

INSIDE THE LABYRINTH: *ASSEMBLY OF LADIES* AND CHARTRES
CATHEDRAL

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the possible meanings and functions of medieval labyrinths and mazes in architecture and literature. Information on labyrinths, including historical and oral traditions, as well as descriptions in narrative texts, are considered. In this project, I examine medieval attitudes toward labyrinths and how those attitudes influence function in the setting of the hedge-maze in the anonymous fifteenth-century poem, *Assembly of Ladies*, and the labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral in France. Ultimately, I argue that labyrinths, whether literary or physical, are more than merely diversions or entertainment, but sacred sites of ritual performance. The rich history of the labyrinth lends authority to the ecclesiastic rituals at Chartres and, in turn, gives narrative authority to the AL narrator.

KEY WORDS: Medieval poetry, Labyrinth, Dream vision, Courtly love, Chartres Cathedral, Church labyrinths, Hedge mazes, Spiritual journey, Religious ritual.

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CHAPTER I

What Is a Labyrinth?

Today, we tend to view the labyrinth as ornament, mere diversion, or entertainment, but its association with ancient myth and religious ritual and its complex design imply sacred space within its boundaries. The idea of a labyrinth connotes creation, design, and even a journey to the center of oneself. The history of the labyrinth is long, and the various meanings surrounding it are complex: any exploration of labyrinths *ab ovo*, though, must acknowledge the mythical labyrinth at Knossos on the island of Crete, created by the architect Daedalus for King Minos. But the story of the labyrinth extends beyond myth: it is found in the art, architecture, and literature of many cultures and serves manifold purposes for each. While ancient labyrinths were meant to inspire admiration or dread for the “treader,” medieval labyrinths in cathedrals and church spaces gave to it an additional, Christian significance. In medieval literature, the labyrinth is often used as a symbol of confusion or danger. Its inclusion in a text, either as an object or allusion, points to a moral lesson. The physical and literary labyrinth is a sacred performance space, carrying a history steeped in ritual. In architecture, the labyrinth serves as a visual reference to Greek mythology, used in Christian ritual to symbolize the path to salvation or signify perfect creation, while the labyrinth’s presence in literary texts is often metaphorical, implying a disoriented mental state. The labyrinth’s roots in myth and mystery provide it with a performative and sacred context.

By exploring the etymology, understanding, and various manifestations of the labyrinth, this chapter will lay the foundation for the following chapters on the physical labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral and the literary maze in the dream vision, *Assembly of*

Ladies. The labyrinth's roots in Crete and associations with Troy in particular served to validate Christian ideals for the medieval believer and the moral message of a medieval author. From its early descriptions in Greek myth, the labyrinth is a site of the *catabastic* journey—a quest that results in gaining new knowledge or experience. Through *catabasis* in the labyrinth, the maze-treader emerges with a changed perspective or status.

Ultimately, this thesis will show that these labyrinths, whether physical or metaphorical, can be viewed as sacred ritual performance spaces where the maze-treaders—historical or fictional—can express their Christian beliefs or narrative authority, respectively.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word *labyrinth* comes from the “classical Latin *labyrinthus* maze, especially that built in Crete by Daedalus, place from which one cannot escape, in post-classical Latin also [a] complicated idea (4th cent.).”¹ A common medieval etymology is “laborintus,” meaning “difficulty going in,” suggesting the impenetrability or difficulty in navigation of the labyrinth. One of the earliest uses of the word *maze* appears in Chaucer's *House of Fame* (Fame's *domus Dedaly*, 1380s) and in the “Nun's Priest Tale” in *The Canterbury Tales* (1390s). The definitions of *labyrinth* and *maze* in the OED overlap: *labyrinth* is defined as “a structure consisting of a complex network of tunnels, paths, etc., deliberately designed or constructed so that it is difficult to find one's way through; a maze. Sometimes distinguished from a maze as consisting only of one convoluted path to the centre and back, rather than containing a number of dead ends.” The OED's primary definition of *maze* is “a state of mental confusion, and related senses,” while later definitions include, “a delusive fancy; a trick or deception, a

¹ “labyrinth, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford UP, November 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/104763. Accessed 27 November 2019.

state of bewilderment; a feeling of amazement or perplexity, and a structure designed as a puzzle, consisting of a complicated network of winding and interconnecting paths or passages, only one of which is the correct route through; a labyrinth.” In her comprehensive study of the labyrinth in western Europe, Penelope Doob explains that “despite different etymologies, medieval mazes and labyrinths are both “characteristically double,” ambiguous, circuitous, and “presume a double-perspective” (1). Kathleen Swaim echoes this sentiment, “the English word *maze* as used today refers primarily to what the Greeks and Romans knew as labyrinth, that is, a constructed network of winding and intercommunicating paths and passageways arranged in bewildering complexity, a usage recorded in and since Chaucer” (133).

While the words *labyrinth* and *maze* appear to be synonymous, there are small but important differences. *Maze* typically refers to a complex multicursal path with forking branches at which the treader must choose a direction. These are often thought of as games or puzzles and involve confusion and even frustration on the part of the player. A *labyrinth*, on the other hand, usually refers to a single, unicursal path with no branches. The goal is to travel to the center and back out.² While the terms are often used interchangeably, by definition, each one gives the participant a completely different experience.

The epicenter of the labyrinth’s mythical history (and the labyrinthine structure with which all later labyrinths and mazes in Europe are compared) is found on the island of Crete, specifically at the Palace of Knossos, built in successive phases by an unknown

² Kern, *Through the Labyrinth* (23). The usage restricting maze to patterns that involve choices of path is mentioned by Matthews (2-3).

people now called the Minoans in the Bronze Age (c. 1950-1750 B.C.). Reports of this labyrinth were spread through the writings of Pliny (*Natural History XXXVI*), Ovid (*Metamorphoses*), and Plutarch (*Life of Theseus*), who all associated the site with the myth of Daedalus' creation. In these largely mythical accounts, King Minos commissions Daedalus, the renowned architect, to build a labyrinthine structure to imprison the Minotaur, the monstrous half-man, half-bull offspring of Queen Pasiphae and the Cretan bull (a gift to Minos from Poseidon). Minos then imprisons Daedalus and his son, Icarus, in the labyrinth, so that its secrets will not be divulged. To escape, Daedalus fashions wings to help them both fly out. Icarus flies too close to the sun, melting the wax that holds the wings together, and falls into the sea and drowns. In the meantime, Minos, who is overlord of much of the Mediterranean, demands that Aegeus, the King of Athens, send seven boys and seven girls to Crete (chosen by lot) every seven years as sacrifices to the Minotaur. Aegeus' son Theseus, who wants to prove his prowess, arranges for his name to be drawn as a sacrifice. When he arrives at Crete, Minos's daughter, Ariadne, falls in love with him. When Theseus descends into the labyrinth to kill the Minotaur with a ball of pitch, Ariadne gives him a ball of thread to navigate his way out. To celebrate Theseus' escape and rescue of the children trapped in the labyrinth, Ariadne performs a dance on her dance floor created by Daedalus. Some versions of the myth tell of Theseus and the children performing the celebratory dance, known as the *geranos*, using the movements from the labyrinth. In 1900, Sir Arthur Evans excavated the ruins of the palace at Knossos in his search for historical evidence of Theseus and the labyrinth. His discovery of the site renewed interest in the labyrinth myth, yet archaeologists now

question whether an actual labyrinth even existed.³ Evans believed that the silver coins, jewelry, and other artifacts found at the site, dating c. 1950-500 B.C. and featuring representations of the labyrinth, the Minotaur, and the *labrys* (double axe), were proof that the stories were more than just myth (108-9). The *labros* (the etymological root of labyrinth), was found to be a significant religious symbol, linked to Minoan religious rituals and ceremonies. The fact that the massive palace itself is labyrinthine in structure lends credence to Evans' claims.

Apparently, the labyrinth at Knossos was modeled after an Egyptian labyrinth (c. 2000 B.C), found near Lake Moeris. The labyrinth was a mortuary temple of Amenemhet III (1842-1797 B.C.) constructed to the south of his pyramid. The unusually large structure was, according to Kern, "counted among the wonders of the world, and was admired by the Greeks more than any other Egyptian edifice except the pyramids; it was described as a 'labyrinth' in antiquity, as a model for the Cretan labyrinth" (57). In his *Histories*, Greek historian Herodotus (484-430 B.C.) claims this maze is more impressive than all Greek architecture, describing it as an immense complex of rooms surrounded by twelve mazes. Other mazes were found in nearby pyramids, possibly built to deter thieves. Of these two sites in Egypt and Crete, the Cretan labyrinth remains predominant in its association with the Daedalus myth and it is this labyrinth that was known to the western world.

³ Kern questions Evans' findings, suggesting that the maze concept appeared much later, "in the Hellenistic period" (42). MacGillivray, Evans' biographer, is also critical of the methods used in the excavation and resulting conclusions. His biography, *Minotaur* (2000), sheds light on the errors of Evans' archaeological practices.

While the actual existence of a true labyrinth structure at Crete is inconclusive, proof of the labyrinth as a *concept* appears on a clay tablet found at Knossos (1400 B.C.), written in Linear B (the writing system of the Mycenaean Greeks, who comingled with the Minoans and later took over Crete). The text appearing on the tablet reads, “One jar of honey to all the gods, one jar of honey to the Mistress of the Labyrinth” (Kern 25). Karl Kerényi concludes that the goddess and place must have been important, thus the mention on the tablet: “After both lines the amount of honey is indicated with a picture of a vessel. The quantity is the same for ‘all the gods’ as for the ‘mistress of the labyrinth.’ She must have been a Great Goddess” (90). More proof of the labyrinth as idea appears on a tablet discovered at the Mycenaean palace at Pylos with a drawing of a labyrinthine pattern (1200 B.C). Kern believes Ariadne to be the goddess mentioned, and the word labyrinth may have signified a dance, more so than a place, based on the appearance of the Pylos tablet markings (25). Even if the labyrinthine markings indicate a structure or dance movements, the two tablets show that the labyrinth was an important symbol in the ancient Minoan and Greek worlds.

Labyrinths figure prominently in literary texts, starting with Homer. In Book XVIII of the *Iliad* (c. 750 B.C.), Homer’s narrator invokes the mythical labyrinth structure at Crete with his description of a spiral design on Achilles’ shield: “The renowned one [Hephaistos], the one with the two strong arms, / pattern-wove in it [the Shield] a *khoros*. / It was just like the one that, once upon a time in far-ruling Knossos, / Daedalus made for Ariadne, the one with the beautiful tresses” (18.590-92, Nagy trans. 290). *Khoros*, as classicist Gregory Nagy explains, “can designate either the place where singing and dancing takes place or the group of singers and dancers who perform at that

place” (290, n. 66), but clearly Homer is here referring to the former. In this ekphrastic description of the shield, Homer’s evocation of Daedalus functions as a double metaphor for the artist: Daedalus, the most famous architect in the world, is credited by the narrator as fashioning a dance floor in Crete, Hephaistos, the consummate artist, is credited with creating the image on the shield, while Homer, of course, is the creator of both. For Homer then, Daedalus and his dance floor symbolize the art of the poet.⁴

The Roman poet Virgil also includes descriptions of labyrinths in the *Aeneid* (c. 19 B.C.). In Book V, lines 549-75, he depicts in great detail the *lusus Troiae* as a part of Anchises’ funeral games, likening the intricate drill routine of the Trojan youth to the Cretan labyrinth: “So intricate / In ancient times on mountainous Crete they say / The Labyrinth, between walls in the dark, / Ran criss-cross a bewildering thousand ways / Devised by guile, a maze insoluble, Breaking down every clue to the way out” (Fitzgerald trans. 146). In Book VI, en route to the underworld, Aeneas discovers two doors to a temple built by Daedalus himself (“they say”), on which are inscribed the story of Daedalus, Ariadne, the Minotaur, and the labyrinth: “Here, too, that puzzle of the house of Minos [was depicted], / The maze none could untangle until, touched / By a great love shown by a royal girl, / He, Daedalus himself, unraveled all / The baffling turns and dead ends in the dark, / Guiding the blind way back by a skein unwound” (Fitzgerald trans. 159-60). Before Aeneas enters the underworld, he is warned by the sybil that this place is easy to enter, but difficult to exit, a characteristic of the labyrinth. The figure of the labyrinth, moreover, is central to Aeneas’s retelling of the fall of Troy. The image of

⁴ Andrew Sprague Becker. “The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Homeric Description.” *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 111, no. 2, 1990. pp. 139-153.

the city Aeneas uses to comfort his people when they are in despair shares the theme of the labyrinth structure; the Trojans experience uncertainty and confusion as they wander, but the city represents the order of civilization they seek. Virgil structures the poem using the mathematical symmetry of the Golden Mean ratio, the same pattern observed in seven-circuit labyrinths, such as the mythical Cretan labyrinth (Duckworth 184). Here the labyrinth signifies the treacherous journey to uncover truth and the limitations of human understanding. While the ideas of order and divine construction are present in Virgil's story, his view is pessimistic: the labyrinth is a place of danger and death.

