Introduction: love after Aristotle

The story of the impact of the late medieval Latin translation of Aristotle has been told and retold for the fields of medieval philosophy and theology.[1] This book tells the story for the medieval English literature of love. The existence of such a narrative might seem unlikely, given the distance between the discourses of a highly specialized, university-centered, Latinate medieval philosophy and an entertainment-oriented, court-centered, vernacular poetry, but it is the late medieval configuration of ethics that brings these two worlds together. Medieval commentators considered poetry to be an ethical genre, typically referring to poetry's interest in human behavior and moral choices to justify this classification. As the field of philosophy constituted by both practical and abstract considerations of virtuous action, desire, and relationships, it is even now not terribly controversial to claim that moral philosophy is involved with the same kinds of human experience as poetry. Yet the medieval emphasis on love as a central ethical concern meant that – from the moment of the "birth" of the vernacular literature of love – philosophy and poetry were yoked together in often surprising ways by a shared language of longing, despair, pleasure, and union. Vernacular poetry constituted a site for thinking through ethical problems such as conflicting loyalties, conflicting emotions, and the necessity for self-sacrifice within the larger context of the pursuit of erotic enjoyment; clerkly ethical concerns with spiritual culpability and love of God were transformed and given voice in a context of pursuits of human justice, love, and happiness. Yet with the sudden availability of Aristotle's ethical writings in the mid thirteenth century – including the entirety of the *Nicomachean Ethics* – vernacular love poetry no longer offered the only space for the consideration of earthly happiness, and central ethical concepts of pleasure, love, and happiness were subjected to reconsideration and redefinition.

The full translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in particular opened up a new framework for philosophical speculation about the

nature of and path toward the sovereign good, a framework that had immediate and widespread effects owing to the centrality of Aristotle in the arts curriculum of the medieval university.[2] Aristotle was already an authority on moral philosophy, with his ideas about moderation, virtue, and *habitus* known through early, partial translations of the *Ethics* and the writings of Boethius and Cicero.[3] But his idea of happiness was typically understood to pertain solely to practical, political happiness. With the full translation of the *Ethics* by Robert Grosseteste (*c.*1246–7; revised by William of Moerbeke *c.*1250–60), the confinement of Aristotelian felicity to the practical was difficult to sustain.[4] The *Ethics* in its full form introduced a definition of felicity that would prove challenging to assimilate to a Christian worldview, for its previously unavailable final book describes a life of perfect contemplative happiness that is theoretically attainable in the mundane world. Early Christian theologians had certainly treated happiness as a spiritual goal, but this happiness was typically only accessible in the afterlife or through experiences bestowed by God's intervention. Absorbing a notion of self-reflection and intellectual contemplation as the highest *human* happiness would require a re-examination of central concepts in medieval ethics: action, love, pleasure, felicity, the good. Human happiness thus became a valid starting point for ethical inquiry, and earthly "imperfect" felicity a suitable moral goal. The new translation of Aristotle's *Ethics* offered an ethical goal imaginable within the space of the narrative of a human life.[5]

It was this earthly location of happiness that changed the way both philosophers and poets thought about love. For beyond the difficulty of assimilating Aristotle's notion of happiness as an earthly activity lay the problem that this theory did not appear to include love. Aristotle's definition of happiness as the most excellent activity of the most virtuous person upon the best object recognizes pleasure as an integral aspect of such action, but this pleasure accompanies, as a "supervening end," the activity of contemplation, not joy in the beloved object.[6] Not only could Aristotelian happiness no longer be explained away as purely active or practical, his contemplative ideal could not easily be assimilated to Christian contemplation, or loving reflection upon God. Medieval readers were left to account for and justify what they understood as an omission in a variety of ways, a project that began with the first complete Latin commentary on the *Ethics*, written by Albert the Great. Albert introduced the problem of Aristotelian contemplation's relationship to love, and proposed that, even in Aristotle, contemplation must be oriented ultimately toward love of God; his student Thomas Aquinas resolved that Aristotle must be speaking

