

# A TRANSLATION OF *LAI* *D'ARISTOTLE*, OR THE LAY OF ARISTOTLE

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## Abstract

The highly entertaining story that follows will provide students of both medieval studies and philosophy with an unseen angle of Aristotle, particularly regarding his reception beyond Greco-Roman antiquity. The profusion of (neo-)Aristotelianism in Western Europe prior to the reintroduction of antiquity via the Italian Renaissance makes for a conflicting portrait of the medieval era's Philosopher, as he is revered in clerical and university contexts, and ridiculed in cultural milieus. This translation attempts to render the original loose octosyllabic verse-lines written in the *françien* dialect into an idiomatic, but subtly archaic, prose-English. The most recent translation of this lay is by Leslie Brooks in the Liverpool Online Series (2011), and only the shortest of the six extant manuscripts was translated.<sup>1</sup> This first translation of the P2 manuscript brings to light the meta commentary of the story's narrator and moral lessons espoused by Cato in the epilogue section and provides a more fluid, neutral alternative to Brook's archaic-verse rendition.

## Translator's Note

The aim of this translation was to produce a prose-version of the octosyllabic lay to better capture the following elements of Aristotle's misadventure: lexical accuracy, tone and register, and ease of reading. First, concerning accuracy: Valenciennes wrote in *françien*, a dialect that was neither Old nor Middle French, but which was used for literary and official works (as opposed to spoken language). Second, the concern on tone relates to the story's diverse participants. Be it the continually intervening narrator, Aristotle, or Cato, etc., the speech pattern of each aligns with the traits of their character. For

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<sup>1</sup> Chadwick, Kay, Pollie Bromilow, Godfried Croenen, Charles Forsdick, Kate Marsh, Adrian Armstrong, Kate Astbury, et al. n.d. "Liverpool Online Series Critical Editions of French Texts."

instance, the narrator and Cato's speech contain undertones of legal principles; Aristotle's dialogue is visibly elevated; the girl often speaks simply but deceptively. What appears to be the odd word here and there is not only an attempt to find English's best counterpart, but an additional indicator as to who is speaking (or commenting) within the text.

And regarding ease of reading, being mindful that the story is light-hearted and bawdy, I have made idiomatic changes throughout to encourage a couple chuckles, and also divided the story in parts and scaffolded it with paragraphs. To this end, I chose prose over verse. Though the lay genre is typically distinguished by its rhyme schemes, lyricism, and short-form length, its function is to share tales of chivalry and romance. It is with the latter in mind that I elected to make use of the clarity afforded by prose. I hope that this project will help readers in search of a conservative, but not archaic, light-handed approach to Valenciennes' work.

## THE LAY OF ARISTOTLE

### PROLOGUE<sup>2</sup>

One should never refrain from recounting and presenting good words. Rather, one should heed good words because one can learn good sense and graciousness by listening to them. Good people rejoice in the good because it is rightful and customary, and the wicked grimace as soon as they hear it. Just as the former praise the good and good people, so too do spiteful people speak ill of others when they cannot do worse! For Envy is the affair of those who house it in their heart at any cost.

It astonishes me why the good weighs on them. You traitorous and uncivilized people, why do you inflict your own misdeeds and pain upon others? What hypocrisy! You commit two mortal sins: the first is that you partake in slander and the other is that you force upon others your deceitful speech, your foulness. I believe it would be of no avail to criticize these pitiless brutes whom we could call *ganelons*,<sup>3</sup> who cannot stop themselves from speaking ill even under pain of death; so won't and accustomed are they to do so.

Now, let us come to the tale of an adventure which I have undertaken, whose subject I much appreciated when I first heard it, and which needs to be delivered in full, spoken in verse, and recited without meanness and without abbreviation. Never should a work that has wickedness coursing through it ever be performed at court, never will the rhymes I craft ever seek infamy, and never—not in any day of my life—have I nor would I engage with any of this. I will never set about creating any

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<sup>2</sup> For ease of reading, I have organized the translation into sections and paragraphs, as the original had neither.

<sup>3</sup> *Guenelons*, or the plural form of Ganelon, a medieval knight who betrayed Charlemagne. While Ganelon is a proper noun, its usage is very much plural, and is also not capitalized. (p. 666.28)

speech or work with hateful words, since wickedness ruins the taste of everything. As I have witnessed,<sup>4</sup> ugly words are harmful, and never in my life will I be a maker of any such thing. Rather, I, by means of an accepted model, will speak of things which are worthy and pleasing and are set in a place of fruit and spice.