The Roman poet Ovid, a contemporary of Virgil, also uses the labyrinth as a symbol of harm and suffering in his depiction of Daedalus' adventures in Book VIII of *The Metamorphoses* (8 A.D). Here Ovid gives a comprehensive retelling of the story, starting with King Minos' affair with Scylla, daughter of King Nisus, and ending with Icarus' fall. Ovid likens Daedalus' construction of the labyrinth to the River Meander:

Great Daedalus of Athens was the man
 That made the draught, and form'd the wondrous plan;
 Where rooms within themselves encircled lie
 With various windings, to deceive the eye.
 As soft Mæänder's wanton current plays,
 When through the Phrygian fields it loosely strays;
 Backward and forward rolls the dimpled tide,
 Seeming, at once, two different ways to glide:
 While circling streams their former banks survey,
 And waters past, succeeding waters see;

Now floating to the sea with downward course,
 Now pointing upward to its ancient source.
 Such was the work, so intricate the place,
 That scarce the workman all its turns could trace;
 And Daedalus was puzzled how to find
 The secret ways of what himself design'd. (Dryden trans. 8.247-62)

Ovid's attitude toward the creation of art is one of caution: Daedalus is almost lost inside the labyrinth of his own making. Other ideas connected with the labyrinth, such as the dangerous journey, confusion, and fluidity of direction are expressed thematically in *The Metamorphoses*: love's power transforms, but often to the detriment of humanity, since reason and morality are usually forgotten. The winding river imagery gives a sense of the experience of treading the labyrinth in chaos and confusion, with the wanderer at the mercy of opposing forces. While the labyrinth path appears chaotic, Ovid concludes that it is truly structured and orderly, like nature: "[S]o Daedalus, famous for his skillful talent in architecture erected the structure, and confused the clues, and led the eyes twisting around on wandering, roundabout different paths" (Doob 36). While the view from in the labyrinth is disorienting, the creator planned and executed the labyrinth with ordered precision. Ovid predicates the philosophical idea that life's journey is seemingly chaotic, with humanity on an uncontrolled, ambivalent course, yet, with perspective, it is ultimately ordered with a predetermined conclusion.

In this vein, the Roman philosopher and statesman Boethius makes metaphorical use of the maze's circular paths in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (CP) (524). Theoretically, Boethius would have found the idea of the prison labyrinth highly

relatable, possibly viewing himself as a type of Theseus. In Book III, Boethius' narrator gets lost in Philosophy's circular logic when she attempts to prove that evil does not exist. The narrator suggests to her, "You are playing with me... by weaving a labyrinthine argument from which I cannot escape. You seem to begin where you ended and to end where you began. Are you perhaps making a marvelous circle of the divine simplicity?" (Cooper trans. 3.12). Boethius compares the inextricability of the argument to the difficulty of walking the labyrinth, and he uses the description of Philosophy's garments in Book I to connect her with the labyrinth itself: "Her garments were of an imperishable fabric, wrought with the finest threads and of the most delicate workmanship; and these, as her own lips afterwards assured me, she had herself woven with her own hands" (Cooper trans. 1.1). As Doob maintains, Philosophy's garment is *textus*, like the labyrinth. She weaves both her garment and the argument, so that her appearance to humanity is revealed through both (313). Philosophy becomes an image of Daedalus, a designer and craftsman of expert skill with argument instead of architecture. The classic themes surrounding the myth are present in CP, and Boethius views the labyrinth from the optimistic theological perspective that this world full of confusion and frustration is meticulously ordered and constructed. While Boethius's text does not make explicit use of the labyrinth, shades of the myth appear in his writing.⁵ Boethius's

⁵ According to Doob, labyrinth illustrations appear in five of the CP manuscripts, four in which "the labyrinth appears at the work's end, as if it were a fitting emblem of the labyrinthine artistry and intellectual complexity of the composition, woven as it is of intricate meters and interlocking, rigorously argued prose sections" (139). At the end of one manuscript, an illustration of a circular labyrinth with eleven circuits appears with a man and woman at its center gripping a sword, possibly an allusion to Theseus and Ariadne defeating the Minotaur (256).

repeated reference to men that have turned beastlike because of their sinful nature possibly connects to the Minotaur:

One whose aims are inconstant and ever changed at his whims, is in no wise different from the birds. If another is in a slough of foul and filthy lusts, he is kept down by the lusts of an unclean swine. Thus then a man who loses his goodness, ceases to be a man, and since he cannot change his condition for that of a god, he turns into a beast. (Cooper trans. 4.3)

Philosophy shares similarities with Daedalus and Ariadne, as she is both the creator of the argument and the guide who frees Boethius. The dialogue is also labyrinthine in its structure, winding back around on itself with themes of doubt, discouragement, and suffering repeating in each book. Finally, Boethius connects the CP with the labyrinth in how the narrator's understanding must come from a shift in perspective: the walker inside the maze is confused and disoriented, but the creator's view from above reveals an established perfect order. This idea becomes an underpinning of medieval Christian belief—the perilous journey through life is unavoidable, but a vision of perfection and evidence of a divine architect can be achieved with a lofty perspective. Unlike Virgil's sybil, Philosophy welcomes the maze-treader, in Boethius' case, the prisoner, into the labyrinthine argument, guiding him through it. Ultimately, the discourse in CP relies on the shifting perspectives of humanity's clouded vision and sinful nature in a labyrinth world to an elevated view resulting in clarity.

Boethius' ideas were adopted by medieval exegetes and carried forth into medieval Christianity in the theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who used the symbolism of the labyrinth to illustrate his ideas. Aquinas believed that one naturally

desires to seek knowledge of that which brings contentment—the vision of God. For Aquinas, all theologians use philosophical knowledge to obtain theological knowledge; however, the reverse is not the case. Reason is limited in the realm of theological truth, as knowledge is based on revelation. In *The Religious State* (c. 1265) Aquinas employs a vision of the labyrinth to illustrate the contradictions in humanity’s actions and the snare of evil:

[Man] wishes to be good, yet he does evil. He desires to serve God, yet he worships the devil... He grows weary of following the same road, and he therefore loses himself in an inextricable labyrinth; he no more belongs to himself, but to worldly goods, public opinion, to hatred, to ambition, and to a hundred other tyrants, and sometimes, alas, even to the powers of darkness. (Didiot trans. 104)

Aquinas wrote further on the concept of extricating oneself from the temptations of worldly pride, warning those who are called to “the religious state” to find it exclusively in the “cloister, under pain of straying into the endless and inextricable labyrinth of scruples, fears, errors, and sometimes even false doctrine” (Didiot trans. 279). One is inclined to call to mind the image of Icarus flying too close to the sun as Aquinas quotes Saint Gregory:

There are persons who, from striving to raise themselves to a degree of contemplation of which they are incapable, fall ever into perverse doctrines, and refusing to be the humble disciples of truth, they become master of errors. Why do

they not rather follow the example of King Solomon, who turned his mind to wisdom to avoid folly? (Didiot trans. 279)⁶

Gregory implies that God alone is the Daedalus—if one does not seek knowledge humbly, a fall to spiritual death is imminent.⁷ Aquinas employs the dual nature of the labyrinth to illustrate his idea that there are two kinds of order: the order of individual objects and the order of those objects in relation to one another. Much like traversing a Daedalian construction, one sees only the part in which one exists; to understand the whole, one must view the relationship of those parts. Aquinas believed that only theological knowledge can give one a complete view of the truth, much like the Creator’s view of the ordered labyrinth from above.

The experience of the labyrinth depends solely on perspective. For instance, the labyrinth viewed from inside appears confusing and chaotic. The maze-treader can see only a fragment of the path, which would serve to disorient. As he or she constantly reverses direction, a feeling of losing ground occurs. While the treader moves forward, he or she seems to reverse direction, falling farther behind with each step. In contrast, when viewing the labyrinth from above, it appears highly structured and ordered: the path in its entirety can be seen; the way is logical and clear, and the twists and turns appear

⁶ Aquinas’ mention of King Solomon in this passage is intriguing, since an eleventh century manuscript contains a poem attributing a labyrinth to Solomon. Some church labyrinths and illustrations bore the title of “Solomon’s maze” but were unknown until the fourteenth century. This does suggest that Aquinas was aware of labyrinths associated with Solomon. See Kern p. 126-7.

⁷ Aquinas’ theology in conjunction with the concept of *Godgames* may have influenced the fourteenth-century Gawain poet. Tyson Pugh observes, “Gawain has real choices to make at the beginning of the game and that Christian humility demands more than Gawain’s subsequent recognition of his ability to achieve human perfection. Once Gawain enters the game, however, he is trapped inside its multiple layers and escape becomes impossible” (546).

carefully designed. From above, the unicursal labyrinth is identified as a mathematical formula. No matter how many circuits are added, the proportions remain the same. The labyrinth creator, like Daedalus, maintains the view of the omniscient God looking down on his creation, a world in which humanity remains frustrated and trapped by its own limited perspective. While the treaders may experience confusion, they acquire experience and knowledge as they traverse the path.

The labyrinth's association with myth, philosophy, and theology carried into medieval Christianity as evident in the work of philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas and also as found in cathedral labyrinths. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Gothic cathedral construction of northern France began to include traversable pavement labyrinths in the naves. These included installations at Sens, Chartres, Auxerre, Amiens, and Reims (Kern 142). As these labyrinths are not structural components of the cathedral, the tendency is to view them as merely ornamental; however, their walkability and prominent placement lead one to suspect an ecclesiastic purpose in the sacred communal space of the cathedral. While labyrinth use in Christian tradition and ceremony dates to fourth-century Rome, its deep association with pagan rituals and myth complicates the understanding of how this symbol functioned and for what purpose, particularly in the Middle Ages.

A widely accepted view of the cathedral labyrinths was their use to symbolize spiritual journey and re-enact the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The image of the Christian pilgrim, or wanderer, was well understood in the medieval world. Specific to Chartres, the Palm Sunday processions remapped the town and countryside with the topography of Jerusalem. The pavement labyrinths, when used as part of this procession, would aid the

participants in viewing them as the symbol of Jerusalem.⁸ According to Kern, the “final part of the labyrinth concept from Classical antiquity—the journey to the center, the center, and the journey back out—served to convey this Christian interpretation of the labyrinth” (207). Historian Henry Adams gives a meditative view of pilgrimage in medieval culture in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904). Adams writes of the importance of pilgrimage and its connection to cathedrals, asserting that, “[t]o feel the art of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres we have got to become pilgrims again” (223). For Adams, the history of the cathedrals and, thereby, pavement labyrinths is not really about fact, but about the feeling out of which they were imagined and created. Margot Fassler looks to the symbols embedded into the Chartres Cathedral architecture for clues to the ritual of pilgrimage: “The processions [in Chartres’s Royal Portal imagery] have a dramatic teaching agenda as well as a reforming agenda” (40). At Chartres, the labyrinth is situated inside the western portal and was likely used as a part of the procession performed by pilgrims to the cathedral. The placement of most church labyrinths at the western part of the nave was to provide, in the words of Kern, a “buffer zone.” He continues, “The faithful had first to internalize the idea of the labyrinth with all its implications by physically tracing its windings; only then were they permitted to proceed further, to advance toward the Holy Sacrament” (128). In medieval thought, by leaving behind one’s security and worldly goods, the pilgrimage offered salvation through proximity to God and deprivation of earthly comforts to body and soul. The labyrinths

⁸ Connelly states, “Labyrinths and maps, when shown together or operating in mutual support of each other, depend upon a preconceived equivalence of their meanings; walking through the labyrinth pavements, then, would also have been understood as travel through the world” (301).

within major cathedrals, such as Chartres, Reims, and Amiens, are unicursal, with one entrance leading to a predetermined destination at the center of the design, with designated areas for meditative pauses along the way. The space within the circumference of the labyrinth was considered sacred and encouraged contemplation. The use of pavement labyrinths in spiritual pilgrimage and procession in the cathedrals was viewed not as an act of individuals but as communal, leaning toward ecclesiastic ritual.

While the labyrinth's associations with pilgrimage and religious symbolism were prevalent in the Middle Ages, use of the labyrinth's physical space in religious ceremonies, including Chartres, further propagate the mystery of its meaning. More compellingly, perhaps, is its transformation into performance space, where participants could celebrate Christ's death and resurrection at Easter through ceremonial ritual dance, while also remembering the myth of Theseus' triumph over the Minotaur. Medieval understanding conflated the myth of Theseus with Christ's overcoming death. Theseus' journey into the labyrinth symbolized his descent into hell and certain death at the hands of the Minotaur, the epitome of evil. As he defeats death and returns to the world, in the same way, Christ defeats Satan through His resurrection (Matthews 63).

The most detailed account of a labyrinth dance occurs at Auxerre in 1396. Jean Lebeuf's account describes the ritual, noting that the clergy would toss a leather ball while dancing circular patterns in rhythm. The labyrinth was recorded as being incorporated in the dance, but it is unclear if the participants danced on the circumference of the labyrinth or inside its boundaries (Wright 139-40). There is further evidence of ritual ball dances at the cathedrals at Sens, Amiens, and Reims at Easter. The rituals were often solemn and formal, as they served as a re-enactment of Christ's resurrection. The

ball possibly represented Ariadne's ball of thread (used to guide Theseus to the Minotaur at the center of the labyrinth) and Theseus' ball of pitch (used to prevent the monster from biting the hero); however, the dance may also represent celestial movement, with the ball representing the sun. While the ball may have been used in other informal games or activities in or around the cathedrals, it first appears as an object used by the clergy for elaborate Easter dances.