about "imperfect" rather than perfect happiness. While this attribution of imperfection to Aristotelian happiness may seem to be a willful misreading of Aristotle, it had the effect of rendering human imperfection and incompleteness, not to mention unfulfilled desire, valid topics for philosophical speculation and ethical consideration. Such shifts were deeply influential, for the relationship between happiness and love of God were hardly peripheral considerations, even outside Aristotelian science. Moral philosophy of this period was already gripped with the challenges of defining pleasure and love, usefulness and enjoyment, need and desire, lack and fulfillment, largely in the wake of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (required theological reading for university students). Medieval philosophers debated whether enjoyment (*fruitio*) – defined as love of an object for its own sake, and the highest good – was a function of the intellect or of the will, whether pleasure (*delectatio*) always accompanied enjoyment, and whether it was ever appropriate to talk about happiness in this world, and in what terms. They asked questions about the proper object of love (*dilectio*), the relationship between love and pleasure, and the possibility that love might be accompanied by despair (*tristitia*). They wondered about the relationship between the intellect (*intellectus*) and the will (*voluntas*) as well as which faculty was the seat of love and the noblest pleasure. Aristotle – referred to typically as "the Philosopher" (as Augustine was "the Theologian") – was an important and constant reference point in these discussions.

Although I will focus largely on the *Ethics* in this study, Aristotle's ideas about the good, pleasure, happiness, friendship, and community were also newly available in the *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, *De Anima*, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*.[7] The *Politics* offered a way of thinking about communities that were oriented toward secular ends, as well as a notion of a "common good" that was not defined solely in terms of Christian morality.[8] Like the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Politics* treated life as an end in itself, finding solace and natural sweetness (*solatio … et dulcedine naturali*) in living for its own sake – even despite hardship and pain.[9] Similarly, Aristotle observes that people form friendships and communities because of an innate desire for company, not necessarily or only because other people provide for specific needs.[10] The *Economics* describes marriage as a moral community; in an ideal partnership a husband and wife are agreed "about the best things in life" and their friends follow suit.[11] Unlike animals, the human male and female couple aims not only at continued existence (*esse*), but a moral, happy life (*bene esse*).[12] The *Ethics* was not understood in isolation, but in the larger context of other Aristotelian writings on the psychology of happiness and free will,

the role of the state, the nature of marriage, and the nature of pleasure, pain, and the emotions. Jean Buridan exemplifies this context in his commentary on the tenth book of the *Ethics*, which references the *Politics*, *Metaphysics*, *Posterior Analytics*, *Rhetoric*, and *De Anima* alongside the writings of Cicero, Seneca, and others. In addition, as Matthew Kempshall shows with respect to Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*, a treatise largely on ethics and politics may be influenced not only by Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, but by a text like the *Rhetoric*, which often circulated with the latter works in the same manuscripts.[13]

The new Aristotelian moral science did not confine itself to learned Latin discourse; the philosophical debates and questions described above are recognizable in the transformed contexts of vernacular literature, and give new dimensions to what scholars have long recognized as the ethical contexts and content of medieval poetry. As Judson Allen has illustrated, the lines between ethics and poetry in the medieval period are indistinct at best. In the introduction to *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages*, Allen describes his search for the medieval category of the "literary," only to find the ethical. In a common medieval classification system that divided knowledge into three branches – logic, ethics, and physics – poetry was quite consistently placed in the category of ethics.[14] His cataloguing of dozens of medieval commentaries on classical and medieval literature (Ovid, Statius, Boethius) led Allen to the conclusion that poetry constituted a significant part of ethical knowledge in this period, and that ethics is itself "enacted poetry."[15] Allen argues that the ethical aspect of poetry is revealed not only in commentaries, but in the way medieval poetry itself functions. For the medieval subject to think ethically, he or she "must behave as if in a story."[16] One often finds characters in medieval narratives comparing themselves to other literary figures – as ideals, or as dangerous examples to avoid. They embody and make explicit the notion that literature offers models and possibilities to embrace, re-enact, or ward off. As John Dagenais describes the medieval practice of "ethical reading," texts "reached out and grabbed the reader, involved him or her in praise and blame, in judgments about effective and ineffective human behavior" and invited readers to confront "basic questions about how one should behave with a view to greater happiness in this world and the next."[17] Of course, such thinking does not guarantee ethical behavior or success. To call medieval poetry ethical is not to lose the subversive or excessive, the rebellious or the strange; it is simply to acknowledge an interest in "telling stories about what we think we are like, what we think we want, and what we think we are capable of."[18]

Perhaps surprisingly, fourteenth-century moral philosophers similarly acknowledged the literary dimensions of even academic ethical discourse. By the same reasoning with which commentators determined poetry to be part of the science of ethics, ethics was understood to have a poetic logic. In the prologue to his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Jean Buridan explains that while the principal content of moral philosophy is conveyed in the *Ethics* and *Politics*, the way of teaching ethics is communicated in the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. In fact, he claims, moral philosophy requires its own special logic:

