Demis Deftes: the Narrative Structure and Cultural Implications of the
Contemplation of Death in Medieval French Courtly Literature

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University.

Lisa Shugert Bevvevino, BA, MA
Graduate Program in French and Italian
The Ohio State University
2012

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Sarah-Grace Heller
Professor Jennifer Willging
Professor Christopher A. Jones
Abstract

This dissertation traces the literary and cultural implications of the representation of suicide and despair in courtly literature from medieval France. The study begins with an introduction to the scholarly work already done on literary texts and is followed by a historical introduction to the problem of suicide and despair in medieval society. Scenes of suicide and despair fall into five main categories: the martyr trope, the desire for union outside the constraints of mortal life, the erotic, the way to truly express the value of life, and the apprehension of death, and they function together to show pieces of the individual personality of each character as well as to highlight societal and cultural problems that would lead a character to despair. Despair and suicide were both grave sins according to the Church in the Middle Ages, yet authors make no obvious commentary or explicit judgment against their despairing or suicidal characters. They do judge them for other sins and transgressions, so this dissertation seeks to examine how the authors do view their characters and what that implies about societal reactions to their problems. Texts from Augustine of Hippo and the Fourth Lateran Council provide the religious implications of suicide and despair, and the use of historical studies also inform the societal practices. The texts studied are: The Golden Legend in its Latin, French, and Old Occitan versions; Le Roman d'Eneas; Le Roman de Troie; Partonopeus de Blois;
Chrétien de Troyes’s *Le Chevalier au Lion*, ou *Yvain*; and Crescas du Caylar’s *Le Roman de la Reine Ester*.

The saints and martyrs from early Christianity provide a significant amount of literary inspiration in the Middle Ages, and their tradition sets the stage for characters to express a wish for an end to earthly existence in a religiously acceptable way. The *romans antiques*, inspired by Classical war epics, provide another tradition of facing voluntary death or even wishing for death as part of the heroic tradition. This then enters into the conscience of characters in vernacular, secular texts from both Christian and Jewish authors. I argue that although the Church cares about the state of one’s soul especially in the face of death and despair, authors create many situations in which such activity is acceptable. Gender, war, love, and other values may trump the laws of the Church within a literary text, but great attention and many lines are dedicated to the problems of the soul, showing that human suffering is as important in a religious context as it is in daily life. Within the narrative structure of courtly literature, no condemnation comes down against two of the gravest sins.
To all those whose souls are not lost.
Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Professor Sarah-Grace Heller, my advisor, for introducing me to the beautiful languages of Old French and Old Occitan during my first year of graduate school. I am deeply grateful for her readings and patience as I wrote my dissertation.

I thank Professors Jennifer Willging and Drew Jones for stepping in as committee members and having endless insights and guidance to offer.

I thank the French Department for providing me with an amazing year abroad, interesting courses, and excellent students throughout my stay at Ohio State.

I thank Professor Daniel Hobbins for giving me feedback on the Saints chapter as well as providing support and advice.

I thank Professors Anthony Kaldellis and Carolina Lopez-Ruiz for providing guidance and listening ears whenever necessary, and most importantly, housing with fully stocked libraries during research summers.

I thank all the professors and fellow students at conferences at Kalamazoo, Ohio State, and Cambridge who commented on my papers and helped me develop arguments and analyses. I especially thank Cyrana Gallay for her excellent and thorough readings.

I thank my family for holding the expectations bar high, which is perhaps the single most important piece in completing a graduate degree.
I thank Aaron specifically for making tea, dinner, and time to listen to me talk through arguments and chapters. I could not have done this without his reading, feedback, and most importantly, his love.
VITA

2006 ............................B.A., French and English,  
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

2008 ............................M.A., French, The Ohio State University

2006-2011 .......................Graduate Teaching Associate,  
The Ohio State University

2011-2012 .......................Lecturer of English,  
University of Rennes 1, Rennes, France

2012 ............................Graduate Teaching Associate,  
The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: French

Specialization: Graduate Certificate in Medieval and Renaissance Studies
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments................................................................................................................................. v
VITA................................................................................................................................................... vii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................... viii
List of Illustrations ............................................................................................................................... ix
Chapter 1: Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2: Background, Historical Context, and Methods ................................................................. 11
Chapter 3: Shame and Honor among Martyrs in *The Golden Legend* ............................................ 42
Chapter 4: The *Romans Antiques* as Predecessors to the Tradition of Despair in Old
French Romance ................................................................................................................................. 74
Chapter 5: A Helpless Hero, a Leading Lady, and a Lion: Gender in Medieval French and
Occitan Romances ............................................................................................................................. 106
Chapter 6: Vashti, A Pagan Queen Turns Saint.................................................................................. 132
Chapter 7: Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 143
Bibliography ...................................................................................................................................... 150
List of Illustrations

Figure 1: *Transi* of Jean de la Grange. ................................................................. 7
Chapter 1: Introduction

Medieval literature treated the problem of suicide with silence, and thus representations of contemplation of death in literature from the Middle Ages invite many questions and considerations on the part of the reader.\(^1\) Characters desiring death appear in both the Jewish and Christian Bibles, classical works, *Lives* of the saints, vernacular romances, nouvelles, and song. Some famous examples include Jonah in the Jewish testament, who was angered by his tribulations and wanted to die, and in the Christian testament, Judas Iscariot who hanged himself after betraying Jesus.\(^2\) Lucretia in sixth-century BC Rome, according to the historian Livy, killed herself after being raped by one of her husband’s companions; she could not bear the idea of living with such dishonor.

---

1 Characters who always have an eye towards death or the life beyond in a variety of genres form part of the narrative motor of medieval literature, and modern scholars of medieval literature Simon Gaunt, Evelyn Birge Vitz, and Sarah Kay have linked death and desire with love, subjectivity, and saintliness, in their interpretation of medieval literature. The literary theory and psychological work of the twentieth-century thinkers Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille and Sigmund Freud necessarily play a part in the reading of these texts because of their prolific writing and cultural influence on the interpretation of and movement towards death, providing religious, psychological, and philosophical interpretations on the death wish. They address differing interpretations of what it means to desire death, how that functions in terms of a relationship to a deity, the possibility or impossibility of imagining death. Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Evelyn Birge Vitz, *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology: Subjects and Objects of Desire* (New York: New York University Press, 1989); Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

2 Jonah 4:3, New Revised Standard Version: “Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live,” Jonah says when he is angry that God will have compassion even on his enemies. At Matthew 27:5, Judas feels remorse for betraying Jesus for some silver coins, “So Judas threw the money away and hanged himself.”
and being an example to other women. Saints Catherine and Marguerite, both queens who converted to Christianity after marrying their pagan husbands, desired death to escape marriage to husbands persecuting other Christians. Chrétien’s texts show knights Lancelot and Yvain both having moments of despair when met with seemingly impossible circumstances or a loss of love. Nouvelles include many examples, and among them a Sleeping Beauty who wants to die if she cannot see the man she must love. Troubadour and trouvère song abounds with lines such as “Si-il platz, que m’aucia, qu’eu no m’en clam de re!” (“If she pleases, let her kill me, / I would not complain about a thing”). These are just a few examples of the ubiquitous contemplation of death found in medieval literature.

One particularly striking example comes from Pons d’Ortafa, a troubadour from near Perpignan, prolific at the beginning of the thirteenth century. He writes of desiring death when suffering and compares it to being on a ship in the sea:

Enaissi cum la naus en mar,  
destrecha d’ondas e de vens,  
que si sent tan for perilhar  
que selhs dedins an grans turmens  
que neys Dieu non volon pregar  
e volrion vius trespassar  
mais que aquell surmen suffir  
e volria mais s’om par morir  
ad honor que tostempes durar  
pena et afan e cossir,  
quar vida val pauc, on jauzir

---

(Like the ship in the sea,  
Pushed by the waves and wind,  
That seems to be in such grave danger  
That those within it are so greatly tormented  
That they don’t want to pray to God  
And wish to pass out of this life  
rather than suffer the torment  
And more than anything would rather die  
With honor than always endure  
Pain, torment, and concern,  
Because life has little value  
When one is given nothing in which to rejoice.  
It is not life but death.  
That is why it is better to die quickly  
Than to suffer such torment forever.)

Pons names the reason for considering death: because “on jauzir de negun” (one rejoices in nothing), there is no value in life. He has developed a comparison used by troubadours before him to show the suffering a person endures when bereft of love. The poet admits the despair in religious faith when he says that people on a stormy ship do not even want to pray to God and would rather die than endure the suffering, implying that people in pain have more faith in death (with or without God) than in God’s mercy in life. The poem continues for nearly eighty lines and becomes a praise of suffering, a motif that flourishes especially in poetry of lovesickness in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Troubadour songs such as this one provide the most frequent appeal to death in medieval literature, but, like this one, many center on the idea of love and use suffering as a

---

10 Toury studies the motif of lovesickness in *Mort et Fin’Amour* across the work of all the troubadours and trouvères, providing lexical summaries and language patterns across centuries.
bargaining tool to win the desired lady. This dissertation will consider several episodes where lovesickness influences the death wish, but the dissertation is more concerned with the death wish itself and its cultural implications as a narrative force.

In the past two decades, numerous volumes have been published about this topic in history and in literature, re-opening the question of the medieval fascination with death with a focus on the moments leading up to it. Alexander Murray, Jane Gilbert, Caroline Walker Bynum, Simon Gaunt, and Sarah Kay have all given great attention to the despair and death in history and literature. Despairing characters were given hundreds of lines to bemoan their situation, to cry out for all the pain they endure in their hopelessness, but their creators remained silent concerning judgment. The desperate person’s sin or the suicide’s sin was not the simple fact that his or her life ended but rather the fact that he or she had despaired and committed murder.

This dissertation serves as another chapter in the ongoing work on suicide reception. Studying the place of death longing in the narrative structure of a text and the language used around each episode offers a structure for understanding cultural reactions to suicide, the contemplation of death, and despair. The contemplation of death in literature from the Middle Ages invites many questions. How do we define this contemplation? Does it function differently from the modes of behavior in actual suicides? Is it the same as suicidal thoughts? Is the longing for death different from any other desire? Is it a longing for the end of longing? How do authors writing within a Christian society comment on scenes that display characters sinning so gravely—either by despairing or by killing themselves? There is a need to examine the desires of the
suicidal characters as well as the surrounding characters to evaluate fully their differences and similarities as a way of understanding intention and reaction.

In this dissertation, the literature analyzed is in Old French and Old Occitan and dates from 880 to 1348, with the majority of texts dating from the mid-twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century. These central dates are not random; they fall at an experimental stage in the development of the romance genre in France and also a moment when the Roman Catholic Church was realizing it needed to address the state of its members’ souls. Despair was a sin equal to apostasy.\textsuperscript{11} Doubting God’s mercy was to believe Him to be less than omnipotent, which is a lack of faith. This belief had been developing for centuries, when theological writers were using versions of the word “despair” as a synonym for suicide.\textsuperscript{12} The Fourth Lateran Council called by Pope Innocent in 1215 bookends these highly-charged centuries by emphasizing the place of Confession in the Church’s role in people’s daily lives. This marked a new, universal demand that every Christian should receive the Eucharistic elements each year and that in order to prepare for the reception, each Christian should make his or her confession. As Christians scrutinized their lives, the priests became local authorities on the state of the individual

\textsuperscript{11} Bishop Ratherius of Verona was one clergyman who, though marginal, preached on the problem of despair in a sermon during Lent in 964. He wrote, “But because God is omnipotent and His pity is nothing else than God Himself, and His pity is omnipotent just as His justice is also (Even to doubt this we believe to be apostatic), let us throw ourselves on His pity while we live. For dead, we shall do nothing at all, but shall receive what we have done.” Ratherius, \textit{The Complete Works of Rather of Verona}, trans. Peter L. D. Reid (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1991), Sermon 22.2, 388. Ratherius, \textit{Sermones Ratherii Episcopi Veronensis}, ed. Benny R. Reece, (Worcester: Holy Cross College, 1969), Sermo II.22, 54. “Sed quia omnipotens est Deus et eius pietas nil aliud quam ipse est Deus, omnipotens vero pietas eius uti et justitia eius, de quo saltem dubitare apostaticum credimus esse, ad illam, dum vivimus, nos conferamus. Mortui enim nihil omnino faciemus, sed quod fecimus recipiemus.”

\textsuperscript{12} Murray, \textit{Curse}, 377-380.
souls of parishioners and began to make use of preaching manuals.\textsuperscript{13} During this century, Church façades also communicated the message to parishioners that they needed to care for their soul; images were no longer of simple churchgoers ascending to Heaven but rather were all people being judged at the moment of their death to see if they had faith or would give into the final temptation of despair.\textsuperscript{14} The geographic and linguistics limits on the study are largely due to limits of time and space, given that this is a dissertation in the field of French medieval literature. The inquiry could certainly be pursued for other spaces and literatures beyond what is now known as France.

The outer limit of the literature in this dissertation coming from the fourteenth century is marked by the beginning of the \textit{transi}, tombs that depict the body of the deceased in a stage of decomposition. This creation showed a change in the thought process from thinking of moments in life before death and thinking about what happens after death. One of the first of these tombs is that of Jean de la Grange, Archbishop of Amiens and an advisor to the French pope Gregory XI in Avignon; before this, there was not a focus or even an expectation that the body of the deceased would be something to be remembered permanently. It was an organic body that would decompose back into the earth. People accepted it would perish and left it to the Church’s keeping.\textsuperscript{15} Though the link between text and tombstone is not direct, poetic themes began changing from spiritual despair to meditation on physical decomposition.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Diarmaid MacCulluch, \textit{Christianity: the First Three Thousand Years} (New York: Viking, 2009), 405.
\item Ariès, 33.
\item Ariès, 44. Ariès points to P. de Nesson’s late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century poem “Vigiles des morts: paraphrase sur Job” where he discusses rotting flesh instead of emotional turmoil.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Figure 1: "Transi of Jean de la Grange, late fourteenth century, Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon, France, photo credit Lisa Shugert Bevevino, 2012."

The Structure of this Dissertation

This dissertation focuses on the death wish and how the narrative itself comments on the intertextual borrowing and adaptation of suicide tropes. Death contemplation is one of the few moments in medieval literature that provides a psychological window on an individual character’s psyche. Chapter 2 discusses the historical and religious background of suicide and despair and examines the literary criticism surrounding their representation in medieval literature. Understanding despair and longing through theological, medical, and literary sources is necessary since each character contemplating suicide demonstrates some sort of lack of hope in what life will bring him or her. This hope can be for faith or for love or for some other desire, the lack of it causes spiritual,
physical, and emotional side effects for the character who does not have enough power to find fulfillment. I rely on the narrative framework of Evelyn Birge Vitz, who sees death as a narrative motor, and the Lacanian theoretical framework set forth by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay in their recent works on courtly literature, love, and death. Reading the death wishes inspired by lovesickness requires contextual background on medical and Ovidian lovesickness theories and will also be informed by Gaunt’s reading of those dying for love. Using these theorists along with the primary texts, five primary types of death wish arise: the martyr trope, the desire for union outside the constraints of mortal life, the erotic, the way to truly express the value of life, and the apprehension of death, together showing the personal turmoil of characters and emphasizing societal and cultural problems that would lead a character to despair. The legal and religious context for the literature to be studied throughout this dissertation comes from medieval historian Alexander Murray who has written two volumes of Suicide in the Middle Ages. Murray’s texts study not only legal proceedings and religious morality in relation to suicides but also societal reactions to self-inflicted death.

Chapter 3 begins the textual analysis of this dissertation, focusing on the Latin, Old Occitan, and Old French versions of the Golden Legend, a collection of saints’ Lives intended as a preaching manual. Though these texts date from the thirteenth to the thirteenth century, they provide a rich source of material for understanding the cultural and societal context of the time. The martyr trope, for example, is a common theme in these texts, reflecting the values of the time and the struggles of the characters involved.

fifteenth centuries and thus follow much of the secular literature in this dissertation, the source material preceded these versions and entered the psyche of the medieval writers and their audience. This chapter examines the role of shame and honor and how gender influences the portrayal of the death wish.

From religious literature we move to Chapter 4’s focus on the Old French romans antiques, secular literature drawing from classical sources. Le roman d’Eneas and Le Roman de Troie from the mid-twelfth century are some of the first non-religious vernacular literature in French. These romances, which are full of characters crying out in despair and even feature a number of them with achieved suicides, rewrite older stories and infuse them with medieval Christian values and contexts. Their portrayal of despair and suicide add to what the Golden Legend’s saints tell us about gender, shame, and honor in relation to suicide and despair. They provide the medieval interpretation of the classical tradition of heroic acts.

Chapter 5’s Old French texts Partonopeus de Blois and Chrétien de Troyes’s Yvain follow chronologically soon after Eneas and Troie. The two texts are inextricably linked because of their intertextuality, and yet, despite their similarities, they each demonstrate very different images of despair. Partonopeus provides perhaps the most detailed account of a character’s progress through internal suffering in the Middle Ages, with over a thousand lines of description. The text also provides an extensive portrayal of the despair of both Partonopeu and his lover Melior, as well as that of a male servant, thereby allowing for gender and class comparisons. Yvain adds to this despair with Yvain himself looking towards death, but even more striking is that his lion companion
attempts suicide out of grief and shame. This chapter shows the death wish in the romance genre across men, women, and animals.

We return to Old Occitan in Chapter 6 by turning to Crescas du Caylar’s Roman de la Reine Ester. This Occitan text by a Jewish writer aims to instruct women and children with his amplification of the Hebrew Bible Book of Ester. The central figure in the text is Queen Vashti, who is led to her death for disobeying her husband to protect her own honor. Her experience recalls that of the saints and suggests intertextuality between Christian and Jewish literature.

Analyzing these texts shows how despair and suicide are understood and portrayed across genre, gender, and religious boundaries.
Chapter 2: Background, Historical Context, and Methods

The contemplation of death is so prevalent throughout medieval literature that the theme merits a thorough analysis—this dissertation as a start—to understand how it functions from an individual character perspective as well as in terms of the narrative.\textsuperscript{20} The death wish is a nearly ubiquitous motif in medieval literature and it must be approached in terms of how it functions within a narrative; indeed, a character’s religion, gender, and worldly honor all play into the motif that becomes almost systematic in some genres, such as the \textit{Lives} of the saints, and surprising in others, such as in romances when not only people can desire death but also animals like the lion in Chrétien de Troyes’s \textit{Yvain}.

This study will comprise close readings of Old French and Occitan texts, examining the death wish in terms of narrative function, drawing on ancient, medieval, and modern theories of longing for death. These representations will be placed in the historical context of actual suicides and death practices and ideology in the medieval

\textsuperscript{20} This narrative approach does not assume a single way for romances to be written, nor a single way for literature of the period to be written, as Keith Busby warns. Expecting the same sort of lyricism, epic themes, or consistent courtly love within each work would prove distracting to this study because it would not allow for a thorough examination of the topic at hand: the death wish. Representations of the death wish are as varied as the type of genres and narrative structures. What is important is that it is nearly ubiquitous and thus can be studied within and across genres. Keith Busby, “Narrative Genres,” \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature}. Ed. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 139-152, at 140.
West. Understanding the history, laws and theology of the society surrounding voluntary death provides a cultural framework for the analyses in this dissertation. By the same token, understanding a text can help us better understand the societal context in which it was created. Thus far, scholars have viewed the death wish in terms of love and in terms of its reception as represented in older sources, but a need exists for a thorough analysis of what this wish or contemplation says about characters and about the society that surrounds them both inside and outside the text. These stories and glimpses of characters’ fears and longings can provide a glossing on biblical texts or religious ideas that fail to address the intimate pain of human suffering. In other words, when it comes to despair and the death wish, there is a gap between what medieval society said about them and what medieval authors said. Society condemned suicide theologically and legally in no uncertain terms, yet authors who wrote scenes of despair and suicide rarely condemn, let alone comment on, their characters’ desire for death. It is this difference that I will explore in this dissertation.

Methodology

The primary method employed in my study is close reading and comparative literary analysis as a tool to achieve an understanding of the reactions to suicide and despair, accepting that literature reflects, at least in part, the cultural reception of suicide and despair. These close readings show that Derrida’s claim that death contemplation
reveals the most honest identity of a person held true even a thousand years ago.\textsuperscript{21} Knowledge of the historical background of suicide elucidates the cultural context in which these pieces of literature were written and read.

Until the present, scholars have approached the theme of the death wish in terms of limited parameters, concentrating on historical suicides, or lovesickness, or suicides in literature. In this project, the attitude of those willing to die and the language used to show this attitude are of primary interest. Simon Gaunt, a modern interpreter of lovesickness, addresses the question of love as a fatal illness in medieval literature by linking high medieval romance depictions of those dying for love and hagiographic depictions of martyrs dying for their faith. Restricting his analysis to the narrative realm, Gaunt underlines the importance of reading religious overtones and references as critical moments in the deaths of lovers and that this religious language must not lead the reader to view the text in only a religious light or to ignore the religion and read it in only a secular light.\textsuperscript{22} Gaunt reads love narratives associated with death using Lacan’s psychoanalysis and Derrida’s ethics, arguing that a “secular ethics of desire” arises from this courtly literature because of the fascination with death inherent in this literature. Gaunt presents a basic definition of Lacanian ethics: “One consequence of taking religious imagery and language in medieval love literature seriously is that, taken at face value, they lend ethical seriousness to love, in that they impute to those subject to love a set of principles which determines right and wrong behaviour and feelings, while offering

\textsuperscript{22} Gaunt specifically discusses the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn’s frequent use of religious imagery, interpreting the usage as not solely pious, but rather as a way to exaggerate and emphasize the emotional struggle of the speaker of the poem. \textit{Love and Death}, 20-24.
concurrently a means of spiritual improvement and salvation.” He argues that a character takes pleasure in death or longing for it when it pleases the character’s object of desire, and thus suffering and erotic longing are naturally combined. In the realm of lovesickness, despair is actually hope disguised as a negotiating tool.

Gaunt views some deaths in terms of oppression and subversion when reading the scenes of fictional women and “queers” who have strange or unexpected deaths. He asserts a critical difference between male and female deaths: men die of intentional and usually violent means while the women die of grief alone, taking no action to end their life in any outward manner, mirroring precisely the historical evidence presented on pages 26 to 32 of this dissertation. Gaunt did not treat the wish for death as an entity separate from love, but rather limited his work to the association of love and death in fiction. This did not include despair resulting from the system of shame and honor as separate from a paradigm of love between characters. A study of the rhetoric of the death wish in terms of the structure of a romance, its characters, and its narrative plot will serve to clarify the use and implications of the death wish in courtly literature. Throughout the corpus of courtly literature, Simon Gaunt sees “one central motif, the association of love and death.” The characters associating love and death are in fact welcoming death.

---

23 Gaunt, Love and Death, 7.
24 Gaunt, Love and Death, 9, 23.
25 Gaunt, Love and Death, 168. Gaunt describes “queer” as generally homosexual, when a male character desires a male object. However, this also includes examples such as Narcissus, where the object and subject is the same.
26 Jean Frappier, Les romans courtois (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1943), 5, defines courtly literature as literature meant for the aristocracy at court, as opposed to both peasants and clergy.
27 Gaunt, Love and Death, 7.
He compares lovers desiring death to Christian martyrs who welcome it. He writes:
“Despite its obsession with death, as art, the courtly lyric is in fact more tuned towards the creative processes and detours that make up life than towards death.” I am viewing the episodes from a literary standpoint, much as Simon Gaunt does in his text, but my primary question is how to analyze the language used for the expression of the death wish, and how can we see that language acting as an overarching feature in literature as something that defines life? In a way, longing for death can always be seen as meeting the courtly paradigm where the lover desires to prove his valor to the object of his affection, that is, if one views the longing for death as some sort of proof of self-worth. But reading a scene of despair in that way means that the author has somehow given the indication that this earning of self-worth is the goal and has left what happens during the contemplation of death as a hollow space-filler. By accepting that this contemplation provides more than properly-metered lines, one can learn much about the specific distress of a character and how his or her created persona endures it, as well as how society accepts that distress. How is one’s identity shown at the time of longing for death within a text? Are their thoughts focused on the worldly or the spiritual? On people, on actions, on religious obedience? By extension, what is at stake with the association of living a life of faith and wanting to die a death of faith?

There is pleasure in the contemplation of death, as scholars such as Sarah Kay

---

28 Gaunt, Love and Death, 8.
29 Gaunt, Love and Death, 39.
30 “I should also stress that my concern is not with the experience or representation of death in the real world, but rather with the evocation of death as a consequence of being in love in fictional and imaginary accounts of love, thus with the meaning and symbolic value of representations of death in texts about love.” Gaunt, Love and Death, 10.
have noted, following Lacan. Sarah Kay also studies the literary representation of the
death wish and argues that “belief is intimately interwoven with death (or rather, Lacan’s
idea of the ‘zone between two deaths’) and enjoyment in all of them, but with different
effects the development of which can be traced chronologically and across genres.”³¹
The saints and lovers consumed by their desire for their beloved in essence ask for their
own torture and death; they seek this in order to avoid betraying their god, their desire to
express faith in a certain way, or perhaps for other unknown reasons. Kay continues her
argument about the saints’ enjoyment and desire for death in order to show that it is a
necessary part of both their existence and the rhetoric created around them: “Martyrs
have from the outset, then, mentally and spiritually given up the world. Death is both
acceptable and welcomed; and they all quickly meet with what should, under ‘natural’
conditions, put an end to their bodily existence.”³² They desire death in order to leave the
world they feel they cannot live in, and they can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if
someone else puts them to death. For Kay, the primary question is defining the “zone
between two deaths,” the time in which a person or character is treated as being dead and
the time at which he or she actually dies in the body, and not the desire for death itself
since the saints do not truly desire to die but rather desire eternal life.³³ The language at
the moment before the death and at the moment of an expressed desire for death, which is
the focus of this dissertation, defines how the character hopes or despairs, which is my
primary concern in terms of religious code. At these moments, the character is

³¹ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, 216.
³² Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, 222.
³³ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, 222.
participating in an essential struggle and is very much alive.

In *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France* Donald Maddox centers his argument about medieval narrative on the self-awareness of protagonists. This is an integral part of the narrative structure of French texts in which the protagonist develops as a character and thereby influences the course of action of the interior self and interpersonal relationships. The protagonist must, in order for the narrative to progress, know the truth of his own circumstances in relation to other characters, and sometimes this relation involves disappointment in love, war, or attempts to meet societal expectations. These disappointments often lead to scenes of the death wish, which I, in an extension of Maddox’s argument, view as integral to medieval literature, rendering it necessary to understand them in order to view medieval narrative more completely. Tony Davenport, a scholar primarily of medieval English literature, continues to argue what is necessary in a medieval narrative. He begins with Cicero’s work as the basis of literary theory in the Middle Ages, quoting from *De inventione*: “This form of narrative [fictional] should possess great vivacity, resulting from changes in fortune, contrast of characters, severity, gentleness, hope, fear, suspicion, desire, dissimulation, delusion, pity, sudden change in fortune, disaster, sudden pleasure, happy ending to the story.” This statement is adapted in medieval books of rhetoric, such as in Matthieu de Vendôme and Geoffroi de Vinsauf, to instruct writers how to create effective works of literature. Understanding

---

34 Modern narrative theory views medieval literature in a descriptive and analytical way instead of Maddox’s prescriptive one.
that authors were expected to write with great emotion is essential to an understanding of how death contemplation functions as a part of the great text and literature.