To uncover the origins of these ecclesiastical ball dances, one must retrace, once again, the labyrinth's historical path back to its beginnings on Crete. The Cretan labyrinth, where Theseus must strategize to defeat the Minotaur, becomes the battleground—perhaps a precursor to the modern bullfight arena (Matthews 29). The original labyrinth also serves as the arena for the ritual killing of fourteen Athenian youths—seven males and seven females—sacrificed to the Minotaur every seven years, according to the pact of peace made by Theseus' father and King Minos.⁹ Since Daedalus' labyrinth structure gives the impression of a house or dwelling, it would not make an appropriate stage for an audience; the Daedalus prison is designed to conceal the Minotaur and hide Minos' shame. Here the labyrinth is a space for private ritual, which translates to the medieval Christian church appropriating the labyrinth for ceremony inside the cathedral.

Like the ball dance ceremonies of the cathedral, dance is a component of the Cretan myth, in which two dances are associated with the ancient labyrinth: the *geranos* and the Troy game. The *geranos* (also known as the Delos dance), was performed in

⁹ See Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* (15.1-2).

celebration of Theseus' defeating the Minotaur: it was, in effect, a victory dance. Plutarch describes the labyrinthine movements:

After arriving in Delos while he was returning from Crete...Theseus danced with the young Athenians a dance still performed by the inhabitants of the island, consisting of twisting and twisted movements that reproduce the shapes of the labyrinth. Dicearchos states that this dance is called *Crane*. (21)

The description of the dance appears to be a reconstruction of the labyrinth itself and ceremony, with circular movements, changes of direction, and dancers joining limbs:

In the dance of Delos Arianna's thread is symbolically represented by the line of dancers that travels in both directions the curves of the labyrinth. When the dancers, guided by a choir leader, move towards the center, the destination of their journey is the Hereafter. When then, certainly at a precise musical signal, the direction of travel is reversed, the one who previously closed the line becomes, in turn, a choir leader and starts guiding the dancers towards the exit, on the way back to the world alive. Thus the tail turns into a head and the end is identified with the beginning. (Lawler 72)

Marcel Detienne connects *Crane*, Dicearchos' name given to the dance, with associations with rebirth after death (542). This imagery would be appropriate for the celebration of Theseus' escape from death and return from the labyrinth.

The Dance of Troy, or *lusus Troiae*, also has associations with the labyrinth, for the Cretan labyrinth was also known as the "City of Troy" since at least 1500, perhaps earlier (Matthews 156). Virgil describes the *lusus Troiae* alongside the sacrifices and events Aeneas organizes for the anniversary of his father's death. Aeneid gives a

description of the dance: “Three bands of horsemen ride, three captains proud, / Prance here and there, assiduous in command, / Each of his twelve, who shine in parted lines (5.568-70).¹⁰ While the dance bears the title of game, it was not a contest, but a display of equestrian skill in which the dance is performed as a retelling of the battle of Troy (Harmon 250). Evidence of the labyrinth’s association with the Dance of Troy appears on artifacts such as the Etruscan wine pitcher from Tragliatella (c. 620 B.C). The pitcher displays a diagram of two horseman emerging from a Cretan-style unicursal labyrinth, with copulating couples in the background. A legend reading “TRUIA” appears in the labyrinth, a reference to the *lusus Troiae* (Matthews 157). Virgil’s description of “parted lines” suggests that riders maneuvered in pairs; the two horseman figures on the vase appear to reference this. Kern cites equestrian games in connection with labyrinths being played around 80 B.C. (77).

While the dance in cathedrals is thought to re-enact the Resurrection, the labyrinth’s association with dance is firmly rooted in the Theseus myth. In both instances, the labyrinth has a place in ceremonial ritual, sometimes private, as in the Athenian sacrifice and cathedral ball dances, and sometimes public, as in the *lusus Troiae*. The Cretan labyrinth is the setting, a stage of sorts, in which mythological stories are passed down, remembered, and retold. The same occurs in the cathedral: Christ’s death and resurrection at Easter is taught through the labyrinth dance, committed to memory, and re-enacted. This pattern mimics dance steps—performed in sequential order and repeated indefinitely. The ritual is performance, and the inclusion of the labyrinth, literally or metaphorically, brings a wide array of associations to the performance: difficulty, danger,

¹⁰ Virgil includes a lengthy description of the dance in lines 5.545-605.

confusion, entrapment, contemplation, and rebirth. Thus, the labyrinth can be treated as sacred space, where history, mythology, religion, and mystery intersect.

As demonstrated here, the labyrinth has a long history in architecture, stories, and myth, and its meaning and significance are fluid, sometimes even contradictory. Chapter Two will consider the purposes of twelfth-century cathedral pavement labyrinths of northern Europe, specifically the one in Chartres Cathedral. As their placement typically coincided with the construction of the cathedral, these labyrinths were not an afterthought or strictly ornamental. The Chartres Cathedral was known as a locus of religious pilgrimage and procession; thus, the labyrinth was incorporated into these processions, and possibly as a penance—medieval Christians would sometimes travel the maze on their knees to symbolize the journey “through Babel on to the heavenly Jerusalem” (Koonce 251). The image of a labyrinth in a cathedral nave was thought to signify exquisite design and service to God. This would be an appropriate interpretation, especially at Chartres, a monument to Gothic architecture. More importantly, the image of the labyrinth was ideal for teaching Christian doctrine: its association with the warrior Theseus created the perfect metaphor of the labyrinth as the site of Christ’s descent into hell and resurrection. At Easter, this idea was performed as a ball dance ritual. It is in this context that I will explore the labyrinth's potential as a site of ritual performance.

In Chapter Three, I will explore the use of the labyrinth as setting for the fifteenth-century anonymous dream-vision *Assembly of Ladies* (AL). The poem is unique in that it features a female narrator and is the only courtly-love poem to be set in a labyrinth. While scholars have examined topics on gender and authorship, none, with the exception of Penelope Doob and Judith Davidoff, have considered the labyrinth as a

significant motif. As Davidoff notes, “Since its deletion from the Chaucer canon in the late nineteenth century, the Assembly of Ladies has received little attention, and most of that has been unflattering” (146). But the labyrinth is central to this poem and may reveal a level of sophistication in the poem that has in large been overlooked. The labyrinth motif may reflect the narrator’s state of mind while also serving as a commentary on the shortcomings of the legal system of the time. More importantly, I argue, the labyrinth becomes a space for the narrator, who performs her dream vision for a knight, who represents a male audience. In the labyrinth, she can express her dissatisfactions safely, as the labyrinth represents an uncommon place—a stage of sorts. The poem’s structure as a framing fiction adds to the labyrinth symbolism: the narrator remains in the labyrinth with a knight, and the poem ends, in a circuitous fashion, where it begins.

In conclusion, I argue that the labyrinth is a site of ritual performance in the Chartres Cathedral and AL. In the cathedral, participation in the Easter ball dances re-enacts the *catabastic* journey of Christ (Theseus) descending into hell to defeat Satan and return heroically. Sociologist Emile Durkheim writes about the power of religious ritual: “Once a desire is made public, change is enacted, as the desire spoken commits one to pursuing the desire, effectively, changing one’s status” (qtd. in Struck 34). To act out the ritual is to commit to the ideals it represents. As the labyrinth provides the space for ritual in the cathedral, it also serves as a performance space for the AL narrator. She can express opinions that, as a medieval woman, were oppressed. She speaks, not only for herself but also for her companions and, presumably, all women. The labyrinth symbol legitimizes the message to which it is bound.

CHAPTER II:

The Labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral

The labyrinth of Chartres Cathedral, a mecca for spiritual pilgrims and maze-treaders for centuries, commands a fulcrum position in the nave, dating between 1200-1220. The labyrinth is one of three gothic paving labyrinths still in existence in southern France, along with Sens and Auxerre. Other paving labyrinths, also composed of alternating black and white stones, were constructed in northern France in the thirteenth century: labyrinths at Amiens (destroyed in 1825, restored in 1894) and Reims (destroyed in 1779) were both housed in these cathedrals' interiors.

The Chartres Cathedral, mostly constructed between 1194-1220, is one of five cathedrals that have occupied the site since the fourth century. Renowned for its innovative design and exquisite construction, it is the best surviving example of French Gothic style of architecture; the builders' pioneering use of flying buttresses allowed for the inclusion of expansive stained-glass windows, including the famous rose window of the west façade. The labyrinth in the cathedral nave, a unicursal, eleven-circuit path with a six-lobed rosette center, has become the most recognizable labyrinth design among the many church labyrinths built in Europe beginning in the twelfth century.

It is believed that church labyrinths were built at the time or shortly after the cathedrals were constructed. The Chartres labyrinth, as well as the labyrinths built in Gothic churches of France at this time, differs significantly from earlier examples in both size and placement: for instance, they are much larger in size and typically dominate significant spaces in cathedral interiors, often as a floor pattern in the nave. As these labyrinths are not structural components of the cathedral, relegating them to simple

ornaments or symbols is understandable; however, their size and design, which produce the ability to walk along its path, lend to an experiential interface for the medieval Christian. While labyrinth use in Christian tradition and ceremony dates to fourth-century Rome, its deep association with pagan rituals and myth complicates the understanding of how this symbol functioned and for what purpose, particularly in the Middle Ages. Far from being able to be reduced to a single meaning, the labyrinth carries layers of significance and interpretation. By examining the history of the labyrinth in both secular and ecclesiastic settings, it can be determined that the labyrinth signifies divine design: it is a powerful symbol of both death and resurrection. Significantly, it also serves as a performance space for ritual ceremonies. The labyrinth at Chartres represented a great number of things in the Middle Ages, but its primary function was that of ritual performance space, most notably with its association with the liturgical calendar and Easter performances that were acted within the labyrinth itself. Beyond aiding the Christian in understanding that Christ is the path to salvation, the labyrinth signifies the skilled creation of both the cathedral and the cosmos. The labyrinths use in Easter dances, the re-enacting of solar movement and Christ's death and resurrection, gives a picture of Christian belief and understanding in the Middle Ages.

There is evidence that labyrinths had ecclesiastical functions in the Middle Ages. As early as the ninth century, the labyrinth symbol with the figure of the Minotaur was used as an ornament on the robe of Christian emperors.¹¹ An example of this ornament

¹¹ According to Edward Trollope, in Ozanum's *Graphia aureæ urbis Romæ*, in the "Documents inédits pour servir à l'Histoire Littéraire de l'Italie," this rule regarding the emperor's dress is given: "Habeat et in diarodino laberinthum fabrefactum ex auro et margaritis, in quo sit Minotaurus digitum ad os tenens ex smaragdo factus; quia sicut non valet quis laberinthum scrutare, ita non debet consilium dominatoris propalare."

still exists on a pier of Cattedrale di San Martino in Lucca, Italy, with the Latin inscription translated as: "This is the labyrinth built by Dedalus of Crete; all who entered therein were lost, save Theseus, thanks to Ariadne's thread" (Hemans 487). Eventually, the labyrinth and Minotaur symbolism began influencing church iconography, with diagrammatic mazes found in northern France and northern Italy.

One possible function of the labyrinth in cathedrals was to represent spiritual journey or pilgrimage. The labyrinth was a site to ritualize and re-enact the journey during times when traveling to Jerusalem was inadvisable. Some church labyrinths bore the name *Chemins de Jerusalem*, such as Reims and Saint-Omer,¹² that may have originated in the Middle Ages, although no documentation of this exists before the Renaissance (Matthews 60). Several church labyrinths were situated near the western entrance portal, such as those in Chartres and Reims, as a possible way for pilgrims to wind their way through the labyrinth and continue eastward through the interior, as if traveling to Jerusalem. Duby writes of entering the Chartres western portal to the interior space of the nave to enter the labyrinth: "the believer had crossed the threshold. He had risen one degree toward contemplation. Having become the son of God through the incarnation of Christ, he partook of his heritage, of illumination" (290). According to Kern, the placement of most church labyrinths at the western part of the nave was to provide a "buffer zone. The faithful had first to internalize the idea of the labyrinth with all its implications by physically tracing its windings; only then were they permitted to proceed further, to advance toward the Holy Sacrament" (128). In medieval thought, by leaving behind one's security and worldly goods, the pilgrimage offered salvation

¹² Wright, p.210.

through proximity to God and deprivation of earthly comforts to body and soul. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux argued that the true goal of pilgrimage is not to find Jerusalem in the mundane world, rather one must seek Heavenly Jerusalem through contemplation, as the image of the earthly city is merely an image of the Heavenly City: As Saint Bernard proclaimed, "for the object of monks is to seek out not the earthly but the Heavenly Jerusalem, and this is not by proceeding with their feet but by progressing with their feelings" (Renna 106). This idea fits with the labyrinth's role in reenacting a physical spiritual pilgrimage incorporating contemplation. The interior spiritual journey was valued above the actual journey.

