



Speaking with the dead

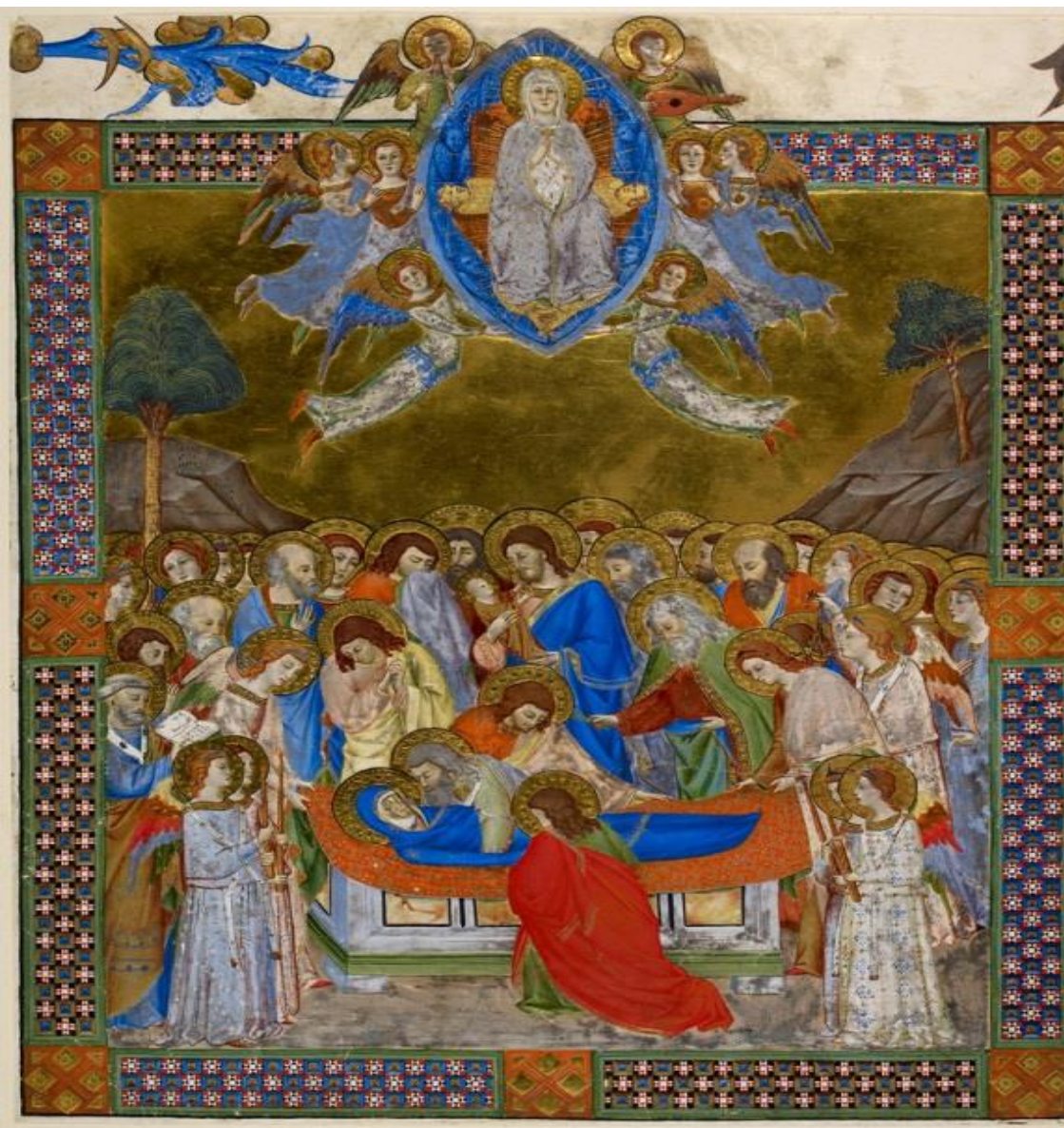
What can Chaucer tell us about today?

Assumption of the Virgin Mary attributed to Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci, 1348-1399, possibly from a choir book, British Library



Triumph of Venus (per inscription: Achilles, Tristan, Lancelot, Samson, Paris and Troilus) Ca. 1390-1420, ascribed to Francesco de Michele. Paris, Louvre Florentine *desco da parto*





What are the similarities?