Evelyn Birge Vitz is one scholar of narrative theory who situates narrative in terms of desire. In *Medieval Narrative and Modern Narratology*, Vitz views desire as the “sole characterological principle” because the reader is not told what a character thinks, only what the character wants. In “Desire and Causality in Medieval Narrative,” Vitz sees desire as the “narrative motor, in the sense that it initiates the action, sets off the causal chain, in the narrative. (Of course, the theologians would say that the desire did not cause itself).” Extrapolating from this analysis of desire, I would propose that the desire for death does not necessarily lead to the death of the one doing the desiring or to anyone else, but reactions to the desire abound in the narrative. The expression of a death desire might be a way to realize some other desire, such as attaining the love of someone. It is nearly always an expression of a desire for an end of suffering in some way.

Whatever event results from a character’s despair, the event is motivated by it. “And there is no causality that is not motivated by desire: no nonintentional causality. But if desire begins the chain of events, human agency (motored by desire) is not represented as competent, of itself, to achieve its ends,” writes Vitz. This incompetence is perhaps why we have so many examples of despair and so few of suicide, both in life and literature, because human beings are not even effective at killing themselves. The portrayal of human agency in the episodes of death contemplation also hints at the

---

36 Vitz, 3. Emphasis on “sole” placed by Vitz.
37 Vitz, 207.
38 Vitz, 207.
cultural acceptance of a person’s responsibility in his or her own death. At what point is the despair part of a character’s agency? At what point is action to be taken? Is the character acting under his own power? God’s? Is he being prevented from action by external sources such as other characters, the Divine, or the marvelous? What would satisfy the desire, and what does this say about the character? Vitz comments on satisfaction: “Satisfaction is of course provided to some of the characters. But often satisfaction is only partial, or short-lived, or is granted in terms noticeably different from what the character had desired or sought.”39 The disparity between desire and outcome is perhaps nowhere as drastic as what happens when a character desires death and is confronted with more life. Distinguishing how different types of characters, different genders, and different social classes, confront various situations will be one way in which the desire for death will serve to elucidate the culture within literature.

**Death Theories**

In addition to narrative theory, religious theory from Georges Bataille will influence the understanding of the system of beliefs and desires of characters. In his *Theory of Religion*,40 Bataille outlines what he calls “mobile thought,” creating an evolving philosophy that investigates the experience of religion by humanity, especially as opposed to animality. In this text, Bataille evaluates consciousness, death, and sacrifice, previously discussed in his *L'érotisme*.41

---

39 Vitz, 207.
Bataille begins his discussion of consciousness by comparing humans and animals, and I quote it at length to show his logic completely:

Nothing...is more closed to us than this animal life from which we are descended. Nothing is more foreign to our way of thinking than the earth in the middle of the silent universe and having neither the meaning that man gives things, nor the meaninglessness of things as soon as we try to imagine them without a consciousness that reflects them. In reality, we can never imagine things without consciousness except arbitrarily, since we and imagine imply consciousness, our consciousness, adhering indelibly to their presence. We can doubtless tell ourselves that this adhesion is fragile, in that we will cease to be there, one day even for good. But the appearance of a thing is never conceivable except in a consciousness taking the place of my consciousness, if mine has disappeared.  

This passage is what will first help us distinguish a character’s desire to die versus his desire to be dead. Bataille’s logic implies that we cannot desire to be dead because we as human beings with consciousness cannot comprehend what a lack of consciousness would be like. This encourages the analysis of a character’s death wish not as a necessarily morbid one but rather as a way of intensifying the expression of some other desire.

Some expressions of the death wish are sacrificial—giving one’s life to help others, as Jonah attempted to do in jumping from the ship, as told in the Old Testament. Bataille’s discussion of sacrifice speaks of it mostly in community and its function in society, but when the sacrificer and the sacrifice are the same, new questions arise.

“Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice...the sacrificer declares: ‘...I call you back to the intimacy of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that

---

is. For a person, or a literary character, to consider killing oneself as a religious sacrifice, or a practical one, or even out of despair, that person is releasing himself from the power structures of the world. Death can also be an escape from despair or bodily suffering, and should the desire for death be consummated in a successful suicide, the death would convey the profound meaning of the suffering, according to Bataille. Bataille also discusses identity, anguish, and sacrifice, and their ties to the human desire for and fear of intimacy, with other people or a deity. Bataille states:

He [man] is afraid of death as soon as he enters the system of projects that is the order of things. Death disturbs the order of things and the order of things holds us. Man is afraid of the intimate order that is not reconcilable with the order of things...intimacy, in the trembling of the individual, is holy, sacred, and suffused with anguish.

The moment of a character or a person despairing and hoping for death or an end to suffering is a time of honesty for the person because it is a disruption of the normal course of events or expectations. In examples from literature, though, we can see patterns of anguish and commonalities in suffering. “It is in leaving the world that the lost intimacy is regained,” Bataille writes, and that is why the character desires death, because although he trembles and anguishes, he sees it is holy and sacred and is obsessed by it.

Bataille’s approach to death and anguish is further elaborated in L’érotisme where he studies the idea that the only attitude facing death is the search for an ultimate “volupté.” Only orgasm or other sexual pleasure can suppress the anxiety about death.

---

43 Bataille, Religion, 43-44.
44 Bataille, Religion, 48-49.
45 Bataille, Religion, 52.
46 Bataille, Religion, 76.
47 Bataille, Religion, 95.
Eroticism, for Bataille, is a way of approving of life and a way of showing exuberance for life, though acknowledging that one’s life must always end. While erotic acts do not always lead to reproduction, their basic goal often is reproduction, and this leads to a way of preserving the continuity of life when one member (the one erotically engaged) is on its way to dying.

In speaking about active ends to life, Bataille writes:

Si l’amant ne peut posséder l’être aimé, il pense parfois à le tuer: souvent il aimerait mieux le tuer que le perdre. Il désire en d’autres cas sa propre mort. Ce qui est en jeu dans cette fureur est le sentiment d’une continuité possible aperçue dans l’être aimé.

(If the lover cannot have the beloved, he sometimes thinks of killing him/her: often he would prefer to kill him/her than to lose him/her. He desires in other cases his own death. What is in play in this fury is the feeling of a possible continuity perceived in the beloved.)

In courtly literature, it is not uncommon for an individual to pine over desired lovers or failed relationships, such as in cases of lovesickness. In other cases, the object of desire is honor or relief from pain. Instead of finding a way to destroy the love or honor, which seems impossible to regain, the person turns to thoughts of ending his or her own life. In extreme cases, the person makes the decision to put an end to his or her suffering or shame via suicide.

Bataille sets up the inherent problem with eroticism: it tends to center on a person trying to find an object of desire outside of himself, yet this process starts as, and continues to be, an interior one. He claims one loses oneself in eroticism, and that this loss of oneself is voluntary. Bataille ties this erotic “death” with a literal loss of desire of life: “la mort, du moins la contemplation de la mort, les rend à l’expérience de la

---

48 Bataille, *L'érotisme*, 27. All translations, here and throughout the dissertation, are my own unless otherwise noted.

continuité” (“Death, at least the contemplation of death, delivers them to the experience of continuity”)

50 because for Bataille anguish is what forms humanity, and contemplating death is one sign of anguish. 51 Bataille provides a study of sacrifice, death, and suffering as integral parts of the human experience. These hardships are what make up individuals and communities, and viewing literary examples of people contemplating or desiring death will inform our reading of medieval courtly literature in terms of culture and specifically the values and beliefs for which one is willing to suffer.

Derrida’s *Gift of Death* studies the ownership of one’s own life and death and what problems and values an individual brings to existence. 52 Derrida considers the “apprehension of death” as a way to begin specifying these sentiments:

We are brought back to the apprehension of death, namely this way of giving oneself death...What we are here calling the apprehension of death refers as much to the concern, anxious solicitude, care taken for the soul (epimeleia tes psyches) in the melete thanatou, as it does to the meaning given to death by the interpretative attitude that...apprehends death differently, giving itself each time a different approach. The approach or apprehension of referring death signifies the experience of anticipation while indissociably referring to the meaning of death that is suggested in this apprehensive approach. It is always a matter of seeing coming what one can’t see coming, of a pure and simple way. Each time the self anticipates death by giving to it or conferring upon it a different value, giving itself or reappropriating what in fact it cannot simply appropriate. 53

This passage from Derrida’s *Gift of Death* lays out some of the main issues at the center of each character desiring to kill him- or herself. By using what Derrida sets forth here (apprehension of death and care for the soul), we can view suicides or contemplated suicides in this light.

52 Derrida, *The Gift of Death*.
Does the person want to kill himself because he fears death and would prefer to choose when it comes for him? In fact, this very rarely seems to be the case in the *contemplated* suicides in medieval literature. The troubadours who make their poems’ speakers claim they are going to die of love or want to die because of love are often saying these lines because they think it will help them gain their lover, not because of an actual death wish. This is one way in which we can possibly distinguish the scenes of characters expressing a desire to die, and those who actually succeed in rendering themselves dead.

We can use Derrida’s apprehension of death to view an apprehension of other events that would be avoided by death in the character’s mindset. The character views the success or failure in love as the culmination of his life. The character views winning (or losing) the woman’s heart and body as the reason to live (or die). By contemplating suicide, the character he can gain more control over whether or not the woman will give in to his desires because of such a dire threat. He can ensure that no outcome will occur if he is not alive to experience it.

In the hagiographical literature of the period, we see similar issues. The saints, especially the female saints, see death as a way of avoiding actions that may cause them to lose their virginity or their holiness. Thus, they are not trying to prevent the unknowable as far as death of the body is concerned but rather death of purity and holiness. Derrida writes of the Christian context that “The Christian themes can be seen to revolve around the *gift* as gift of death, the fathomless gift of a type of death: infinite love (the Good as goodness that infinitely forgets itself), sin and salvation, repentance
and sacrifice.” In the saints’ lives from the *Golden Legend*, many saints desire death and demonstrate the way in which it will come at a given time; they want their lives to end so that they can give their life as an example for Christ. For the female saints, dying a martyr’s death will give them honor of such a manner that no woman achieves elsewhere in the legend. Others desire death because they cannot bear to live without their friends or families who died a martyr’s death before them.

The desire for death or the simple contemplated death in most medieval courtly literature can be seen as Derrida sees suicide: a desire that is about demonstrating individuality and avoiding apprehension. We can apply his theory to the apprehension of an event or a situation in contemplated suicides or demonstrated death wishes.

Throughout the analysis of the literary examples in this dissertation, the historical, religious, and theoretical backgrounds will be essential to form an understanding of the representation of human suffering. The theology of the time period mixed with the characters’ experience can provide elaboration of Bible passages that ended with little judgment on a character whose life ended in suicide.

**Historical Context**

Alexander Murray’s *Suicide in the Middle Ages Volume I: The Violent against Themselves* and Georges Minois’ more general *L’Histoire du Suicide: La Société Occidentale Face à la Mort Volontaire* both appeared in 1998, marking a renewed interest among historians as to how Western societies have perceived and reacted to

---

54 Derrida, 49.
suicide or another kind voluntary death. Understanding how authors portray this death to readers further elucidates the reception of the phenomena, and that is the focus of this dissertation. Historical records of suicide by Murray in his volumes of *Suicide in the Middle Ages* show the cultural context for suicide and how imprecise the records were. Religion often affected the motivation for committing suicide or for deciding against it, and because the law was so tied to the Church, theology frequently influenced legal sanctions.

Unlike literary representations, historical sources do not provide elaboration of emotional or spiritual struggles of the victims, but Murray does elicit from them the basic reasons and reactions to suicide. Facing or provoking voluntary death was often an act of religious defiance, such as in the saints’ *Lives* where persecuted Christians preferred to be put to death as punishment than to accept the worship of other gods or systems of religion. Chapter 2 of this dissertation provides a study of how the female martyrs reacted to this persecution. It could also be an expression of the ultimate in human suffering, thereby making the self-murderer an intimate friend of God. Murray describes ninth-century stories of Saint Melaine, who, when prayed to by the mother of a suicide, grants back the life of the child after the mother herself “offers” to kill herself to join the child. The mother does not believe her own intended suicide would bring her child back to life, and this suicide would be brought about by apostatic despair and grief, obviously transgressing the religious code. Despite this transgression, the mother is

55 See notes 190 and 11.  
56 Murray, *Violent*, 12.  
57 Murray, *Violent*, 258.
rewarded with the life of her child instead of being punished by death, being condemned herself, having her body cast out of the churchyard, and her soul relegated to Hell. This punishment was carried out more often in France than in other countries, though no historical study has yet been done to show why exactly this happened there. Because of the punishment and the great shame for the living that accompanied it, families as well as victims attempted to keep the suicide a secret.\textsuperscript{58} Religious literature, such as miracle stories to the Virgin Mary, always involve the perpetrator’s quest for secrecy, and later in the dissertation, we will view similar themes in literature. However, this secrecy—in both literature and real life—could be a way for the person desiring death to avoid interference from others who might prevent his or her death instead of secrecy for the purpose of hiding the method of death after the fact.\textsuperscript{59} A suicide brought shame to one’s family and could result in loss of property to heirs.

Jean-Claude Schmitt, a French medievalist, studied fifty-four cases of suicide from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century and demonstrated that one cannot view suicide during that period as the same sort that one witnesses in contemporary society because the cultural contexts are different, especially with respect to the punishment of a suicide. In France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and in some cases until the end of the Ancien Régime, the body was tortured as though alive, hanged, dragged through the streets in public procession, and then burned.\textsuperscript{60} Alternately, the body would be sent down the river and buried in a shallow grave on the riverbank. Families generally lost all

\textsuperscript{58} Murray, Violent, 29-30.
\textsuperscript{59} Murray, Violent, 24-27.
rights to any possessions or land of the suicide because feudal obligations could no longer be fulfilled. If a vassal used land and owes money or property to his lord, he could only repay his lord while alive. The vassal’s family and children would have no power to fulfill these obligations, and so the land is taken from them. Thus, there were many societal influences that served as a deterrent to killing oneself.\textsuperscript{61} Despite this ritualized punishment being carefully executed for lower class, there is no record of suicide’s body from the noble class being punished.\textsuperscript{62} If a nobleman killed himself, it was tragic, because it can always be seen as part of a worthy cause—whether that is for love, warfare, or anger.

Even though the treatment of suicides was standardized, there was no set word used for suicide; the word “suicide” first appears in 1178 in the \textit{De Quatuor labyrinthos Franciae} manuscript from Walter of St. Victor,\textsuperscript{63} and Schmitt states that it was not widely used in France until the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{64} Prior to the acceptance of “suicide” as a word in itself, writers used a word implying a death with an indication that the victim and perpetrator were one and the same: \textit{être homicide de soi-même, se meurtrir, s’occir soi-même, mortem sibi consciscere, manus sibi inferre, and felo de se.}\textsuperscript{65} An absence of a single word for the action did not prevent the legal system or society from judging the deceased or his or her family.

\textsuperscript{61} Schmitt, “Le suicide,” 8-10.
\textsuperscript{62} Schmitt, “Le Suicide,” 17.
\textsuperscript{63} Murray, \textit{Violent}, xviii.
\textsuperscript{64} Schmitt, “Le Suicide,” 34.
\textsuperscript{65} Schmitt, “Le suicide,” 4. To be the killer of oneself, to murder oneself, to kill oneself.
\textsuperscript{66} Murray, \textit{Violent}, 35, 59.
Men then, as today, appear to have died from suicide attempts much more frequently than did women, and this occurred because they used more violent means. However, Murray argues that the accounts of suicide of women are lacking because society did not want to condemn them for such a grievous crime against the Church and society. The women also did not have feudal obligations as the men did, so there was less of a question of property rights. Letters of remission from the French parliament mention the forgiveness of suicides, and these often provide more details to the cases than do trials of actual suicides. Very few men involved in military activity exist in these records, presumably because their deaths can take place in battle should they desire it. Academic clergy also had a high rate of suicide compared to other professions. Very few among the poor are listed because there would have been no legal proceedings about the inheritance of property. Minois elaborates the noble “substitutes” for suicide, claiming that tournaments are convenient ways for desperate knights to have an end to their life not at their own hand while peasants resorted to hanging themselves. Records of suicides in the Middle Ages were infrequent during wartime as well as tournaments because death surrounded the people and gave an outlet for aggression against others and oneself. Because this dissertation will be focused more on the contemplation of death rather than the actual self-inflicted death of a character, men involved in battle and women will be among those who contemplate the end of their life. Analyzing “risky

---

67 Murray, Violent, 383.
68 Murray, Violent, 390-4.
69 Minois, 32.
70 Minois, 10-11.
behavior” among characters who do not see pleasure in life provides further theoretical framework for probing an attitude towards a welcomed death.

Murray questions whether characters dying of grief can be considered under the rhetoric of suicide, and Constantinus Africanus, a doctor living from 1017 to 1087, discusses the same issue in terms of melancholy. Murray, Violent, 364. Jacques de Vitry, a thirteenth-century theologian and prolific sermon writer, blamed tristitia (sorrow, despair, or despondency, often caused by fate) as having an active hand in suicide, and thus maintains that it is not the fault of the actual victim of suicide. Murray, Violent, 365. Murray found the following reasons for suicide listed in medieval documents: prison or accusation, defeat, violence or wound, love or bereavement, disgrace, loss, disease, shame, “madness” or demon, despair, tristitia, though most were because of tristitia. Murray, Violent, 402. This fits with the experience of most of the characters in literature, since nearly all cases of a desire for death arise from some sort of trouble, fall from power, or despair. This is an overarching trend for suicide or despair scenes, much like the expression of individual identity. It is rare that anyone besides a martyr desires death for the purpose of living and dying with joy, and even the martyrs are seeking an escape from something or someone.

In contrast to the punishment facing the body and families of the suicide victim, the death rituals surrounding those dying of external causes reflected the idea that their death was acceptable. Murray, Violent, 402. Whether in a Roman necropolis from the fourth century, or in a

\[71\] Murray, Violent, 364.
\[72\] Murray, Violent, 365.
\[73\] Murray, Violent, 402.
\[74\] Boase, 76.
churchyard in sixth-century Amiens, and whether the burial was in the ground or in vaults, sometimes in a shroud, the body was always placed intentionally, unlike the punishment of a ritual “drowning” or burning the corpse of suicide victims to inflict suffering publicly as a way to emphasize the shame of the deceased’s decision. If the deceased (a non-suicide) owned property, it was also common to be buried on this property instead of on Church grounds in order to show his continued power over his land. Death was treated and observed piously in the ceremonies, with priests giving last rites for pardon as well as providing funeral processions and services for the dead. Surviving families hoped that the last thoughts of the deceased were ones of repentance should the rites not be available. The Church and its members provided a community for the dead in their funerals, approving of the actions and lives of those who have died. The message communicated by the Church in the treatment of death in different contexts showed its ideas of salvation or condemnation.

Religious and Social Context

Certainly the Church’s theology influenced not only the rites surrounding death, but also the law and societal expectations and reactions to suicides. The beliefs and moralities held by people in the Middle Ages thus came from the Church Fathers,

---

75 Philippe Ariès, Essais sur l’histoire de la mort en Occident du Moyen Age à nos jours (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 30-31. Before the sixth century, burials occurred outside of the city walls, but the clergy changed this taboo by bringing a body to be buried in the churchyard in Amiens.  
76 Boase, 110.  
77 Boase, 113.  
78 Boase, 126.
primarily Augustine, though the theology originated from the Greek and Hebrew Testaments. As Murray indicates in his second volume on suicide, most biblical examples of suicide come from the Hebrew Testament and have influenced Judaic thought more than Christian. Judas is the sole character in the Christian Testament to die by suicide, recounted both in Matthew and Acts. Suicide was condemned according to both Jonah 1:12 and Matthew 27:4-5, and these were the only two texts frequently cited by theologians in terms of a desire for death or a completed suicide. The story of Jonah shows Jonah’s despair and desire to end the suffering of his shipmates, so he begs them to throw him overboard: “He said to them, ‘Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” This text was interpreted as being against suicide because five verses later, Jonah is saved by a fish that God sent to save him from ending his life. God’s prevention of Jonah’s suicide is the only textual commentary on his sacrificial attempt at death. The passage from Matthew concerning Judas’ similarly does not comment on the actual suicide. It reads: “He said, ‘I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.’ But they said, ‘What is that to us? See to it yourself.’ Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself.” The text continues to discuss what to do with the money Judas left behind, but not what to do about his body or soul.

79 Saint Augustine, bishop of Hippo living from 354 to 430 CE, was the only religious known to write on suicide from the fifth to the twelfth century, and he was the most influential one for religious thought in the Middle Ages. Chapters 16-27 of The City of God condemn suicide, though his writings on suicide stemmed largely in response to Christians who wanted to die a martyr’s death. Murray, Curse, 101-102.
80 Murray, Curse, 92.
81 Murray, Curse, 99.
82 Jonah 1:12, New Revised Standard Version.
Still, his suicide is interpreted as a sin because it is a murder and was done so out of shame and repentance for another sin: selling information about Jesus.

Murray notes the lack of commentary made by the biblical authors on the suicides; little criticism appears in the texts, except small phrases about how the person died with no forgiveness of the sins that they committed or that their body was ultimately accepted in part of a proper burial. The patristic fathers did, however, comment. Origen wrote the first Christian text against suicide at the beginning of the third century of the Common Era, citing Judas’ choice as a poor one, but not reflecting at all on Job’s temptation of suicide. Jerome (writing at the end of the fourth century) allowed for suicide only in cases where it was a defense of a woman’s chastity.

The historian Minois, in his study of suicide in Western society, sees these texts slightly differently and questions whether Christ’s own death was voluntary and could thus be considered a suicide. The gospels clearly encourage followers of Christ to give up their lives. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” appears in John, and “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” in Matthew. Justin Martyr, writing in the second century, praised Christians who sought death. Many Christians took his praise seriously, as witnessed by the stories of saints being tortured and dying painful deaths to maintain virginity or adherence to Christian faith. These sorts of Christians, and

---

84 Murray, *Curse*, 97.
especially their great number, later incited Church Fathers to write against suicide so strongly.\textsuperscript{88} Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), bishop of Hippo, was the only Christian theologian known to write on suicide from the fifth to the twelfth centuries, and he was the most influential writer on religious thought in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{89} Chapters sixteen through twenty-seven of \textit{The City of God} condemn suicide, though his writings on suicide stemmed largely in response to Christians who wanted to die a martyr’s death.\textsuperscript{90} The opportunity for such a death had recently diminished severely because Constantine converted to Christianity in the beginning of the fourth century, thereby removing governmental persecution of Christians.\textsuperscript{91} Augustine refused to accept any sort of suicide, even to maintain one’s chastity, because if one were truly chaste, then any action, even one such as rape, could not harm the soul of the victim. Giving up one’s life at one’s own hands cannot put one on better terms with the Christian deity. Augustine always based this on the idea that killing was wrong, and therefore suicide was wrong.\textsuperscript{92} This text provided enough opposition to the idea of suicide to construct a general condemnation for it throughout the Middle Ages.

More closely related to the experiences of characters to be studied in this dissertation is the idea of despair or the intention of suicide with no action. Despair was seen as a sin, starting at the latest in the tenth century, according to Bishop Ratherius of

\begin{flushleft}
\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Minois, 26.
\item Murray, \textit{Curse}, 101.
\item Murray, \textit{Curse}, 102.
\item Murray, \textit{Curse}, 103.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
\end{flushleft}
Verona (887-974 CE) who said that doubting God’s mercy was equal to apostasy. Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 CE) in the *Moralia in Job* distinguished this aspect of desiring death by indicating that those who despair might be the least likely to want death earnestly because it would bring them before God’s judgment. His argument was unique, though; most theologians and writers assumed despair and the inability to accept God’s pardon as reason enough for anyone who committed suicide. This will be seen in many examples of literary characters who claim to desire death but do nothing to hasten it because they have less hope in death than in life. However, in some cases beginning in the eighth century, a person in “desperatio” was one who had killed himself, using a variety of versions and parts of speech formed from *desperatio* as a euphemism for suicide. Whether actual suicide or a simple lack of hope, this despair was a grievous sin because it is a separation of oneself from God.

**Despair, Death, and Lovesickness**

As important as thoughts on suicide were in a religious context, despairing or desiring death was part of the tradition of lovesickness, dating back to the classical period. This dissertation focuses on how the death wish and suicide are not intrinsically related to lovesickness, but some death wishes occurred solely because of a desire for

---

95 Murray, *Curse*, 279.
96 Murray, *Curse*, 382.
97 Sappho discussed the symptoms of lovesickness as far back as the seventh century BCE in poem 31, though she does not mention desiring death, only that she is so sick with love that she is almost dead. Sappho, Fragment 31, in *The Poetry of Sappho*, trans. by Jim Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.
love or of love from a distance. Much of medieval French literature has been read as centered on the ideas of courtly love, which included suffering on the part of at least one of the lovers in any pair. The idea of “courtly love” followed the tradition of Ovid and Andreas Capellanus by transforming love into a ritual to be learned and perfected. A man must be noble in status and spirit and must appeal to his desired lady as though she were his feudal lord.98 As in the tradition from antiquity, suffering for love was as much a social problem and also a medical malady. Passion in the Middle Ages carried a different meaning than it does today: in both the Latin and the Old French, the word derives from the verb patior—to suffer or endure.99 Originally used to describe the religious suffering of Christ and the saints, this language became absorbed into the literary canon and became as much a part of the poet’s vocabulary as the saint’s.100 The suffering caused by love, whether through unfulfilled desire or jealousy because of adultery, created illness within the sufferer because of such immoderation of feeling, and this illness—lovesickness101—went so far as to cause its sufferers to desire death. In a study of discourses of desire resulting from the analysis of literature, medical texts, religious treatises, and love treatises,102 John W. Baldwin wrote, “The torments of jealousy and unfulfilled desire absorb the thoughts proceeding from their hearts, now

100 For further elaboration of the intricacies of this study, see Gaunt, Love and Death.
101 Lovesickness will be further elaborated in a separate definition, as an extension of passio.
102 Baldwin studies Constantinus’ Viaticum, Augustine’s De Civitate Dei, the Old French Fabliaux, Ovid’s Amores and Ars Amatoria, Andreas Capellanus’ De amore, Béroul’s Trisan, and Chrétien’s Cligés.
separated from the bodies through adulterous love. Death is the only possible resolution to such suffering.”

Andreas Capellanus, a contemporary of Chrétien de Troyes, discussed sexual desire in his treatise *De Amore*. For Andreas, love was the origin and cause of all good, bringing supreme joy; but regarded as suffering, its inherent immoderation hastened illness, insanity, senility, and death. In the beginning of his treatise, he writes:

> Quod amor sit passio facile est videre. Nam antequam amor sit ex utraque parte libratus, nulla est angustia maior, quia semper timet amans ne amor optatum capere non possit effectum, nec in vanum suos labores emittat.  
> (It is easy to see that love is suffering because before love is balanced on both sides, no anguish is greater, because the lover always fears that his love will not be able to achieve his desired effect, and that his efforts are in vain).