While the labyrinth symbolized the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, some medieval scholars upheld the idea of its penitential use in churches. According to D. W. Robertson in his *Preface to Chaucer*,

Among scriptural concepts which appear in *The Canterbury Tales*, the most important is the idea of pilgrimage. Any pilgrimage during the Middle Ages, whether it was made on the knees in a labyrinth set in a cathedral floor, or, more strenuously, to the Holy Land, was ideally a figure for the pilgrimage of the Christian soul through the world's wilderness toward the celestial Jerusalem. (373)

B.G. Koonce notes that cathedral labyrinths were frequently used by penitent pilgrims, "who followed the maze on their knees to the center, a figure for the soul's pilgrimage through the maze of Babylon to the heavenly Jerusalem" (251). John Demaray speculates that given the labyrinth dimensions of Reims and Chartres, along with their proximity to entrance portals, "it seems very likely, as commentators have long suggested but have been unable conclusively to prove, that medieval pilgrims actually fell to their knees on

the mazes and so acted out figural journeys to Jerusalem before rising and proceeding down the aisles to main altars” (22). While there seems to be an oral tradition of pilgrims performing penance on their knees upon the church labyrinths, scholars can provide no concrete evidence of specific times, associations with religious feasts, or recitation of prayers; however, the possibility cannot be ruled out.

Whether pilgrims traversed the labyrinths on their knees is still debated; nevertheless, it is widely accepted that Chartres was an important pilgrimage site in the Middle Ages. Historian Margot Fassler mentions the *Sancta Camisa*, the relic believed to be the tunic of the Virgin Mary, as a major draw for Christian pilgrims, propagating the cult of the Virgin association with Chartres: “The cathedral processions also served to define church doctrine and political power. The processions [in Chartres’s Royal Portal imagery] have a dramatic teaching agenda as well as a reforming agenda” (40). For cathedral historians writing in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the image of Mary and the foundation of cult worship is central to the historical context in which Chartres resides. Historian Malcolm Miller believes that pilgrimages to Chartres began to occur after the eleventh century (51). Jean Favier suggests that Chartres became an important pilgrimage destination by the end of the twelfth century, especially during the feast days dedicated to Mary, as well as in times of disease outbreak, as the cathedral’s crypt also served as a hospital (31). The evidence of pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral, specifically regarding Marian worship, may have strengthened the idea of the labyrinth’s attachment with pilgrimage. The pilgrim to Chartres would certainly not have been able to ignore the labyrinth’s prominent placement.

The placement of pavement labyrinths in church naves brings weight to the discussion of their usage with spiritual pilgrimage, yet the historical symbolism labyrinths carry may complicate this understanding. In the tradition of reading architecture as text, William Durand of Mende concludes that every detail in a church might have a symbolic interpretation, as “it is highly probable that the teaching of the Church, as in other things, so in her material buildings, would be symbolical” (42). While Durand does not mention the labyrinth specifically, he does address the church floor in which the labyrinth is set, stating that “the foundation of the church is the foundation of our faith... the pavement is the poor of Christ, wherefore on account of their humility, they are likened to the pavement” (24-5). While John Leyerle cautions against finding symbolic interpretations in architecture where they may not exist, the fact that labyrinths were not an integral part of the cathedral structure indicates that they probably have symbolic meaning.¹³ Thus, the histories of the labyrinth and of Christianity converge to create a uniquely layered and complicated meaning.

One explanation for the placement of the labyrinth in the cathedral nave is that it serves as a sign of the cathedral architect’s genius, perhaps in association with illustrations of labyrinths included in medieval illuminated manuscripts. While they often appear in manuscripts that discuss ancient labyrinths, such as *Liber floridus* and Raban Maur’s *De universo*,¹⁴ there are instances where the labyrinth illustration does not

¹³ Leyerle quotes A.J. Porter’s *Medieval Architecture: Its Origins and Developments*: “although Medieval mysticism was extremely apt at inventing allegorical interpretations of structural forms already existing, there is not a single existence known where this spirit governed the design of anything but the decoration, or where the development of architecture proper was subordinated to other considerations than the logic of structure” (11).

¹⁴ See Kern plates 158-163.

correlate explicitly with the content of the manuscript. For instance, labyrinth diagrams appear in five manuscripts of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. While one diagram appears where Boethius likens Philosophy's argument to an inescapable labyrinth, the other four diagrams appear at the conclusion, akin to an artist's signature (Doob 139). In some cases, diagrammatical labyrinths appear to have functioned as celebrations of superior workmanship or intricate design because of the labyrinth's medieval association with Daedalus. Likewise, cathedral labyrinths may have had a similar function.

Some scholars surmise that labyrinths were commemorative of the architects who had constructed the cathedrals they were placed in.¹⁵ Both Reinhardt and Santarengeli believe that incorporating labyrinths into French cathedrals as a tribute to the artists preserved their memory, revered their unsurpassed skills, and held them up as exemplars of service to the glory of God.¹⁶ Much like the cathedral, the labyrinth design, according to Jesse Gellrich, is one of "many medieval forms that are so determined to clarify their own method of construction that they reveal every joint and seam" (74). As the labyrinth reflects the *domus daedali* innovation and invention, it is plausible that the labyrinth symbol in the cathedral nave points to the innovation of the Chartres Cathedral's use of flying buttresses in conjunction with massive stained-glass windows. The genius of the Chartres Cathedrals' construction resulted in a structure like no other cathedral in its time, as the inclusion of the large flying buttresses allowed for the stained-glass window size to increase significantly. The labyrinth may have functioned as a visual acknowledgement of the superior skill of the architect.

¹⁵ See Demaison, "Les Architectes" (16) and James, *The Contractors of Chartres* (14).

¹⁶ See Reinhardt (76) and Santarengeli (283).

Evidence of the labyrinth's use as symbol of the architect existed as early as the eleventh century in Pisa, Italy. Inscriptions on the façade of the Pisa Cathedral in the Piazza dei Miracoli, dating from 1070-1150, compare the cathedral's primary architect, Buscheto, to both Ulysses and Daedalus. According to Wickham, "This commemoration in stone of bold military operations and its close association with such an innovative and ambitious architectural project, has no parallels anywhere in this period" (71). Other cathedral labyrinths include representations of the architects themselves. Jacques Cellier's drawing of the Reims labyrinth includes the figures of the four master masons of the cathedral (Branner 18). The abbey at Saint Etienne contains a labyrinth with the inclusion of several Norman coats of arms, implying commemoration (Matthews 65). As genius construction is associated with Daedalus' construction of the labyrinth, ecclesiastical labyrinths celebrate human inventiveness in the service of God.

Furthering the labyrinth's purpose of metaphor or symbol in the church is the shape, often circular, as in the Chartres labyrinth design. The circle represents the perfect form, the shape of the world, the universe, or eternity. While the Chartres labyrinth's circumference creates a perfect circular shape, the hairpin turns give a perception of intersecting lines through the center. This image of the cross in a broken circle, or *rota*, was a popular symbol of the wheel, having associations with time in conjunction with alchemical processes and spiritual enlightenment (Chevalier 1103). Rota images in cathedral ornamentation may have called to mind the transformation of humanity's sinfulness to spiritual perfection. For Augustine, Christ represents the straight path to

God, while the repetitive circular pathways are the worldly frustrations of faulty belief.¹⁷ The labyrinth points to both God's perfect creation and the cathedral's perfect design.

The symbolism of the rota, of which the Chartres labyrinth is an ideal example, with its four sections quartered by the straight paths, also points to the Wheel of Fortune, often used in medieval art as an allegory for religious instruction. Each of the four sections represented a stage of human life or season. Many rose windows used in the cathedral are based on the rota design, making sense that the Chartres circular labyrinth with four quarters fits into that category. Medieval historian John Murdoch distinguishes between "pictorial and diagrammatical materials," where the rota form has a functional property with a purpose (52). Since the Chartres Cathedral's architect remains anonymous, the labyrinth's representation of architectural genius is akin to a creator's signature.

While one use of the labyrinth was to indicate architectural genius, some scholars believe that the labyrinth in churches is actually a metaphor for hell, along with the entanglements of sin. A wall illustration in San Michele Maggiore at Pavia combines both pagan and Christian lore with depictions of Theseus and the Minotaur at the center of the labyrinth and David and Goliath outside the perimeter (Matthews 56). A Christian viewer would have understood the connection of danger and death symbolized by the monstrous Minotaur and Goliath figures. A labyrinth in San Savino contains an inscription that reads, "The labyrinth represents the world we live in, broad at the entrance, but narrow at the exit, so he who is ensnared by the joys of the world and

¹⁷ In Book XX of *De civitate Dei*, Augustine writes of Christ as the straight path that eludes the pagan philosophers, who wander in repeated temporal circles or "circuitibus temporum." I used Oates's translation.

weighed down by its vices, can regain the doctrines of life only with difficulty” (James 14). Both Matthews and Kern include diagrams of the labyrinth at San Vitale, Ravenna, with triangles pointing from the center to the outside in succession. Wright notes the placement of the labyrinth near the mosaic of the Mystical Lamb (35-6). It demonstrates the medieval belief in the lamb as symbolic of Christ combined with the triangles of the labyrinth’s path as his crucifixion, descent into hell, and resurrection. Therefore, the labyrinth in Ravenna could be a representation of the individual’s descent into Hell or Purgatory; and with Ariadne’s thread, which was placed there by the Grace of God, they could hope to escape (35-6). Just as the circular form of the labyrinth represents a perfect creation, its twisting path may represent the entanglements of the fallen world, out of which only God can rescue us.¹⁸

Another biblical connection to the labyrinth is King Solomon. In Kabbalistic tradition, mazes and labyrinths located in cathedrals were known as *Solomon’s Maze*. Alchemists saw them as,

images of the whole task involved in the work, with its major difficulties; an image of the path they needed to follow to reach the centre arena for the two warring natures; image of the path which the artist must follow to find release... the transformation of the self which occurs in the middle of the maze and which will be manifested in broad daylight at the end of the return

¹⁸ Medieval Christians may have understood this concept from Scripture, as in 2 Peter 2:20, which states that once souls have “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning” (KJV).

journey through darkness to light, will mark the victory of the spiritual over the materialistic. (Chevalier 643-4)

In this application of labyrinth symbolism, transformation occurs through intellectual and spiritual illumination. Therefore, for alchemists, entering and exiting the labyrinth could also signify death and resurrection. Two sources claim that Solomon had a labyrinth built. The first is from Batschalet-Massini, who describes an eleventh-century Greek manuscript with a poem attributing the labyrinth creation to Solomon along with a drawing of a red labyrinth, “which is described in Christian moral terms” (Kern 127). The second account is from Adolphe-Napoléon Didron Aînés, who claims to have seen a red Chartres-type labyrinth with the label Solomon’s Prison labyrinth painted on a wall at Varlaam in 1844 (Kern 156). The labyrinth’s attribution to Solomon may explain its uses in Christian iconography in the Middle Ages. According to Wright, the rosette center of the Chartres labyrinth symbolizes the nature of God, pointing to the *new God*, or Christ, connecting the labyrinth to Christ’s Harrowing of Hell (43-4). Within the nave of the cathedral, the labyrinth serves as a powerful reminder to the Christian visitor of Christ’s triumph over hell and death.

The perfect circle of the Chartres labyrinth was a fitting symbol of the world crafted with a divine compass; in the Middle Ages, the compass and circle it produced were signs of unity and divine perfection, for the circle knows no end.¹⁹ The paths within the circle may have symbolized the traveler traveling through the world to find unity with the perfection of God in the rosette center. Within the nave of the cathedral, the labyrinth

¹⁹ Wright includes an illumination from the thirteenth-century French Bible moralisee of “God, the Architect of the Universe” holding a compass over the world.

serves as a powerful reminder to the Christian visitor of Christ's triumph over hell and death. Just as the circular form of the labyrinth represents a perfect creation, its twisting path may represent the entanglements of the fallen world, out of which only God can rescue the penitent sinner.

While the labyrinth's associations with pilgrimage and religious symbolism were prevalent in the Middle Ages, its connections to cathedral iconography and the use of the labyrinth's physical space in religious ceremonies further propagate the mystery of its meaning. More compellingly, perhaps, is its transformation into performance space, where participants could celebrate Christ's death and resurrection at Easter through ceremonial ritual dance, while also remembering the myth of Theseus' triumph over the Minotaur. The participation in and witness of the performance could instruct and solidify understanding of the specific event (Resurrection) being re-enacted at a designated time (Easter) in a space reserved for this purpose (the labyrinth).

There is convincing evidence of ritual uses of labyrinths in medieval churches dating back to the fourteenth century. Often these rituals were performed as part of an Easter liturgy; if the cathedral contained a labyrinth, the Easter dance would incorporate the labyrinth space. The most detailed account of a labyrinth dance occurred at the Cathedral of Saint Stephen at Auxerre, as early as 1396. Craig Wright translates Jean Lebeuf's account of the ritual:

Having received the *pilota* [a leather ball] from the newest canon, the dean, or someone in his place, in former times wearing an amice on his head and the other clergy likewise, began antiphonally the sequence appropriate for the feast of Easter, *Victimae paschali laudes*. Then taking the ball in his left hand, he danced to the

meter of the sequence as it was sung, while the others, joining hands, danced around the maze. And all the while the *pilota* was delivered or thrown by the dean alternately to each and every one of the dancers whenever they whirled into view. There was sport, and the meter of the dance was set by the organ. Following this dance, the singing of the sequence and the dancing having concluded, the chorus proceeded to a meal. (139-40)²⁰

Wright interprets this as a description of the clergy led by a bishop or archbishop, throwing the ball to one another as they dance in a circular pattern through the maze (140). George Mead brings attention to Lebeuf's notes on this passage:

The canon who had been most recently received, stood ready, holding his ball (pelotte) in front of his chest, in the nave of St. Stephen's, about one or two of the clock in the afternoon. He then presented it formally to the dean, or to the senior dignitary present, who put what is termed the poke (poche) of his amice over his head in order to manipulate the ball with greater ease. When the dean had ceremoniously taken over the ball, he supported it, as the canon had done, on his breast with his left arm. And thereupon he immediately caught hold of one of the canons by the hand and began a dance, which was followed by the dancing of the other canons in a circle or in another mode. Then the sequence "Praises to the Paschal Victim" was chanted, accompanied by the organ, in order to make the singing more regular and more in time with the dance-movement... But the finest part of the proceedings was the

²⁰ From Lebeuf's "Remarques sur les anciennes Rejouissances Ecclesiastiques." *Mercur de France*. 1726, pp. 911-925.