## PART 1

We learn that Alexander, the king of Greece, displayed his anger to many princes, to degrade and tame them, and to exalt and ennoble himself. His mother is Generosity<sup>5</sup>, hostile to all who are cruel and pleasant to all who are generous. For so long as an avaricious person loves money, the generous one hates to support him, for no good can come of it.

The good king of Greece and Egypt had recently conquered Greater India, bringing it beneath his feet. He also stayed there for a visit. If you wanted to ask me why he willingly chose to stay in that part of the world, what he was holding on to, then I will gladly tell you. Love, which grasps and embraces and attacks and enlaces everything, had shackled him so tightly that he became a devoted lover, which he didn't regret at all because he had found a lady-friend<sup>6</sup>, as beautiful as he might wish for. He had no care to court elsewhere, but only to be and remain with her.

Love certainly is mighty and masterful. He<sup>7</sup> makes the most powerful person in the world so humble and obedient that he cannot control himself; instead, he forgets everything for another. It is legitimate that Love is of such worth for once she<sup>8</sup> has taken control over a man, he need not have any inner turmoil; Love has as much right of power—and supreme at that—over a king as over the poorest man, be it in Champagne or all of France... her lordship is sovereign.<sup>9</sup>

The king resided with his lady-friend. There are lots of men and lots of women who speak amongst themselves of what could have caused the king to go mad to this degree and lead such a debauched life. Never does he leave her side, he is like someone incapable of refusing. Most of his people do not dare to speak... but behind his back, he is blamed by many.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ne ja ne me ferai trovor / De rien que voie en mon vivant / quar villain mot vont anuiant.* This is one of the sentences that suffer from the free-form nature of the lai and its poetic license. *Que voie*, in this instance, might refer to the act of witnessing or testimony, or of gleaning from one's life, among others. (p. 666.48-50)

<sup>5</sup> *Largesse* can be translated literally as 'largesse,' but more conventionally as generosity. It is represented as an entity, in the same way that Love and Nature are in this story. (p. 666.59)

<sup>6</sup> *Amie* is particularly difficult to translate, as it is friend, female-friend, beloved, lover, and so forth. While the choice of beloved is tempting, only lady-friend is able to assume all of the different undertones of *amie*, and also an archaic tone not unwelcome to this medieval story. (p. 668.78)

<sup>7</sup> *Bien est Amors poissanz et mestre.* The adjectives of mighty and masterful are gendered masculine, and thus Love is masculine. However, throughout the text, Love is also gendered as female, and all instances are marked in the endnotes. (p. 668.81).

<sup>8</sup> *C'est droiz qu'Amors est de tel pris / que puis qu'ele a un homme enpris.* The pronoun '*ele*' or she makes clear that Love also assumes a feminine form. (p. 668.85-86).

<sup>9</sup> *Franche*, which is more than frank or noble; it speaks to the feudal obligations that come with lordship. (p. 668.94)

When his teacher Aristotle heard of this, he quite rightfully disapproved of him. He begins to advise Alexander oh-so very nicely. He says, “In a bad state of mind, you have abandoned all the barons of your kingdom for the love of a foreign woman!” Alexander retorts at once when he hears this, “How many is a good number then? I think those who think me mad have never loved, because one cannot love<sup>10</sup> but a single woman, nor is it right that one should please more than a single woman. Whoever criticizes<sup>11</sup> a man for remaining where his heart begs him to be, such a person finds very little love within himself.

Aristotle, who knows all and has all rightful knowledge,<sup>12</sup> replies to the king, saying such behavior brings great shame to him. For the entire week, Alexander had been and stayed<sup>13</sup> with his lady-friend and did not partake in any revelry or festivities with his knights. “I truly see that you can barely see at all, my King,” says Aristotle, his teacher. “Now then, we might as well lead you to graze right here like a beast in the meadow. Much has your sense been deranged that we cannot find any sense of moderation within you, for you have so forcefully altered your heart for a foreign girl. I earnestly beseech and implore you to abandon this practice because this madness is much too costly.”