His elaboration of the suffering of love informs us, as readers, that this suffering comes first from fear of unfulfilled desire.

The suffering for love was a medical malady, a *morbus*, in Constantinus Africanus’ eleventh-century medical handbook. The understanding of joy, suffering, and immoderation join to produce the idea of lovesickness in the Middle Ages. Lovesickness was not seen solely as an emotional pining for someone, but rather as an illness unto itself that could cause other illnesses. Lovesickness was seen as a disease of

---

104 Baldwin, 808.
107 *Amour courtois* or “courtly love” was coined by Gaston Paris, “Etudes sur les romans de la Table Ronde,” *Romania* 10 (1881), 478. Based largely on the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere, Paris defines courtly love as idolatry of a loved one with the goal of becoming worthy of the loved one. The lover often must prove his worth by performing certain deeds or tests to prove his love and devotion. It was based on sexual attraction but not necessarily having sexual satisfaction as the goal. When one fails to achieve the loved one’s affection, or before one achieves it, the lover might have the symptoms of lovesickness.
the brain that could cause other symptoms, not a symptom of another malady.\footnote{Another view of lovesickness came from Ovid’s works on love. (See Ovid, \textit{Amores}; \textit{Medicamina faciei femineae}; \textit{Ars amatoria}, \textit{Remedia amoris}. Ed. E. J. Kenney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.) This version of lovesickness served as the literary starting-point for most accounts of the death wish in medieval romances and troubadour lyric. Here, lovesickness is a rhetorical device used to express longing and desire. Ovid also instructs how one can use the symptoms of lovesickness to convince one’s object of desire to love one in return, a set of instructions taken at the same time seriously and cynically. His works presented many of the views of convincing someone to share one’s love in a comical way, such as what happens when one uses the wrong sort of hair dye, but the adaptation and reception of his theories in medieval literature such as Andreas Capellanus’ work shows that it was read as more than just cynicism. Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe are examples of this because they suffered and despaired for love when their parents forbade their union. They then killed themselves due to a misunderstanding; Pyramus believed Thisbe to be dead and took his own life in order not to survive without her. Thisbe, not dead, found Pyramus and killed herself for the same reason. (For Pyramus and Thisbe, see Publius Ovidius Naso, \textit{Metamorphoses} IV.55-169, trans. A.D. Melville [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986].)}

Constantinus’ work includes both the influences of the Church Fathers, Plato and Aristotle and was later interpreted and glossed by Gerard de Berry, Giles, and Peter of Spain. Mary Frances Wack’s \textit{Lovesickness in the Middle Ages} presents the medieval view of lovesickness as a medical malady that could have a death wish as its symptom.\footnote{Though it is necessary to accept that lovesickness and courtly love were a part of the medieval narrative system, this dissertation focuses on what the presence of the death wish in literature says about the medieval attitude towards suicide and despair, and thus the details of lovesickness may apply to despairing characters already treated in separate studies of lovesickness.}

For Constantinus Africanus, those commenting on the \textit{Viaticum}, Ovid, and for modern scholars of lovesickness, the disease existed with fatal possibilities. Lovesickness was felt emotionally and physically and could alter the quality of one’s life as well as lead to one’s death. However, the focus of this dissertation is about what else can alter the quality of life and one’s death and how society views a person facing despair and death. These death wishes fall into five primary categories, and below are the details of this typology.
The Suicide Typology

The death and literary theories lead us to formulate a typology of the death wish with which to analyze texts that include despairing characters. Most of the pertinent scenes delve into the expression of individuality, and thus that expression is not a type but an overarching trend. Maddox claims that medieval narrative centers on the self-awareness of protagonists, and I argue that they are most aware when they are contemplating the end of their own existence (and thus of their own awareness). Derrida and Bataille, too, sees the moment of death contemplation as the moment of truest self-expression. By viewing the death wish within a work of literature, one can see quite specifically the extent to which the reader can know the identity of a character. The types are:

1) *martyrdom*. These characters express a wish to die in order to remain faithful to their cause—religion, value, or person. Gaunt, Kay, and Lacan have all offered readings and theories that contribute to the understanding of this as a trope. The desire for death gives the characters a certain pleasure—they know they are fulfilling a higher calling, and they are living what are potentially their last moments outside of the constraints of normal societal expectations because they are between their former participation in life and their potentially imminent mortal death. This trope can be further divided into three subcategories of a) wanting to leave society to find union with God, b) wanting to die for Christ, and c) avoiding shame. As Kay stated, death is not an end so much as an entry into immortal life for the martyr. In the historical
context, there are two possible explanations about why the women want to
die: martyrdom is a way for the women to gain cultural and religious
collateral, and they can avoid sin and shame, or the destruction of their purity
through an unwanted marriage.

2) *union outside mortal life.* While this is a subcategory of the martyr trope, it
merits its own classification because union with God is not the only way to
avoid the constraints of mortal life. Lovers may want to die to find some
union together.

3) *Erotic longing.* Bataille’s theory claims that it is only in seeking sexual
pleasure that one can suppress anguish and anxiety about death. Cases of
lovesickness often apply to this category because when the object of desire is
not attained, the desirer thinks of killing him- or herself because only the lover
could make life worthwhile.

4) *expression of the value of life.* Both Bataille and Derrida view a longing or
desire for death as a way to express the value of life. For Bataille, the erotic
shows the pleasure in life, and death is a disturbance to the natural order of
things in life, thus highlighting what is worthy enough to show disturbance.
For Derrida, the individual evaluates life each time he or she anticipates death.

5) *apprehension of death.* Bataille views death as a disturbance of the natural
order of things and thus as something that elicits honesty from an individual.
For Derrida, the apprehension of death is an essential part of taking possession
of one’s own life. Death is never in one’s own control if it is not a suicide,
and as a result, one always fears death as part of the unknown. By giving it to oneself or by contemplating doing so, one can appropriate a sense of ownership over one’s fear and thus conquer it.

Each of these types of death will apply to one or more death wishes analyzed in this dissertation. This typology will allow for a greater understanding of how the death wish functions within each narrative, and thus in narrative as a whole.
Chapter 3: Shame and Honor among Martyrs in *The Golden Legend*

In the earliest extant poetic text in Old French, *La Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie*, Eulalie expresses a preference for death over a loss of honor. Although it is somewhat by chance that this is one of the first texts surviving in Old French, and that this French text is about a Spanish saint,\(^{110}\) it is not out of the ordinary to see a contemplation of death as a preference to pain or shame in life in a French text, especially in a saint’s life. The text reads:

```
Ell’ ent adunet lo suon element
melz sostendriet les empelementz,
Qu’elle perdesse sa virginitet:
poro s furet morte a grand honestet.

(So she gathered her strength
she would rather suffer chains,
Than lose her virginity:
for this she died with great honesty/honor.)\(^{111}\)
```

These saints follow Paul’s discussion of life and death in his second letter to the Corinthians in the Greek testament, “For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”\(^{112}\) Ambrosiaster, a name given to the unknown author or authors of some early Church writing, interprets this passage for the medieval

---


\(^{111}\) “La Cantilène de Sainte Eulalie,” ll. 15-18 in P. Meyer, ed., *Recueil d’anciens textes français, 2e partie*, Paris: F. Vieweg, 1877. Translation here and all others throughout this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.

\(^{112}\) 2 Cor. 4:9-11. New Revised Standard Version.
believer in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, defending the tribulations that human beings must suffer as part of their mortal condition by citing passages from both the Jewish and Christian testaments.\footnote{Ambrosiaster is the name given to the author of certain commentaries because they had previously been attributed to Ambrose of Milan (fourth century). These commentaries are classified by the Patristics to explain the meanings of biblical texts. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, \textit{Ambrosiaster’s Political Theology} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11-32.} Paul encourages his people to be willing to suffer and even to die because, with the promise of resurrection, a Christian should not fear death as the end of his or her existence. Paul himself risked his life by preaching what he did, so the saints are simply emulating the actions of those closest to Christ.\footnote{Ambrosiaster, \textit{Ancient Christian Texts: Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians}, ed. and trans. by Gerald L. Bray (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2009), 221-222. His comments on this passage are: “What Paul is saying is clear. We have the power to go on living, but we do not object to being handed over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life by which Christ rose from the dead may be granted to this mortal flesh of ours. We are not afraid to die because we have the promise of resurrection. Paul is saying this because he and Timothy were being subjected to death for their sakes. By preaching to the Gentiles, they were stirring up hatred against themselves both from Jews and Gentiles, risking even death.”} Eulalie, as well as the other saints analyzed in this chapter, follows the trope of the martyr, and this trope will be further detailed within this analysis.

The primary goal of this chapter is to define the language and social and cultural problems surrounding each death wish that is accompanied by the feeling of shame or honor in \textit{The Golden Legend} in Old French and Old Occitan. The saints' view of eternity compelled them to use their lives as a service and example to others. Because their goal was life after death, they did not need to dwell on the hatred of their existence here on earth. The female saints in particular are attributed the most discussion of shame and honor; society controlled so much of their lives, but in their faith, they could claim a sense of honor by asserting their rights over their bodies. The language chosen by the French and Occitan translators emphasizes what death as a goal implies in life and how
that goal is portrayed to the medieval reader. Questions that arise during this analysis are: how can we categorize and define the language used for the expression of the death wish throughout the lives of the saints, and what does their focus on shame and honor teach us about their society and their role within it? By extension, what is at stake in the association of living a life of faith and wanting to die a death of faith?

**Previous Scholarship on Shame, Honor, and the Body**

Part of the trope of the martyr’s death wish focuses on the presence of shame and honor within the saint’s culture and how that person must act in order to maintain faith and attain sainthood. Caroline Walker Bynum, a scholar of religious ideas and practice in Western Europe from late antiquity through the Renaissance, argues that shame and honor with regards to the bodied existence has been problematic for women since the beginning of the Hebrew tradition, in which Eve brings sin onto humanity by eating the forbidden fruit.\(^\text{115}\) One of the first statements about woman in the Bible is: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed,”\(^\text{116}\) acknowledging the relationship between the physical state of people and their emotional reaction to themselves. It is, obviously, a negative statement and does not claim that honor exists for Adam and Eve as a contrast to shame, but simply that shame is absent, foreshadowing its imminent arrival in their lives.

Eve’s temptation by the serpent immediately follows this statement, in which the

---

serpent claims that the bodily effect of the forbidden fruit will not be death but rather will be a mental enlightenment. The serpent said, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Both Adam and Eve ate the fruit, resulting in new knowledge and awareness of their bodies: “they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings.”

God confronts his two human creations about their new actions and proceeds to curse them and the serpent after the woman blames the serpent and the man blames the woman. The woman’s curse is focused entirely on her body and its relation to her husband: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children; yet your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.”

According to the myth, the woman’s penance is one of physical pain and also of submission, a loss of control over her self.

The man receives a curse from God because he chose to listen to the temptation of his wife. However, his curse is external to his body:

Cursed is the ground because of you;
In toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
And you will eat the plants of the field;
By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread.

The man’s penance for shame is action that he must perform, and the difficulty of it, in order to survive and to provide for his fellow human beings. From the first written book of the Judeo-Christian tradition, man is shown as avoiding shame by action, and woman
is shown as living with it under another’s control.

Bynum takes this as the origin of the theology of shame and the body for the experience of the Christian woman in the Middle Ages. The honor in a woman’s life centered on food, over which she exerted the most control within the household, and her body, which though under submission to men, was her own to control in terms of immediate needs, such as eating. By combining these two sources of power, she was able to live with honor or die with it. We see this in many of the saints’ lives in which the women refuse to eat or refuse to give their body in marriage to someone they do not desire, preferring death over giving into the control of a man. This acknowledges the unavoidable presence of shame within the body, and thus within life.

Marcia Mount Shoop, a twenty-first century theologian, subscribes to a similar interpretation of the problem of the female body in Christianity. She writes, “Woman as temptress, as unclean, as lacking in moral capacity, as irrational...are just some of the symptoms of how hatred, distrust, and negativity about the body have been particularly heaped onto female bodies.” She maintains, like Walker Bynum, that this hatred and distrust became a foundation of the Judeo-Christian tradition starting with the first Biblical text and continuing throughout the religion’s history.

Mount Shoop also discusses the body without regard to its sex. Both her viewpoints about women being objectified and hated and the body of either a man or woman pertain to the feelings and experiences any person might have. “Feeling is how

---

122 Walker Bynum, 8-9.
we intersect with everything else—our mode of encountering all that is, our means of negotiating ourselves through life, and the way we incorporate all that we encounter into our ‘selves.’” This feeling is expressed by characters in romance and hagiography, especially when they contemplate death, which, though extremely individual, indicates how a character intersected with everything and everyone else in his or her life. This contemplation brings forth what makes a character most joyous and most grieved.

Mount Shoop’s work discusses the experience of feelings of grief and suffering and how those have related to life throughout the Christian era:

All embodied existence entails suffering and so shares in the tragic layers of having a human body. Human bodies are not only steeped in the distortions and deformities of sin...Human bodies are also ravaged by the wounds of tragedy. Suffering is, indeed, entangled with the wages of sin, but suffering is also a fact of human life that is sometimes addressed best outside the framework of sin, guilt, and forgiveness. Sin carries with it moral judgment for suffering; tragedy focuses less on judgment and more on acknowledgement, grief, and compassion.

The examples of the contemplation of death in hagiography and romance generally are found outside of the realm of sin. According to Mount Shoop’s definition of tragedy, these characters are focusing on just that: they acknowledge their pain and share it with a public audience in the case of the saints or, generally, a more private one in romance, and the authors display the characters’ grief. These saints and characters are seeking compassion; the saints desire it from God, the heroes or lovers from other people in their lives. The suffering that a person feels as a result of internal shame or shame encouraged by a society provokes many of the contemplations of death in literature, both in hagiography and romance.

124 Mount Shoop, 17
125 Mount Shoop, 37.
In their literary study of Old French hagiography, Phyllis Johnson and Brigitte Cazelles\textsuperscript{126} highlight the saints’ desire, to the exclusion of all others, of making Jesus visible in their lives. This is one way in which the women can redeem themselves from their “innate” shame. The saints provide an example to the living of how to move towards goodness and salvation in God. The survival of Christianity in its earliest days depended on the death or willingness to die of its most faithful members. Their death and dialogue about death is intended for a wide public audience, used to encourage others in the faith by assuring them of the afterlife that people can find with God. They often used terms such as \textit{voldre morir} (to want to die), \textit{guerpir} (to flee or escape), \textit{fuga} (flee or escape), \textit{ciel} (sky or heaven), and \textit{siecle} (secular world) as they demonstrated their desire for an exit from life.

**Female Saints in the \textit{Golden Legend}**

The contemplations of death are surrounded by shame and honor in the \textit{Golden Legend}. This text was a collection of saints’ lives and feast days of the liturgical year, and was intended as a preaching manual.\textsuperscript{127} The \textit{Golden Legend} and hagiography in general has had a long tradition of being read by those outside the Church—the Christian laity and non-Christians alike. The text for some was what we would think of as a coffee table book, a sign of luxury; others owned it as a collection of what today we might call

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Le Vain Siecle Guerpir: A Literary Approach to Sainthood through Old French Hagiography of the Twelfth Century}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1979).
\textsuperscript{127} Boureau, 32-41.
short stories. Thus, the characters appearing in the text should be understood not only as saints revered by the faithful but also as characters seen by contemporary readers. In the Latin text Jacobus de Voragine chose to include only snippets about each saint. The Old French versions contain only the stories that Jean de Vignay had in the Latin text from which he was working (with some of his own additions, such as short prayers at the end of the lives). The Occitan text is pared down even further.

As Barbara Fleith points out, Jacobus de Voragine follows the tradition and sources of Dominican hagiographers very closely; however, with the themes, images, and repetition of narrative structure, his *Golden Legend* began to be perceived as a unitary work. Alain Boureau claims that Jacobus de Voragine—and his text—were viewed as having the “strange status of a minor monument” until the 1970s, and thus scholars have only been seriously studying this text and the questions surrounding it for the past thirty or so years.

Individual saints—many of them appearing in the *Golden Legend*—have been studied by hagiographers as examples of people suffering for Christ, or as figures meant to be venerated, or as figures of the Church. My study, however, first aims to explore how the stories of the female saints throughout the *Golden Legend* are linked

---


philologically by the theme of a death wish, specifically in the Old French and Old Occitan translations, and then to further investigate the specifics of the death wish surrounding shame and honor. This close study of the saints expressing some sort of wish to die has not yet been done, in part because it is simply assumed that martyrs must die and must be willing to do so, but I am looking at them as wanting to do so. In order to work with this assumption, we need to have an understanding of the vocabulary and verbal patterns behind the expressions of this death wish.

The saints were not simply suicidal people who found martyrdom a socially and religiously acceptable way to die, nor were the translations of the Golden Legend meant to be the newest pieces of literature with a large focus on suicide and longing for death. Rather, the texts present this longing for death as one theme, and a major one at that, that arises from many of the lives of the female saints, and as a theme that needs to be subtly articulated to bring the different manifestations of that longing to light. I have chosen to focus only on the lives of the female saints because such a high percentage of the women are presented as having a longing for death, and many of these with discussion of shame and honor.

---

131 Boureau studies the narrative system within the Latin Legenda Aurea, but I am viewing the reception and not intentionality of the narrative system. Alain Boureau, La Légende dorée: le système narratif de Jacques de Vorgine ([died] 1298) (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 207-212.

132 Boureau cites Saint Thomas, saying: “Thomas procède à de nombreuses exclusions: les femmes qui ont préféré le suicide au déshonneur ne méritent pas la couronne.” “Thomas defines a number of exclusions: women who preferred suicide to dishonor do not earn the crown.” Boureau, 114.

133 The theme arises among the male saints as well, but the proportion of female saints with an expressed wish for death is almost half—48.5% in the Latin, 45% in the Old French, and 42% in the Old Occitan. In a later study, I plan to examine the language behind the scenes of men expressing a death wish.
Throughout the *Golden Legend*, dying by martyrdom is shown as one of the most—if not the most—viable way of gaining a high religious status, or honor. Women may also remain virgins, and in some rare cases, married women may gain respectable status by leading holy lives. The desire to remain a virgin will be treated partially in light of Augustine’s view of rape and suicide in *The City of God*, especially because so many of the women express a wish to die when they learn they will have to be married. They do not want to be ashamed of their bodies because of giving them to a non-Christian or because of defiling them in any sexual way.

The bulk of this section is a close reading of the French and Occitan translations to determine the pattern of the specific word choices made by the Old French and Occitan translators in their depictions of saints expressing a wish to die. This provides a basis of comparison for similar discussions of shame and honor surrounding a desire for death in the overtly fictional romances and *chansons de gestes*.

*The Legenda Aurea Tradition*

The texts that I use include editions of the Latin, Old French and Old Occitan versions of the *Legenda Aurea*, but each version has its own problems. The medieval authors omit certain stories and add or change details within a story, and often we can only guess as to whether there were missing pieces from the branch of the manuscript they were using or if it was their own choice to do so. Each text contains a different

---

134 Boureau, 38.
135 Brenda Dunn-Lardeau has worked extensively on the Old French, and she shows the missing stories within the French as due to their absence in the Latin source. Monika Tausend has edited the Provençal, but the source for that is unknown. It is unclear as to whether the source was in the Old French or the
number of the lives of the saints, and thus some are missing altogether from the Old French and Old Occitan.

Jacobus de Voragine, who was born in 1230, entered the Dominican order in 1244, and died in 1298, compiled the Latin text between 1260 and 1267. His *Legenda Aurea* is a collection of saints’ lives that he copied from a variety of sources with minimal commentary of his own throughout each life. The text is also known by the title “The History of the Lombards” because that history makes up the contents of the last chapter. Roughly one thousand Latin manuscripts are extant along with hundreds of vernacular incunabula left from the origin of the printing press. For the Latin *Legenda Aurea*, I use the third edition of Graesse completed in 1890; Graesse’s original edition was made in 1475. Brenda Dunn-Lardeau explains the content of the text as a collection of *Lives* of the saints, organized according to the dates of the liturgical calendar, interspersed with prayers and other documents relating to other liturgical feasts. She clarifies that Jacobus de Voragine had decided to suppress the longer and more traditional accounts of the *Lives* in favor of *abbreviationes*, so as to facilitate the grouping of all the lives in one manual for the preaching clergy who had only limited access to hagiographical collections in their parishes. Many of the collections of

---

138 Dunn-Lardeau, 9.
sermons from the Middle Ages serve as evidence for the use of these lives in sermons and homilies.\textsuperscript{139}

The \textit{Legenda Aurea} proved its fame by the demand for translations from its original Latin version into vernacular languages. The greatest number of extant manuscripts of this collection in France was the Old French translation by the Hospitaler Jean de Vignay who translated the text (which speaks to the text’s status to be translated for someone so powerful at court) for Jeanne de Bourgogne, Queen of France,\textsuperscript{140} between 1333 and 1348. There are thirty-two extant manuscripts today in addition to ninety other printed copies dating to 1557 that stem from de Vignay’s translation. This vernacular edition states in the prologue that it is dedicated to “unlettered people who will read or hear this text read” (“gens non lettrés qui liront et ourront lire ce texte”) and that it does not include all of the citations of the early Church Fathers and the Bible. The lives end with a prayer, whereas they do not in the Latin original.\textsuperscript{141}

The principal difference between the manuscripts in the vernacular and those in the Latin is their purpose. Dunn-Lardeau states that the \textit{Legenda Aurea} in the original Latin was an instructional text designed to spread the Church’s teachings to a broad vernacular-speaking audience. Jean de Vignay’s French version later became a symbol


\textsuperscript{140} Jeanne de Bourgogne was the wife of King Phillip VI and thus was queen of France from 1328 to 1349.

\textsuperscript{141} The quotation and other background information for the Old French text come from Dunn-Lardeau, 10.
of luxury and prestige for those who owned it. The *Golden Legend* may be read as a piece of courtly literature because of its significant courtly audience. Two-thirds of the manuscripts of Vignay were illuminated and belonged to the Burgundian aristocracy. Dunn-Lardeau compares them to Books of Hours, used as much for devotion as for ostentation.

I use Dunn-Lardeau’s Old French edition of the text, which follows Batallier’s revision from 1476 from the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal (Fol. H 3718 R’s.) and La Brit. Libr. (IC 41504). She gives the lexical variants between the editions of Vignay and Batallier. The Vignay manuscript from which she made her edition was B.N. fr. 241, from 1348, at the base of the stemma of the extant manuscripts.

The Occitan text is more problematic than the Old French. As with most Occitan texts, there are no complete extant manuscripts of the text, nor do we know many specific details about any of the translators, including when they may have been working. It may be inferred that the purpose of the text was both to educate local preachers and also to serve as a devotional text for individuals—and perhaps also as a symbol of prestige—as the Old French translations were. Of the extant manuscripts, there are four Catalan, three Occitan, and one Occitan fragment. These texts date from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, but it is unclear whether they were translated from the Old French, the

---

142 Dunn-Lardeau, 11. “Ainsi, la *Legenda Aurea* dans l’original latin demeure un texte didactique de vulgarisation de l’enseignement de l’Église tandis qu’elle devient dans la version française de Jean de Vignay un symbole de luxe et de prestige.”
143 Dunn-Lardeau, 11-12.
144 This is also the oldest manuscript known. Dunn-Lardeau, 11-12.
145 Tausend, 8.
Latin, or both. Monika Tausend uses manuscript B (Kodex Paris, Bibli. Nat., n. acq. Fr 6504) for her edition, along with notes from the other six manuscripts and the fragment, and thus my work throughout this chapter will be based on this manuscript. G. Brunel in 1976 offered the most detailed suggestion for who might have translated the work: a Languedocian copyist originally from Albi (un copiste languedocien originaire de l’Albigois.)

Theoretical Background and Introduction to Other Scholarship

Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay in their recent works on courtly literature, love, and death view death and love as integral to the literature, as seen in Chapter 2. Simon Gaunt asserts that, throughout the corpus of courtly literature, there is “one central motif, the association of love and death” and that the characters associating love and death are in fact welcoming it: “A lover welcoming death—like a religious martyr—is a common motif in courtly love literature even when the word martire is not used.” I take a similar approach to the saints represented in the Légende dorée and the Occitan Legenda Aurea where the association of love and death tends to be—but is not always—expressed as love for the deity instead of love for another living human being. Thus, I am not defining the legends as courtly love literature, but I am viewing them as courtly

---

146 Tausend, 13-26.
147 Tausend, 17.
149 For Gaunt and Kay, see Chapter 2, note 6.
150 Jean Frappier, 5, defines courtly literature as literature meant for the aristocracy at court, as opposed to both peasants and clergy.
151 Gaunt, Love and Death, 7.
152 Gaunt, Love and Death, 8.
literature—literature read not just for religious purposes by people in the Church since, as stated above, that was not their sole purpose. I am viewing the episodes from a literary standpoint, much as Gaunt does in his text.\textsuperscript{153} This study does not treat any of the other representations of the saints’ lives and deaths or with any more historical versions of anyone’s life or death, saints or otherwise.

In Sarah Kay’s studies of the literary representation of the death wish, she argues “that belief is intimately interwoven with death (or rather, Lacan’s idea of the ‘zone between two deaths’) and enjoyment in all of them, but with different effects, the development of which can be traced chronologically and across genres.”\textsuperscript{154} This enjoyment on the part of the saints invites further study in the greater theme of longing for death. The saints ask for their torture and death; they seek this in order to avoid betraying their God, because of their desire to express faith in a certain way, or perhaps for other unknown reasons.

Kay continues her argument about the saints’ enjoyment and desire for death: “Martyrs have from the outset, then, mentally and spiritually given up the world. Death is both acceptable and welcomed; and they all quickly meet with what should, under ‘natural’ conditions, put an end to their bodily existence.”\textsuperscript{155} Thus, death is socially, culturally, and religiously acceptable for the martyrs.\textsuperscript{156} They desire death in order to

\textsuperscript{153} “I should also stress that my concern is not with the experience or representation of death in the real world, but rather with the evocation of death as a consequence of being in love in fictional and imaginary accounts of love, thus with the meaning and symbolic value of representations of death in texts about love.” Gaunt, \textit{Love and Death}, 10.
\textsuperscript{154} Kay, \textit{Courtly Contradictions}, 216.
\textsuperscript{155} Kay, \textit{Courtly Contradictions}, 222.
\textsuperscript{156} Boureau, 113, notes, “l’Eglise attire l’attention du fidèle sur les conditions strictes que doit respecter tout candidat à la palme du martyr: ne pas provoquer le persécuteur, mourir pour la foi, témoigner
leave the world they feel they cannot live in, and they can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if someone else puts them to death. For Kay, the primary question is defining the “zone between two deaths” and not the desire for death itself. For Simon Gaunt, the primary question is: “what is at stake in the ubiquitous association of love with death in medieval courtly literature.” In exploring this question he wants to separate the secular and the spiritual by more defined lines than has previously been done. In this chapter of the dissertation, the study and argument are about the language at the moment before the death and at the moment of an expressed desire for death.