“circulation” of the ball, that is to say the passing (renvoi) of it from the leader of the company to the several players, and repassing of it back by them to the president, who was probably in the middle of the ring clad in all his distinctive vestments and ornaments. (98-9)

Further proof of the dance at Auxerre was found in a 1412 document that describes the dean performing a three-step dance in the center of the labyrinth while holding a ball. The canons joined hands and performed “circa daedalum,” suggesting that the dance took place in or around the perimeter of the labyrinth (Backman 67-8).

While some historians have relegated the ball dance to a recreational pastime or informal game,²¹ Mead believes this dance was certainly formal and ceremonial in nature, based on the inclusion of the dignitary’s use of the amice and the synchronization of the movements with the chanting rhythms (100). Xavier Barral I. Altet proposes that the labyrinths were used in ceremonies or processions linked to the dedication or completion of the cathedrals, but there is no hard evidence to support this.²² However, there is documentation of labyrinth rituals by Jean Beleth in *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* (1162) describing a ball game played in both Amiens and Reims Cathedrals during Easter festivities (Wright 139-40). There is also documentation found at Sens corroborating the use of ecclesiastical dances with a ball at Easter. A decree of the chapter of the cathedral

²¹ See Mews p. 20 and Lebeuf in Mead p. 102.

²² From Connolly’s, “At the Center of the World: the Labyrinth Pavement of Chartres Cathedral” from *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, Edited by Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe, Brill P, 2005, p. 286.

of Sens dated April 14, 1443 mentions a ballgame taking place around the labyrinth at Easter (Kronig 115).^{23 24}

Lebeuf discovered evidence of a ball dance at Narbonne Cathedral.²⁵ While it took place on Easter Monday in the bishop's palace, there is no mention of a labyrinth:

While the bells are ringing for vespers, the whole chapter (*conventus*) is to assemble in the hall of the archbishop's house; there tables are to be laid, and the servants (*ministri*) of the archbishop are to serve certain dishes with wine to follow.

Afterwards the archbishop is to throw the ball (*pelota*). (101)

Mead contends that the ball dance was likely held in the cathedral as part of a formal ceremony, but Mews disagrees: "Clearly, the ritual of the *pila* could easily degenerate into a game, accompanied by an extravagant feast, especially once it had been removed from the sacred context of the maze within the cathedral" (520). While there is evidence that the *pila* may have been used in informal game play in or near the cathedrals, it initially appears as part of the elaborate liturgical dances performed primarily at Easter.

There are instances in which documentation of ceremonial ball dances fails to acknowledge a labyrinth; however, the interpretations and proximity of these ceremonies to the labyrinths, as most took place inside the cathedrals, should be considered when deciphering the labyrinth's relationship to religious festivals. Wright mentions a

²³ Translation by Eisenberg.

²⁴ Constant Mews translates a statute given by the bishop of Paris in order to reform the clergy of the archdiocese of Sens: "It is forbidden for priests to allow dances particularly in three places: in churches, cemeteries, and processions" (541) as quoted in *Les statuts synodaux francias du XIII siècle*. Edited by Odette Pontal, Collection de Documents inedits sur l'histoire de France 9, 1971-1995.

document from Chartres dated 1609 describing an Easter dance that took place in the cathedral. While the labyrinth is not included in the description, the dance is described as performing the wonder and doubt of the patriarchs when Christ appeared to them during the Harrowing of Hell, which could serve as an analogy of Theseus's descent into the labyrinth, victory over the Minotaur, and escape. The Lucca and San Michele labyrinths explicitly illustrate Theseus attacking the Minotaur: the example at San Michele includes religious imagery alongside familiar labyrinth iconography. The center of the labyrinth depicts the Minotaur as a centaur wielding a sword above a human cadaver with the inscription: "Theseus intravit monstrumque biforme necavit" ("Theseus went in and killed the hybrid monster" [Kern 141]). The rim of the labyrinth shows Goliath with his shield, containing the words, "Sum ferus et fortis cumpiens dare vulnera mortis" ("I am wild and strong and want to cause mortal harm."). David's reply is also inscribed, "Sternitur elatus, stat mitus ad alta levatus," ("The arrogant will be vanquished, the peaceful will be exalted.").²⁶ Kern believes the images of Theseus attacking the Minotaur next to David killing Goliath, along with the inscriptions, parallel Christ's defeat of the devil (141-2). In other words, the labyrinth's roots in familiar mythology were used as a backdrop for the Christian understanding of Christ's death and resurrection at Easter.

Documentation of the ritual dances in cathedrals suggests that the use of music, movement, and specific feast times work to connect the labyrinth with a medieval understanding of Theseus as a Christ-figure, and some scholars believe the use of the ball

²⁶ Translations by Kern (141-2). The last inscription bears a resemblance to Isaiah 2.11 (*KJV*), "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." This verse is often used to describe the Day of Reckoning, or the Last Judgement, when all are held accountable for their transgressions.

strengthens the relationship between Christian doctrine and ancient myth. Doob, citing the influence of the *Ovide moralisé* on medieval thought, suggests that the ball represents both Ariadne's red ball of thread used to guide Theseus's escape and the ball of pitch he uses to subdue the Minotaur. The red ball of thread equates to Christ's divinity, allowing Him to survive the depths of hell, while the ball of pitch portrays Christ's humanity overcoming Satan (126).²⁷ The ball, when viewed in this manner, further enmeshes the Theseus myth with Christ's triumph over hell—both examples of *catabasis*. In this Christian interpretation of classical myths, Theseus' *catabasis* journey into the labyrinth is compared to the soul's journey toward salvation; only Christ's grace, represented in myth as the guidance of Ariadne's thread, could save one's soul from the entanglements of sin. The *Ovide moralisé* also reinterprets the myth of Daedalus imprisoned in the labyrinth by King Minos: in order to escape death, like Daedalus fashioning his wings to fly above the labyrinth, the Christian must eschew his or her worldly desires to escape the labyrinth to enter heaven.^{28 29}

While some scholars associate the ball with the Christ-Theseus figure, others believe the ball, combined with use in the labyrinth, symbolizes the sun's place in the cosmic order. Wright interprets the ball as the rising sun, or possibly a symbol of the cosmic harmony of celestial movement, stating that the mixing of pagan practices with Christian ceremonies is characteristic of medieval culture. (142). Chambers believes that

²⁷ Both the Old and New Testaments refer to "the scarlet thread" as an image of Christ's redemption and "pitch" as representing of both protection from death and His vengeance. See Radshall (90, 96).

²⁸ The passages referred to in the *Ovide moralisé* appear on lines 1579-1708 and 1767-1928.

²⁹ Radshall explains the medieval theories of the atonement that include a literal descent of Christ into hell based on Mark 3.27 (242).

the ball dance must be connected to village festivals celebrated at Easter, in which sun-charms, such as yellow eggs and fire wheels, were used. He concludes that since the cathedral dances celebrated Resurrection, it's plausible to view the ball as a sun symbol: "[P]erhaps this game of ball may be connected to the curious belief that if you get up early enough on Easter morning, you may see the sun dance" (128-9). Medieval thought tended to mix both pagan and Christian symbolism, as the Risen Christ was also known as the *Sol Salutis Christi*, or "sun of righteousness"³⁰; therefore, viewing the ball as a symbol of the sun was not necessarily exclusive from using it as an accessory to the Christ-Theseus re-enactment.

The detailed descriptions of the dance at Auxerre corroborate the idea of the ball as sun. Choreographed circular movements with retracing of steps and movement of the ball possibly mimicked solar and planetary movement. If the labyrinth dances happened primarily at Easter and occasionally during December,³¹ a re-enactment of planetary motion with emphasis on the sun's placement would be appropriate at these times of the Vernal Equinox and the December Solstice, respectively. Both events mark the reversal of the sun's perceived motion in the heavens from a geocentric perspective: at Easter, the sun moves directly above the equator as it shifts closer to the Northern Hemisphere, while at the December Solstice, the sun traces its lowest point near the horizon to begin its climb higher in the sky. For the medieval Christian, celebrating the sun's place in the center of the universe would figure well into ecclesiastic ceremonies that also venerate Christ's place as the central focus of Christian worship.

³⁰ See Eisenberg

³¹ See Mews writings on the pagan Saturnalia festivities associated with "December freedom" celebrations and ball dances (512).

While the dance in cathedrals is thought to re-enact the Resurrection, the labyrinth's association with dance is firmly rooted in the Theseus myth. In Dryden's translation of Plutarch's "Life of Theseus," a commemorative dance is performed to celebrate Theseus' victory over the Minotaur:

Now Theseus, in his return from Crete, put in at Delos, and having sacrificed to the god of the island, dedicated to the temple the image of Venus which Ariadne had given him, and danced with the young Athenians a dance that, in memory of him, they say is still preserved among the inhabitants of Delos, consisting in certain measured turnings and returnings, imitative of the windings and twistings of the labyrinth. And this dance, as Dicarchus writes, is called among the Delians the Crane. This he danced around the Ceratonian Altar, so called from its consisting of horns taken from the left side of the head. They say also that he instituted games in Delos, where he was the first that began the custom of giving a palm to the victors. (21)

This dance is known as the *geranos*, or Crane Dance, and is mentioned in Book XVIII of the *Iliad* with Homer's description of Achilles' shield: at the very end of the long digression, detailing the god Hephastus' construction of the hero's shield, the narrator tells us that "on it a dancing place was wrought by the very famous god who was lame in both legs, / like the one which once in broad Knossos / Daidalos made for Ariadne of the beautifully braided hair" (qtd. in Dué 21). Eustathius (1166) comments that although the dance floor was originally constructed by Daedalus for Ariadne, the dance is identical to the Theseus dance. He describes the dance as composed of both male and female dancers,

uncommon in Greek dance, and an amalgamation of two forms: the dance of war and the dance of peace (Ghiselin 41). Eustathius states that people in the Middle Ages, “especially seafarers, perform a winding, sinuous dance imitative of the twists and turns of the ancient Labyrinth” (qtd. in Lawler 114). According to Wright, the writings of Marius Victorinus include “detail about the dances supposedly established by Theseus, as well as the view that these dances imitated the movement of the universe—a notion that loosely echoes that of Honorius in the twelfth century” (37). Lawler believes that the dance performed on Delos must have been a victory dance:

It could have a choreography exactly like that of the dance described in the *Iliad*—a rapid circle, representing the movement of the planets through the skies, followed by a dance of two lines in opposition, representing the apparent approach of the various planets to the earth and to one another, and their subsequent separation... if there was a solar or celestial dance in the Labyrinth, it may well have been similar to the dance of the *Iliad*. (118)

The Theseus dances from ancient myth continued to be performed and described centuries later. While these examples further tie the labyrinth dances to the cosmic order of solar and planetary motion, the themes of war, peace, and victory complement the theory that the dance re-enacts Christ’s *catabasis* journey in the Harrowing of Hell.

The ball dances in the cathedrals were sacred ritual, not just playful pastimes. For the medieval Christian, to traverse the labyrinth or engage in ball dance games was to safely act out the pilgrim’s journey, as well as Christ’s Resurrection. By re-enacting these core ideas of Christianity, the believer gains understanding and edification of his faith. The statute given to Sens by the bishop of Paris forbidding priests to allow the ritual

dances implies that the dances were, in fact, taking place “in churches, cemeteries, and processions” (Mews 541). The document could also explain the disappearance of ritual dances in connection with Christian feast days, such as Easter. The sacred ritual was phased out as changing Orthodox Christian sensibilities deemed the ball dance’s Cretan origins heretical. These rituals were relegated to children’s games and informal play. The transition is logical. Rising pressure from governing clerics abolished the ritual from the cathedral nave and the labyrinth, but a communal desire to keep the tradition alive resulted in the ball dance relocating apart from cathedral grounds. Without the sacred space of the cathedral labyrinth and the inclusion in holy feast days, the ritual loses the power of the performance. While the same movements may persist, the context has changed. The dance transitions into the realm of sport. While sports have much in common with performance—performance theory states that theater includes rituals, sport, dance, music, play, and various performances in everyday life (Schechner 179), the game’s relocation away from the sacred space and time remove its religious significance. Renaissance attitudes toward the ball dance is that it degenerates into a secular amusement.

Along with its functions as symbol and ceremonial setting, the Chartres labyrinth is a calendrical calculator that can be used to demonstrate the moon phases and solar cycles. Aligning with the idea that the labyrinth dance acted out celestial movement, it served as a *computus*, marking the time of the moveable feast of Easter by tracking these lunar and solar patterns. Since Easter is a series of feast days that must be prepared for in advance, the ability to calculate the exact date would be of extreme importance to the church.