> Since it is only in moral matters that appetite is inherently supposed to take away the judgment of reason, and thus in other arts and sciences an unqualified logic suffices for us, in moral matters we require a special logic. However there are two parts of this moral logic, namely rhetoric and poetry, which differ in this way: because rhetoric desires clear knowledge, it uses words retained in their proper signification. Poetry endeavors to obscure knowledge delightfully through metalepsis or by other means.[19]

Rhetoric and poetry are necessary to the transmission of ethical knowledge because the audience for such teaching is the human subject conceived of as appetitive and emotional. As Buridan observes, a thing does not seem the same to those who love as to those who hate (*amantibus et odientibus*), and it is these affect-driven people with whom moral philosophy is concerned. Poetry, as a part of "moral logic," is a means of conveying ethical knowledge by first obscuring it "delightfully." In addressing the pleasures, desires, prejudices, and passions of the ethical subject through rhetorical and poetic language, moral philosophy turns the frailties of reason to its advantage. Thus Buridan, in his discussion of certain thorny questions concerning happiness in Book x of Aristotle's *Ethics*, advises that if he has not offered "real solutions" to these questions, they should "nevertheless be received as dialectical and playful (*logice et lusive*)."[20] He is not here giving up on the possibility of arriving at ethical truths, and avers that it is clear that happiness consists in one act toward which we must order all of our other actions. Yet the subject of happiness admits of playfulness, and it is appropriate that Buridan offers this mode of ludic argument when speaking about the way happiness might be thought of in the context of lived experience – whether happiness is compatible with old age, misery, ill fortune, or even sleep. These narrative, experiential possibilities complicate the logical definitions of happiness, and thus open questions that can only rightfully be answered dialectically, playfully, perhaps poetically.

The desiring, pleasure-seeking, loving, pain-experiencing ethical subject described above shapes both vernacular poetry and scholastic moral philosophy.[21] Nevertheless, while a great deal of scholarship has engaged with medieval literature as an ethical discourse, there has been much less attention given to the relationship between this literature and the ethical conversations taking place in the context of the moral philosophy produced at the universities.[22] Gestures toward such work have been made more often by intellectual historians than by literary critics. In an essay on late medieval theories of enjoyment, William Courtenay notes that in the twelfth century both theologians and courtly poets were interested in seemingly parallel notions of pure love, a juncture that might encourage one to seek other "cross influences between theological and poetic discourse on desire and longing (*cupiditas* and *desiderium*), on doubt, sadness, and despair (*tristitia*), and pleasure or joy of possession (*delectatio*)."[23] Arthur Stephen McGrade proposes that, for the fourteenth century, "Ockham and his successors provided a framework for human understanding which poets and others could have utilized in many concrete ways, both in understanding, for example, how poetry itself affects us and in understanding or depicting the behavior of actual fictional characters."[24] Despite the acknowledgment of the ethical content of medieval literature, the question of the relationship between poetry and the moral philosophy of Augustine, Abelard, or the scholastic philosophers of later centuries remains largely open.[25] My readings of vernacular poetry in the chapters below show that poets were often markedly aware of the overlapping ethical languages of clerkly philosophy and poetic depictions of love.[26] There is no question that ethical debates about the nature of culpability, intention, virtue, desire, and pleasure suffused the world of courtly poetry, and it is the guiding thesis of this project that the philosophy and poetry of the later Middle Ages together formed a thriving ethical discourse, particularly in response to the challenges of defining pleasure and love, usefulness and enjoyment, need and desire, lack and fulfillment. These terms, in Latin as well as in the vernacular, are weighted after the twelfth century with the burden of secular love poetry. With the influence of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and the assimilation of Aristotle's philosophy, enjoyment as an ethical, psychological, and theological phenomenon took on an increasingly central role in philosophical discourse.