This chapter seeks to answer these questions through close textual analysis, especially in the lives of Agnes, Pole, Agathe, the Vierge d’Antioche, Petronelle, Catherine, Marguerite, and the queens in the Catherine and Marguerite accounts, where we can see the association of a desire to die with the deity in which these characters believe. We see through these examples the vocabulary used in both the Old French and Old Occitan versions of the Golden Legend and how the diction used by the translators can illuminate the links between the deaths.

---

“The Church draws the attention of the faithful under strict conditions that each candidate of the palm of martyrdom should respect: do not provoke the persecutor, die for faith, witness publicly.” As we will see, the first category is not observed by many of the martyrs in the Legenda Aurea; many of them provoke their persecutor to hasten their death.

"Of course, spiritual love is also grounded in the body—Christ was after all made flesh—but courtly literature appropriates and incorporates models of sacrifice and desire associated with religious discourse and practices to produce an alternative ethical space in which salvation and redemption may be sought (albeit hopelessly erroneously, or sinfully) through a passionate attachment to another human being, rather than to God. My hypothesis is that this move may be far-reaching indeed, in that through the ethics of desire, the 'fuzzy edges' between the 'secular' and the spiritual may eventually start to become more defined.” Gaunt, Love and Death, 10.

Translations are my own and have been left in the original language for primary sources within the body of the text and the English translation in the footnotes because this chapter’s argument hinges on the vocabulary used within these death wishes. I refer to most of the saints by their Old French terminology except when I am discussing their Occitan or Latin lives. Because these lives have not been analyzed in precisely this light before, my analysis will assimilate the theoretical ideas of Gaunt and Kay in the background.
Analysis of Episodes and Language Used

In the *Legenda Aurea* compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, there are 182 chapters. These chapters can be distinguished by a few categories: 123 titles refer to men, five of which also have prominent female figures. Another twenty-eight titles refer to episodes about women. The remaining stories are concerned with the Virgin Mary (considered separately from the other female saints and martyrs), other feasts, observances, and histories of the Church. Of the thirty-three episodes concerning women, sixteen of the episodes involve a woman expressing some sort of wish for death. In the *Légende dorée* by Jean de Vignay, only thirty-one episodes feature women prominently, but of these thirty-one, fourteen contain some expression of a death wish. Several stories were omitted in the French version without any explanation. The *Legenda Aurea Provençal* is quite incomplete with only twelve of its 106 episodes featuring women, and only five of these show the women to have a death desire.

The deaths of these women and the acts leading up to their deaths can be categorized thematically in three ways: 1) wanting to leave society and join God, 2) wanting to die, and 3) giving thanks for death when it came. The female saints expressing some desire for death are in the following *Lives*: Agnes (XXIV), Paula (XXIX), Agatha (XXXIX), Sophia (XLVIII), Antiochena (LXII), Apollonia (LXVI), Petronella (LXXII), the Seven Brothers (XCII), Margaret (XCIII), Savinano and Savina (CXXIV), Natatlie and Adrian (CXXXIV), Eufemia (CXXXV), Catherine (CLXXII), and Perpetua (CLXXIII).
wanting to die for Christ, and 3) having a desire for an immediate end—possibly due to the fear of losing their virginity or other purity connected to conceptions of shame and honor. Other themes and repetitive structures, such as the cries of martyrs or their last words, will not be treated here.\textsuperscript{164} Rather, the above three categories will be analyzed respectively in the following sections.

1) Leaving Society and Finding Union—Pelagia, Marina, Agnes, and Pole

Leaving society in order to find unity—for most of the saints, a unity with God—is a category into which many female saints belong. Two saints, Marina and Pelagia, remove themselves from society and reject their natural community in order to embrace their life with God but remain alive. However, Saint Agnes, a virgin and noblewoman depicted in chapter XIV, does more than become a hermit or a monk.\textsuperscript{165} She expresses her death wish through the desire to leave society in the Old French version. The text reads:

Et Ambroise aussi dit en son preface : “La benoicte Agnes, despisant les delis de noblesse, desservit la celestielle dignité ; en delaissant les desirs de la compaignie humaine, est en la compaignie du roy pardurable. Et celle, recevant mort precious pour la confession de Jhesucrist, est faice ensemble semblable a celluy.”

(And Ambrose said in his preface: “The blessed Agnes, despising the pleasures of the court, deserved heavenly dignity; by abandoning the desires of human society, she is in the company of the ever-living God. And this one, receiving precious death for the confession of Jesus Christ, is made like him, united with him.”)\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{164} Alain Boureau (1984) has done an extensive study on the tropes and themes throughout the saints’ lives in the \textit{Golden Legend}.
\textsuperscript{165} Stories LXXXIV and CL in the Latin \textit{Legenda Aurea} respectively. Marina hides her female identity in order to leave her expected social milieu, and Pelagia becomes a hermit, according to their representations in the \textit{Legenda Aurea}.
\textsuperscript{166} de Voragine, \textit{La Légende dorée}, 239.
She is not just abandoning “la compaignie humaine” but is abandoning specifically its “desirs” as if there were something shameful about them, or at least not as honorable as heavenly acceptance. The construction of these phrases and those about being in the company of the everlasting king shows the stark contrast between her earthly existence and what she believes she will treasure in death. Her death is “precieuse” because it unites her with her king, and while this may seem obvious—a martyr wanting to be joined with Christ—the essential part of the passage is in the intentionality of the word “delaissant” when placed so closely with “mort precieuse.” She has not just been separated passively from the world; she has abandoned it for something better.

In the Occitan version, there is no mention of Agnes “desprisant les delis de noblesse” or of “delaissant les desirs de la compaignie humaine” even though the legend is present in the collection. The text’s editor does not note that this is because of a lacuna in the manuscript, so we must infer one of two ideas: one, that this was intentionally left out and that the desire to leave society through death in order to join a heavenly society was not necessary to emphasize, or two, that the original text from which the scribe was working was also missing the life. If the scribe intentionally omitted the lines about Agnes leaving society, we still have the rest of the legend that supports her rejection of society and her noble birth. Her “honorable” birthplace in society cannot compare to the honor she would find in a heavenly reward. Thus, her actions are the same, but they are not emphasized in quite the same intensity for the audience, making the intentionality of her actions, and her desire to die, seem weaker.

---

The language in the life of Saint Pole also demonstrates a desire but does not explicitly use a word for death. \(^{169}\) Pole’s death in the Old French is described as follows:

Elle cheist en tresgrant foiblesse, et trouva ce qu’elle desiroit pour nous laisser et pour estre plus plainement avecques Nostres Seigneur.

(She fell into very great illness, and found what she desired—to leave us and to be more fully with Our Lord).\(^{170}\)

As with Agnes, Pole wants to abandon or leave (delaisser/laisser) society (nous) in order to be more fully with her God. Jean de Vignay writes that she found what she desired, and because this satisfaction of desire helped her abandon life and society, the satisfaction was death. The verbs, as in the story of Agnes, are active: “desirer” and “laisser.” Pole’s journey toward death highlights her desire for separation from society, her desire for the journey toward death. This is more than the welcoming of death that Kay discusses in *Courtly Contradictions*; it is a specific desire for cutting off life. The entire story is absent from the Occitan version, and again, it is not possible to know whether this was intentional or due to a lack of the life in the original from which the Occitan scribe was copying.\(^{171}\)

In order to express the theme of leaving society to join God or another person, the scribes and transmitters of these texts use a collection of active verbs (delaisser, laisser, desirer) and a specification of what is being abandoned (“les delits de la noblesse,” “la compagnie humaine,” and “nous”). The writers are portraying what these women are

\(^{169}\) Legend XXIX in the Latin and Old French.
\(^{171}\) See pages 447 and following of Tausend’s edition of the Occitan *Golden Legend* for further information on which texts are included and which are not.
primarily leaving as society in the living world. Wanting to abandon their lives—hating their lives—is something to which they are called, and this could appeal to the women culturally as well. Agnes is portrayed as a noblewoman, but the story does not show her as having any significant amount of social influence except for her title; thus, wanting to die as a martyr would help her gain more religious and social collateral. Pole, another female figure represented without significant social influence apart from her faith, can be seen as also wanting to gain more religious collateral, in other words more spiritual worth, by being “plainement avecques Nostres Seigneur” (“openly or plainly with our Lord”). In this way, she cannot be exceeded by anyone—man or woman—on a social or religious scale.

2) Wanting to Die for Christ—Marguerite and Catherine

Wanting to die for Christ is a way of securing a place of honor or power on the social and religious spectrum and follows from another of Christ’s sayings in the Gospel of John: “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”

Marguerite and Catherine are two women who clearly announce their desire to die for Christ, and their deaths center on religious glory through self-sacrifice.

In the story of Marguerite, LXXXVIII in the Old French, Marguerite says, “Jhesucrist bailla soy mesme a mort pour moi et pour ce ne doubte je pas a mourir pour jhesucrist” (“Jesus Christ gave himself as the wage for death for me and for this I do not

172 Luke 14:26. New Revised Standard Version. Theologically, their desires are in accordance with the Bible: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”

fear dying for Jesus Christ”\textsuperscript{174} and “ce tourment de char est sauvement de m’am\textsuperscript{e}“ (“This torture of body is the salvation of my soul.”)\textsuperscript{175} Marguerite, in the Old French, does not specifically want to die here, but she does not actively “doubte” (fear) it. The Old Occitan Margarida in chapter L has a stronger statement: “Lo mieu Dieu moric per mi, e per so ieu viehl mori per luy” (“My God died for me, and so I want to die for him.”)\textsuperscript{176} She “viehl” (wants) to die for her God early in the account of her life. Not only does she use an active verb of desire (voler), but she also claims intimacy with God (lo mieu Dieu).

The Marguerite/Margarida comparison appears in reverse in the similar story of Catherine. In the Old French life, Catherine is the one depicted with the more active desire. She says:

\begin{quote}
N’atens point a faire les tourmens que tu as pourpensés, car je desire offrir a Dieu mon sang et ma char et fay ce que tu as conceu en ton courage, tu me verras appareillee a soutenir tous tormens
\end{quote}

(Don’t wait at all in doing the tortures that you have planned, because I want to offer to God my blood and my flesh and do what you have conceived in your courage, you will see me called to endure your tortures.)\textsuperscript{177}

Like Margarida in the Occitan \textit{Golden Legend}, Catherine “desire offrir” her life (sang et char) for Christ; she uses an active verb of volition.\textsuperscript{178} In the Occitan equivalent, Katherina says, “Sapjas, emperador, que nos em crestias, aparelhatz de morir per la fe de Jesu Christ” (“Know, emperor, that we are Christians, prepared to die for the faith of

\textsuperscript{174} Jacques de Voragine, \textit{La Légende dorée}, 606.
\textsuperscript{175} Jacques de Voragine, \textit{La Légende dorée}, 607.
\textsuperscript{176} Jacobus de Voragine, \textit{Legenda Aurea Provençal}, 208.
\textsuperscript{177} Jacques de Voragine, \textit{La Légende dorée}, 1115.
\textsuperscript{178} Karen Winstead and others have explored the idea of suffering, but here I am looking at the command of carrying out the torture as evidence of a death wish instead.
Jesus Christ.” This time, it is the Occitan version that has the weaker word; the Occitan writer uses “aparelhatz” (prepared) to describe the state of the saints. This is weaker not only because it invokes no action, but also because it is an adjective describing a simple state of the characters.

The philological aspects of these stories include, as with the Agnes and Pole accounts, active verbs of volition and an explicit negation of fear. One conclusion that might be drawn from the reversal of representations in the Marguerite/Margarida and Catherine/Katherina stories is that both translators were comfortable enough with the saints’ desires or willingness to die that they did not feel a need to remain consistent with active or passive representations of this state. The women may have wanted to die in order to live out their understanding of the passage from John, or perhaps like Agnes and Pole, who are described without a wide social influence, may die this way in order to attain honor, security, and importance in the afterlife.

3) Desire for Death to Avoid Shame

Related to this desire for death at a specific moment are those times when a saint demands immediate termination of her life from her executioner. We see this in many Lives throughout the Golden Legend, and one obvious way to interpret the request is—as above—a way to end one’s misery or fear. However, Karen Winstead argues that

179 Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda Aurea Provençal, 393.
Jacobus did not want his readers to interpret his saints as fearful. She also follows Cynthia Hahn’s argument about the saints’ relationship to pain. She quotes:

One of the principal characteristics of saints...is that they do not feel pain; viewers, on the contrary, confronted with the sight of whips, claws, torches, and the display of wounds and blood cannot help but conceptualize and experience the unfelt, unexperienceable pain of others. The presence of weapons and wounds cues a response of pity and empathy in the viewer.

Thus, if the tortures these saints endure are painless, then I hesitate to read these requests for a quick execution as moments that let the characters end their physical suffering. I see another motivation behind these deaths: an avoidance of sin, which would lead to shame.

Some examples of characters wanting to die to avoid falling back into sin or falling into sin anew are the wives of the kings persecuting Catherine and Marguerite. Shortly after the queens’ conversions to Christianity through the help of Marguerite and Catherine, these queens seek hasty deaths. When the queen in the Marguerite account is being led to her death, she first prays and then commands her executioners to carry out their orders. In the Old French Marguerite tale, the scene is as follows:

Et donc se leva d’oroison et dist au decoleur: ‘Frere, prens ton glaive et fiers.’ Et donc ferit et lui osta le chief a ung coup : et ainsi receut coronne de martyre

(And then she raised herself from prayer and said to the executioner: ‘Brother, strike your sword and fiercely!’ And he did so and removed her head with a single stroke, and thus she received the crown of martyr.)

The Occitan version is almost identical:

---

182 Jacques de Voragine, La Légende dorée, 608.
Both representations of the queen tell her executioner to kill her quickly, and both executioners follow the order. There is no explanation given for why the queens want to die in haste, but we could infer, with the rationale of Saint Augustine, that it might be to avoid cowardice or further sin. When, in Chapter 27 of *De civitate Dei*, he discusses the question of suicide in order to avoid sin, we see avoidance of sin as a reason for a hasty death. I reiterate: I am not suggesting that the martyrs should be characterized as suicidal because most of them do nothing by their own physical power to kill themselves, but I do emphasize their death wish. Augustine follows a very rational argument in this chapter about the value of killing oneself just as one has been baptized or forgiven all of one’s sins, but then he negates this, saying:

Hoc quia nefas est dicere, nefas est profecto se occidere. Nam si hoc sponte faciendi ulla causa iusta esse posset, procul dubio iustior quam ista non esset. Quia uero nec ista est, ergo nulla est.

(To say this is criminal, it is logical that to kill oneself is unlawful. But if somehow it were possible to make this just, I doubt that one could find one more just than this. But since this is not true, this is not just.)

Perhaps this is why the queens in the Marguerite stories wish to exit life so abruptly.

In the Catherine stories, the queens act similarly. In the Old French, the queen hastens her death:

---

And she was strong and admonished the martyr-makers to do what had been commanded to them. And thus the men took her out of the city and cut off her breasts with iron clamps, and then they cut off her head.  

The Old Occitan version says the same, though her torture is not so harsh in the end:

And thus the queen asked them that they cut off her head quickly and they did so. And then they took her head outside of the city.

The main difference between these two representations is that the Old French queen is “ferme” (firm, rigid) in her orders while the Occitan queen has no adjective. The adjective “ferme” indicates a strong will on the part of the queen; she asks for her death voluntarily.

An even more overt seeker of death is the Virgin of Antioch in life LX who fights a knight for her right to die as a martyr even though he stepped in to save her from losing her virginity and her life. This life is absent from the Occitan, and as before we do not know if this was a scribal choice or whether it was absent from what the scribe had as French or Latin texts from which to work. The opening of the Virgin of Antioch story is similar to the Old French Marguerite: “[Elle] fut tant religieuse que elle ne doubtoit la mort” (“She was so religious that she did not fear death.”) We are introduced to her as one who does not necessarily desire death, but as one who does not fear it. However, as the story progresses, her desire for death becomes apparent.

The Virgin is put into a brothel, and a knight comes to save her; the Virgin thinks he is only coming to save her chastity, but he comes to save her life as well. Her outcry against his attempt to preserve her life depicts her death wish:

Je ne t’ay pas esleu a estre gage de ma mort, mais je te desiray estre defendeur de ma chastee... Et se l’on veult avoir le sang, je ne desire nul plege, j’ay bien de quoy paier et contre moy est donnee ceste sentence la quelle est donne pour moy... je morrai hui coulpable de ton san ou martire du mien.... Et tu me ostes la mort... Garde, je t’en pri, que tu ne me condemnes et ne me oste pas le benefice que tu me as donne.

(I did not choose you to be the wage for my death; I only wanted you to be the defender of my chastity...And if they want to have blood, I desire no pledge, I have enough to pay for it and against me is given this sentence which is given for me...I will either die today guilty of your blood or martyred myself...And you take death from me...Be careful, I beg you, that you do not condemn me and do not take from me the blessing that you gave me.)¹²⁸

The woman is determined to die. She says in the indicative future, “je morrai hui.” She will die on that day, and while she prefers to die a martyr and not as one guilty of his blood, too, she will die regardless. She also asks him not to take away from her the blessing or “benefice” he has given her. “Benefice” was also an income source, sometimes land, for the regular clergy, elevating them to a higher social status. The blessing is left unspecified; Jacobus de Voragine and Jean de Vignay leave the possibilities for multi-layered interpretations open. Thus, it means a variety of possible blessings: first and most obviously, martyrdom (death); secondly, saving her chastity; thirdly, freedom from any sin she could possibly commit. If she dies a martyr with her virginity intact, she will not sin nor be tempted to sin, and thus will go to her God. The language of the death wish here comes in the verb “morir,” the more important feature is its tense and affirmative, emphatic nature.

¹²⁸ Jacques de Voragine, La Légende dorée, 446.
Considering her death wish in light of the third option, it is interesting to turn back to Augustine’s *Dei civitate Dei*. The Virgin of Antioch evades this problem of suicide by finding a way to escape life while she is chaste and guiltless in all respects. She seeks death to retain this purity for eternity. The Virgin of Antioch does not perform any actions that directly lead to her death even though she argues strongly against a man who thought he was saving her so that she could have the right to die.

Petronelle, account LXXVIII in the Old French, is another woman who wanted to preserve her chastity. The story reads:

Le conte Falcus vint a elle et la voulut avoir a femme pour sa beaulté. Au quel elle dist : ‘Se tu me veux avoir a femme, commande que les vierges viennent a moy qui me tiendront compagnie jusques a ta maison.’

(The count Flaccus came to her and wanted to have her as his wife because of her beauty. To which she said: ‘If you want to have me for a wife, command that the virgins come to me who will keep me company until your house.’)\(^{189}\)

Petronelle devised the distraction of the virgins so that she might escape the marriage.

During the distraction:

Perronelle se mist en jeunes et en oraisons, et recpeut le corps Nostre Seigneur, et se coucha en son lit et trespassa en dieu au tiers jour.

(Petronelle began to fast and pray, and received the body of Our Lord, and lay down in her bed and passed over to God on the third day.)\(^{190}\)

The narrator does not say for certain how she died, but one can speculate that by fasting, she could have caused the end of her own life.

The Occitan version of the same story is very similar:

Et edevenc se que hun comte venc a luy, e per la sua gran beutat demandet la per molher. Et ela respos li : ‘Se tu me voles aver per molher, fay me venir de las viergis que-m meno a ton ostal. » .... ela mes se en oratio e cumerguet. Et en apres mes se el liech. Et en apres –iij- dias, ela va morir.

\(^{189}\) Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*, 529.  
\(^{190}\) Jacques de Voragine, *La Légende dorée*, 529.
(One day a count came to her and asked her to be his wife because of her great beauty. And she answered him: ‘If you want to have me for a wife, command that the virgins come to me who will keep me company until your house’...She began to pray and fast, and received the body of Our Lord, and lied down in her bed and after three days, she died.)

The count is nameless, and the woman does not just have beauty; she has “gran beutat.”

The word order, too, is different; the prayer comes before the fasting. As in the Old French, the writer does not exclude the possibility of her dying because she refrained from food and drink, thus making it a possible direct suicide. The vocabulary in this tale that leads us to view it as a death wish again centers on the verbs, the verbs representing the actions that could possibly have led to Petronelle’s death—“se mist en jeunes” and “cumerguet.”

As in the previous two thematic categories, we have a rejection of fear in this story in addition to active verbs reflecting the desires of the women in the stories. It is worth noting that the queens in the stories do not receive the same prestige as the primary saints even though they die through martyrdom. Perhaps their deaths are too close to what Augustine discussed in *De civitate Dei*. Alternatively, perhaps the reader perceived their method of death (these women with a powerful social title) as being similar to the death of the saints featured in the stories, which would have served to elevate the standing of the saints for the reader.

We have seen a variety of examples of martyrs displaying a death wish: as a specific way of wanting to leave society and join God, wanting to die for Christ, and a desire for the immediate end of life because of a fear of losing virginity or other purity

---

and thus losing honor or taking on shame. The language used to make this theme apparent enough to tie one story to another across a collection of over 180 stories comes with the use of powerful verbs and a sense of intentionality. The intention is necessary to label a “character” as displaying an actual desire for death, and it is presented repeatedly throughout the *Golden Legend* in both its Old French and Occitan versions, despite the sections that seem to be missing from the Occitan.

Both vernacular languages express an equal recognition of the desire for death among the characters. To view these figures set forth by the Church as people to be revered but also to see them as desiring death when the Church’s stance on suicide is clearly a negative one, as shown with the example of Augustine, adds a new level to their characters. As Karen Winstead, a scholar of medieval English literature, notes:

> Martyrs occupied an ambiguous position in medieval culture...The significance of the martyr, like that of any cultural symbol, was constantly being contested and renegotiated, and in that process different facets of the legends—defiance, suffering, fear—were given emphasis as writers at various times and for various audiences sought to reconcile the exemplary and the potentially subversive elements.\(^{192}\)

\(^{192}\) Winstead, 220.

Jacobus de Voragine or Jean de Vignay or the Occitan writer were not necessarily highlighting the death wish as the theme they wanted to emphasize, but this theme remained significant in every story and every assumption made about the martyrs. To read the stories without identifying the assumptions made and what those assumptions imply—that the saints’ journeys toward death were more complicated than a simple faith in God—strips them of a very important theme.
The saints’ stories cannot be read as separate from the stories by Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and other writers of courtly literature. The saints, as well as intentionally fictional characters, display a proclivity for death.

In the historical context, two explanations emerge as to why the women want to die. The first is that martyrdom is a way for them to gain cultural and religious collateral. Men within the text are given a variety of positions to hold in society: bishop, martyr, doctor, evangelist, hermit, abbot, sinner, confessor, and even pope. Women in the text (because they would have been limited in society) are primarily limited to being virgins, martyrs, and (repenting) sinners, with some flexibility for becoming a hermit or an abbess, an alternative to death. The martyrdom the women seek elevates them to the highest status they know—union with God—and thus they have cause to strive for that within their cultural and societal framework. The women wanting to die for Christ and leave the societal structure in which they live (even if they are a noblewoman like Agnes) both fit this theory. The second theory is that the women desire death in order to avoid sin and shame, or the destruction of purity through an unwanted marriage.

This study of vocabulary with respect to the types of approaches to death on the part of the female saints opens up a new venue for the study of the saints and their relation to other figures in courtly literature. Their scenes are the archetype for the martyrdom version of the death wish. These saints consistently desired something actively; their characteristic action began because of a named desire, and by successfully

---

193 Boureau, 36-38, offers a succinct breakdown of the social and religious status held by the saints throughout the collection, dividing them into evangelists, sinners, virgins, martyrs, popes, bishops, hermits, abbots, confessors, and doctors, showing the majority of opportunities for social status to be solely for men.
acting on it, they proved their sincerity. Keeping the faith of the portrayed characters in mind but not limiting ourselves to the assumptions that too often come with seeing them as faithful will allow us to approach the texts in a fresh way so that we can apply the theory that the saints and martyrs not only faced death but are presented as desiring it. Jacobus de Voragine, Jean de Vignay, and the Occitan scribe all maintain this narrative background in their versions of the *Golden Legend*. The pattern of the death wish that we have seen in this chapter has provided us with the details needed to apply this pattern as a label to other death wish’s in medieval courtly literature.
Chapter 4: The Romans Antiques as Predecessors to the Tradition of Despair in Old French Romance

The romans antiques involve the translatio of original Greek or Latin texts from antiquity into medieval Latin and then into French. Along with the Lives, these were some of the first examples of courtly literature provided to the Old French and Old Occitan audiences, dating to the mid-twelfth century. They are as essential to the medieval tradition of rewriting and intertextuality as the Lives of the saints. The source matter was not original for either the saints or for the heroes from classical antiquity. The medieval writers rewrote and adapted their tales for their own specific audiences. In each of these texts, there are many examples of despair, death wishes, and actual suicide. These are much more acceptable to Christian audiences as direct suicides or despair because they originated in a different time and place with a different cultural background. Because these romans were based on stories from classical antiquity, the Christian norms and rule against suicide (as articulated by Augustine) and against despair (as articulated by Ratherius) had not yet come into existence in the source material. Thus, the French authors could more easily explore these human predicaments at least partially outside the

196 See Chapters 1 and 3 for a further discussion of Augustine and Ratherius.
judgment that Christianity would have placed on more-recently-created literary heroes. The authors did, however, Christianize the stories as well as add elements of the merveilleux characteristic of secular, non-antique romances. In scenes of suicide and the death wish, however, very little adaptation of source texts occurs, and this provides the most pertinent and interesting insights into the reception and presence of the death wish and suicide in this period. Because examples of these abound in the romans antiques, the focus here will be on two of the earliest: Le Roman d’Eneas and Le Roman de Troie, which feature some of the most famous examples of suicide and have amplified scenes added to the original classical stories. The authors update the stories into contemporary works, and thus show, in some of the very first of the examples of the genre of romance in French, the cultural reception of the death wish and suicide through the depiction of human desire and agency.

The Romans Antiques and the Roman d’Eneas

One of the first vernacular romances to appear was the Roman d’Eneas, composed by an anonymous Norman poet around 1155-1160. It follows the basic plot of Virgil’s Aeneid. Eneas departs from the defeated Troy and arrives in Carthage where he meets Queen Dido. They have a love affair, resulting in his departure for Italy and her suicide. The Italian king wants him to marry his daughter Lavinia, the princess of Latium, in order to join the Trojan race to the Latin one. The poet amplifies this section of the tale to include the themes and motifs of courtly love. The queen opposes their union, and battle ensues until the Trojan forces achieve victory, thereby founding Rome.
Surviving in nine manuscripts, the French romance met with success in its time. Its indebtedness to the *Aeneid* illustrates what exactly a *roman antique* is. The *translatio* of the material from one time period and source to another produces a genre somewhere between a romance and *chanson de geste* (medieval epic war poems).