The eleven-circuit unicursal layout of the labyrinth lends itself to the demonstration of astronomical patterns. Its division into four quarters corresponds to the four seasons of the year; each quarter contains seven winding turns for each day of the week. The labyrinth's total of twenty-eight turns corresponds to the length of the lunar month and the years in the solar cycle (McClusky x-xi). The circumference of the labyrinth displays a line of cogs resembling half-moons, or lunations, that create 112 spaces. This feature may be used to calculate the Easter cycles, as the liturgical year makes up 112 days, or four lunar months of twenty-eight days.

Leclercq suggests that the labyrinth's purpose was more than celestial calculations and moveable feast dating: The Chartres labyrinth aided academic scholars at the School of Chartres in their understanding of astronomy. Using the labyrinth as a guide for a cosmic dance or game would have made the minutia of astronomy more accessible for students. Bodily movements in the labyrinth would aid in memorization of celestial patterns (Leclercq 245). While there is no written record of these movements, there is proof of a poem used to instruct the workings of the labyrinth computes. Fulbert, a teacher at Chartres who became bishop in 1006, composed the poem for his students to memorize the calculations of the Easter date, including each sign of the Zodiac. The numbers corresponding to the labyrinth layout are mentioned in the first stanza:

The day on which each month begins is laid out for you
 in these seven little lines. Each of them contains four numbers,
 and the total, twenty-eight, are distributed over the same number
 of years according to a fixed pattern. These numbers are also called
 the solar epacts. (Behrends 261)

Wright explains the lack of evidence for scholars actually moving about the labyrinth while studying celestial motion for the same reason there was little documentation on the ball dances or games in the Chartres labyrinth: “The documents are few in number, and with good reason...The dance of the labyrinth was on the margin of acceptable religious practice and the less said about it the better” (138-9). Wright believes that documents from Auxerre and Sens corroborating the clerics’ use of the labyrinth in ritual games suggest the Chartres labyrinth was utilized for activities as well. Even without documented proof of movements being practiced by scholars in the labyrinth, the existence of the poem at Chartres is compelling evidence of the labyrinth’s use as a *computus*.

The Chartres labyrinth, as well as other cathedral labyrinths of northern France, allow for many interpretations of its uses and meanings, often mixing ancient mythology with medieval Christian understanding. Exploring the phases of thought and chronology of labyrinths in the Gothic cathedrals leaves room for many proposed usages to exist. In the Gothic cathedrals, labyrinths were more than an ornament or a design borrowed from the past. The conflation of Theseus with Christ in medieval thought illustrates the labyrinth’s effectiveness as a powerful visual for understanding doctrine. The labyrinth is an appropriate symbol of spiritual journey and salvation: the path is treacherous and cannot be tread without assistance. In the case of cathedral labyrinths, the implication is of Christ’s intercession to aid the Christian pilgrim, while their prominent placement signified the importance of this idea.

Beyond the labyrinth’s use in understanding the figure of Christ as the path to salvation, the labyrinth’s ability to signify a skilled creator is juxtaposed with its use as

both a space to celebrate cosmic order and a tool to measure that order. These ideas complement each other; the existence of ball dances in conjunction with labyrinths, thought to re-enact solar movements at ceremonies, such as Easter, creates a beautiful tapestry of medieval knowledge, beliefs, and ideas.

CHAPTER III

Labyrinth as Performance Space in *Assembly of Ladies*

The anonymous dream-vision *Assembly of Ladies* (AL), written c. 1470-80, treats morality, gender, and courtly love from a female narrator's point of view. The short dream vision of 745 lines survives in three fifteenth-century manuscripts: British Library, Addit. 34360(A); Cambridge, Trinity College, R3.19; and MS 258 Longleat. The central motif used throughout the poem is a maze, a setting for the characters in the initial frame and the narrator in the dream-vision. The inclusion of the maze sets the poem apart from all other dream-vision poetry: Judith Davidoff's exhaustive survey of Middle English love-vision poems finds "no other poems with actual mazes" (213). While the narrator uses the word *maze* to describe her surroundings, the words *maze* and *labyrinth*, as Penelope Doob has shown, can be used interchangeably to describe both her physical and psychological experience. Aside from using the maze or labyrinth motif, the poem employs a female narrator telling her tale to a male listener, an unusual feature in fifteenth-century courtly love poetry. These characteristics serve to distinguish the poem for its female concerns using a female point of view as expressed in a labyrinthine garden maze setting familiar to the aristocracy. The poet's inclusion of these three elements—female narrator, male audience, labyrinthine setting—indicates the poem's theme and purpose. Arguably, most important is the presence of the labyrinth to represent a performance space in *Assembly of Ladies* for the narrator to express her state of mind and her desire to break conventions in the rules of courtly love to a male audience. The labyrinth setting creates a liminal space where the narrator acquires the narrative authority to express her desires and opinions that are otherwise oppressed.

The poem begins in September, with the narrator wandering through the maze with her companions, four other “ladyes” and four gentlewomen (5-8). Knights and squires are also treading the maze, and one asks the narrator why she is there. She reluctantly tells her tale of walking in the same maze on another occasion, when she found its center. There, she tells him, she fell asleep and dreamed of a woman named Perseverance, who summoned her and her companions to an assembly at the court of Plesaunt Regarde, over which Lady Loyalty resided. When the narrator and her companions arrived, dressed in blue, they were asked to present bills of complaint against their lovers to Lady Loyalty. After the petitions were heard, Loyalty acknowledged that these women had legitimate grievances, some quite sad; however, she promised that her judgment would be given at a later parliament meeting. At this point, the narrator awoke from her dream to write it down. When the knight asks what she will call the tale, she replies, “La Semble des Dames” (752). This outer frame of the beginning and end of the poem where the narrator encounters the knight is set in the garden hedge-maze (1-28, 743-56). Similarly, the maze provides the setting for the subsequent frame of the narrator’s tale of a previous experience of treading the same maze with her female companions (29-46), while the third frame contains the dream vision of a labyrinth-like journey through Plesaunt Regarde (78-449).

While the poem’s intricate structure of a maze-within-a-maze is clearly central to the poem, most scholars focus their attention instead on questions of gender and authorship. Simone Marshall believes that “*The Assembly of Ladies* is an instance of a poem that is deliberately anonymous in order to project its theme of female authorship” (“Interiors” 36), and that while the identity of the author may never be known, “we know

that the narrator is a woman and that she offers us her poetic world as a reflection of fifteenth-century English society” (*Female 2*). Derek Pearsall, in the introduction to his edition of AL, writes that “the constant references to clothes, and the putting on and wearing of clothes, and the comments on the way the clothes look, suggest a woman’s interests” (31); at the same time, he recognizes that “they may equally well be what a man would characterize as a woman’s interests” (31). He concludes by noting that the “threadbare repertoire of tags and conventional phrases suggests a hack versifier, and if this versifier is also responsible for the romance of Generydes, as seems to me certain, it is very unlikely that it is a woman” (31). For centuries the poem was attributed to Geoffrey Chaucer, whose poems often included the theme of women’s experiences in love, yet even after being rejected from the Chaucerian canon, W.W. Skeat included it in his 1897 *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*. Skeat also claims the poem is authored by a woman, who, he maintains, also authored *The Floure and the Leafe* (FL).³² The identity and gender of the author are still topics debated by critics, and much of what has been published on AL pertains to this subject.

Questions regarding the artistic merit of the poem have also been contentiously debated. While Skeat includes AL in his Chaucer collection, he concedes that the poem “fails to satisfy the rime tests over and over again. In fact, some of the rimes can only be

³² According to Pearsall, “style, language, and meter are all against common authorship” of AL and FL (29). Thomas Speght included this allegorical love-vision in his first edition of *Chaucer’s Collected Works* (1598), and it is also listed in a contemporary contents of the Longleat MS, which suggests that FL once belonged, but may have been lost: “FL takes its origins from the real or supposed courtly cult of the Flower and the Leaf to which Chaucer refers in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*” (1-2). Marshall believes the separation of AL from the Chaucerian canon limited the audience to scholars interested primarily in the female authorship (*The Anonymous Text* 141).

described as bad” (*The Chaucer Canon* 110). C. S. Lewis wrote that the AL poet “has no better vocation to allegory than that of fashion” (231), describing it as “silly a poem as man could find in a year’s reading” (257). Bradford Fletcher asserts that the poem is poorly written, a “representative of a class of late medieval courtly love poems composed by writers who, for want of a better term, might be called amateurs” (230). On the contrary, Penelope Doob views the poem as highly sophisticated: “Throughout, the social function, physical description, psychological effects, and symbolic potential of the maze are handled with an easy grace.” She calls it a “delightful and often realistic allegory to illustrate the experience of being in a real garden labyrinth” (172). Davidoff affirms the poem’s intricate design with the ironic device of a male author using a female persona and “an example of what an especially talented poet could do with structural patterns to which he felt confident his audience would respond” (153-4). The ongoing question of authorship may be to blame for the wide range of criticism regarding the poem’s value.³³ Critics prioritizing gender expectations for this genre may have confused their misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the poem with the legitimacy of the poet’s skill.

The popularity of courtly love poetry began to grow in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as literacy spread throughout Europe, influencing the literature being produced. Poets such as Charles d’Orleans (1394-1465) and Jean Froissart (1337-1405)

³³ Matlock contends that the poem is extremely focused on the details of the court’s functioning, while Ruth Evans focuses on the characters’ dress. Matlock, Wendy A. “’And long to sue it is a wery thing’: Legal Commentary in *The Assembly of Ladies*.” *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 101, no. 1, 2004, pp. 20-37 and Evans, Ruth & Lesley Johnson. “*The Assembly of Ladies: A Maze of Feminist Sign Reading?*” *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*. Susan Sellers, ed. U of Toronto P, 1991, pp. 171-196.

were widely read and emulated. The theme of loyalty and faithfulness of women was central to many love poems. Christine de Pisan, a prominent court writer in the reign of Charles VI (1380-1422), wrote in defense of women's virtues, a clear concern of the AL poet. Many of Christine's works (characterized by many scholars as feminist) critique the ethics of courtly love as favoring men but providing little value for women. For example, her *L'Épître au dieu d'Amours* (1399) defends women against the misogyny prevalent in the Middle Ages. The AL poet, likely influenced by Christine's writings, includes representations of women unfortunate in love in the descriptions of engraved images reminiscent of Lydgate's *Temple of Glass*. These stories of faithful women are similarly redolent of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, in which Chaucer recounts the tales of famous fictional women wronged by their lovers. Unusually, AL creates a medieval court composed solely of women: no men are allowed. Of course, an actual court would have included men. The poem's focus on the details of the women's dress, including trim, jewels, and mottoes, suggests interest in contemporary fashion. Embroidered mottoes were considered heraldic marks of identity.³⁴ The poem also includes a hedge-maze, in which the characters pass the time walking, a popular pastime with the upper classes during the fifteenth century. The type of hedge mazes and extensive gardens described in the poem are representative of those on castle grounds, valued for their recreational aesthetics. Social etiquette and manners of the time are reflected in Lady Loyalty's acceptance of the woman's bills of complaint (540-81) and would have been easily

³⁴ Talking garments functioned both to conceal the body and reveal a character (Crane, Susan. *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2002, p. 28).

recognized by a contemporary court. All of these elements in the poem point to a theme of courtly love that reflects, albeit in a skewed way, European courts at the time.

While familiarity with the genre of courtly love poetry helps in understanding the poem, the three manuscripts in which AL appears provide scholars with additional clues to its meaning. Each manuscript holds a collection of poems unified by a common theme. For instance, Marshall believes that it is possible that the compiler of British Library Addit. MS 34260 considered AL “to continue the general tone and style of other courtly love poems in the manuscript, suggesting the author of the *Assembly of Ladies* was familiar with the literary conventions in use in the fifteenth-century” (136). Marshall was the first to note that its inclusion in these three different collections indicates that the poem could be understood in diverse ways, depending on its varying manuscript contexts, thereby suggesting a complexity in the poem that has been previously ignored: While “there is little doubt that scholarly focus on its possible female authorship is important, this argument opens up for scholars the possibility that *The Assembly of Ladies* has been understood and interpreted by others in earlier periods in quite different ways” (48). While all three manuscripts contain a number of complaint poems, the Cambridge MS situates AL in a collection of courtly love poetry, placing it alongside Alain Chartier’s *La belle dame sans merci*, a poem of similar length at 749 lines. This placement led Julia Boffey and John Thompson to believe that *La belle* was “too small to form a complete volume on its own account, and yet too long to be categorized as mere makeweight” (283). Marshall believes the same of AL; while it could have appeared alone, its inclusion in this manuscript gives it a significant relationship to the other texts collated with it. Fletcher notes that while the wear of the manuscript’s booklets indicates they were

initially circulated independently, this did not last long: the entire manuscript was foliated in a single fifteenth-century hand, and, according to Marshall, this is significant. She believes that the Cambridge MS booklets were intended as a single collection, yet the original order is unknown. Together, the contents in MS Addit. 34260 share the theme of courtly love tradition, and, as Felicity Riddy notes, a “significant number of the poems [in it] concern women” (67). Marshall notes that some of Lydgate’s anti-feminist texts appear in the manuscript, as well as a lyric against hypocritical woman, leading Boffey to believe that the manuscript as a whole negates a common theme (18). However, Marshall concludes that because this manuscript is composed primarily of courtly love texts, such as *The Craft of Lovers* and *The Court of Love*, AL’s purpose is to highlight the mechanics of the courtly love tradition (19). Ultimately, Marshall’s scholarship on the language used in these courtly love poems helps to characterize AL as expertly written and well-crafted in its use of courtly love conventions.