What are the differences?

Desco de parto, birth salver = Triumph of Venus

- Purchased/commissioned by Tuscan husbands
- Given as gifts to wives to celebrate a successful childbirth
- Custom originates post-plague years, ca. 1370
- Frequently a family crest was on the reverse side
- Protected with cloth, the salvers would be used to carry wine, gifts, and sweetmeats to the new mother during her lying-in.
- Children often inherited and treasured the *deschi* given to their mothers when they were born.

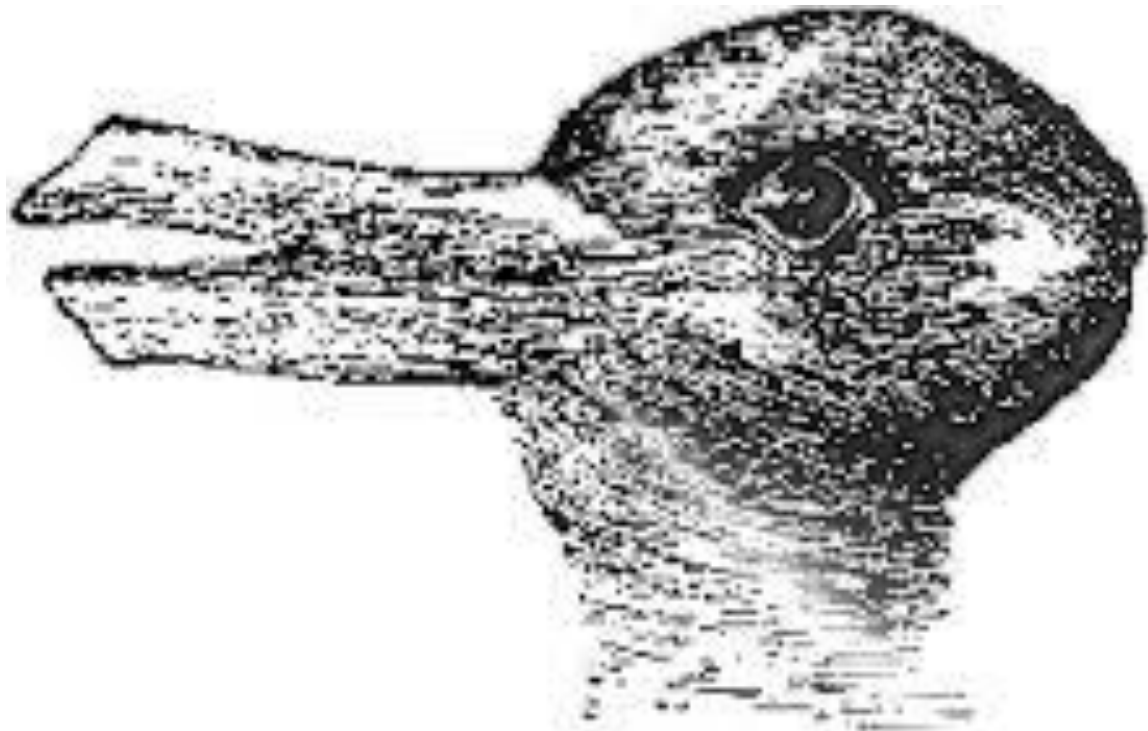
Hermeneutics of 'both/and'

- Venus is exalted as a sexual goddess of love and fertility
- But too great an adoration of the goddess poses a spiritual danger
- As an object, the salver encapsulates transcendent solemnity coupled with humor
- The tone of the object is difficult to pinpoint. As with much medieval literature, the tone is 'between earnest and game' and entails 'both earnest and game.'
- Contradictions and paradox uncover "those puzzling places between affirmation and negation," between *both-and* (Brown, *Contrary Things*, 148)

The point?

- Medievals contemplated the contradictions.
- They liked the mental activity of liminality, of being between binary categories, of going back and forth between them.
- Their minds meditate on the whole even if humans cannot hold each category in our consciousness at the same time.
- For medievals, the world was a book written by God so nothing is off-limits.
- We are pilgrims in this world and trying to capture the whole, which we are unable to do. By contemplating the contradictions, by being aware of the dialectic, we become close to grasping actuality.
- In short, I am asking you to think differently than we usually do when negotiating the mundane.