This romance provides one of the most famous examples of the suicide of a character in Western literature: Dido, already famous from Virgil’s Latin *Aeneid*. To further preface the study of Dido’s death wish, a brief background of the categories of death wishes in the *romans antiques* is necessary. The *Roman d’Eneas* provides not only Dido’s vivid example of suicide but a number of others. Aimé Petit and Jessie Crossland maintain that the poet actually skipped the step of *translatio*, opting to use Virgil’s own text as the inspiration for the work. Crossland juxtaposes the episode of Dido’s moment of death from Book IV of the *Aeneid* with the French text and shows how in a number of places the texts are almost identical, to the extent that the French author uses the same root of the word from Latin to French even when the French word has a slightly different meaning. Although the poet used this Latin text in writing his own, he made choices of omission and amplification, and thus one can treat the text in its own right and not as a mere translation. Crossland also notes that after the appearance of the French

---

Eneas there was very little interest in Virgil’s text. The French Eneas pleased the reading audience because he surpassed the Latin in terms of contemporary glory and values.

Though the above-mentioned scholars have studied the representation of suicide and the reception of Virgil’s Aeneid in the Eneas, the presence and absence of the marvelous in this romance merits attention. This is extremely important in terms of the analysis of suicide and the death wish in medieval French literature because before Dido’s death, she pretends to invoke magic to calm herself, but it is only a ruse. Her mixture of suicide and the feigned supernatural highlight the stark reality of self-inflicted death and the fact that it creates an unbreachable rupture between those living and those dead.

Women are now understood to have constituted a significant part of the text’s audience, and this could explain the lengthy descriptions of women as central characters and their clothing and emotions, which, in turn, could explain why Dido’s death scene would be so embellished in the French. Kathryn Talarico pushes this argument of description further and attempts to define a specific mode of description particular to the medieval romans antiques. Her article provides a close reading of the text, and this chapter draws on her reading, going further by studying the marvelous in relation to the death scenes. Talarico studies the descriptions of love and its symptoms, but she emphasizes that the descriptions of characters in love or those dying are ruled by an

---

200 Crossland, 282-284.
201 This is also mentioned by Mary Paschal, “The Structure of the ‘Roman d’Enées,’” *The French Review* 54 (October 1980), 47-51.
202 Paschal, 49.
She believes that this method of description is actually one of the themes that dominate the romance because the two moments most described by the writer are when a character falls in love and when a character dies. In both situations, the character must be in a state of transition or flux. Studying the descriptions concerning death scenes then, can elucidate much of what the French writer had to add to the Latin text. Talarico compares death to love:

Death, like the wrong kind of love, is seen as a negative metamorphosis. The right kind of love, such as that between Eneas and Lavine, will be depicted in its metamorphosing powers also, but this time the transformation will be a positive one: a sort of exquisite, willingly sought death in life, death in order to live. This death leads to renewal, rebirth.

This hints at the idea that a desire for death would be a desire for a sort of life, perhaps in another world or as another being, but a continuation nonetheless. Dido’s seeking of death falls into the erotic category of death because her death is the closest she can get to fulfilling her sexual desires. Death would provide an equivalent to orgasm. The metamorphosis of which Talarico writes, is not essentially negative according to the person desiring death; in a way the transformation could be positive for him or her because it could be a relief for the pains of life. The writer of this romance can therefore describe, according to her, death as something negative, but that raises the question of where to find the positive. During moments of death and in moments of voluntary or desired death (both negative or positive), noticing the presence or absence of the marvelous as a way of reducing suffering of death for the character—or even for the

---

204 Talarico, 215-217.
206 Cf. pages 26-27.
reader—highlights the reality and severity of the scene and what the characters and perceived reader can bear.

Warriors desire to die in order to attain glory, though they prefer victory, and because of this desire, they follow the martyr trope in their desire for death. Some enamored characters wish to die because they claim life cannot continue without the salutary love of the person they desire; however, the latter can be categorized as courtly love, which is not the main subject of discussion here. In these romances some characters have an actual intention (and not a simple love-threat) to kill themselves with their own hands. Each situation—love, battle, grief, or other—provides details of death wishes, and in each situation there is a lack of judgment and of commentary, but above all, there is a lack of the marvelous that so often comes to the rescue in other situations. With the marvelous absent, the death wish and suicide become realistic in the text, not softened even by fiction. For each character, too, the reality differs. A character may want to die, or may simply say that he or she wants to die, or conversely he or she may believe that death is just another way of living.

Dido’s suicide brings many of these aspects together in her successful suicide. She wanted to kill herself and realized that aim. It is necessary to view this death not just as a copy of Virgil’s presentation but rather as a separate French work of its own. Studies of the influence of the Latin source material in the romans antiques already exist, namely by Petit, Crossland, R. J. Cormier, and E. Faral, but here the question is what results from the translatio in the extant vernacular example of the death wish in the Old French

---

207 Cf. pages 26-27.
The death wish as presented by the authors of the *romans antiques* is, however, rather different than the idea in typical romances, *chansons de gestes*, lais, and other songs and poems because of the classical subject matter.

In the *Roman d'Eneas* and in other *romans antiques*, the writers give the impression that the world of the romance is entirely different from the one known by its French readers. Not only is the romance’s world one of the past and of a different part of the world, but it also belongs to the fantastic, where magic and marvelous events can happen, for instance with the intervention of fairies, witches, and sorcerers. A death wish can be interrupted or caused by something, and that interruption or cause comments on the death wish in the literary scene. Two such causes or interruptions are the *merveilleux* and lovesickness. Theories of the *merveilleux* and lovesickness as developed by medieval scholars assist in the interpretation of these scenes because both occur so frequently in medieval narrative. Theologian Hugh de Saint Victor provided a guideline for how the *merveilleux* comments on and functions within the action within a text: the *merveilleux* is noticed but not understood and encourages the reader to ask what it must mean. Thus, in a scene of despair or suicide where the *merveilleux* is present, we know that the intended audience would have even more cause to attempt to consider the implications of the action. The *merveilleux* is an occurrence or character that explains a break in the “natural” chain of events. It is something that needs an explanation based on the

---

supernatural, and Zumthor divides the *merveilleux* into three categories: 1) something that connects cause and effect in reality, 2) something magical that explains a discontinuity, and 3) the pure *merveilleux* where there is no cause present for an effect except for magic, sorcerers, fairies, or other supernatural beings. 209

It is the idea of this marvelous world in Dido’s death scene that makes the death so shocking and, for the period, so modern. Her fictional tomb (not present in the Latin) explicates her suicide, love, and madness:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Iluec gist} \\
\text{Dido qui por amor s’occist} \\
\text{Onques ne fu meilleur paiene} \\
\text{S’elle n’eust amor soutaine,} \\
\text{Mais elle ama trop follement,} \\
\text{Savoirs ne li valut neant.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Here lies
Dido who killed herself for love;
Never would there have been a better pagan woman
Had she not found this sudden love,
But she loved out of madness,
Wisdom did not help her at all.) 210

Thus Dido’s ending point in the romance provides a lens through which to view her experience up until her death. The poet laments her death with a tombstone. He wants Dido to be read as a victim of lovesickness, but even more as a victim of madness. To achieve a suicide and not simply suffer is shocking and reminds the reader and author that she is not a Christian woman. He even comments upon her worth as a pagan, admitting that a non-Christian could have value before undercutting this admission.

The first example of voluntary death in the romance is near the opening of the text, when Eneas encourages his people to face their fear of death and suffering:

Seignor, fait il, franc chevalier,  
ne vous devez mie esmaier:  
se vous avez eu pouor  
en celle mer, mauz et dolor,  
ça en avant vous delitra  
quant il vous en remembera.  
Hom qui se met en autrui terre,  
qui vuelt ne gain ne bien conquerre,  
a grant honnor ne puet venir  
se bien ne mal ne puet souffrir.  
Mais se il sueffre .I. pou mesaise,  
que il n’ait tot ce qui li plaise,  
ce m’est avis, miex priser  
le bien aprez quant il l’avra.

(Lords, he says, noble knights,  
you should not be afraid at all:  
if you have been afraid  
on this sea, with pain and suffering,  
later it will delight you  
when you remember it.  
A man who travels to another land  
to conquer a kingdom cannot  
achieve great honor  
If he cannot endure both good and evil.  
But if he suffers a little uneasiness  
so that he does not have everything he  
pleases, in my opinion, he will value the  
reward more greatly once he has it.)^{211}

This passage is one of stark reality spoken in time of need; there is no mention of the marvelous. Eneas does mention Jupiter five lines later as he describes Lombardy, but this is only a traditional mythological conceit, not an actual event caused or interrupted by the supernatural. What is positive according to Eneas (who, as the hero is representative of what is glorious and honorable) is the glory that one can earn if one risks one’s life in combat; the negative only exists for the warrior who fears death. Eneas’s appeal to his people fits both the category of the martyr trope and the category of the apprehension of death.\textsuperscript{212} Kay suggests that in the culture of the \textit{romans antiques} from this period, the

---

\textsuperscript{211} Lines 220-233. Translation my own.  
\textsuperscript{212} Cf. pages 26-27.
body of the warrior is seen almost as that of a saint and that his achievement of glory only exists in his death.\textsuperscript{213} There is no reason for a warrior to fear death because of any religious or moral reason; his salvation comes from his glory, which in turn comes from death. There is thus no reason why Eneas (or the poet who wrote the French tale) should speak of the marvelous or add a few lines or words encouraging or comforting the characters or readers. Eneas’s original values remain largely unchanged in comparison with contemporary, chivalrous ones. Indeed, the content of the lines are hardly changed from the Latin to the French.\textsuperscript{214} What does change is the admission of fear, which is present in the Latin and absent in the French. The French Eneas tells his people not to fear in the lines quoted above, while the Latin one only encourages his people.

Immediately following his speech in Virgil’s poem, Eneas is shown to have fear—of

\textsuperscript{213} Kay, 232, writes that in \textit{Le Roman d’Enées} and in \textit{Le Roman de Troie}, “The martyr's sublime body results from arresting the natural process of death at its very frontier. Although subjected to lethal violence, the saint is suspended in a miraculous state of indestructibility...but, in these texts, the zone between the two deaths occurs not just before, but just after, literal death... the body of the warrior is also elevated to the sublime.” Kay, 239, also writes, “[the roman antiques] record the translatio of body into text as though it were an enduring historical truth, while at the same time conceding that we can have no evidence that it was so; it is up to us whether we believe it or not... So in place of the living sublime body of the martyr and the immediately relevant text of their life, we find in the romans antiques an awareness instead of the intimate bond between art and death.”

\textsuperscript{214} Virgil, \textit{Aeneid} I.198-207:\textsuperscript{47} “O socii—neque enim ignari sumus ante malorum—/ O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem. / Vos et Scyllaem rabiem penitusque sonantis / accetis scopulos, vos et Cyclopea saxa / experti: revocate animos, maestumque timorem / mittite: forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit. / Per varios casus, per tot discrimina rerum / tendimus in Latium; sedes ubi fata quietas / ostendunt; illic fas regna resurgere Troiae. / Durate, et vosmet rebus servate secundis” (in \textit{P. Vergili Maronis Opera} ed. R.A.B. Mynors. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). In English, “Friends, you’ve suffered worse than this, we’ve known troubles before, and god will give an end to these also. You survived the madness of Scylla and the crashing cliffs and the Cyclopean rocks. Restore your courage, and put away sad fear. Perhaps some day it will be pleasing to remember these things. Through different misfortunes and so many problems we are making our way to Latium, where the Fates promise a peaceful home. There the kingdom of Troy will rise again. Be strong, and save yourselves for better days” (trans. Dick Caldwell (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2004).
implied death or failure—himself, whereas the French poet does not dare imply that the leader of knights could harbor such lowly sentiments.\(^{215}\)

Five thousand lines after this speech, the poet shows Nisus, a young warrior, who serves to illustrate Eneas’ speech.\(^{216}\) He flees from some of the enemy and as he runs forgets his friend (\textit{ami}) Euryalus because he “trop crien la mort” (“feared death so much”).\(^{217}\) Nisus realizes his error very quickly, not because of a message from the gods, nor because of the intervention of a sorcerer or fairy, but because of his love for Euryalus and for his honor. Thus, Nisus, like Eneas, fits into two categories, though his categories are that of the erotic and that of the martyr.\(^{218}\) Nisus retraces his steps, saying:

\begin{quote}
se je nel truis, poy pris ma vie,
et se il n’est home qui m’occie,
si say je bien que m’occiray.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(if I don’t find him, then my life is worthless,
and if there’s no one to kill me,
then I know I will kill myself.\(^{219}\)
\end{quote}

As Kay observed, to die in battle for the honor of another is honor for oneself; the warrior’s culture thus gives the warrior an opportunity to desire death without shame and without fear. Men in the most glorious position in this semi-classical, semi-Christian society, then, have a partial means of escape from the laws of the Church because their final judgment rests on honor in battle and not religious values. This reflects reality in contemporary practice where actual tombstones praised honor and glory even above any

\(^{215}\) Virgil, \textit{Aeneid} I.208-209 (trans. Caldwell): “Though sick with worry, he hoped outwardly and repressed his cares deep in his heart.” (“\textit{Talia voce refert, curisque ingentibus aeger / spem voltu simulat, premit altum corde dolor em.”)

\(^{216}\) Lines 5100 and following. Nisus and Euryalus were two young warriors who attacked the enemy at night; later the enemy found them and killed them.

\(^{217}\) Line 5226.

\(^{218}\) Cf. pages 26-27.

\(^{219}\) Lines 5257-5259.
religious values. Nisus thus pursues the enemies who were attacking Euryalus, and he dies avenging his friend. No sorcerer intervenes—no fairies, no giants, no magicians. Nothing in the descriptions of Nisus’s actions indicates that anything other than worldly values as handed down by Eneas and human actions caused this chain of events, and thus, that there must be an other-worldly intervention.

Shortly after this scene, there is another reaction to the loss of a young man in battle, this time through the grief of King Evander. Because of his loss, the king explains his despair saying:

Lasse, je n’avray mais confort
De ma tristor jusqu’a la mort;
toute metray ma vie a duel,
la mort me prene, or le veil!

(Alas, I will never have comfort
From my sadness until death;
I will pass my life in grief.
Oh, may death take me, I want it now!)

One sees such exclamations throughout the romans antiques as well as in the chansons de geste and in other forms of literature where a character suffers great pain because of the loss of someone he or she loves. In the presence of such grief, the marvelous cannot intervene in the action to comfort the living person. This episode follows the death wish category of the expression of the value of life because the king is grieving for the loss of

---

220 Ariès notes that tombs and other monuments mix earthly and heavenly values, claiming that fame and glory are a person’s best legacy and how they attain salvation, 94.
221 It should be noted that one can also view this scene in relation to love. In Virgil’s Aeneid, one sees several mentions that the relationship between these two men was of a physical, sexual nature. Virgil writes, “His unus amor erat” (Their love was one). Aeneid IX.182 (R.A.B. Mynors, R. A. B, ed., P. Vergili Maronis Opera [Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1969].) John Makowski writes about this, maintaining that they are in love with each other, and thus one can see this death both as voluntary for military honor but also for love. See John F. Makowski, “Nisus and Euryalus: A Platonic Relationship” The Classical Journal 85:1 (1989), 1-15.
222 Lines 6430-6433.
223 For exclamations of grief see Troie, lines 13194, 13504, 16374, 17634, etc.
a young man’s life and showing how his own is no longer worth living in the face of such a loss.\textsuperscript{224} It is important to note that this episode was greatly changed and amplified from that of Virgil and thus, there was ample room for the poet to alter the situation, but he does not.\textsuperscript{225} He shows human suffering for the loss of a loved one with real intensity.

The poet also offers episodes of love and the suffering that accompanies it. Dido is the principal example of suffering for love and of the desire for death that follows this suffering because Dido kills herself instead of enduring the vicissitudes of her passion. Dido is also a character who suffers from madness, as seen on her tombstone, so it is not a clear case of courtly lovesickness.\textsuperscript{226} Here one can see Talarico’s idea that sometimes one must die in order to live. Dido could not survive while feeling such pain, and thus she kills herself. This death is negative according to the poet and other characters who see Dido as mad, but for Dido herself, death will provide her with a positive transformation. Some parts of these scenes are directly taken from the Latin,\textsuperscript{227} but the emotional description is significantly amplified in the French text, perhaps for the benefit of the supposed female audience.\textsuperscript{228}

The symptoms of love from which Dido suffers for Eneas follow the model of courtly love proposed several centuries later by Andreas Capellanus,\textsuperscript{229} and the idea of

\textsuperscript{224} Cf. pages 26-27.
\textsuperscript{226} Dido’s epitaph is quoted earlier in this chapter.
\textsuperscript{227} Crossland, 283.
\textsuperscript{228} Paschal, 47-51. Paschal maintains that the majority of the audience for these texts was female.
seeming to die of lovesickness goes as far back as Sappho and later Ovid.\textsuperscript{230} These typical aspects of courtly love occur before the consummation of Dido and Eneas’s relationship. Talarico maintains that it is during the consummation and the madness of love that Dido loses her power (this resembles the argument in the text from Anna, Dido’s sister, when she tries to convince Dido to forget Eneas in favor of her life).\textsuperscript{231} Talarico continues by arguing that this was a negative transformation and not a positive one towards love.\textsuperscript{232} Indeed, the author of the romance writes that “Amors le fait de saige folle” (Love turned her from wise to crazy).\textsuperscript{233} However, because this love in some ways follows the model of courtly love, the suffering and the death wish are not presented as serious risks; the reader would expect to see two such courtly lovers end up together.

As in the Latin text, Eneas decides to leave Dido after some time with her, but before his departure, he announces his fear for her life: “moult doute la departie / de la dame, que ne s’occie.” (“he greatly feared for the lady at his departure, lest she kill herself”).\textsuperscript{234} The French poet, like Virgil, says that Eneas must leave because of “I. message” (“a message”) from the gods.\textsuperscript{235} One could consider this intervention from the gods (or simply from the tradition of the text) a sort of intervention of the marvelous.\textsuperscript{236} According to Hugh of Saint Victor, a twelfth-century theologian, the marvelous is noticed but not understood and encourages the reader to ask what it must mean. The merveilleux is an occurrence or character that explains a break in the “natural” chain of events. It is

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{230} Yunck, 81, 85.
\footnotetext{231} Lines 1414-1467.
\footnotetext{232} Talarico, 218-220.
\footnotetext{233} Line 1493.
\footnotetext{234} Lines 1718-1719.
\footnotetext{235} Line 1699.
\footnotetext{236} Zumthor, \textit{Essai}, 170-173.
\end{footnotes}
something that needs an explanation based on the supernatural. Venus is blamed at the beginning of the story for Dido’s love of Eneas because it was she who placed passion on Ascanius’s face before Dido embraced him.\textsuperscript{237} The gods do not traditionally make up what can be classified as marvelous, but they are a supernatural other in this story, without which there would be a great lack of explanation of events.

Another aspect of the supernatural enters during the moments preceding Dido’s suicide. As in the \textit{Aeneid}, in order to hide her suicidal intentions from her sister Anna, Dido invents a story about a sorceress who can help her bring Eneas back and convince him of his love for her, but this is only a ruse even within the fiction of the story. Dido appeals to a form of religion for her distraction. It is significant that the poet would not choose to amplify this religion or add the marvelous as a way to explain or change the readers’ perception of Dido’s suicide because the author is conforming to the traditional pattern of the tale. This reinforces the idea that there is nothing worldly or other-worldly that can explain the act of suicide to the living, but the temptation of a belief in religious power can hide the act of suicide from the living. What is negative for Dido exists in her life, caused by her own madness and whatever can be blamed on the gods. She is alone without her deceased husband and finds herself even more alone without her lover. Death is positive for her because she can escape her suffering: “By this fabrication Dido communicates in oblique fashion that she too entertains the inner hope that through her dread act she will triumph, will secure union with her beloved. It is in the portrayal of a

\textsuperscript{237} Lines 800-861.
suicide that failed to achieve the end sought that we have the clearest enunciation of this paradoxical hope,” notes Williamson.\footnote{238}

Dido is acting as the author of her own death scene and uses religious magic as a ruse to distract other characters so that she may plan her exit from life. She thus acts as the driving force behind the actions to fulfill her own desires, explaining the sequence of suicide preparations to her sister with a magical explanation. She demonstrates the erotic trope, preferring to lie in bed with death if she cannot have Eneas in life. The Eneas poet uses less of the marvelous than do other writers of the \textit{romans antiques}, preferring to focus on bringing themes of courtly love and a fascination with foreign lands into his narrative, and so it is remarkable that he retains the idea of the marvelous in the death scene of Dido and even expands upon it, as noted by John Yunck. Dido tells her sister Anna: “Je muir a dolor” (“I’m dying of grief”).\footnote{239} Then Dido pretends to find a way to avoid her death. She says:

\begin{quote}
Anna, fait elle, or ay trové
I. bon conseill et esgardé.
Yci près a une sorciere,
Moult fort chose li est ligiere.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
(Anna, she says, I have made
A good and wise plan.
There is a sorceress nearby
For whom the most difficult thing is easy.)\footnote{240}
\end{quote}

From the beginning of her speech, Dido is shown as the creator of the plan, deciding herself to bring into the situation a sorceress. However, this sorceress does not exist and is created merely to distract Anna from Dido’s actual intentions of suicide. These lines


\footnote{239 Line 1969.}

\footnote{240 Lines 1988-1991.}
are very close to those of Virgil, except that Virgil’s sorceress was a priestess.\(^{241}\) The Eneas poet transforms what was a pagan rite into a magical one as part of his Christianization of the poem, as Crossland has noted.\(^{242}\)

As Yunck points out, the Eneas poet does add to the sorceress’s powers with the lines “si fait les oysiaux parler / et l’eve arriere retourner” (“she makes birds talk and water run backwards”).\(^{243}\) Dido continues in both the Latin and French to say:

Elle m’a dit qu’elle fera
Que le vassal retournera,
Ou le me fera oublier
Que n’avray soing de lui amer.

(She told me she will make
The vassal return
Or make me forget him
So that I will not care about loving him.)\(^{244}\)

Dido clearly states the fulfillment of her deepest desires here, but she knows that nothing, no matter how marvelous, could fulfill them. The difference between the Latin and the French is that in the Latin, Dido includes curses of Aeneas whereas in the French, the tone is more forgiving and the curses are erased.\(^{245}\) While this does not make Dido a saint, the event merits a comparison with hagiographic narrative. Dido desires death because she has lost her lover and has lost her honor because her lover has left,\(^{246}\) the female saints desire death to avoid a loss of honor that would result in a loss of God’s love. The saints have an access to death that is acceptable because, despite the fact that

\(^{242}\) Crossland, 284.
\(^{244}\) Lines 2010-2013.
\(^{245}\) Virgil, *Aeneid* IV.850-875.
\(^{246}\) Line 2019. Dido refers to the bed where Eneas dishonored her (“le lit ou il me vergonda”), indicating that she has lost her honor in her loss of him. In the Latin, she only “came to grief/perished on that marriage bed” (lectumque iugalem / quo perii, *Aeneid* IV.496-497).
they may have *provoked* others into killing them, they did not actually deliver their own violent execution. Dido’s ending moments parallel those of the saints who forgive the world and those against them. Yunck insists that this is another example of how the poem has been Christianized; Dido forgives her lover.

Dido’s speech continues:

```
elle fera par son anguire,  
   Par merveilleus enchantement,  
   S’amor ne grevera noiant.
```

(she will make with her magic
By marvelous enchantment
So that his love will grieve me no more.)

Because Dido is only a character and not a more powerful narrator bringing the marvelous into this scene, this is nothing but fiction for both Dido and the poet. This fiction that she herself creates would have been the only thing able to save her.

Dido succeeds in her efforts to trick her sister and kills herself. After her death, there is no thought of invoking magic or necromancy to resuscitate her. Dido must die according to the traditional Virgilian story, so no magic could save her. However, it is in Dido’s own created scenario that religion can fail; in medieval narrative, for something to be considered marvelous, it must function as a successful intervening force. The gravity of an action such as suicide is not even momentarily treated as reversible. No hope is mentioned after a suicide, as Dido had no hope in the existence of a higher power to redeem her love, and poets and authors who might invoke religious, magic, or marvelous events elsewhere do not dare use it against such a worldly event.

---

The roman also contains later commentary on Dido’s suicide, a rare occurrence in medieval literature. Eneas wants to marry Lavinia, princess of the native Latins whom Aeneas encounters once he finally lands in Italy, but her mother does not approve and in her discourse discusses Dido: “Elle s’occist a grant martire,” which could be translated as “she killed herself because of great suffering,” but the importance of the choice of the word “martire” should not be lost. Her death mimics that of the saints because of her loss of honor. Whether she is mad or sane, without her lover, she has lost all honor and cannot continue to live. The hatred that Lavinia’s mother has for Eneas erases all thought of judging Dido’s death, even if the poet who Christianized the text could have added some subtle or explicit commentary at this point.

Toward the end of the story, when Eneas himself speaks of his love for Lavinia and the difficulty that it gives him, he compares it with the suffering he caused Dido:

Onc ne fui mais en tel destroit ;
Se je en eusse tel coraje
Vers la royne de Cartaje
Qui tant m’ama que s’en occist,
Ja mon cuer de li ne partist ;
Ne la guerpisse en mon vivant,
Se je seuse d’amor tant
Com j’ay dés ier matin apris.

(Never have I known such torment;
If I had ever had such feelings
For the Queen of Carthage
Who loved me so much she killed herself.
My heart would never have left her,
I would never have left her in my life
If I had known as much about love
As I learned since yesterday morning.)

---

248 Line 3395.
249 Lines 9090-9097.
Eneas understands Dido’s suffering so well that he says a few lines later: “moult me metray a abandon / ou de la mort ou de la vie” (“I will take any risks for love for life or death”). This risk pushes Eneas into the type of the erotic death wish because he hopes for orgasm either literally with his lover or figuratively in death. These risks would be secular, mortal risks, not marvelous invocations; however, he has no opportunity to prove that he would take such a risk for love because Lavinia accepts him. Neither in Dido’s own speech nor in that of other characters does one see an invocation of the marvelous when a suicide is discussed. Lavinia’s mother believed that Dido’s suffering only existed in reality and feared the same brutal reality for her daughter; Eneas compares his emotions to those of Dido and realizes how real and present they are. Perhaps the most damning commentary on the suicidal Dido in medieval France is her singularity: her character is not reprised or adapted into other romances. The Lavinia-Eneas heiress-hero courtly relationship becomes a romance trope, but the despairing abandoned queen is truly abandoned by later authors.

The marvelous, magic, or enchantment cannot change the course of events for Dido, nor any other death wish in medieval literature. In this romance, the death wish falls into four types of the death wish as established in Chapter 2: the martyr trope, the erotic desire, the apprehension of death, and the way to express the value of life. The successful suicide does not desire an intervention; neither narrators nor the suicidal characters themselves act to change this desire. The marvelous cannot be present in a willing military death because dying in battle brings glory to the dead man and to his

---

250 Lines 9106-9107.
people and because it is not part of the historical genre in its medieval definition. Death desired because of love cannot use an invocation of the marvelous because the character wanting love knows that it is only in reality that he or she can succeed in having the love of the other. Occasionally in literature, love potions exist or supernatural characters help reunite lovers, but they do not use powers over the emotions of the people, either for changing their feelings desiring love or death. Suicide in the *Roman d'Eneas* is despair incarnate, and neither the marvelous, often used elsewhere to give hope or help to a character, nor any other solace enters this total void of hope.