While the poem exemplifies conventional elements of the courtly love tradition, the inclusion of the hedge-maze as the exclusive setting in both the present (the narrator speaking with the knight) and the past (the narrator recounting her prior experience in the maze) sets the poem apart from other love poetry. This setting represents a performance space for the narrator to express her confused and frustrated mental state. In the opening stanza, the narrator begins to recall her experience with companions from memory, or in her *mynde*: “in a garden... foure in nombre, as to my mynde doth falle / And I the fift, symplest of alle” (4-7). In the third stanza, she clearly identifies the maze setting when the knight asks what she is doing here, to which she replies, “as it fil in my thought: / ’To walke aboute the mase, in certeynte, / As a womman that nothyng rought” (16-8). She

does not appear to answer his question—either she does not understand what the knight is asking or does not want to answer. She does tell him that she wishes to traverse the maze with a clear direction and no worries. The knight’s observation of her pale appearance is another indication that she is not at ease in the space. In telling the knight her tale, she describes the actions of the group of ladies, herself included, moving about the maze on a former occasion:

To passe oure tyme in to this mase we went
 And toke oure weyes yche aftyr other entent:
 Som went inward and went they had gon oute,
 Som stode amyddis and loked al aboute. (32-6)

She explains that each woman took her own way: some thought they had gone out instead of in, while others stood in the middle of the maze, looking around. The narrator’s description of their movements helps define the space of the maze, as well as suggesting the mental state of the women as being confused about their direction and location.

While the presence of the maze in the poem is unconventional, a contemporary audience would have been highly familiar with the type of garden maze the narrator depicts and, quite possibly, the experience of walking in one. The earliest examples of Western European garden mazes appear to date from the fourteenth century. Hedges lined both sides of the path, which was often widened to provide clear views of the maze’s turns. Labyrinths of love, a specific type of popular hedge maze, often contained an arbor at the center (Kern 247). The narrator’s descriptions of this physical structure in the outer frame of the poem invite the audience to view the maze as a metaphor for the narrator’s mental state and for the audience’s experience of the poem. Doob describes

fifteenth-century hedge mazes as well known “elegant, baffling playgrounds;” while they were sites of entertainment and relaxation, she continues, “treading the maze was an attractive if frustrating recreational activity” (110). In AL, the narrator describes the difficulties her companions have in negotiating the maze:

And soth to sey som were ful fer behynde
 And right anon as ferforth as the best;
 Other there were, so mased in theyr mynde,
 Al weys were goode for hem, both est and west.
 Thus went they furth and had but litel rest,
 And som theyr corage dide theym so assaile
 For verray wrath they stept over the rayle. (36-42)

Their physical movement is accompanied by differing mental states, including a play on the word “maze,” as being “so mased in their mynde” (38). Some cannot choose a direction, as both east and west seemed good to them, and their indecision eventually wears them out, while others, out of frustration, simply cheat by stepping over the rails. It is only the narrator’s account of the event that identifies both the movement and emotions of her companions. As a result, she establishes the maze as a performance space, a space for her to translate her experience to the knight, who represents the listening audience.

In performance, “spaces are used intensely...for the scheduled events. The spaces are uniquely organized so that a large group can watch a small group—and become aware of itself at the same time” (Schechner 14). The orality of the narrator’s tale in AL, combined with the listening knight and the written record of “this booke” (740), indicates self-awareness for both characters. This secures their roles of performer (the narrator) and

audience (the knight) in relation to the stage (the maze). The knight as listener serves as a means for the narrator to transfer her memory, first to a listening audience and, later, into writing as a means of preserving, and possibly recreating, history. The performance space of the maze gives a context for the characters' awareness: the maze provides the enclosure for the characters' close proximity along with the setting for the narrator's tale. Inside the boundaries of the maze, like the community spaces used for games, theater, and ritual, "reality is being performed" (Goffman 36).

This performance space also enables the narrator to express her own maze-treading experience: she articulates her decision to "gate my self a litel avauntage / Al for-weryed" (44-5), resulting in complete exhaustion. She begins to recall memories from the past, when she found the center of the maze and immediately fell asleep. Doob observes that while "maze-walking seems to be a normal aristocratic diversion, responses to the experience are highly individual;" though treading the maze appeared to be leisurely activity, the physical and emotional stamina needed to master it was great (110). The duality involved in the labyrinth activity is apparent in the narrator's description: physicality versus emotion. The idea of the labyrinth connotes opposing forces, such as chaos versus order. Kern believes that this underlies the allure of the labyrinth, in that "the notion of going astray is only conceivable against a backdrop of certainty, orientation, and order" (306). In the same vein, the narrator's retelling of her tale to the knight has two layers of meaning: she gives the literal description of the physical act of treading the maze, while at the same time expressing the underlying emotions of confusion and frustration. Jane Chance argues that "the maze symbolizes the problem of female difference, women's subjectivity... their confusion over direction... and over

their social role” (256). In other words, while the narrator’s performance appears on the surface to be a playful recounting of a past experience in the garden maze, under the surface stands a female performer expressing her companions’ and her own dissatisfaction to a male listener who represents the fifteenth-century audience of *AL* itself.

As the labyrinth represents a performance space in *AL* for the narrator to translate her mental state into language, it also gives her agency to act out the breaking of conventions in the rules of courtly love. Since the hedge-mazes of the aristocracy were planned spaces in the gardens, places to play and interact with members of the court, courtly love rituals would be expected with these highly organized spaces. Because the maze brings the expectation of courtly love rituals to occur, the image of the labyrinth becomes the lens through which the audience views the narrator’s tale.³⁵ In the maze, the characters would be expected to act according to the rules of courtly love. Doob points out,

While most medieval literary references to labyrinths link them with sin, error, confusion, and damnation, it is all the more important to remember what the aristocratic three-dimensional labyrinth teaches: that in a parallel courtly tradition, a maze, like a garden, might be a place of pleasure, beguiling nothing but the time. (112)

³⁵ In Chaucer’s *Troilus and Creseyde*, 2.160, Helen and Deiphobos leave Troilus’ room, ostensibly to read a letter in a walled garden, where they remain for an hour: the implication here is that they have already begun their relationship (Helen will marry Deiphobos when Paris, her husband, dies in the war). A medieval audience could not have missed Chaucer’s meaning here.

Like the Daedalian construct of a highly ordered labyrinth, the rules governing courtly love play in the garden space were also extremely controlled and adhered to as ritual.

When the narrator recalls the knight's questioning of her pallor, it is an admission of her fair play in the rules of courtly love. Although a problematic source on the conventions of courtly love, Andreas Capellanus, in his twelfth-century *De arte honesti amandi* (*The Art of Courtly Love*), claims that "every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved" (184). For example, Chaucer's Troilus turns pale at the sight of Criseyde:

"Whan he was fro the temple thus departed, / He streyght anoon unto his paleys torneth (1.323-4). In AL, the narrator's being pale also suggests that her beloved is present in the garden maze (quite possibly the knight himself). While the narrator calls attention to her faithful observance of the rules of the maze, she also tells of the knight's being less than chivalrous in his conduct toward her: he bluntly asks her what she is doing in the maze twice in a "hasti" manner (21). While she follows the rules of courtly love in the maze, he does not follow the rules of chivalry. It is this transgression of courtly love rules in the outer frame of the narrator's tale (1-28) that provides greater context for interpreting the events in the dream-vision.

Viewed through the lens of the framing fiction, the dream-vision at the core of the frame narrative can be read as a reaction to the events in the narrator's waking state. The first line of the poem breaks dream-vision convention by opening, "In Septembre at the fallyng of the leafe" (1), instead of the much more usual setting of springtime. Pearsall explains that "the spring opening... was conventional in courtly love-allegory as a way of suggesting the renewal of love and love's expectation, or the unhappiness by contrast of unrequited love" (n22). M.C. Bodden believes the unusual setting signals rebellion: "The

use of autumn as a setting is itself striking. Surviving English courtly love narratives do not feature it. [The poet's] intention was, I think, to underscore the temporality of love" (80). A contemporary audience would have been aware of the unusual fall setting, as well as the knight's falling short of chivalric behavior through his rude questioning of the narrator. As these expectations for courtly love poetry diminish, the narrator describes the dream-vision core, where she is summoned by the allegorical figure of Perseverance and guided by Diligence to the court of Lady Loyalty. En route to Pleasaunt Regarde, the narrator refuses Lady Loyalty's request to carry a motto, or grievance, declaring, "C'est sanz dire" (it goes without saying, or, my case speaks for itself) (627).³⁶ By not articulating her grievance in the dream vision, she draws attention to the knight's unchivalrous behavior. In declaring that her case speaks for itself, the narrator implies that her complaint should be obvious to the court, and perhaps for her audience (the knight). Bodden suggests,

As courtly interactions go, his is a nongallant question put in a noncourtly manner, an action that so violates the tradition of the courtly knight—still in play—that it leads us to wonder if this is part of women's public reality, that is, being addressed by the curt speech of men where curtness seems uncalled for. In this way, her complaint becomes clear: the knight in the poem's outer frame is not playing by the rules. Because the bills of complaint are presented in the dream-vision itself, they are not the actual experience of the narrator but rather an experience dreamed by her. (84)

³⁶ Pearsall, 167.

Indeed, the poem's maze becomes an allegory for the narrator's labyrinthine state of mind. As she fails to leave the labyrinth, she remains frustrated in the dream vision. This failure represents the plight of the voiceless female. The framing fiction of the female narrator's recounting of her story to the male knight is a clue. While the space represents confusion or frustration, it can also act as a stage from which the narrator performs her tale for the knight. The result is the poem itself, *La semble de Dames*: the written performance of the female voice to be heard.

Just as the labyrinth symbolizes the co-mingling of order and confusion, the dream vision of AL depicts the narrator's inner dream world and her outer reality. In the dream vision, the narrator is asked to give her identity—twice—as expressed by her motto, yet she refuses both times. In her waking state she remains secretive but reluctantly tells her tale when asked. She seems to prefer to keep her thoughts private. As a result, the narrator herself is a puzzle, and more information is given about her in the dream vision than in the waking section. As such, the dream vision may be the portal to her inner fantasy world. Throughout the poem, in both dream vision and waking, she remains inside the maze: the space in which she can fictionalize the serious matters of concern.

The framing fiction of AL thus creates a labyrinth of possibilities in which the reader can extrapolate meaning from the text. The poem can be viewed as performance in which the female voice can be expressed, in this case from the narrator to the knight character, in a nonthreatening manner. The complaints of women who wish to break free from society's constraints upon them can be read or heard by the audience. The narrator is reluctant to tell her "tale" in the beginning, but the knight presses her to do so: "He

asked me ageyn whom I sought” (19). At the end of the poem, when she tells the knight that she has written her dream vision down, the knight shares his opinion: “Now verily your dreame is passyng goode/And worthy to be had in remembraunce” (743-4). He asks the name of the poem, and she tells him; however, she also asks what he thinks of the name. Her reluctance to tell him in the beginning may be a power play, since the labyrinth is a space in which she can both talk to the knight and refuse a request, in accordance with the rules of courtly love. Marshall believes that the close of the poem is focused on “how a woman can participate in literary production... the narrator gets the last laugh. The knight asks the narrator what the tale is called, and she replies, ‘*La semble de Dames*’... The title of the poem, given in French, is a pun. It is the assembly of ladies and the semblance of ladies, but the knight, even when invited to consider the title, does not seem to understand this joke” (47). The dual meaning of the poem’s title, along with its recursive structure, is reminiscent of the nature of the labyrinth in which the narrator remains. Even at the end of her dream vision, she tells the knight the title of the poem, in a way, turning back to the beginning, while directing the audience’s attention back to the beginning of the poem as well. It is in this playful space that the narrator gains agency through the act of courtly love to express desires otherwise suppressed.

While the labyrinth represents a place where the narrator can safely speak her mind, it is also an archetypal form of sacred space that is removed from the conventional expectations of medieval life (as seen also in the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral). The medieval labyrinth diagram often included a cross’s stipes and patibulum that dissected the concentric circle pattern. Saint Augustine preached that Christ is the straight path, while the error of pagan thought leads to inescapable wandering away from God (*De*

Civitate Dei, 12.13/14 – 20/21, Oates trans. in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*). The cross represents Christ's victory over the temporal sphere of the world as symbolized by the labyrinth. The labyrinth's association with the worldly realm also suggested an inextricability from the prison of sin in which unity with God is completely unattainable. Dante uses the character of Minos in Canto V of the *Inferno* to connect the myth of the labyrinth through the inextricability of sin. By the same token, the labyrinth's ability to entangle also links it to a protective fortress that contains the mystery of God. Humanity cannot fathom the perfection of God. His ordered creation is viewed as chaos and confusion from a worldly perspective; only God can see the order from above the maze. God, then, can be viewed as a Daedalus-like creator of a perfect order that can only be seen from a lofty height. In this way, the perfect space of the labyrinth is set apart from ordinary life.