## PART 2

Hereafter, Alexander remains absent; he waits a great many days and hours and does not approach his lady-friend because of his master’s speech and reproaches. However his desire does not diminish; although he does not see his lady-friend as he used to, he loves her all the more and wants her more than he ever did before. Shame and slander held him back until finally he returned to the one who, in his eyes, is so beautiful.

The lady leaps to her feet, as she had been so greatly disheartened by the absence of the king. She says, “Your great disarray has been well noted, sire. How can a faithful lover<sup>14</sup> deprive himself of going to see what pleases him?” With these words, she cries, and then falls silent.

He responds, “Lady-friend, do not be surprised, for my absence was not without cause. My knights and barons criticized me harshly for I seldom came and went with them. And my master, who admonished me severely, said it was bad. Nevertheless, I know well that I have wronged you, but I feared their contempt and shame.”

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<sup>10</sup> *Amer*, which while in this case is love specifically, is a pun on ‘bitter,’ an inventive and fashionable play on words at the time, though trite to a modern speaker. (p. 670.114).

<sup>11</sup> *Rancune*, which has a novel usage in the text. *Rancune*, which is a noun and means the resentment caused by an injustice or an aversion, has been twisted and used as a verb. (p. 670.116).

<sup>12</sup> *Clergie*, whose historical meaning does not have clerical or ecclesiastical connotations, but simply knowledge, in the domain of clerics and learned individuals. (p. 670.120)

<sup>13</sup> *Que toute entiere la semaine / est avoec s’amie et arreste*: I have kept all the redundancies that were in the original since they are features of the era’s writing, and occur throughout the text. (p. 670.224)

<sup>14</sup> *Finz amant*, rendered as faithful lover, has deeper roots coming out of the troubadour-love-lyric tradition. (p. 672.356)

“Sire, I understand well what you wish to say,” says the lady. “God save me! Cleverness and reason are not lacking in me... in time, I would very much like to avenge myself upon Aristotle, and that way you can better insult him and enact an even bigger shame upon your pale and hoary master. If I am still alive tomorrow mid-afternoon, and if Love, whose power never fails, gives me the force needed, then neither will dialectic nor learnedness ever be useful to him, nor can he possess enough swordplay to prevail against me ... you will see well enough tomorrow! Lord-king, do get up tomorrow; at the windows of this tower, I will prepare the arrangements!”

Upon hearing this, Alexander rejoices greatly. “You are so brave, my beautiful sweetheart, if I love anyone other than you, may God give me a bad welcome! I have a love such as I wish; I pursue no one else.” Thereupon he departs from his lady-friend... thus he goes, and she stays.

### PART 3

In the morning, when it was the time and the hour, without awakening another person, she rises without difficulty. She wears only her nightdress,<sup>15</sup> and, in a dappled, indigo cloak, she settles under the tower of the orchard. On this summer morning, it was warm and breezy... how nicely had Nature enflowered her radiant face with lily and rose. Nor was there anything on all of her form that should not rightfully have been there. And do not think it possible that she wore a wimple or a headband. What really enhanced and embellished her was her long, blonde, beautiful braid; a woman who wears her hair so prettily does not deserve to have it shaved!<sup>16</sup>

Amid the orchard and in her cloak, she goes about in full swing, singing not even a bit loudly.

*Now, I see her, see her, see her*

*There, the fountain spills serenely.*

*Now, I see her, see her my lady-friend*

*The gladioli beneath the alders,*

*Now, I see her, see her, the fair,*

*The blonde I see her.*

When the king, who harkens with ear and heart, hears the song, he goes to the window and rejoices in his lady-friend’s speech and song. And now his master, Aristotle of Athens, can attest well and truly, that good, loyal lovers desire to approach one another from afar. And he will not ever go about reproaching the king nor ever torment him for he will find so much desire within himself that he will be very drunk on it.