**The Death Wish in *Le Roman de Troie***

Like *Le Roman d'Enéas*, *Le Roman de Troie* has many scenes of the death wish. Benoît de Sainte-Maure composed the popular romance between 1155 and 1165, which survives in thirty-nine manuscripts.²⁵¹ The dating of this text has been debated for at least a century, with most scholars certain that it precedes 1172 because of the dedication to Eleanor of Poitou, Queen of England, and most accept that it followed *Enéas*.²⁵² This medieval version of the Trojan War was one of several that inspired other epic poems that became known as *romans antiques*. His 30,000-line tale is not original but instead is the retelling of the Trojan War based on versions of Homer’s *Iliad* (which was not

---

²⁵¹ Levenson, 67.
²⁵² For dating, see Léopold Constans, *Le Roman de Troie par Benoît de Sainte-Maure, publié d’après tous les manuscrits connus par Léopold Constans* (Paris: SATF, 1912), Vol. VI, 189; F.A.G. Cowper, “Date and Dedication of the *Roman de Troie*,” *Modern Philology* 27 (1930), 379-382; and F.E. Guyer “The Chronology of the Earliest French Romances,” *Modern Philology* 26 University of Chicago Press 1929, 255-277. Guyer believed that the text must have dated from after 1184, when Eleanor was released from prison, because Benoit would not have dedicated his work to an imprisoned queen. Cowper disagreed, accepting dates between 1154 and 1174. In this he agreed more closely with Constans, who thought that the text dated from anywhere between 1154 and 1160.
directly known in medieval France) by the late antique authors Darès Phygius and Dictys Cretensis. These primary sources for Benoît’s romance are considered forgeries, because their authors falsely claimed to be eyewitnesses to the Trojan war. Aïmé Petit demonstrates the anachronisms spread throughout this and other romans antiques to support the independence of the texts as created and not simply translated literature, particularly emphasizing the use of chanson de geste stylistic traits in battle scenes.

What remains constant throughout these presentations of the war is the depiction of the suffering of humanity, seen again in romances, poems, and lais throughout the Middle Ages. He especially uses language that describes this suffering in terms of shame and honor.

The scholarship tradition for Homer’s oeuvre provides many examples of how to view the works as a whole, studying how the various types of episodes play into plots, narration, character, and structure. For the romances from the Middle Ages, the overarching structure of the narrative has yet to be examined in terms of personal despair or longing for death. In Medieval French literature, desperation arose from many aspects of life and often led characters to wish for the end of their life or to be willing to give

---

253 David Rollo, 202, argues that Dares was an imaginary Trojan and that either the Greek source was a forgery or non-existent or the Latin source was a forgery or non-existent. David Rollo, “Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie: Historiography, Forgery, and Fiction,” Comparative Literature Studies, 32 (1995), 191-225, at 202.
254 Petit, L’anachronisme, 277-278.
255 Levenson, 63, adds that this is part of the overall narrative structure of the poem: “In Le Roman de Troie, therefore, the total chaos of medieval warfare again and again subsides, epic fashion, leaving in the forefront of the narrative an encounter between two heroes which takes place in an orderly, formulaic manner.”
256 Bruce Heiden uses a similar approach in Homer’s Cosmic Fabrication where he views the story of the Iliad in terms of poetic design and how the various episodes within the poem form a whole that must be viewed comprehensively in order to be fully understood. Bruce Heiden, Homer’s Cosmic Fabrication: Choice and Design in the Iliad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
their life in order to achieve a goal. A wish for death could come as a symptom of
lovesickness, as a way to save one’s honor, as avoidance of losing a battle, as grief for a
lost relative, as a means for revenge. More than forty episodes of a character desiring to
die occur in the *romans antiques*, and in order to understand each, these episodes must be
studied in terms of the structure of the entire romance, the character expressing these
desires, and the plot.

R. M. Lumiansky and J. L. Levenson see the romance as having an overriding
structure and narrative format that guides the reader to view the characters in personal
and contemporary ways and that this structure established a tradition that continued to
influence writers for centuries.\footnote{257 Levenson, 54.} Levenson points out that the descriptions of characters
appeal specifically to the mind of the intended audience and have echoes with other
romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, adding *le merveilleux* in the middle of
descriptions.\footnote{258 Levenson, 66.} Lumiansky notes that “Benoit’s portraits seem purposefully
summarizes the attributes given to each character in detail to show that Benoit added
much to the work of his sources and that he did so in the aim of appealing to a
contemporary audience. No choice of individual characteristic is random in the text, and
Benoît changed gender roles, emotional trends, and physical attributes to portray a
realistic and complex group of people. Lumiansky argues that the main structure of the
poem centers on the relationships among characters and that the poem cannot be read

\footnote{257 Levenson, 54.}
\footnote{258 Levenson, 66.}
without taking these into account as the driving narrative motor.\textsuperscript{260} Levenson adds that both the personal relationships between two characters and consultations that occur between leaders and their people in speeches or private counsel provide these central scenes.\textsuperscript{261} The reactions of the characters to each other in the text are as important as the reactions of the audience, and this reinforces the importance of studying the meaning of the themes and problems in the work as indicative of contemporary cultural reception of them. Levenson writes, “By presenting the Trojan war as a contemporary event, they [the implications of particular incidents] add a philosophical dimension to the story which insistently challenges the reader’s judgment.”\textsuperscript{262}

The characters in \textit{Troie} focus as much on honor as do the saints, and many of these characters are women who look to death, much as the saints did, for solace as well as some sort of preservation or redemption of honor.\textsuperscript{263} Instead of focusing on a few select characters, as does \textit{Eneas}, this \textit{roman antique} provides many more relationships and situations, thus illustrating different aspects of the death wish. For instance, Achilles provides the martyr’s and warrior’s example of willingness to die, as well as the erotic longing, when he wants to avenge his friend Patroclus’ death:

\begin{verbatim}
Amis, ja mais ne cuit rien fere
Dont k’aie joie ne leece.
Toz jors serai mais en tristece.
Amis, por quei vos ai perdu?
Vostre gent cors, tant mare fu!
Vos m'amiez sor totes riens,
Quar je ere vostre e vos miens.
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{261} Levenson, 56.
\textsuperscript{262} Levenson, 60.
\textsuperscript{263} Of course, this obsession with honor can be traced back to the \textit{Iliad} itself and the warrior code followed by the Bronze Age-era heroes it depicts.
A plors, a lermes vos plaindrai
A toz les jors mais que vivrai.
Venjerai vos se faire puis.
Bien sache Hector, se jel truis,
Qu’il oicira mei o je lui.

(Friend, never again will there be another
who could give me joy or happiness.
I will dwell in sadness forever.
Friend, why did I lose you?
Your noble body, it was so wronged!
You loved me above all else,
Because I was yours and you were mine.
Crying, in tears I will grieve for you
All the days that I will live.
I will avenge you if I can.
Hector knows well that when I find him,
Either I will kill him or he will kill me.)

Achilles desires to avenge his best friend, who gave his life for him, and he will fight to the death in order to do so. In his immense grief, he does not, however, claim a desire for death, only a promise of vengeance. This statement is not a simple appeal to gaining from battle; it also stems from love (“ami” can signify an erotic as well as amicable love relationship). The despair that might be present in a representation of lovesickness is entirely absent. Achilles knows his own strength and knows that he can cause Hector to battle with him over this matter. Thus, there is no cause for despair when personal agency and capability is present, in contrast with the limited agency afforded female saints or Dido. Achilles spoke of the mutual devotion between himself and Patroclus,

264 Lines 10350-10361. Unlike in the Roman de Troie, in the Iliad, Achilles learns of Patroclus’ death via a messenger, Antilochus, who, upon telling Achilles the news, “clutched Achilles’ hands as he wept his proud heart out—/ for fear he would slash his throat with an iron blade” (Homer, Iliad 18.37-38, trans. by Robert Fagles [New York: Penguin, 1990]). In addition, during one of his laments for Patroclus in the Iliad, Achilles desires to avenge his friend, but his view of his own death is a bit different. He says, “For my own death, I’ll meet it freely—whenever Zeus / and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!” (Iliad 18.137-138), implying not so much a desire for death as an acceptance of his fate as decreed by Zeus. He is also so eager to fight the Trojans that he wants to enter battle before eating (“I, by god, I’d drive our Argives into battle now, / starving, famished, and only then, when the sun goes down, / lay on a handsome feast—once we’ve avenged our shame. / Before then, for me at least, neither food nor drink / will travel down my throat, not with my friend dead,” Iliad 19.246-250), and although the other Greek commanders convince him to postpone the battle, he still refuses to eat.
and Patroclus lived out that devotion until the moment he died. Achilles follows suit when he suggests single combat with Hector:

Ire e vergoigne ot Achillés:
“Je ne vivrai, fet il, ja mes
Jor el siecle san desenor
E sans contraile e sans iror
Se ja ceste en mei defaut.” (13195-13199)

(Achilles was full of anger and pride:
“I will not live,” he goes, “even
one day out of a century without dishonor
and without feeling wrong and angry
as long as this fault is within me.”)²⁶⁵

Achilles names honor and dishonor according to his own experience and worth, and he lives out his desire to earn back his honor. He, as the Homeric Achilles did, uses his own agency and strength to act upon his desire, creating the effect of a victory over Hector and a renewal of honor.

Andromaque, Hector’s wife, attempts to prevent him from leaving her for this encounter with Achilles because she says that she knows he will die. She knows that her only hope of protecting him is to keep him from leaving. Her fear manifests as despair because she knows she has very little ability to change the outcome of the situation. Her fear falls into the category of apprehension of death, even though it is for another person outside herself. As a woman at home, she cannot protect her husband from mortal combat, and in the French Troie, she cannot even ask him to protect himself. It would be a dishonor for him to avoid battle. She implores Priam, his father, to help her, and he sees her “douleur” and decides he must help. However, like Achilles, Hector knows that he must face this battle for his honor and fit within the model of the martyr trope. He

²⁶⁵ Lines 13195-13199.
says, “Trop i porrai grant honte aveir / Se je remeing por tiel afaire” (“I would have too much shame if I remained here for such a reason”). The men do not avoid death, but they do not desire it either. They simply express facing it as a source of honor and avoiding it as a source of dishonor.

After many of the men have died, Hecuba announces that the women too must join in the death:

Dreiz est que nos muirons o vos,
Que nos ne vos veions morir,
Ne par force çaien saisir
As anemiz.

(It is right that we should die with you,
Because we did not see you die,
And because we do not want to be taken
By the enemies.)

It is not that the women should die because the men died but rather because the women were not there to support them as they died. This is a way to have union with the men outside the constraints of mortal life because the men and women would then have died similar deaths. Their desire for death is practical as well; the alternative in life is to be enslaved and live dishonored, submissive to the Greeks. Ménésthée supports a willingness to die among men or women (echoing almost exactly the French Eneas’s words) when she says:

On ne doit mie criendre mort
Contre si faite deshonnour

(One shouldn’t fear death in the slightest
Doing so would cause dishonor).

The question to this point is certainly one of honor as much as it is of any personal,

266 Lines 15588-15589.
267 Lines 16450-16453.
268 Lines 18382-3.
individual feeling. Again, the narrative structure of relationships reminds the reader of how intertwined all the characters are throughout the text. Here, the death wish is as much about community as are actions in life.

Hélène reinforces this near the end of the story when she realizes what her own situation has caused, since she was the cause of the entire war. Though she does not name shame or honor, she deplores her life and regrets all that has been lost as a result of her:

Lasse! Por quei fui onques nee
Ne por quei oi tiel destinee
Que li monz fu par mei destruit?
Bien engendra estrange fruit
Mis pere en mei, quant jo conçui!
C’est granz dolors que unques fui:
A ma neissance vint sor terre
Ire e dolor e mortiel guerre,
Del mont chei e joie e pes.
Ja tiel femme ne nesse mes!
Li cuers me partireit, mon vuel.

(Alas! Why was I ever born
and why would my destiny be
That the world be destroyed because of me?
He engendered strange fruit,
My father, with me, when I was conceived!
This is the greatest pain that ever was:
With my birth, into this world came
Wrath and pain and mortal war,
Out of the world went joy and peace.
Never let such a woman be born again!
Let my heart leave me, that is my wish.)

Of all the women in the exceptionally long romance, Hélène most closely mirrors the saints. She contemplates the world and her place in it, but she does nothing to bring about specific action against herself by her own hand. She states a desire to have her life end by her heart leaving her, but this does not constitute an action. She is a helpless

269 Lines 22933-22943.
member of the group of women in the romance, partly because of her presence as a stranger among the Trojans.\textsuperscript{270} She can see the destruction she causes and feel its effects, but she can do nothing, or perhaps chooses to do nothing, to improve the situation. Her death wish falls into the apprehension of death or ending; she cannot fathom the future or her influence on it, and thus her thoughts must turn to the end of life and a desire for it. There is no commentary about her desire for death, and this silence demonstrates much about the reception of despair and the death wish. She is not a permanent part of the community with which she grieves, so she does not have the right to die with them.

Hélène is given language much like that of the saints, cursing her birth and wishing for her end. She looks at the world and comments on it, much like the saints. They see pain and suffering in the world at the hands of non-Christians, however, while Hélène takes personal blame. She is not judged for her despair or desire; Benoît makes it seem an acceptable reaction to her situation.\textsuperscript{271}

Like the saints, Hélène is not excessively individualized. Her complaints are philosophical, reflective about the destruction and nihilism of war. As a Christian martyr can emulate Christ’s death and accept the blame of humanity’s sin and die as a result, Hélène accepts the blame for the war. More than an allegory for Christ or a martyr, she symbolizes the nation and its conflict. As a symbolic force, she has even less efficacy than a typical woman in performing an action to satisfy a desire for death. Indeed, her

\textsuperscript{270} Lumiansky emphasizes that Hélène at once participates with her fellow women, watching the fighting from the walls, encouraging Paris, trying to protect Hector, and grieving for Trojan losses, but that ultimately she returns “home,” noting that it is not her territory even if she behaves in it like the other women. Lumiansky, “Structural Unity,” 417.

\textsuperscript{271} Levenson, 65, notes: “Benoît has so organized and portrayed the engagements, that when he focuses upon this tragic result, his readers never forget its causes.”
desire is more to undo her birth, a complete impossibility for anyone, man or woman.

“Desire is presented as a narrative motor, in the sense that it initiates the action, sets off the causal chain, in the narrative...But if desire begins the chain of events, human agency (motored by desire) is not represented as competent,”\(^{272}\) Vitz writes of human power and desire in narrative structure. The characters from *Le Roman de Troie* speak to the power of personal agency with regard to the question of despair. Achilles refuses to live a day without avenging his friend, but as a man—a very powerful one—he has the ability to make good on that claim and he uses that ability. He takes action against an action. The women, on the contrary, attempt to take action because of inaction. Andromaque wants her husband to remain with her instead of facing his death, which elicits a similar response to the original scene in the *Iliad*: he cannot remain because it would cause him shame. He must use his abilities to fight to defend his country.

However, in the French romance, Andromaque does not even have her own voice to use in expressing her desperate desire. So weak is her agency that she must instead ask a man to intervene—albeit unsuccessfully as well—on her behalf. The action that Hecuba and Menesthée can take is only that of death; by failing to keep their men alive, they, like Yvain’s lion, think they can only die in order to redeem their failure. These brief scenes at once inform about the divide between male and female action, but also about personal agency and its efficacy.

\(^{272}\) Vitz, 207.
Conclusions

In the *romans antiques*, many characters must die, in accordance with the original source material. Many of these same characters desire death while they live, and it is in the treatment of the attitude towards a desired death that the medieval writers have the opportunity to share their mores with their readers. Between just these two romances, each instance of the death wish typology is acted out by a variety of characters, and many of these show the individual thoughts and feelings of the desperate characters. The *Eneas* poet shares the reality of death and the horror it can cause when it occurs in a way that contradicts what society accepts. Benoît de Sainte-Maure weaves the Trojan War story in a way that makes the characters’ deaths—desired or not—an integral part of the community in which they exist. Each character’s willingness to die comes from a reaction to a communal need or societal role. Thus, there is no dishonor in a willed death—only honor and necessity. This, along with the *Lives* of the saints, as some of the earliest vernacular literature, places the death wish as an essential piece of the Old French or Old Occitan romance. Whether part of a rewriting or part of an amplification, the juxtaposition of life and death highlights the extremes of life; it shows what people need, want, or feel and how they interact as a whole. Judgment, in these *romans antiques*, comes only when these characters go against their society in a way that will harm it. Widows of war heroes cannot harm a society now destroyed, but queens dying to avoid the pain of shame and lost love can no longer serve their country. Thus, what is insanity for some is the next natural action for others. Despite the contemporality given to the romances, Christian values cannot judge despair or willed death when it folds into the

104
natural way of antique war and battle. The genre constrains some possibilities for change within the text because the text must remain true to the fate of the nation or society represented therein, but gender roles, especially with regard to facing death, maintain many of the same characteristics as in other genres in the Middle Ages.
Chapter 5: A Helpless Hero, a Leading Lady, and a Lion: Gender in Medieval French and Occitan Romances

If the popular legends of the saints provide a one-sided view of who wishes for death and why, popular fiction expands on the exploration of such despair, including not just women but also men and animals. Medieval romances deriving their source material from either an author’s imagination or other non-classical subject matter represent despair and suicide differently than the romans antiques, and this chapter explores that difference. The focus rests on characters in two romances: the Old French Le Roman de Partonopeus de Blois and Chrétien de Troye’s Old French Yvain ou Le chevalier au Lion. Almost any text and any number of texts could have been chosen as exemplary for this analysis because hardly any medieval romance exists without at least one character despairing or wishing for death. The texts chosen here follow not long after the appearance of the roman antique and certainly simultaneously with much of the literature written about the saints. These two have been chosen because in each work, the narrative provides a death wish, a suicide, or an attempted suicide of a character, and the authors explore the emotional and physical experience of the characters to a much greater extent than other medieval romances did. These texts treat the same themes as other authors but

273 Partonopeus is often seen as spelled “Partonopeu.” Partonopeus is the subjective form of the noun, and Partonopeu the objective. Throughout the dissertation, the subjective form will be used.
draw out the experience to a much more profound extent. While the authors provide ample commentary on a variety of social and religious problems occurring in the fiction, there is a noticeable lack of this commentary when despair and suicide are present. Why does the author refrain from commenting on such a grave sin on the part of his characters? The analysis of Partonopeus comprises the largest part of this chapter because it provides the longest exploration of despair and attempts to answer this question. The intertextuality of Partonopeus and Yvain has been discussed by many scholars, but most notably Penny Eley and Penny Simon. thus making the two texts a pertinent pair to study in terms of the different approaches to the death wish.

Partonopeus de Blois

“Dous Jhesucris...Je ne convoit riens fors morir, Mais n’i sai coment avenir”

(Sweet Jesus, I don’t want anything besides death, but I don’t know how to make it happen, B lines 5405, 5423-5424). So says Partonopeus during the climax of his despair scene after his lover has banished him. This invocation certainly includes the character’s appeal to religious belief, but there is no response reflecting the judgment or perception of the despair on the part of the Church. The reader thinks of God not because

---

274 Penny Eley and Penny Simons, “Partonopeus de Blois and Chrétien de Troyes: a reassessment,” Romania 117 (1999), 316-341, at 316-322. Eley and Simons discuss the intertextuality between Yvain and Partonopeus, showing how the rewriting process so common in medieval literature is at work especially between these two texts. They establish that Partonopeus clearly reflected the political activity of the day, especially with references to Philippe-Auguste, Philippe-Auguste’s sister Agnes, and Henry II. Partonopeus and the works of Chrétien (after Éric et Enide) share many similar characters and storylines, whether one accepts Partonopeus as first written and disseminated or the works of Chrétien (Yvain, Lancelot, Le conte du graal, and Cligès). The intertextual links between Partonopeus and Melusinian legends and Pyramus and Thisbe stories are described later in this chapter.

there is religious criticism of Partonopeus but because he himself asks for God’s help as part of his despair. Such dramatic lines with a religious invocation encourage a comparison with the lives of the saints, especially those who seek solitude in the wilderness to find union with God, as well as a thorough analysis of the man’s death wish.

_Partonopeus de Blois_ is a medieval French romance, composed between 1182 and 1185.\(^{276}\) The romance is composed of over 12,000 lines in its shortest version, and over 15,000 in its largest continuation. Until the recent work of Eley, Simons, and Bruckner, it has remained a little-studied romance because the editions were not sufficient for in-depth scholarship.\(^{277}\) This romance was something of a medieval success, with translations into at least eight other languages and with at least seven manuscripts\(^{278}\) surviving in French. Some fragments and continuations also remain, and indications of other manuscripts having circulated exist. There are ties to the _romans antiques_; for instance, the romance begins by tracing Partonopeus’s lineage all the way back to Trojan heroes.\(^{279}\)

\(^{276}\) Anthime Fourrier dated the text between 1182 and 1185, thus showing that much of Chrétien de Troyes’s work preceded _Partonopeus_, and Eley describes the widespread acceptance of this dating. Penny Eley, _Partonopeus de Blois: Romance in the Making_ (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 10-11. For the in-depth study of the dating, see Anthime Fourrier, _Le Courant réaliste dans le roman courtois en France au Moyen Âge Tome I: Les débuts (XII siècle)_ (Paris: Nizet, 1960) 315-446.\(^{277}\) Eley, _Partonopeus de Blois: Romance in the Making_, 2-6. Scholars worked on producing adequate editions of this text as far back as 1781 and continued to make attempts to publish one until they were successful in the late twentieth century. The original difficulties related to the problem of choosing the best base manuscript, but the length of time it took to produce an edition had more to do with “bad luck,” as Eley calls it, with various scholars dying before they finished their project.\(^{278}\) In this dissertation manuscript B is used because the desperation of Partonopeus and Melior is very clearly apparent and explored. Eley and Simons have stated that it is difficult to view any one manuscript as the sole base manuscript. Their electronic manuscript provides the lines quoted within the text, and translations into English are my own. Eley et al. eds., _Partonopeus de Blois: An Electronic Edition_ (Sheffield: HrIONline, 2005), www.hrionline.ac.uk/Partonopeus.\(^{279}\) Eley and Simons. “Reassessment,” 316-341.
In the *Romance of Partonopeus de Blois*, the hero is taken in a magical ship to a city where he meets his soon-to-be lover and heroine, Melior. She is very skilled in the magical arts, and she has learned to make herself invisible, so Partonopeus falls in love with her without the distraction of visual feminine beauty. Melior plays the part of a resisting woman until she gives in to his advances and admits that she planned for the ship to bring him to her. Melior of course forbids him from trying to see her in exchange for a variety of gifts as well as sexual pleasure. Partonopeus becomes dissatisfied with this invisibility, especially because his mother is quite suspicious of her, so with the help of a nearby bishop, Partonopeus’s mother convinces him to take a special light into Melior’s bedroom to see her. Shame is brought upon Melior who, as empress of Byzantium, should know better than to sleep with a boy too young to be her husband and whom the public has not yet approved for her marriage. She thus banishes him, and both Partonopeus and Melior go through over a thousand lines of misery and desperation. Eventually, after anguish and a tournament in which Partonopeus is publicly acclaimed as the most valiant knight, Melior is able to forgive him and be reunited with him, and they marry. The story follows the basic plot of the story of Cupid and Psyche as told by the ancient Roman writer Apuleius but it is presented according to the patterns of a Melusinian Legend as described by Lecouteux and LeGoff, making it as much a part of a fixed tradition as the saints’ lives or a *roman antique*. In a Melusinian legend, the hero

---

280 The continuations discuss other characters in detail, including one who appears in the shorter manuscripts who had his own brief scene of despair with Partonopeus.

281 The story of Cupid and Psyche is found in Book IV of the Latin novel known as *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*, which dates from the mid-second century AD. One of the few modern critical editions of this work is that edited by Rudolf Helm and published in 1968 by Teubner (Leipzig). For the pattern of a
leaves home, meets a supernatural being who gives the hero her love on the condition that the hero obeys her conditions. The hero then receives a gift and is separated from the supernatural being. An antagonist enters and encourages the hero to disobey the loved one. As a result, the gift is lost and the supernatural being disappears in some capacity.

In the romance, the male hero not only suffers of his own accord but also in a way that is very similar to the way the female saints of early Christianity suffer, as demonstrated in the second chapter of this dissertation. Scholars, especially Amy Ogden in recent years, have noted the gender-bending in Partonopeus in relation to the Lives of the saints. Ogden uses the representation of the male and female saints as the defining terms for gender representation in literature. She thus argues that the vernacular Lives of the saints and their continuations provide as much of a guideline for reading the gender of a character as any non-Life romance could. In Partonopeus, the woman’s suffering is as pertinent as the man’s in terms of the present question of judgment, the merveilleux, and silence surrounding despair, the death wish, and suffering. Suicide and despair were taboo in terms of the religious practices of the time. Partonopeus centers on a taboo that is very clearly laid out—that of obedience to his lover—and then breached, and the story is full of characters who despair to the point that they want to die, so this romance provides ample material for an attempt at understanding the reception and attitude toward the taboos on despair and suicide.


Many scholars in addition to Ogden have already discussed the gender play and the role of religion in this romance, such as Tracy Adams, Sylvia Huot, and especially Matilda Bruckner, asserting that the typical roles include the woman as the center of knowledge and power at the beginning of a narrative, and the man taking this knowledge and power when he becomes her lover.\textsuperscript{283} However, what this study aims to add to this discussion is and inquiry into how the taboo of male shame—just like the avoidance of shame on the part of the saints—trumps that of the suicide taboo. Suffering is written differently for Melior and Partonopeus. The narrative focus on their emotional turmoil shifts back and forth between their expectations of each other and society at large, and this also can be read as an example of how suffering was different for men and women in twelfth-century literature.

The Church provided a general culture for literature of the period and \textit{Partonopeus} provides a variety of approaches to religion and faith. By juxtaposing the characters in the story with the saints in the Golden Legend, the gender roles of Melior and Partonopeus become apparent as do clues as to male/female and religious taboos. In the saints’ lives, as seen in Chapter Two, it is most frequently the women who seek death as a way of attaining their ends.\textsuperscript{284} Many male religious writers, and most notably, Augustine deplored the idea of suicide, especially for women who want to avoid


\textsuperscript{284} Many men were martyrs, and we have more of their stories than stories of women. Their deaths and behaviors were seen as self-sacrificing, but the language used within their stories differs from that used in the stories of the female saints. The men are depicted as “happy to die” or are forgiving of those who kill them, but it is only a rare case in which the man dies to avoid shame. Approximately five percent of the male saints show an actual desire for death as an avoidance of shame, whereas almost half of the female saints within the Golden Legend explicitly express this desire.
dishonor, but putting oneself at the hands of others who will cause one’s death is acceptable (if indirect suicide), not a taboo or a sin, and thus there is one form of martyrdom.\textsuperscript{285}

Despite the fact that in the \textit{Partonopeus} poet’s time, there was no need to die as a martyr for Christ, Augustine’s writings on suicide remained the most influential and provided general condemnation for the practice through the Middle Ages. Augustine refused to accept any sort of suicide, even to maintain one’s chastity, because if one were truly chaste, then any action, even one such as rape, could not harm the soul of the victim. Giving up one’s life at one’s own hands cannot put one on better terms with the Christian deity (though the threat may be effective for winning a lady’s heart); and Augustine supported this according to the commandment against murder which therefore meant that suicide, self-killing, was wrong.\textsuperscript{286}

As discussed in Chapter 3, the saints have already given up the secular world, and they welcome an acceptable death as they approach or seek circumstances that end their bodily lives.\textsuperscript{287} They desire death in order to leave the world they feel they cannot live in or to avoid performing actions that would be sinful to them, and they can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if someone else puts them to death. The female saints in particular experience a bodily shame that begins from the origins of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which Eve brings sin onto humanity by eating the forbidden fruit.\textsuperscript{288} Sylvia Huot follows this shame into courtly literature, noting that women are frequently shown

\textsuperscript{285} Boureau, 113.
\textsuperscript{286} Augustine, \textit{City of God}, I.27.
\textsuperscript{287} Kay, 222.
\textsuperscript{288} Walker Bynum, 2.
suffering actual illness and death, and that they cannot displace their pain or desire, whereas men can symbolically enact their “artificial death” in public and construct “a symbolic identity through feats of heroism.” The women thus must own their shame within themselves, and the men have a means of transferring it away from themselves as they gain honor elsewhere.

