in *The Flower*

and the Leaf is not simply and straightforwardly part of this learned element in the collection. Dryden here seems to be feeling his way along an uncharted middle way of his own that draws from religious language without either entering the contemporary para-religious discourse of panegyric (as used in his dedication to the Duchess of Ormonde) or inviting specifically Christian readings. The states of 'holy Fear,' 'ecstasy of Bliss,' and 'mystique Show', occupy a different discourse of – curiously for a Catholic convert – a seemingly non-religious morality and non-faith mysticism. Perhaps the freedom to do this in the peculiarly complex form we find in Dryden's *The Flower and the Leaf* arose from the freedoms and the inspiration that working in a long-disused genre gave to him.

NOTES

¹ Important discussions of Dryden's translations include: Mark Van Doran, *John Dryden: A Study of his Poetry*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1946, pp. 215-32; William Frost, *Dryden and the Art of Translation* Yale Studies in English 128, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1955; Judith Sloman, 'The Structure of Dryden's *Fables*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4 (1971), 199-211; Earl Miner, *Dryden's Poetry*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1971, pp. 287-323; Judith Sloman, 'An Interpretation of Dryden's *Fables*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 4:2 (1970-71), 199-211; William Myers, *John Dryden*, London, Hutchinson, 1973, pp. 170-90; David Hopkins, *John Dryden*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 168-210.

² In 1868 Henry Bradley argued against the attribution and in 1878 Skeat's revision of Bell's edition of Chaucer put it firmly into a separate volume with other apocryphal works.

³ On fifteenth-century dream poetry and feminist aspects of this, see Helen Phillips, 'Frames and Narrators in Chaucerian Poetry', in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 71-99.

⁴ C. S. Lewis's condemnation, given sadly extra force because of his persuasive rhetorical *élan*, helped to discourage readers from exploring much fifteenth-century and Tudor literature for more than fifty years: 120-56. He sees *The Flower and the Leaf* as offering little more than welcome touches of realistic detail amid its slavish following of forms made fashionable by Chaucer's dream poetry, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 135.

⁵ The medieval poet never describes the narrator falling asleep or dreaming. Dryden solves this uncertainty about whether the allegorical presentation should be regarded as a dream by calling it a 'show'.

⁶ e.g. Guillaume de Machaut, *Dit dou Vergier*, Thomas Usk, *The Testament of Love*, another poem erroneously attributed to Chaucer.

⁷ See summary of allusions to this in the introduction in Pearsall's earlier edition of the text: *The Floure and the Leafe*, ed. D. A. Pearsall, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962, pp. 23-29.

⁸ See the analysis of the philosophical ideas in the *Fables* in Miner, *Dryden's Poetry*, pp. 318-322.

⁹ Preface to the *Fables*, p. 40.

¹⁰ Letter, 1839, about a modernized Chaucer, *The Later Years, Part III, 1835-1839, The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Alan G. Hill, 6 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 736.

¹¹ Anne Middleton, "'The Modern Art of Fortifying': *Absalom and Architophel* as Epicurean Epic', *Chaucer Review*, 3:3 (1969), 124-43.

¹² Wordsworth did not include this poem among his Chaucerian translations. True to his age he chose more pathetic texts than Dryden, yet his avoidance of repeating Dyden's choice of texts may also indicate 'anxiety of influence'. His attitude to Dryden and Pope was a mixture of deep familiarity, admiration, and hostility: he had internalised their writing while building his own style in opposition to it, much as Dryden did with his medieval reading. See Robert J. Griffin, *Wordsworth's Pope: A Study in Literary Historiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 88-93, who sees more antagonism than ambivalence.

¹³ Miner, *Dryden's Poetry*, pp. 298-99.

¹⁴ This transmutation was greatly to the taste of the Romantics. Both Godwin and Scott praised it. William Godwin: 'delicious luxuriance of fancy, may be classed with the most successful productions of human genius', *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, London, Phillips, 1804, pp. 3, 253; Scott, *Works of John Dryden*, Edinburgh, Gray, 1810, vol. 11, pp. 355 and 496.

¹⁵ Preface to the *Fables*, p. 37.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Stephen Knight for drawing this parallel to my attention.