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<sup>15</sup> *Chemise* is rendered as nightdress, though it is specifically a generalized undergarment-frock, used for sleeping or worn by soon-to-be executed prisoners. (p. 674.199)

<sup>16</sup> *N’a pas deserve c’on la tonde*. The underlying significance of this practice of shaving as a punishment or a humiliation, often for adultery or other crimes, and persisted even into the 20<sup>th</sup> c., such as *Les Tondues*, a group of women in France who were shaved for sexual collaboration and relationships with German soldiers in World War II. (p. 674.212)

When Aristotle rises and sits at his books, he sees the lady coming and going. She awakens a memory in his heart that makes him close his books. “Alas! God,” he says, “oh might this vision come closer! I would place myself at its mercy! But how will I act? I will not do it; never has come to pass that I, who know so much and can do so much, have found this kind of madness in my heart, that a single sight has taken away my entire heart. Love wants me to host<sup>17</sup> him, but honor considers such a memory and such homage<sup>18</sup> to be a source of shame! Gosh!<sup>19</sup> What has my heart become... I, who am so old and hoary, ugly and pale and darkened and thin, and what’s more, I am also bitter and sour, more than anyone might know, or could even think possible! I have used my intellect poorly, I who have never stopped learning. And now Love, who takes many a worthy man, has unlearned me, all the better to capture me. In learning I have unlearned, unlearned I have in learning, because Love seizes me so strongly that I can no longer oppose him.” Thus the master tears himself apart and laments bitterly.

With a little branch of mint, the woman makes a garland of many flowers. She remembers Love whilst making it; as she picks little flowers, she sings:

*Here, I am held by flings,  
My sweet, I love you so!  
Here, I am held by flings,  
Where I hold out my hand.*

So she sings, so she frolics. Master Aristotle is quite distraught that she won’t come any closer. She knows very well what is necessary to ignite and attract him. She wants to shoot him with an arrow, barbed with grace. Indeed, she worked and strived with all her will to seduce him. She places her garland all prettily and alluringly on her fair head, pretending that nothing is going on, that she neither sees nor perceives him. And to deceive him even better, so that he sees her bewitching more beautifully... she goes towards the window singing verses from a troubadour’s song.<sup>20</sup> She does not want him to shy away, having put everything into this encounter.

*Close to an orchard, next to a little spring,  
Sat a daughter of a king, her hand against her cheek.  
Whilst sighing, her sweet friend calls,  
“Ah, Count Guy, your love  
Deprives me of all solace and joy.*

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<sup>17</sup> *Amors veut que le tiengne a oste*. This has a double meaning, in that Love can be either the host or the guest. (p. 676.248)

<sup>18</sup> *Tel souvenir et tel bonmage!* I have used the cognate, homage. Note the overarching tradition of homage in a feudal and erotic context, that individuals paid homage to the god of love in texts like the *Roman de la Rose* or *Le Remède de Fortune*. (p. 676.250).

<sup>19</sup> *Avoi* is more often used in the less refined lyric genre. Gosh marks a departure in register like *avoi*. (p. 676.251)

<sup>20</sup> *Chanson de toile* is a specific genre of troubadour-lyric poetry that is sung as women are weaving, and the following verse-excerpt (Close to an orchard...), is an example of this genre. (p. 678.290)

## PART 4

When she had said this, she passed by the large, low, window. And he, who thought he had suffered enough, so much did he desire the maiden, seized her by the cloak. With these words, the naughty cat's candle fell to the ground<sup>21</sup>; he is caught without any chance of escape.

The young woman<sup>22</sup> cries out, "God help me, who is holding me back?" "Lady, you are most welcome," says he who is both prosecutor and mayor of the madness which oppresses him. "Sire," says the lady, "gosh, is that really you?" "Yes," he responds, "my sweet lady, I would risk heart and soul for you, my life and my honor. Love and Nature have made me such that I cannot leave you." "Ha, sire," she says, "since when have you loved me in this way? Certainly I am not to blame! But everything is going poorly: I do not know who has come between me and the king and criticized him so much for larking about with me."

"Now, lady," he says, "calm yourself for I will appease the ill will and the outrage and the blame and the strife. But by God, come here and placate my desire with your smooth and flawless body." "Master," says the lady, "before I commit such a folly, and if you are so enamored of me, first, you must agree to a very particular thing, for a great, great desire has taken hold of me: to ride you for a bit on the grass of this orchard. I also want," the damsel says, "for there to be a saddle on your back; this will be more proper."

At once, the master responds as someone who belongs to her entirely, that he would do this willingly. Love really left in him shambles, when he made him wear the saddle of a parade-horse across his neck! Deftly does Love make the wise man foolish because Nature commands him: the greatest sage in the world goes on all fours like a saddled draft horse, advancing cat-like on top of the grass! I will give you an example and a proverb; I will know how to explain it well.