The study of the *Golden Legend* in Chapter 3 provides examples of women who want to avoid life for the shame that they suffer, but they have no shame in wanting death because they have such a good cause. The men’s suffering and shame is not apparent because they do not need to die in order to gain the most glory possible. They can be bishops or monks or have other important roles in church or societal life. They have mobility both socially and physically, much more so than do the women. This freedom and this chance to earn different kinds of honor give us the lack of shame surrounding their lives. But certainly, despite the silence in literature about their own attitudes about personal shame, they could have felt shame.

The *Golden Legend* is certainly not the definitive statement about how shame and suicide are depicted either in the Middle Ages or in Christian practice in general, but as a piece of writing read or heard by a wide audience, it provides a basis of understanding for how contemporaries may have absorbed ideas about death, despair, shame, and suffering. It thus serves as a useful comparandum for secular courtly

---

289 Huot, 176.

290 Indeed, the more than fifty extant vernacular Lives from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries provide extensive examples of the death wish, even more explored than in many romances, but the *Golden Legend* provides a simpler backdrop that served as influence for both the Lives and the vernacular, secular romances, thus my usage of it in this dissertation. Comparing the findings in this dissertation to those in the *Lives* will be part of future work.
literature, such as *Partonopeus de Blois*. The suffering in this romance begins with a physical transgression: Partonopeus disobedys Melior in order to view her body. He does so because his mother, with the help of a Christian bishop, convinces him to do so. He is acting in a way that he thinks will please society, family, and the Church. However, when he does so, he ruins everything. Melior is not some sort of devil hidden by invisibility; she is an attractive woman hiding her body’s desires from a male-dominated society in order to have what she wants. Her situation is particularly difficult because, ostensibly approaching the age of twenty (the text is less specific with her age than Partonpeus’), she is old in terms of marriage, and Partonopeus, around thirteen, is not technically past boyhood. Melior is under pressure to choose a husband in order to secure her kingdom, and thus is under scrutiny more for her refusal to choose than for her sexual transgressions. The publicity of sexual transgressions would bring her shame as indicative of her refusal more than sexual morality.291

Partonopeus transgresses the conditions set out by Melior about her invisibility.292 According to these rules of honor and the context of their relationship, he should be ashamed of himself, and he is. Melior, according to the rules of her society and how a woman should behave, should be ashamed of herself, and she is. Partonopeus’s shame comes primarily from a kind of personal, interior shame because he acts against the woman he worships, much as the saints would be ashamed if they did anything against the god that they worship. In this way, his death wish follows the trope of the martyr. He is also grieving because he has lost his lover, and here he follow’s the Bataille erotic

292 Lines 1400-1600.
death wish. Melior’s shame comes because the public now knows how she has
transgressed their expectations by using her body in order to please herself. She is also
grieving for her lover. Melior, like Partonopeus, follows both the martyr and erotic types.
She wanted to choose her own mate, rather than having one imposed by her counselors.

An explicit appeal to honor and shame in the whole affair of the transgression
comes as the Bishop of Paris convinces Partonopeus to disobey Melior. He says:

A Deu devés grant gueredon
Que si buens estes de son don.
Penès [vos molt] de Lui servir
Et do vos en s’amor tenir,
Car autresi legierement
Vos puet Il torner a nient
Trestot quanqu’Il vos a doné
Con Il vos en fist la bonté.
Servés Le en crieme et en amor,
Joie en avrés et grant honor.
S’ensi nel faites, amati
Vos verons en fin [et] honi.

(You should be grateful to God
who has given you much.
You must serve Him
in order to hold onto His love
because he could easily
take away
all that he has given you.
Serve him with fear and love
and you will have joy and great honor.
If you do not do this,
you will know shame forever.)

The Bishop emphasizes gratitude to God as the first reason to look upon Melior, but a
close second is the honor he will earn and the shame he will avoid. In response to this,
Partonopeus thinks first of his gratitude to Melior and explains to the Bishop that she
prayed to God who gave him many gifts that he used to earn honor and fame, but in the
end, he thinks of his concerns over her order that he not try to see her. Despite the fact

293 Lines 4401-4412.
that Melior prays to a Christian god, the Bishop still wants Partonopeus to find out more about her. According to the Church and Partonopeus’s mother, she needs to be discovered to be good or bad by Partonopeus in order to know that she is not evil. For the sake of his honor and his concern about the invisibility, Partonopeus decides to follow the Bishop’s and his mother’s recommendations. Colleen Donagher claims that the strongest message in the episodes surrounding Melior’s magic and Partonopeus’s transgression is that Melior’s magic is obviously a sin and needs to be stopped because she uses it to act out as a woman and choose her own mate. But it is not that her magic is so bad; it is that she acts out as a woman.\textsuperscript{294} What causes dishonor for Partonopeus, then, is not just that she might be a sorceress but more that she might have power over him as a man.

Partonopeus returns to Melior and uses the lantern that his mother has given him to look at her. Melior responds by fainting multiple times and cursing the day she was born (“mal fu nee”).\textsuperscript{295} Melior’s first conscious reaction is to think of her shame for giving herself to him:

\begin{quote}
Con je me sui par moi traie
Et con sui par mon fet honie!
Trop me hastai de mon servise,
Par tant me sui a honte misse.

(I have betrayed myself
and dishonored myself by my own act!
I was too hasty to give my service,
and so I have put myself to shame.)\textsuperscript{296}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{295}Line 5436.
\textsuperscript{296}Lines 4541-4544.
It is only after she thinks of her shame that she wonders what she did to deserve this. She defends her powers by describing how she attained them, through study of the liberal arts and the Old and New Testaments.\(^{297}\) She explains in detail how she hid her talents and used them to help him but that now they are gone and will never return because of his betrayal. The *merveilleux* can do nothing in the face of despair. Despair, then, shows itself as a human, mortal experience, left alone by fantastic powers that can solve so many other situations and losses. Despite this great loss, she repeats that her shame greatly exceeds her sadness over her loss of supernatural powers.

For the next two hundred lines, just like a saint, she does not cease to vocalize her troubles and emphasize her shame using forms of the terms *honte* and *deshonneur* and *honi* more than twenty times.\(^{298}\) There are about half the number of appearances of those words in nearly a thousand lines of Partonopeus’s suffering.\(^{299}\) Before the narrator turns to Partonopeus, he leaves the image of Melior wringing her hands and tearing her hair out ("ses poins detort, ses cevels tire")\(^ {300}\), a very feminine action that expresses her pain.\(^ {301}\)

In the bedroom, Partonopeus would prefer to be dead than to live ("miols volroitestre mors que vis")\(^ {302}\). Then the narrator says he curses his mother and the moment ("l’eure")\(^ {303}\) when he was persuaded by the bishop, but it is not until he begins to speak that he owns any direct blame for himself, perhaps because he thinks that will gain him

\(^{297}\) Lines 4580-4593.  
\(^{298}\) Lines 4500-4600.  
\(^{299}\) Line 4760 and following.  
\(^{300}\) Line 4760.  
\(^{301}\) Esther Cohen, “The Animated Pain of the Body,” *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 36-68. Cohen discusses the establishment of feminine gestures exhibiting bodily pain, noting that they were named as specifically feminine and condemned as immodest as early as the fifth century by John Chrysostom.  
\(^{302}\) Line 4762.  
\(^{303}\) B Line 4766.
the most pity. He asks her to bring his death, to deliver him to those who will kill him. For twenty lines he repeats how he wants and deserves death, but it takes over twenty lines for him to even mention that he has shame and dishonor, as though naming that would be worse than naming the sin of despair, and when he does mention this to her, he only does so twice instead of the dozen or so times that Melior does. Helaine Newstead observes that he does not despair until after he has transgressed. It is shame that causes his despair and desire for death, and his actions brought this shame upon himself, though at the instigation of the bishop and his mother. He does not want to die to avoid the act of shame in the future, as the saints would, but rather to avoid the feeling of shame with which he must now live. Melior’s shame by contrast was named as something she deserved: “Et [drois] est qu’ele a honte vait (And she merits her shame)” because of her actions in sleeping with a young man when actual valorous men awaited her hand in marriage. Her shame is inward and outward.

When Partonopeus leaves to get back on the enchanted ship, he passes the knights who await Melior.

“Ne vos daig aconter lor dis,...
Molt la honissent et maldient.”

(I won’t tell you what they said about them.
They covered her with shame and cursed her.)

None of these men, however, accuses Partonopeus of having shame or of having done something shameful. This could be because people did not hear the story of exactly what happened, but it is more likely that what he did was not a source of public shame. She

304 B Line 4840.
305 B Lines 5109-5111.
was the primary person acting to make the events happen. She had given her body—a body that was supposed to be reserved for someone worthy—to a mere child that she had chosen. But Partonopeus is of no consequence to the men, whereas the fate of the country depends upon Melior's marriage and progeny. Bruckner notes that Melior, as the agent of change in the story, fits into the Eve/Mary binary in which Eve is the agent of sin and Mary is the agent of redemption, which Melior is at the end when she welcomes Partonopeus back into her life.  

So the poet presents an ashamed Melior, who prays to the Christian god, no longer has magic, and has followed what could be seen as a religious type, yet there is no commentary on the religious view of despair here, only societal reactions against her personal conduct. Thus, personal conduct that others perceive openly was more important than the state of her soul, even to the readers who see both as they go through the text.

As the narrator follows Partonopeus, he distances himself from the conduct and feelings of Melior. Once Partonopeus is alone on the riverbank, having been left there by Melior’s sister and those who helped carry him back home, he despairs. And he despairs in a very similar way to Melior, asking why he should be born if it is only to suffer such a destiny. He is angry, however, that no one else has killed him yet. He admits his agency in the shame—agency that he avoids in his search for death—for the first time outside of Melior’s presence. “Trahie l’ai, si sui honnis” (“I have betrayed, so I am ashamed”).

He is alone. No one is there to hear that he has shame because that would be a worse “sin” than despair or self-inflicted death.

---

307 Line 5196.
To emphasize just how much honor he has lost, Partonopeus compares his loss to that of Adam:

Adans, ki perdi paradis,
Ne fist tel perte com je fiz
Cant je perdi primes m’onor...
Il en mena od soi s’amie...
Ke je n’ai nul bien retenu,
Ne je m’onor ne je ma vie.

(Adam, who lost paradise,
didn’t lose as much as I did
when I lost first of all my honor...
He left with his beloved...
and I held onto nothing.
I have neither honor nor my life (beloved).) \(^{308}\)

Throughout this section of the text, Partonopeus exchanges “vie” (life) with “amie” (beloved) thus conflating the two. Partonopeus specifically highlights the fact that it is his lost honor that pains him most, even more than the loss of the love that gives him life.

There is only one moment in all of his despair that another person actually appeals to God to help him, but still, the despair is not named as a sin; it is dishonor that is viewed as such. His mother says:

Por Deu, aiés merci de vos;
Ne parsoiés si agoissos.
France est por vos de mort garie,
N’est nus mestier qu’on le gerrie.
France est destruite a deshonor
S’on [e]n seitt ke aiés dolor.

(For God’s sake, have mercy on yourself;
Don’t be so troubled.
France was saved from death because of you.
Don’t put it in danger.
France will be destroyed with dishonor
if people know that you despair so/ are in such pain.) \(^{309}\)

\(^{308}\) Lines 5211-5221.
\(^{309}\) Lines 5319-5324.
The closest statement the poet makes about desperation and a desire for death being an offense to God is in this passage, and even here, it is not clear that this is sinful behavior or just an expression of exasperation and emphasis on the part of the boy’s mother. The focus is very clearly on other people knowing of dishonor. The taboo of causing one’s own death does not come close to being as important as public dishonor for a man, and thus there is no focus on it.

Added to this, fewer than one hundred lines later, Partonopeus begs, as seen at the beginning of this chapter, all persons of God to end his life. The supplication and listing of the names of the deity are spoken in even more detail than any saint’s Life portrays a saint praying for death. After trying to starve himself and letting himself die, much like cases of women who were actually documented as having done so in early Christianity as well as in the stories of the female saints who suffered physically in the Golden Legend, Partonopeus fails and says:

Dous Jhesucris, vois Dez, vois hom,
Verais fiz De, par ton voir nom,
Par ton savoir, par ta vertu,
Conseile moi de mon salu.
Confors des las, Sains Esperiz,
[Uns od le Pere et od le Fiz],
Conforte moi de mes dolors
Et bonement me fais socors.
Sainte Marie, virge mere
Ki conceus en toi ton pere
Et enfantas contre nature
Ton creator, tu, creature—
Si voirement, con je ce croi--,
Ma dame, aies merci de moi.
En vivre sui tos assotez,
Car j’ai vescu molt plus qu’assez.
Trop vit hom ki fait felenie,
Car miech en desert mor[t] ke vie.
Je ne convoit rien fors morir,
Mais n’i sai coment avenir.

(Sweet Jesus Christ, true God and man,
true son of God, by your true name,  
by your wisdom, by your power,  
counsel me about my salvation.  
Comfort the unfortunate, Holy Ghost,  
[one with the Father and the Son,]  
comfort me in my pain  
and kindly give me help.  
Saint Mary, virgin mother,  
who conceived within you your father  
and gave birth, against nature,  
to your creator, you, creature—  
so truly, as I believe this—  
My lady, have mercy on me.  
In life I am all troubled,  
because I have lived much longer than enough,  
lived too long for a man who has committed a crime.  
I deserve death more than life.  
I don’t want anything besides death,  
but I don’t know how to make it happen.\textsuperscript{310}

Partonopeus goes beyond other romances in fully exploring his desires for suicide. He later mentions that all weapons have been confiscated around him and that he has no freedom.\textsuperscript{311} He even escapes at one point with a servant, Anselot, in order to let beasts in the forest eat him.\textsuperscript{312} But at no point does he recognize that seeking his death is a sin or that there would be religious consequences. Perhaps it is because the strongest attempt at ending his life is his refusal to eat, much like some of the early female saints, which results in a slow death where the personal agency can be questioned instead of directly blamed. There is no theological or religious commentary on the problem of Partonopeus’s despair. His family and servants at home have confiscated his weapons, but they say nothing about how his despair relates to his soul or Christian experience. Only he prays for help regarding his salvation. When Anselot helps him escape under false pretences, Partonopeus delays his suicide in order to help the man get baptized, and

\textsuperscript{310}\ Lines 5405-5424.  
\textsuperscript{311}\ Lines 5425-5432.  
\textsuperscript{312}\ Lines 5408-5468.
even then there is no mention of a religious taboo. Anselot himself, upon learning the
original reason for the escape and realizing that much of it was a ruse to baptize him,
accuses Partonopeus of causing him dishonor himself because he has renounced his
family. 313

Far more often there is more description of a male character despairing than a
female one in literature produced in the high Middle Ages because most plots follow the
male characters, but in the rare instances where a female character despairs, the language
is quite different. In both the vernacular saints’ Lives and secular literature, the notion of
honte (shame) and the dishonor of mentioning shame seems almost taboo for male
characters. While shame may be what a male character thinks about, he rarely speaks of it
in the dialogue given to him. Moreover, it is not permitted even to name this weakness
too often.

In the romance of Partonopeus de Blois, over one thousand lines in this romance
explore the suffering of these two characters, as well as Partonopeus’s mother and servant
who join him in his misery. The poet evokes many instances of religion and faith
throughout the text, including the presence of the bishop of Paris and the frequent
reminders that Partonopeus’s lover prays to the Christian deity, but there is no religious
stigma against a suicide. It is not a question of the writer not knowing his Augustine, but
more of a focus on the honor and shame that a person must earn or lose in life and that
without direct personal agency for the ending of a life the public cannot aim to judge or
accuse the character.

313 Lines 5655-5725. The narrator does not follow the rest of that man’s tale, but says that it is for another
time.
The lack of taboo around suicide is found in the impossibility of the death. It would be strange to have the story end for the central hero in death at his own hands. In the *Chastelaine de Vergi*, for example, one of the few stories with a successful suicide, the story is not named for the man. The suicide of a titular hero would invoke too much shame and render him cowardly instead of heroic. Sylvia Huot in *Madness in Medieval Literature* says that,

> Male victims of love... are defined by their relationship to the symbolic. Their death is not real but symbolized, represented in a host of symptoms ranging from incomprehensible speech and gesticulations, to unrestrained violence, to an excessively zealous mortification of body and spirit. Their psychic trauma may certainly manifest itself through the body, whether in the self-mutilation of Machaut’s knight, the decomposing flesh of Tristan, the bestial appearance of Partonopeus, or the grotesque behavior of Amadas, who speaks...backwards...in a display of manic frenzy...\(^{314}\)

Still, they will not actually die of these problems. Trumping the stigma of suicide or suicidal tendencies is no easy task, but poets provide a clearer idea of what is important to each gender and character by juxtaposing death with any of their preoccupations, troubles, or interests. The view of the “ultimate sin” as seen from medieval eyes also clarifies a bit more about common acceptance of theology. Worrying about the state of a suicide’s soul is not nearly as grave as worrying about the dishonor of a living man. Narrators do not criticize female martyrs who encourage others to kill them because their heavenly cause is seen as so important. By the same token, suicide or despair are not a taboo and are barely sins in literature because the idea of a man having shame and dishonor is so much more serious.

\(^{314}\) Huot, 176.
Yvain’s Lion

Given the lengthy discussion of a death in *Partonopeus*, a comparison with its closely related text, *Le chevalier au lion* further informs a general attitude toward suicide and despair. If *Partonopeus*’s whining and languishing for thousands of lines begins to seem comical or exaggerated, then Chrétien de Troyes takes it to the extreme when it is an animal that attempts suicide. While perhaps normal in Eastern legends, suicidal animals are out of the ordinary in Western ones, which renders the scene even more surprising. *Le chevalier au lion* most likely appeared in 1177, and like *Partonopeus* was met with great success, with seven extant manuscripts and translations, continuations, or reworkings in many other languages. This tale follows the knight, Yvain, from the feast of Pentecost at Arthur’s court into the forest of Brocéliande to avenge an attack on his cousin by the protector of the fountain of youth. Yvain kills the knight who had shamed his cousin and goes to his castle, falling into its trap, but meeting Lunete, a maiden who gives him a magical ring to protect him with invisibility. While

315 Eley and Simons explore the close relationship between the two texts throughout “Reassessment,” 316-341.
316 Charles Hammond, a scholar of Chinese literature, notes that there are remarkable similarities between Eastern tiger legends and Western lion ones, most notably in that of Yvain. His argument, most interestingly, suggests that the lion’s attempted suicide implies the fact that a life saved by one who has died is no longer worth living because the saved individual should have been able to prevent the other’s death in return as a sign of gratitude and honor. “The medieval European romance puts far more stress on chivalry, love, and valiant battles than the Chinese legend, but one story suggests another intriguing parallel to the Chinese belief in the righteous tiger. In *Le Chevalier au lion*, the hero Yvain rescues a lion from a venomous fire-breathing serpent. Presenting the lion locked in combat with the evil serpent suggests that like the Chinese tiger, the lion is a symbol of divine power. At one point, mistakenly believing that his benefactor is dead, the lion nearly commits suicide. Afterwards, it repays its debt to Yvain by repeatedly assisting him in several contests Yvain undertakes on behalf of aggrieved women, just as the tiger often helps the oppressed. Such requital is a theme common to many animal legends, not all of them feline. Chinese sources record similar stories.” Charles E. Hammond, “The Righteous Tiger and the Grateful Lion,” *Monumenta Serica* 44 (1996): 191-211, at 198.
invisible, he falls in love with the lady of Landuc, who was the widow of the knight Yvain killed. She eventually decides she can marry him. Yvain later leaves her to travel with Arthur’s knights on the condition that he return in one year or less in order to retain her love. He, like Partonopeus, fails to keep his promise, but unlike Partonopeus, it is out of forgetfulness instead of design. He thus loses her love and goes into the forest to despair. Yvain’s death wish is a combination of the erotic trope and madness. In the forest he is rescued from madness by three ladies and proceeds to travel again and perform many valiant deeds, winning the devotion of a lion. This lion assists him in all his travels, much like Partonopeus’s companion Anselot. The lion despairs to the point of wanting to commit suicide when he thinks he has failed Yvain. Yvain stops him, and they continue their adventures until returning to his wife, with whom Yvain reconciles thanks to the guidance of Lunete.

As in Partonopeus, the greatest sin is disobeying the beloved. The “local” rules and laws, such as not forgetting his wife’s existence and his promise to her, are the ones which are the most important to obey, leaving the greater problems against Church rules and government laws. Unlike Partonopeus, Yvain’s despair at the loss of his wife is not a death-driven madness, but a life-driven one:

Les bestes par le bois aguete
Et lors ochist, et si menjue
La venoison trestoute crue.

(He attacked the beasts of the forest and killed them, and ate the meat entirely raw.)\(^\text{318}\)

\(^{318}\) Lines 2824-2826.
He does not wait for the beasts to come find and eat his starving body but rather seeks them out to prolong his own life. The narrator does not attempt to describe the thoughts of a madman seeking life, though the narrator of *Partonopeus* detailed the thoughts of one seeking death. Therefore, the more attention-seeking descriptions are those with death at hand.

One thousand lines later, the narrator proves this point. Yvain’s lion companion wishes for death when faced with the supposed loss of Yvain:

> Il se detort et grate et crie,
> Et s’a talant que il s’ochie
> De l’espee dont est maris,
> Qui a son boin seigneur ochis.

(He writhes and scratches himself and cries,
And he wants to kill himself,
With the sword
That killed his good lord.)\(^{319}\)

The lion goes so far as to position the sword in a place where he can impale himself upon it:

> A ses dens l’espee li oste,
> Et sor un fust jesant l’acoste;
> Et puis derrier .i. fust l’apuie,
> Qu’ele ne guenchisse ne fuie
> Quant il y hurtera du pis.

(He took the sword in his teeth,
And lay it against a log lying there;
And then pushed it behind another log,
So that it would not move
When he hurled himself upon it.)\(^{320}\)

The actions are described in exact detail, showing, rather than telling, the lion’s thoughts. His actions are premeditated and with intent to have immediate effect. It would be too great a shame for the lion to live when he could not keep the man who saved his life

---

\(^{319}\) Lines 3507-3510.
\(^{320}\) Lines 3511-3515.
alive. Much like the female saints, the animal only has limited access to honor. In addition to following the martyr trope, the lion’s actions indicate that he may be able to have some sort of union with Yvain because they will both have died. For the lion, honor is only possible through devotion to Yvain. Shame, even for an animal who lives outside of the realm of Church rules about sin and salvation, can overtake the desire for life.

A number of scholars have shown that the lion acts more like the self-sacrificing dog shown in the bestiary tradition than like a lion, but Julian Hall maintains that Chrétien’s lion resembles a dog only because the author writes what he knows and paints after nature. Hall supports the theory that the lion acts much more like a Christ figure, a typical usage of the lion as a symbol in bestiaries, intervening for Yvain in every extreme situation. Hall comments that the lion’s self-destruction may be a “crude allusion” to Christ laying down his life for mankind, but crude is certainly the best adjective to describe this.\footnote{Julian Harris, “The Rôle of the Lion in Chrétien de Troyes’ Yvain,” \textit{PMLA} 64.5 (1949), 1143-1163, at 1148-1150.} The lion would not be able to help Yvain at all in his death, while Christ’s death was meant to save mankind. The lion could have joined Yvain in death (as the saints joined Christ in death), thereby being as close to serving him as in life, but with no further effect than having the same deceased status of his companion. Shame and desire for unity are thus the two major motivating factors in the lion’s attempt on his own life.

Yvain, however, is not dead but only unconscious, and awakens to see the lion’s attempts only to faint once more. At this moment, it is as though the lion teaches the man how a human must act when faced with despair. Yvain says,
Qui pert la joie et le soulas  
Par son meffait et par son tort  
Mout se doit bien hair de mort.  
Hair et ochirre se doit.

(Whoever loses joy and comfort  
because of his own fault and wrongdoing  
should hate himself to death.  
He should hate himself and kill himself.)\textsuperscript{322}

Chrétien de Troyes thus begins to detail Yvain’s despairing thoughts as he considers death, the opposite of what he did when he sought life. To seek life is to be active, and thus the man’s actions must be described for the audience, but to seek death is pensive and passive for a human, leaving only the thoughts to be followed. The lion’s actions in seeking death may be described by the poet because the animal can take an active role towards death without the subversion of creating an illicit and taboo act, whereas the (non-saint) human may only consider it. Indeed, Yvain has no need to do more than consider death because he continues to faint, its own small death. He is permitted brief escapes from his waking misery in the few lines before Lunete comes to save him from despair and offer a solution to his problems.

\textit{Yvain}, while involved in intertextual repartee with \textit{Partonopeus}, subverts some of its ideas, especially those concerning despair.\textsuperscript{323} Less religious interference exists in Chrétien’s text than in the anonymous \textit{Partonopeus}, despite the framing of each action within the Church calendar in \textit{Le Chevalier au lion}. No bishop instructs Yvain how to act; instead, a lion demonstrates what an honorable hero must do. The lack of commentary around the attempted suicide suggests a lack of inherent judgment on the part of a secular writer. There is no implied religious judgment on Yvain because a

\textsuperscript{322} Lines 3538-3541.
\textsuperscript{323} See the beginning of this chapter for a discussion on the intertextuality.
woman enters to save him before there would be any need for a religious authority to do so. Discussing how to solve the problem of despair would be more of a taboo than the despair itself.