Modern version



Combination of medieval & modern



"There can be no peace until they renounce their Rabbit God and accept our Duck God."

Turning to Chaucer 1343-1400

- 1374-86 Took up residence over Aldgate in London
- Took up position as controller of the Wool Customs
- Wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* set in Troy before its destruction

O blisful light, of which the bemes clere
Adorneth al the thridde heuen faire;
O sonnes lief, O loues doughter deere,
Plesance of loue, O goodly debonaire,
In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire; 5
O veray cause of heele and of gladnesse,
I-heryed be thy myghte and thi goodnesse.

In heuene and helle, in erthe and salte see,
Is felt thi myght, if that I wel descerne;
As man, brid, beste, fische, herbe, and grene tree 10
The fele in tymes with vapour eterne.
God loueth, and to loue wol nought werne,
And in this world no lyues creature
With-outen loue is worth, or may endure.

3e loues first to thilke effectes glade, 15
Thorugh which that thynges lyuen alle and be,
Comeueden, and amorous hem made
On mortal thyng, and as 3ow list ay 3e
3eue hym in loue ese or aduersitee,
And in a thousand formes down hym sente 20
ffor loue in erthe, and whom 3ow liste he hente.

O Blissful light, of which the beams clear
adorn all the third heaven fair!
O sun's beloved, O Jove's daughter dear,
pleasure of love, O grace of air,
in gentle hearts and ready to live there! 5
O true cause of health and gladness,
blessed be your power and your goodness!

In heaven and hell, in earth and salt sea
your power is felt, if I truly discern all,
since man, bird, beast, fish, herb and green tree 10
feel at times your influence eternal.
God loves, and from love will never fall:
And in this world no living creature
without love, has worth, or may endure.

You Jove first to those effects so glad 15
(through which all things live and be)
brought him, and amorous him made
towards mortal things: and as you wish, ye
gave him in love ease or adversity:
and in a thousand forms down him sent 20
to love on earth, and where you wished he went.

Chaucer's – biography until he arrives at Aldgate

- 1343 -Born to a Merchant social class
- 1357- Page to Countess of Ulster, wife of Lionel, 2nd son of Edward III
- 1359-Serves in retinue of Lionel (100 Years War)
- 1360-Captured at Reims, ransomed for 16 pounds, becomes diplomatic envoy (Calais to England)
- 1365-6- marries Philippa who serves in Queen's household, daughter of knight
- 1366- travels to Spain
- 1367-esquire to Edward III
- 1369-travels to France, serves in John of Gaunt's army
- 1370 – travels to continent on King's service
- 1374-1386 – Chaucer living in Aldgate

Smithfield

Moorfields

Newgate

Guildhall

St. Paul's Cathedral

St. Martin in the Vintry

St. Katharine Cree

Holy Trinity Priory

St. Botolph's without Aldgate

Aldgate

Tower Hill

The Tower

Custom House and Wool Wharf

London Bridge

Southwark

Thames

Thames Street

Cornhill Street

Leadenhall St.

Fenchurch Street

Aldgate Street

Oil Jewry

Conspicuous Place

Thames River

Smithfield

Westminster

Southwark

Greenwich

London and environs

0 2 4 Miles

0 75 150 300 Yards

0 75 150 300 Metres

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What is going on in the rest of England?

- 1337-1453 Hundred Years War
- 1348 Black death arrives and continues to decimate population as it recurs in waves
- 1376 Black Prince dies in Sack of Limoges
- 1377 Edward III dies, and Richard II ascend to throne @ 10 years old
Lollard movement – Pope condemns John Wycliffe's doctrines
- 1378 Great Schism (rival Popes in Rome & Avignon)
- 1381 Peasant's Revolt
- 1386 Noblemen co-opt Richard II & reduce his power
- 1388 Bloody parliament – Lords Appellant executes closest supporters of Richard II, friends/acquaintances of Chaucer
- 1400 Richard deposed; Chaucer dies

Tumultuous times

- 1386 - Chaucer leaves Aldgate, London, for Kent, serves as Justice of Peace and member of Parliament
- In short, he does not lose his head, but removes himself from London.
- Perhaps he was just not that important; BUT and here is the question:
- Does liminality –the ability to contemplate the in-between places— inform a mode of resistance in times of political and social upheaval?