Aristotle puts the maiden on his back and carries her about the orchard to his and her content. And in a clear and full voice, she sings:

*So goes the one whom Love leads,*

*A virgin as white as wool,*

*Master Moron carries me.*

*So goes the one whom Love leads,*

*And those who obey his laws.*

Alexander is in the tower, he has easily seen everything which surrounds him... not for his whole entire empire could he keep himself from laughing. "Master," he says, "by God, what does this

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<sup>21</sup> *A cest mot chei l'estincelle / toute jus a terre au vil chat.* This acts either as a proverb or a reference to the story or trope of the "Cat and the Candle." See "The Story of the Cat and the Candle in Middle English Literature" by Willy L. Braekman and Peter S. Macaulay. (p. 678.303-4).

<sup>22</sup> Valenciennes has intentionally used different terms for women, including *dame*, *pucelle*, *damoisele*, or lady, virgin, young woman or girl, etc. (p. 676.266)

mean? I see very well that someone is riding you. How... have you gone so mad as to let yourself come to this? The other day you prohibited me from seeing her. And now I see you brought to the point where there is no reason left in you; on the contrary, you abide by the law of beasts!”

Aristotle raises his head, and the maiden descends. Then he replies shamefully, “I was right to fear you, burning as I am like a young man in the prime of youth even though I am stricken with old age. I cannot fend off Love’s snare without it recoiling, as you’ve obviously noticed; in one hour, all that I have learned and read was undone by Nature, who takes and devours everything. Since I committed such a blatant folly in the open, know with certainty that you will not be allowed to get away without loss and condemnation by your people.”

And so, elegantly and nobly did Aristotle easily escape from his misfortune. The lady, too, achieved everything she had undertaken, entirely and completely. The king prized her all the more for having taken revenge upon his Master, who had condemned and slandered him. But since the act was so amusing and Aristotle’s excuse so clever, the king pardoned him, laughing. And his master gave him free rein to do as he liked, since he had no reason to restrain him.

## EPILOGUE

Now, I would like to make an appeal regarding this story and this affair, of which I will take Cato, who was a good scholar and a wise man—of such manifest authority—as my guarantor. *Turpe est doctori cum culpa redarguit ipsum.*<sup>23</sup> Regarding this verse, Cato offers the explanation that when one is reproached for something that they have blamed in another, then they receive blame and anguish. Whoever does this commits a great folly: they diminish and damage their intellect. It is true that Aristotle condemned and scorned Alexander; he, who put himself in such distress and then allowed himself to be so deeply wounded by love—had no more resistance left inside him. And he who was under duress... should that one be found guilty?

No indeed, because Love, who imposes his will on all men and women collectively, forces him; therefore, it seems to me that the master does not have any guilt for his misdeed. He did not act by way of intellect but by pure and rightful law. Henry finishes this adventure which says and shows that one cannot deceive a noble heart, nor take away its will because Love has it in his power to imprison and to dominate the noble heart. And the one who wants to delude himself on this point must not be a loyal lover because his love seems bitter to him; one can better withstand Love only by making it tasteless.

In brief, those who try out love will undergo pain from it many times, but it is better for them to take pleasure in this pain, for after the pains they receive the pleasures. She, Love<sup>24</sup>, knows how to comfort the one who can loyally endure her delay and suffer as her martyr, for their hardship returns to

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<sup>23</sup> In English: It is a dishonor for a scholar to denounce a fault of which he himself is culpable.

<sup>24</sup> *Si set **ele** rasasseur.* The subject-pronoun is only ‘she,’ except Love has been inserted for clarity. (p. 686.452)



them as joy. And so, from this story, we can learn that we should not blame nor reproach the beloveds or the lovers, because Love has power and command over all men and all women. And regarding these people, Love acts on all his<sup>25</sup> desires, and all of his deeds should be honored since Aristotle,<sup>26</sup> who was master of all knowledge, bore his burden. We should take care to draw wisdom from the pains we bear for Love given that we know much less than Aristotle... for whoever suffers pains for Love will be well compensated for the toils which lovers endure for him. This is the Truth, and I stand by it, for Love conquers all and will conquer all so long as the world endures.

## FINIS

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<sup>25</sup> *Et d'euls fet ses volentez toutes/ et tret a honor sez fez.* Love is ambiguously gendered and can be taken as a masculine or feminine. (p. 686.461-462)

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle is not explicitly mentioned but referred to twice in this last paragraph. For clarity, he has been named. (p. 686.464, 466)

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