Conclusions

These episodes elucidate many of the death wishes in Old French and Occitan literature. *Partonopeus* shows the despair of three characters: an honorable man, a woman bereft of magical powers, and a servant. *Yvain* offers up both a desperate knight as well as his lion companion. Each offers insight to the portrayal of gender roles, personal agency, and the common acceptance of desperation. To welcome death as a way to avoid dishonor became established as a way for a devout female Christian to act under early persecution, and here it is established as a way for a man, woman, or animal to act in order to salvage one’s honor or waste away in the hopes of winning back one’s lost love. While the men at first seem to mimic most closely the actions of the female saints, it becomes clear that a gender difference remains; female and non-human characters may access steps toward death much more easily than male characters. Partonopeus demonstrates this quite clearly when he is unable to bring about death even through starvation and offering himself to wild animals as food. *Yvain* cannot reach death because of his madness and unconsciousness. The lion, however, unbound by human requirements of religious honor may construct his own death scene, unsuccessful though it was. The woman may despair or die without fear of religious consequences; Melior may thoroughly despair of her lost honor and powers.
The way in which these characters despair becomes almost a coping mechanism for the reader. It would be impossible to allow a male hero to despair profoundly or to die in a suicide because the dishonor caused by that would be intolerable and unbelievable to the audience. That was not a part of acceptable storytelling. During the twelfth century, the Church had not yet found a way to offer forgiveness for this grave sin, but as it approached a solution, namely confession, the problem was nearly ubiquitous in courtly literature. Life-seeking actions can be described without interior feelings, but death-driven actions cannot. No judgment is offered for the despair or desired death within the texts except for the events surrounding them and the characters chosen to undergo these episodes. By letting Partonopeus’s despair continue for so many thousands of lines, and by having other characters despair within those lines, the poet shows the excess and lack of plausibility within the situation. By choosing an animal for an attempted suicide scene, Chrétien de Troyes emphasizes the impossibility of such an action for a man. Courtly romance would be lacking without these interior monologues and their public suffering because it is an intrinsic part of the way authors created their tales. Each romance shows this and elucidates the cultural reception of the ideas around despair, that despair exists and must be conquered, yet neither offers criticism against the apostasy, making it an acceptable process as long as it does not lead to an actual suicidal end.

---

324 Cf. Chapter 1 and its discussion about the Fourth Lateran Council.
Chapter 6: Vashti, A Pagan Queen Turns Saint

A century later, despair scenes continued to use the narrative template established by hagiographic texts and later adapted for vernacular romance. A woman features as the primary character facing voluntary death in the Occitan *Le Roman de la Reine Ester*. Crescas du Caylar, a fourteenth-century Occitan writer and Jewish doctor, read the story of Ester in the Hebrew Bible and embellished it, giving Queen Vashti, a minor character in the original story, a voice and a death. Crescas adapted the biblical book into Judeo-Provençal verse form in 1327, enlarging what was originally a twenty-two-verse chapter into two hundred octosyllabic rhyming couplets. Only one, incomplete, Judeo-Provençal manuscript exists. Crescas asserts that his audience was composed mainly of women and children, which perhaps explains his neglect of the male characters. Vashti is not merely banished in his version of the story, she is burned alive for her disobedience of a man. Much like a martyr, she holds to her ideals even in the face of death. Despite the striking decision taken by Vashti, a saint-like woman in this Occitan

---

325 Crescas du Caylar, “Roman de la Reine Esther” in *Nouvelles Courtoises* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1997): 124-157. The amplification of description of female characters is also due to the fact that beauty was such a focal point in the texts, though this is also related to the intended audience. Edmond Faral *Les Arts Poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe Siècle: Recherches et Documents sur la Technique Littéraire du Moyen Age*, (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1962) 77.

326 Judeo-provençal is Provençal/Occitan language written phonetically in Hebrew characters.

327 A. Neubauer and P. Meyer, “Le Roman Provençal d’Esther par Crescas du Caylar, médecin juif du XIV siècle,” *Romania* 21 (1892): 194-227, at 195-197. Surprisingly, these nineteenth-century scholars are among the most recent researchers of this text. They say that in the Hebrew, Crescas announces his audience as women and children.
text, very little attention has been given to it from the academic community. This story shows one of the main differences between the depiction of men and women (and, now that we have seen Yvain’s lion, animals) in facing shameful situations and desiring death. Both the woman and animal could face it as an avoidance of shame, but the men could not.

Little evidence has been found as to the sources of Crescas’ amplifications. Neubauer and Meyer found only some evidence of inspiration from the Midrasch or other Hebrew texts, which invites the question of what else could have inspired it if not other secular literature of the time. However, viewing the treatment of a character within an invented scene enduring shame indicates that the culture, if not the texts extant at the time of composition of the romance, influenced the way in which despair was written within romance, even when not using the Roman alphabet. Reading a text inspired from the Hebrew Bible for a Jewish audience reinforces the way that silence surrounds the issue of despair and the death wish, emphasizing the lack of the Church’s influence on secular literature about the problem. For a man with access to at least two languages, it is possible that the author also had access to literature from the north. Without question, however, this tale remains silent in any judgment on the despair of the character in question.

The romance follows Queen Vashti, the wife of King Xerxes (also known as King Assuerus in the Book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible). She was queen until she refused to parade in front of her husband and his friends when he drunkenly and lustfully demanded

328 Neubauer and Meyer, 195.
that she do so. Because of her disobedience, Assuerus banished her from his sight forever and found a new queen, Esther. The Biblical narrative does not provide much more detail than that; it only provides that Assuerus asked Vashti to appear before him and his friends with her crown, which some read as “nothing but her crown.”329 This reading obviously makes the request much more difficult for a woman who must at once honor and obey her husband. It would be a dishonor to him to share her beauty with other men, but it would be disobedience, and thus also dishonor, to deny him his request.

Vashti was not a Christian, so dying by martyrdom as a result of disobeying a man in power was not a way of retaining her own honor. However, her manner of adhering to her own moral convictions follows hagiographic narrative conventions. The saints in the fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Old Occitan translations of the Golden Legend share much in common with the pre-Christian Queen Vashti. Yvain’s lion’s readiness to show his valor and honor also echoes with her actions. As a devoted servant to a powerful man, whether as a man (in terms of Partonopeus’s situation), an animal (in terms of Yvain’s) or a woman (in terms of Vashti’s situation or that of the saints), the actions are very similar. When juxtaposing these texts, the question emerges of how does the woman as saint differ from the woman as non-Christian sufferer, if in fact they do. The woman, Partonopeus’s non-Christian servant, and the lion do not differ greatly. As seen in Chapter 3, many female saints preferred death to losing their virginity and honor to undesired, often non-Christian, husbands.

Narratives of female saints often follow Christ’s idea of self-sacrifice and tend to be extremely explicit about their goals of avoiding sin or loss of honor in their faith, even to the extent that they express a wish for death. This sacrifice of life is one of many themes in the saints’ lives, but it is the most important in terms of the comparison with Queen Vashti because it highlights the way in which women could exercise independence or power and honor in a male-dominated society. The Occitan Romance of Esther begins with a discussion of self-sacrifice. King Nebuchadnezzar was in the process of having a statue of himself constructed in order to force everyone, especially the Jewish people, in the kingdom to worship his idol. Crescas provides a bit of fascinating commentary on that:

A quel pecat fon gran e fort,
Car Dieu vol c’on se liur’a mort,
Per que n’estem toz en balansa;
Mes Dieu nos donet perdonansa.

(This was a grave and strong sin
because God would prefer that people deliver themselves to death.
This is why we are always unsure of what to do,
but God pardons us.)

Crescas adopts the Christian rhetoric of self-sacrifice for one’s faith and ideals, much like the female martyrs, directly addressing the reader and saying that he has added to the biblical story to provide a gloss on the holy story to a reasonable extent:

E non vos o tengas a car
Se mon roman sera plus larc:
Ganren mais otra lo test,
Conta las glozas des proset
E car es tot cert et verai,
Per qe ieu ren non laissarai.

(Don’t think there is too much
Even if my romance is longer [than the original]

330 Lines. 27-30.
Because in addition to the original
It tells a holy story
And because everything is true and verified,
I will leave no part covered.)

The Bible does not instruct anyone to give him or herself to death, in either the Hebrew or Greek Testaments, but Crescas uncovers that hidden morsel of “truth” for his audience. Vashti, a woman, gives herself to death in the manner of the female martyrs, who try to imitate Christ’s self-sacrifice instead of accepting that He died on their behalf. Vashti belongs to a literary culture where following such guidelines is tantamount to following the perceived truth of God’s word.

Vashti, like the saints, desires death as an end to an unbearable situation in her mortal existence. These female martyrs desire death in order to leave the world they feel they cannot live in, or to avoid performing actions that would be sinful to them. They can achieve this death in a non-sinful way if someone else puts them to death. It is important to recall the discussion of female shame from Chapter 3, remembering that shame and honor with regards to corporeal existence have been problematic for women since the beginning of the Judaic tradition, in which Eve brings sin onto humanity by eating the forbidden apple. The woman’s penance for eating this and encouraging Adam to share it is one of physical pain and also of submission, a loss of control over her

331 Lines. 37-42.
332 The Church also did not explicitly encourage its members to seek death, and even gave “strict conditions that each candidate of the palm of martyrdom should respect: do not provoke the persecutor, do die for faith, do witness publicly.” The first category is not observed by many of the martyrs in the Golden Legend; many of them provoke their persecutor or act transgressively to hasten their death. “L’Eglise attire l’attention du fidèle sur les conditions strictes que doit respecter tout candidat à la palme du martyr: ne pas provoquer le persécuteur, mourir pour la foi, témoigner publiquement.” Boureau, 113.
333 As seen in Chapter Two, medieval literary scholar Sarah Kay describes this mental and emotional outlook that the saints had, saying that: “Martyrs have ...mentally and spiritually given up the world. Death is both acceptable and welcomed; and they all quickly meet with what should, under ‘natural’ conditions, put an end to their bodily existence.” Kay, 222.
334 Walker Bynum, 1-2.
self. A woman’s honor centered on her body, which was arguably the only aspect of her life she could control. As seen in Chapter Three, this played out in many of the saints’ lives in scenes where the women refuse to eat or refuse to give their body in marriage to someone they do not desire, preferring death in place of giving themselves into the control of a man.

Saints Catherine and Marguerite present examples of characters wanting to die to avoid falling back into sin or falling into sin anew. Moreover, like Vashti they are the wives of kings who attack those of a persecuted faith. Recall that when the queen Marguerite is led to her death, she prays and asks her executioners to carry out their orders. The persecuted queens behave similarly in the Catherine story in order to end their existence before greater shame comes upon them. Petronelle, another woman from the *Golden Legend* who sought to preserve her chastity, specifically spoke of this desire when devising a distraction to escape marriage. The narrator implies that this woman of great beauty died by fasting, thus causing the end of her own life.

335 Walker Bynum, 8-9.
336 See Chapter Three for a more in-depth discussion of these and other female saints.
337 de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Provençal*, 210. “E quant ela ausi aquesta vos, levet se de oratio e di al carnacier que-l trenques la testa, ayssi coma avia comandamen. Et adonc lo carnacier levet lo glasi es al primier cop ostet li lo ca Et en ayssi la gloriosa sancta redet l’arma a Nostre Senhor.” (“And when she heard this voice, she raised herself in prayer and told the executioner to chop off her head, just as she had commanded. And then the executioner raised his sword and removed her head on the first strike. And in this way, the glorious saint gave back her soul to our Lord.”)
338 de Voragine, *Legenda Aurea Provençal*, 393. “Et edevenc se que hun comte venc a luy, e per la sua gran beutat demandet la per molher. Et ela respos li: ‘Se tu me voles aver per molher, fay me venir de las virgis que-m meno a ton ostal.’ .... ela mes se en oratio e cumerguet. Et en apres mes se el liech. Et en apres –iij-dias, ela va morir.” (“One day a count came to her and asked her to be his wife because of her great
Surpassing female beauty is a key narrative element in these three saints' lives (among others), as it is similarly in the Vashti poem. The biblical source material regarding Vashti indicates that King Assuerus has been giving a long party to celebrate his reign, and when he became inebriated, he asked his wife to show to his friends that she is the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. In the embellished Occitan version, Vashti, like the saints, is described further and is specifically ascribed great beauty. The king says:

\begin{verbatim}
Per caritat,
Al mont non a tant bela dona
Con la regina, ni tant bona.
\end{verbatim}

(By the love of God,
in the world there is no woman so beautiful
as the queen, nor one so good.)²⁴⁰

He then commands

\begin{verbatim}
Anas de cors
E menans me ses vestidura
Vasti la bela creature.
\end{verbatim}

(Go quickly
and bring to me Vashti, without her clothes,
the beautiful creature.)²⁴¹

The Occitan writer makes explicit the lack of clothing instead of letting it be inferred by saying that Vashti should be wearing only her crown.

Vashti, like the saints, lives in a society where she is obliged to obey a man, but she chooses not to. Despite her stature of submissive wife, much like that of Partonopeus’s servant and Yvain’s lion, all three characters have personal freedom to

³⁴⁰ Lines 176-178.
³⁴¹ Lines 184-186.
obey or not to obey as well as to live or die when faced with a certain reality or loss of honor. Her response is:

Per que li digas tot cort
Que en aiso non meta ponha;
Trop me seria gran vergonha

(You go tell him right now
that he should not ask for that.
It would be too great a shame for me.)

She adds further: “Ieu en cort non venrai nuza” (I will not enter court naked.) These are Vashti’s words in her own voice, much as the saints speak to their persecutors in their own voices. Unlike Eve, who added to Adam’s shame by performing a sinful act, Vashti wanted to protect the honor of herself and her husband, knowing that the effect would be shameful for him as well. In the Bible, Vashti is merely described, not personified. She is not shown to attempt to save herself or her husband from shame, though she does lose her life for her disobedience. This woman is not only responsible for her own honor but also that of her husband, infusing her character with wisdom. That she was not able to protect either of them from shame speaks to a lack of power, again unlike Eve. Her wise actions, obedient not to her husband but to greater values of honor, build her as a strong, noble character for the reader, holding onto her clothes but throwing off the cloak of shame surrounding the tradition of the female experience in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The king, of course, cannot accept such disobedience and consults with his advisors as to the proper action, which is to put her in a swamp and leave her there until

---

342 Lines 212-214. In the Apocryphal commentary, there is suggestion that she has leprosy and is hiding that, not hiding her body. However, this is still shame for her, and nudity would expose that shame.
343 Line 228.
344 Lines 211-218.
she drowns. There is one main difference between the treatment of the woman versus
that of the lion and the male servant: the man and animal may hasten their own death by
their own hands (or paws), but the woman must be put to death. The king’s advisors
suggested that perhaps the king should wait a bit to make such a decision and that he
should consult with others.\textsuperscript{345} The new set of advisors decides that in order to assert the
power of husbands over wives, Vashti should indeed be killed, and that she should be
killed by fire, much like the punishment of the suicide’s corpses.\textsuperscript{346} Often in the saints’
lives, we see attempts on a person’s life in a variety of forms until that person dies.
Famous examples include Catherine, who was first put on the wheel, but after its
inefficacy, she was beheaded.\textsuperscript{347} Barbara was another example of this when she did not
die after torture, the men who tried to burn her found their torches extinguished, and
eventually they beheaded her to be certain of success.\textsuperscript{348} Here, the persecutors only try
fire, but the discussion and deliberation of traditional methods of killing saints is present.

In this story, there is no “hidden message” that the issues between saint and
persecutor are of power between a man and a woman. As in the biblical narrative, the
problem is \textit{overtly} one of male control over a woman, and Crescas gives voice to the king
and his advisors who worry that Vashti’s disobedience would teach other women that
they could be independent if she were not executed as an example to them. He even uses
the phrase “portar las braías” (“to wear the pants”)\textsuperscript{349} when talking about what this would

\begin{footnotes}
\item[345] Lines 264-275.
\item[346] Cf. Chapter 2, Historical Context.
\item[347] Jacobus de Voragine, CLXXII.
\item[349] Line 310.
\end{footnotes}
teach women because the women would feel that they could be powerful within their households. Thus, they burn her. The next day, the king does not understand what happened to her because he had forgotten what he had done in his drunkenness. He recovers quickly, comparing the loss of a woman to the feeling when one hits one’s funny bone (mes qe aital es dol de molher / cant cel de copde c’om se fier / qe la dolor passa tantost). All of this is added to the Occitan version by Crescas.

Crescas, a Jewish man, thus created a new story from an old one, retold within the Christian rhetoric. Both Vashti and the female saints must follow their inner morals in order to maintain any semblance of power and honor against the men in their lives and that in a culture where there is an abundance of tales of female saints, Vashti is necessarily rewritten like a saint and is necessarily not judged for preferring death to life. Vashti is under the authority of a man, the king, and is asked to do something with her body that would bring her shame. She refuses to obey in order to maintain honor and independence, and this choice brings an end to her life at someone else’s hands. This does not go quite far enough to actually classify her as a saint, but it certainly follows a similar pattern established by the hagiographic tradition. Crescas takes Vashti’s story and rewrites it according to the same models and patterns established in the popular saints’ lives, reflecting the influence of the hagiographic tradition on medieval literature.

---

350 Lines 359-361.
Conclusions

This later medieval piece of Occitan literature, Le Roman de la Reine Ester, provides a rendition of a Christian martyr approaching her death. The romance offers insight to the portrayal of gender roles, personal agency, and the role of shame and honor. To welcome death as a way to avoid dishonor became established as a way for a devout female Christian to act under early persecution, and here it is established as a way to act in order to salvage one’s own honor or protect another’s. Like the saints, Vashti, a female character, may access steps toward death much more easily than the male characters who lead her to her death. She may despair or die without fear of religious consequences; Vashti goes to her death in defiance and disobedience but maintaining her honor. The author does not judge her despair but rather judges her husband’s absurdly rash behavior. By choosing a woman to defy orders even unto death, Crescas du Caylar reflects the tradition of holy women in the past and shows such action as acceptable. This hints at intertextuality between Jewish and Christian texts and further emphasizes the availability of death as an escape from pain without external judgment.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The past few chapters have, I hope, shown that the desire for death was represented across many genres in medieval French literature and was portrayed in different manners depending on the genre of the text, the gender of the character, and social hierarchy. The five main types of the death wish—the martyr trope, the desire for union outside the constraints of mortal life, the erotic, the way to truly express the value of life, and the apprehension of death—all function together to show pieces of the individual personality of each character as well as to highlight societal and cultural problems that would lead a character to despair. At the beginning of this dissertation, a number of questions were put forth, and I recall them here: Does the longing for death function differently from the modes of behavior found in actual suicides? Is the longing for death different from any other desire? Is it a longing for the end of longing? How do authors writing within a Christian society comment on scenes that display characters sinning so gravely—either by despairing or by killing themselves? Some answers have been apparent, some merit more treatment here, and others invite future study. Most need to be addressed separately in terms of genre and gender.

Within our example of hagiography, the *Golden Legend*, the martyrs all, by definition, die for their faith, so in a way, they have all brought about their own death. To bring an end to one’s existence calls for a strong and decisive action, and these saints
stood by their faith to the point of enduring or provoking death. The gender bias is immediately apparent upon reading the collection of stories: roughly half of all the *Lives* prominently featuring female saints show the woman as wanting to die, but only two out of over one hundred featured male saints expressing a desire or preference for death. These women wanted to leave society and join God, wanted to die for Christ, or wanted to avoid an earthly circumstance that detracted from their own honor. Their stories hold together in the collection not solely because they share the same title of saint and lead a life of faith but because of the desire for death. Faith gives them an elevated status in one of the only ways they can achieve it in society—through their religion. As important as the idea of the saints seeking greater social collateral is, the significance falls on the fact that these women were constantly and actively desiring something. Their death is not a simple end to mortal life but also a beginning to an eternal one and a rebellion against the political system that oppresses them. In hagiography, the fate for a woman is set.

Whether it is because of human or divine agency, the women’s desires are named and fulfilled.

The *romans antiques* have a different kind of fate, though it is not always related to individual characters. The nations featured in these romances must end in victory or defeat, according to what the classical source material prescribed. The characters, too, live or die according to the classical sources, but the medieval writers changed the way in which these characters faced or sought death. In this genre, the authors often Christianize or modernize the texts, but the deaths of characters still fulfill a communal need or societal role in accordance with the original narrative. Like the *Lives* of the saints, these
romances showcase the death wish as an integral part of the narrative structure, providing poignant events for the rest of the community to experience. The medieval authors do not add their Christian values to the deaths of war heroes, but they do provide characters like Dido with redeeming, Christian qualities at the end of her life. Benoît de Sainte-Maure rewrote Hélène, creating a character who more closely resembled the female martyr from hagiography, which highlights how the *romans antiques* represent a deliberate program of updating their classical source texts.

In later secular romance, what was established as a way to avoid dishonor for a devout female Christian under persecution became established as a way for any character—man, woman, or animal—to act in order to protect one’s honor or win over a potential lover. Although the death wish can be a protective mechanism for all characters, accelerating or approaching one’s death remains easier for women and other subordinate or submissive characters. The male protagonist hero is not shown succeeding in suicide or death, while the female character—Christian, Jewish, or pagan—may die of despair or be put to death for transgressions. It is important to remember that the genre of secular romance uses subversion and satire, and in such scenes as Yvain’s lion attempting suicide, we must ask why Chrétien would use an animal here. One can abstract that such scenes can be understood to be comical, and this choice of placing the comic into a scene of such a serious matter shows the need for levity as well as providing a critique on the overuse of despair in literature and perhaps in society.

As the Church recognized and began to craft solutions to the problem of despair and suicide during the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries, romance writers also
approached the problem in their fiction. Interior monologues and public suffering marked courtly literature’s narrative across genre boundaries, each genre probing how different people face their turmoil in society and spirituality. Hagiography showed the death wish primarily for the women, and given their position in society and religious aspirations to join their Lord, death provided an immediate and acceptable solution. This death was a continuation into another life as well as a political statement against the ruling powers. The *romans antiques* continued to show women suffering but drew from sources that were not originally subject to the Christian morality of the twelfth century. Despite the fact that the authors Christianized the texts and rewrote certain aspects, they rarely commented on a death wish as being either positive or negative. The need to explore the Christian spiritual ramifications of despair remained less important than the need to explore the despair itself in as accurate a way as possible. Secular romance continued this realistic exploration of despair and extended it further by writing and rewriting scenes where heroes and heroines prefer death to life. They mimic the sense of having a worthy cause as the martyrs did, and in the courtly literature context, this became standard acceptable practice. The later romances drew on similar themes and showcased religious characters anachronistically reenacting the martyrs’ behavior approaching death because the preaching manuals were becoming even more common in the general culture. Analyzing whether the contexts are serious or comic also contributes to the interpretation of the reception of the death wish, and whether it is in fact a death wish.

These are some of the explanations as to why trends of the representation of the
death wish exist in vernacular literature. Yet the texts still invite the reader to consider how and why a character might want to die because it happens so frequently in each narrative. Texts comment on current religious practice by presenting bishops or monks who enter a scene to save a suffering person or by rewriting a pagan heroine as a forgiving Christian. Thus, we should expect to see some sort of Christian reaction to the embodiment of despair and suicide. The problem was of utmost importance to the Church in the Middle Ages, as the declaration of despair as apostasy and the solution to the problem via confession prove. The manner of description and of events surrounding the despair can inform us about the cultural reception of the problem and the extent to which the public shared the Church’s view of despair, thus indicating the public perception of religious dogma. In society, the nobility were exempt from the ignobility of despair and self-destruction, and the same is true in the nobility’s representation in the literary texts. Their suicides or death wishes are tragic and highlight worthy aspects of society instead of functioning as a way to escape from society’s pressures. The use of humor or satire also can show the attitude toward the death wish, literary trends, and religious belief. The question merits further research to fine-tune this reception, which will not only place the understanding of despair and suicide from this time period into clearer understanding but also the role of the Church within literature and public perception of sin.

The discussion of suicide is just beginning to get interesting, and further studies show promise in a few different directions. A major trajectory to pursue is the role of the merveilleux and the death wish. The portrayal of Dido’s despair was by no means alone
in its inclusion of the *merveilleux*; the *Roman de Troie, Partonopeus*, and *Yvain* were all infused with characters or influences from the fantastic world. Treating how the non-Christian supernatural resolve or fail to resolve desperate situations will contribute to the understanding of the reception of suicide and despair in the Middle Ages.

As this dissertation has shown, much of the death wish centers on just that—the wish, so a logical step would be to examine in just what circumstances a character is actually longing for the end of longing. Looking at the reactions of the characters after their unfulfilled death wishes will inform this study.

Interdisciplinary work with art historians and Jewish studies will bring the most wide-ranging perspective on the death wish together. Finding more common points like the representation of Queen Vashti and the Christian saints will help elucidate the common person’s interpretation of despair and the death wish as separate from theology.

The problem of suicide and despair has always been a part of society, and most likely will continue to be, so understanding just one historical period is a beginning to completing the history of suicide and despair and its cultural reception. It is essential to understand the evolution of human development in terms of personal struggle; thus studying suicide and despair from one period will contribute one piece to this understanding and allow us to draw conclusions about the human condition and its changes or stability over time. Studying literature as a way to approach the problem provides a fictional, imagined example of how despair is perceived by an author who is a member of a society and expects to connect with an audience in that society. Studying medieval literature is specifically relevant today because so much of the despair in the
literature is focused on shame and honor, and every day new information appears about politicians, celebrities, and small-town locals who are lauded for success or shamed for failure. Their personal suffering or despair is rarely ever shown in reaction to that, but there is a general obsession with psychoanalysis and treating depression. Finding links between societal experience and personal suffering in the past can help inform the present because human concerns are not frozen at various moments but move gradually on a continuum. The past not only can inform us about society’s reactions to and perceptions of suicide and despair but also help us bridge the gap between the hopeful and the despairing.
Bibliography

*Ancient and Medieval Primary Sources:*


*Modern Secondary Sources:*


Cardullo, Bert. “Of Virgin Suicide, Human Bondage, and Male Indulgence.” The Hudson


Polo de Beulieu, Marie Anne. “Présence de la Légende dorée dans les recueils
d’exempla: citations, traces et réécritures.” In De la Sainteté à L’Hagiographie.
Génèse et Usage de la Legende Dorée, edited by Barbara Fleith, 147-171. Paris:

Lecoffre, 1908.

Reames, Sherry L.. The Legenda Aurea: a reexamination of its paradoxical history.

Roach, Andrew. “Occitania Past and Present: Southern Consciousness in Medieval and

Rockwell, Paul Vincent. "The Failed Embrace of the Father: Historical Continuity in Le
Chevalier As Deus Espees and Le Roman D'Eneas." Romance Quarterly 51

Rollo, David. “Benoit de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie: Historiography, Forgery, and

Saintyves, Pierre. En marge de la Légende dorée : songes, miracles et survivances :
essai sur la formation de quelques thèmes hagiographiques. Paris : E. Nourry,
1930.

Schmitt, Jean-Claude. “Le Suicide au Moyen Age.” Annales: Histoire, sciences sociales

Segol, Marla. “‘Floire and Blancheflor:’ Courtly Hagiography or Radical Romance?”

Shedd, Gordon M. “‘Flamenca’: A Medieval Satire on Courtly Love.” The Chaucer

Shepkaru, Shmuel. “Death Twice over: Dualism of Metaphor and Realia in 12th-Century
Hebrew Crusading Accounts.” The Jewish Quarterly Review, New Series 93

Sinclair, Keith V. “Yunck, John A. (translator and introduction). Eneas. New York :


Winstead, Karen A. “Fear in Late-Medieval English Martyr Legends.” In More than a Memory: The Discourse of Martyrdom and the Construction of Christian Identity