Enjoyment thus emerges as the key term of this book, precisely because it functions as a focal point and ethical goal for medieval moral philosophy and medieval poetry. It is a useful umbrella term because it conveys the fundamental qualities shared by Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, vernacular

"joy," Christian *fruitio*, and even Lacanian *jouissance*: it is desirable for its own sake as an end goal, it is "complete," and it includes pleasure.[27] Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, usually translated as "happiness," literally means "having a good genius (*daimōn*)," suggesting good fortune.[28] For Aristotle, happiness is the self-sufficient and complete telos of life – the "best possible life"; at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* he defines it as the most excellent faculty of the human mind engaged in the most virtuous activity, with the best object.[29] In discussing Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, Latin writers such as Cicero and Seneca most often translate it as *beata vita*, a phrase used also by Augustine to speak about the happiness of life after death. For medieval Latin writers, *beata vita* or *beatitudo* are used to talk about happiness as the goal of life, along with *felicitas* – a word used to translate *eudaimonia* in Aristotle's treatises. Occasionally, these terms are differentiated, as Boethius uses *felicitas* to speak about earthly (false) happiness, and *beatitudo* to speak about true happiness outside the realm of fortune.[30] In later scholastic writings, *felicitas* and *beatitudo* are often used interchangeably.[31] Latin *gaudium* – the inner joy that Thomas Aquinas and others speak about as the inner joy infused by God – is recognizable as the root of vernacular *joi*.[32] And yet the Latin term *fruitio* – typically translated as enjoyment – is perhaps the location of the most difficult terminological, theological, and ethical assimilation of Aristotle's ideas about pleasure and happiness. Augustine defines *fruitio* in *De Doctrina Christiana* as "inhering with love in something for its own sake" – a definition that persists throughout the Middle Ages.[33] Enjoyment, in this view, is a self-sufficient act of love, and the enjoyment of the beatific vision was understood to be the *summum bonum* of Christian life. One might understand an Aristotelian life of flourishing (*eudaimonia*) to be oriented toward a life of virtuous political or contemplative activity, while the Christian life of flourishing (*beata vita*, *beatitudo*, or *felicitas*) was oriented toward the enjoyment of God. The medieval reception of Aristotelian ethics led to questions about how to understand an act of *fruitio* that could be oriented toward felicity as an ethical goal for human experience in this world. But Aristotle was also marshaled as an authority regarding questions about the beatific enjoyment of God. The Aristotle of medieval philosophy is both a source of knowledge about the possibilities for ethical earthly pleasures and an authority on the relationship between these pleasures and the love of and imitation of the divine. As Jacques Lacan would observe in the twentieth century, Aquinas and other medieval theologians created an Aristotle who had a privileged understanding of the obstacles to human desire, a philosopher who was – above all – a

theorist of love and pleasure. Lacan's Aristotle seeks after the "*jouissance* of being" itself, recognizing the way that we model the enjoyment of God on our own enjoyment, and acknowledging that philosophical "thought" is not only pleasurable, but a form of loving God.[34] This Aristotle emerges from the Latin authors who tried to reconcile an ethics oriented toward human happiness in this life with a Christian ethics, largely Augustinian, which tells us that the only object rightfully to be enjoyed is God.

Vernacular love poetry, with its simultaneous commitment to a sacrificial ethics and a working out of happiness in a world of conflicting desires, was as shaken as theology by the advent of an ethical system that located felicity and love in this world. Late medieval love poetry is interested in what it might mean to love someone as another subject who is pursuing his or her own happiness in the world, and especially what it might mean to pursue such a love toward an enjoyment that acknowledges the overlap between the philosophical pursuit of happiness and the happiness pursued by lovers. The post-Aristotelian courtly lover acknowledges his narcissism, worries about her free will, talks about clerkly happiness, and pursues his love not just to its ineffable conclusion, but beyond. The scholarly Aristotelian discourse of happiness is both compelling and inadequate for the subject of courtly love. As the narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* comments, speaking about the bliss of the two lovers, "Felicite, which that thise clerkes wise / Comenden so ne may nought here suffise" (III.1691–2).[35] Chaucer's romance is a poem that is at least in part about taking this clerkly intrusion into the bedroom seriously, asking what it means for felicity to "suffice," and moreover what these clerks might have to say about the pursuits of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century lovers, or perhaps what lovers might be able to reveal to the clerks.

Many late medieval poets recognized that what was most radical in Aristotle was not only that happiness is worth striving for on earth rather than being deferred to the afterlife, but also the corollary insistence on contingency as a component of love and happiness – what the Middle Ages refer to as fortune, and often personify and deify as Lady Fortuna.[36] This orientation toward earthliness and fortune ensured that the medieval reception of Aristotle begat a number of ongoing ethical discussions and debates as to the ontological and ethical relationships between love and pleasure, the propriety of loving earthly objects, the psychological experience of love, and what, if any, happiness may be had on earth. These debates, though necessarily in less formal terms, were equally the stuff of medieval love poetry. A fuller literary account of the reception of Aristotelian ethics in the late medieval period, an age when poetry itself

was considered part of moral science, can help us to understand the ethical history of European medieval poetry, and to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of psychoanalytic and other modern ethical theories about love that root themselves in the "birth" of love as we know it in the Western world.

This book examines the medieval history of enjoyment, the intellectual context for the production of poetry in the thirteenth century, particularly the vastly influential *Roman de la Rose*, and the resultant "intellectual-erotic" tradition. As moral philosophy and poetry moved closer together in their central concern with love as an ethical problem, philosophy and poetry were brought geographically closer as Paris became a center of university life and literary production. With its wide readership and explicit intertwining of romance narrative and philosophical debate, the thirteenth-century poem the *Roman de la Rose* played an influential role in the unification of intellectual and poetic discourses. In its unique circumstance of a double authorship which took place on either side of the reception of the full *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Rose* offers remarkable insight into the changing discourse of love and ethics. The philosophical and literary history that follows after the *Rose* allows for a clearer picture of the questions at stake in late medieval ethical discourse: What is the relationship between love and pleasure? Is human happiness possible or desirable? Is love an activity or a state of rest? Can one love without objectification? What are the dangers of deferred desire? Tracing the asking, answering, and revising of these questions offers another way of thinking about the intellectual and poetic history of medieval love and the roots of modern "amorous subjectivity."[37]

The following chapters tell a story of enjoyment that traces the efforts of both philosophers and poets to grapple with the new possibilities and challenges wrought by the reception of Aristotelian ethics in a Christian world. The first chapter provides an intellectual history of enjoyment, considering its meanings in the frameworks that existed before the Latin translation of Aristotle's writings on ethics. It traces the transformations of pagan philosophical virtue into Christian love, followed by the development of Christian enjoyment as it breaks down into the various components – intellect, pleasure, labor, and happiness – that would become particularly controversial in the wake of the full translation of Aristotle's ethical writings. Following these aspects of enjoyment from antiquity through the twelfth century illustrates the way in which already-existing tensions in the philosophical tradition were poised to emerge more forcefully with the Latin reception of Aristotle. The chapter further shows that

questions about enjoyment animated both philosophical discourse and vernacular poetry in the period just prior to the full translation of the *Ethics*, in texts such as Peter Abelard's *Dialogue between a Philosopher, a Jew, and a Christian* and the troubadour poetry of Guilhem IX, Bernart de Ventadorn, and Jaufré Rudel. While providing a history of a key set of terms associated with enjoyment, I argue that vernacular poetry – with its concerns about love, loss, and satisfaction – was a natural, if not inevitable, space for the emergence of earthly enjoyment as an ethical problem.

Chapter 2 explores the way in which the "new Aristotle," the flood of translation into Latin from Greek and Arabic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, affected courtly poetry, by examining the famously bifurcated *Roman de la Rose*. I argue that the poem is divided not only by a temporal gap and a shift in authorship, but by the impact of the full translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that takes place during that gap. Where Guillaume de Lorris writes within an ideological framework in which neither the political nor contemplative lives are thought to offer any hope of earthly perfection, Jean de Meun writes within a new, controversial context of Aristotelian contemplation, where contemplation provides the best life for man on earth and therefore confers human happiness. I argue that Jean was attracted to Guillaume's poem for its ethical exploration and linking of the Narcissus myth, poetic activity, intellectual self-reflection, and physical labor. Jean thus asks what Guillaume's Narcissus might look like in the new Aristotelian context, a context where self-reflection might inhabit a continuum including erotic love, intellectual contemplation, and the beatific vision. Exploring the potential of self-reflection through art to bring happiness, madness, love, and hate, Jean's portion of the *Rose* experiments with the assumption of Aristotle's narrative ethical system, where rational activity precedes love, self-knowledge determines love, and happiness consists in labor rather than rest. The *Rose* in its widespread influence bequeathed vernacular poetry a distinctly intellectual erotics, a discourse that would have lasting implications for the ethical engagements of late medieval poetry.

The following three chapters take stock of the repercussions of both the "new Aristotle" and the Aristotelian aspects of the *Roman de la Rose*. Chapter 3 focuses on the way that Aristotelian definitions of pleasure are disturbingly silent on one of the most pressing issues for Christian theologians: the motivation for pursuits of contemplative happiness. Do we seek to know and love an object (God, in this context) because of the promise of pleasure experienced when that object is possessed or loves us in return? Or is pleasure somehow inextricable from the act of love,