Along with serving as a sacred space, the labyrinth circumscribes a legal realm. In AL, the court of Lady Loyalty is described as a series of connected chambers, not unlike the Egyptian labyrinth at Hawara. Described by the Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 B.C.), this complex structure included passageways, great halls, and temples (De Sélincourt 160-1). Ancient writers believed its purpose included serving as a mortuary temple in which the Egyptians would make daily sacrifices and celebrate annual festivals (Kozloff 92). According to the Greek historian and philosopher Strabo (63-24 B.C.), the building was a massive palace containing many smaller palaces connected by winding passages; it would have been impossible to make one's way out unless accompanied by a guide (105). Strabo associates the number of palaces with the number of Egypt's provinces, or Nomes, along with the Forty-Two Judges who preside over the

fate of souls at the final judgment. It was the custom of the Nomes to assemble at their appointed courts according to their rank in order to offer gifts and sacrifices to the gods and administer justice in important matters. The connection between labyrinth and law court may also derive from Ovid's account of King Minos in his *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) as the lawgiver who imprisons the Minotaur in Daedalus's labyrinth to hide his wife's sin of lust. This well-known myth entangles the labyrinth symbol with justice.

In a setting reminiscent of the Egyptian labyrinth, the AL poem's narrator dreams of following the guide, Diligence, through the labyrinthine series of chambers surrounding Lady Loyalty's court. The narrator is invited by Perseverance to join an assembly of court proceedings for which she is asked to dress in blue. She inquires of Perseverance's rank, "[i]n what office stand ye, or in what degre?" (99) and to what type of place she is being led (155). Perseverance describes the palace of Plesaunt Regard:

Feirer is none, though it were fore a kyng;
 Devised wele, and that in every thyng;
 The toures high ful plesaunt shul ye fynde,
 With fanes fressh tournyng with every wynde;

The chambres and parlours both of oo sort,
 With bay wyndowes goodely as can be thought,
 As for daunsyng and other wise disport;
 The galaries right wonderfully wrought;
 That wele I wote, yef ye were thider brought
 And toke good hede therof in every wise,

Ye wold it thynk a verray paradise. (158-68)

The narrator is led to an enclosed chamber she describes as “like an hospital” (230), to another chamber where she dresses (253) and then a third chamber to rest (286), then follows Perseveraunce to “a litel space” (432), and into a fourth chamber with a “paved floore” (451) and walls “made of berel and cristal” (455) in which Lady Loyalty’s court is held. It is in this fourth chamber that the narrator observes the court proceedings amidst “a noble company” of which she is uncertain of the number (503). This is as far as the narrator journeys in her dream, and the court chamber is like the center of the labyrinth. In this chamber, the narrator and her companions experience a court characterized by delays with no resolution of their cases, as in the fictional court of King Minos in the anonymous dream-vision poem, *The Assembly of Gods*³⁷ (c. 1478-83).

The AL maze setting also, importantly, functions as a platform for the narrator to express dissatisfaction with her circumstances. The confusing maze symbolizes the confinements (and confusion) of her life. While the narrator’s actions appear contradictory in the poem, these discrepancies deliberately serve to shed light on her desire to break free from social conventions and expectations. Since the narrator is telling her version of the dream occurring in an individually experienced event, she alone mediates the telling of the dream, the event, and, ultimately, her character. Curiously, her behavior is full of contradictions. For example, when asked by the knight to explain her goal and her pale appearance, she initially refuses; however, when he asks again, she relents. While she is pale and is clearly in search of something or for someone, she

³⁷ In an introduction to *The Assembly of Gods*, Jane Chance notes that it is collated with and in the same hand as AL in MS Cambridge Trinity College Library MS R.3.19. Other contemporary poems associated with women appear in the MS.

describes herself as having few cares, or “as a womman that nothyng rought” (18). In addition, though she initially classifies herself as part of a group of ladies, explaining there were “foure in nombre... and I the fift” (6-7), calling them her “felawship” with whom she passes the time by traversing the maze (30-32), she spends much of the poem ahead of and separate from her (and successfully reaches the center of the maze). And she is lost in the maze when the poem opens, even though she solved it on another occasion. One must keep in mind that both the narrator’s memory and perspective allow her to leave some details intact, while simultaneously withholding others. Marshall maintains that her contradictions are intentional:

[S]he has tailored the story to suit her own purposes, she has not attempted to memorise accurately all that occurred in the dream... the narrator encourages the reader to uncover the falsities in the text, the elements that do not seem logical and indicate that the “truth” of the text is more likely to lie in what has been omitted from the narrative. (115)

If this is the case, then she is forcing the audience into active roles in the uncovering of meaning.

The dual nature of the labyrinth provides a backdrop for the narrator to perform the story of her memory for the knight. She presents herself as a naive maze-treader inside the labyrinth but also positions herself as a savvy player in the court of love, by turning pale. Her reluctance to tell the knight her tale suggests she does not wish for him to know her true feelings. While she plays the part of maze-treader, she can also represent a Daedalus-like creator, as she is, after all, the fictional author of the book. While in the dream court, she appears surprised that men are not allowed there, asking, “Why? What

have they done? I pray, you tell me” (146-8). According to Bodden, there is an implied criticism of men (91). The question is rhetorical, left for the audience, including the knight, to answer. In the court, she refuses to present a bill of complaint: “But as for me I have none verily” (411). Ironically, a medieval audience would understand that she has a grievance against the knight’s poor behavior, but she does not reveal it, as he is the listening audience. At the conclusion of the dream-vision, she admits her tale is worth writing down, but she still asks the knight if he thinks her title is a good one (753). This draws attention to her title: “*La semble de Dames.*” What appears to be on the surface is something very different underneath: the duality is present in the poem’s title, but this is hidden until the end. The reading is recursive; the ending must be known to understand the beginning, and the duality of the title is a clue to the defiance of convention in the opening stanzas.

Ultimately, the labyrinth motif in AL is far more than simply a unique setting for a courtly love poem. The garden maze in two outer frames and the inner core of the dream-vision serves the message of the poem with its underlying connotation of duality. The image of the labyrinth for a medieval audience gives the poem its multilayered meanings; the garden maze of a *Hortus Conclusus* is a familiar setting in the tradition of courtly love, yet the maze is also associated with the Daedalian construction designed to imprison, or simply frustrate, the maze-walker. In his collection of homilies written to instruct priests, John Mirk explains that the use of images was to teach those unable to read the text: “There are many thousands of people that could not imagine in their heart how Christ was treated on the cross, but . . . they learn it from the sight of images and painting” (qtd. in Erbe 171). In *Quattro Sermones* (1483), the argument is given that

“‘Lewd men’ learn from images what they should worship and imitate, it says, just as clerks learn this from books.” The use of familiar images as allegory are more than just a method of imparting information to the audience; the images with their symbolism affect understanding on a subconscious level. Language is dependent on the image and only exists to serve the image. While language is linear, the depiction of the image in the poem creates a visual space, such as the AL narrator’s description of the labyrinth and her placement in it. The labyrinth provides the liminal space where the narrator undergoes a *catabasis*- she changes from one who is reluctant to speak into the author of the book. The narrator’s mental state is confused as she walks through the maze, but, eventually, she comes to a straight path leading into the first core in the poem: “So come I forth into a streyte passage” (47). The duality of the labyrinth suggests the dual nature of the narrator: calmly treading the maze “in certeynte,” while under the surface she has a troubled mind. After the chaotic experience in the maze, she discovers order in the straight passage. In the end, she declares that she is the author of the book, suggesting that she now possesses the vantage point of creator with an omniscient view of the maze. Through her performance of the narrative in the liminal space of the labyrinth, she experiences a shift in status to gain creative authority. The narrator plays the roles of both maze-treader and maze-viewer simultaneously as she articulates her experience in the poem’s frame and dream-vision core, as she discovers order in the disorder and clarity from the confusion. As the labyrinth is traversed by the power of human memory, so is the poem: the narrator’s dream is remembered, then spoken, and finally written down to be performed by the speaker and experienced by the audience.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion

In both Crete and northern Europe, the labyrinth's use was ritualistic. The Cretan labyrinth was used for sacrifice to appease the gods, while the cathedral labyrinths were used to commune with God. In both cases, the labyrinth functions as a sacred setting in which communal beliefs are acted out, and, ultimately, preserved. These beliefs are performed as a means to engage in the mystery or myth. This engagement, through ritual re-enactment, enables a remembrance of the past and transmission of beliefs to future generations. The physical labyrinth serves as a visual reference to ancient mythology, its use in Christian ritual symbolizes the path to salvation or perfect creation; in literature, the labyrinth is often used as a metaphor for an arduous journey, danger, or a disoriented mental state. The AL poet uses the labyrinth as a symbol of the narrator's confusion and dissatisfaction, as well as a metaphor for her descent into her dream vision. In AL, the labyrinth setting functions as a performance space in which the narrator participates in a ritual transformation to break societal conventions. This allows the narrator to express desires that are otherwise oppressed, and, more importantly, establish her narrative authority. The image of the labyrinth can be viewed as a sacred performance space, where transformation disrupts the status quo to establish a new order. For the Christian believer, the labyrinth is a site of renewal and validation of beliefs through spiritual journey and calendrical rites, while its inclusion in the AL poem signifies a ritual transformation of the narrator in mind and status. The labyrinth gives context to the ecclesiastic rituals and the poem. Both the Chartres labyrinth and the labyrinth setting of AL represent a metaphorical *catabasis* reminiscent of Theseus' literal journey into the

labyrinth to re-emerge victorious over the Minotaur (death) with renewed heroic status. These rituals express a shift in status within the communities they represent. In understanding the function of ritual at Chartres, one can better comprehend the role of the labyrinth in the shift of narrative authority in *AL*.

As Chartres Cathedral was an important pilgrimage site in the Middle Ages, the labyrinth was likely incorporated into the communal processions as a “buffer zone,” to use Kern’s words. In the tradition of ceremonial cleansing or purification, the procession walked the labyrinth, with its mythical connection to the River Meander, before approaching the holiest place in the cathedral, the altar. Through walking the labyrinth as a purification or penitential rite (as some followed the path on their knees), believers would have understood the ritual act of spiritual transformation they were undertaking; to approach the altar of grace, they must first be of a humble spirit, clean heart, and renewed mind. The water imagery of the labyrinth serves this part of the ritual, and the pilgrim’s journey through it, becomes a type of baptism or ritual cleansing. By exiting the labyrinth, the pilgrim completes the spiritual journey symbolic of traveling to the Heavenly Jerusalem, now fit to commune with God at the altar.

This ritual purification has forms and attributes that Victor Turner identifies (in his development of Arnold van Gennep’s *liminal phase*), as rites of passage, in which there are three phases: separation, margin (*limen*, signifying threshold in Latin), and aggregation. The passenger (van Gennep’s term) first separates from the group, passes through the liminal phase (usually a lowering state), and returns to the group in either the former state or, often, an elevated state. The passenger often gains a heightened status in relation to the status occupied before the ritual (94).

This theme of the liminal phase is reminiscent of *catabasis*. The cathedral labyrinth brings forth the ancient memory of Theseus' *catabasis* experience, making it a fitting symbol to represent the Christian pilgrimage. For the pilgrim, the ritual of walking the labyrinth is a *liminal* experience—an act in which the individual is separated from society or common life. Van Gennep calls this the “liminal phase” of *rites de passage*, which he defines as “rites which accompany every change of place, state (or status), social position, and age” (Turner 94). In this state, the pilgrim, or passenger, travels through the winding paths of the labyrinth that bear no resemblance to the literal ways of travel. Moving in the confined space of the labyrinth is tedious—the precise hairpin turns and circling rotations more closely resemble dance movements than traveling. This movement is specific to the labyrinth and non-existent in the pedestrian motion of daily life; perhaps it is this liminal phase Kern had in mind when he termed the cathedral labyrinth the “buffer zone” (128). The passenger in the liminal phase enters a “realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner 94). The labyrinth separates the world from the cathedral interior; the labyrinth space has little or no physical resemblance to the world outside or interior space of the cathedral. Thus, the ritual transforms: the walker separates from the outside world to enter the cathedral space, walks the labyrinth, and finally emerges to proceed toward the altar in a purified state.

More so than the spiritual journey of pilgrimage, the ball dances that occurred in and around the cathedral labyrinths of northern Europe, and likely at Chartres, have a

similarity to the *catabasis* myth with the idea of *communitas*.³⁸ Liminal rituals command a state of humility in opposition to the sacred, as ritual is about societal structure, such as rank or class. According to Victor Turner, through the ritual process the initiate exchanges one status for another:

Indeed every social position has some sacred characteristics. But this 'sacred' component is acquired by the incumbents of positions during the *rites de passage*, through which they changed positions. Something of the sacredness of that transient humility and modelessness goes over, and tempers the pride of the incumbent of a higher position or office. (97)

This characteristic of ritual can be observed in the labyrinth ball dances of the cathedrals. According to Lebeuf's account at Auxerre, the dean of the cathedral, or his representative, would receive the ball from the newest canon and begin the Easter antiphonal chant, *Victimae paschali laudes (Praises to the Easter Victim)*.³⁹ With the ball in his left hand, the dean would dance in time with the sequence (presumably in the center of the labyrinth), while the clergy would dance around the labyrinth with arms linked. As the dance continued, the dean would deliver and receive the ball alternately to and from each dancer as they moved into his view. The dance would close at the finish of the singing, and the group would proceed to the feast (Wright 139-40). Mead calls attention to Lebeuf's notes concerning his description, which include more detail. The dance occurred in the cathedral nave at "about one or two of the clock in the afternoon"

³⁸ Turner's concept, denoting intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with rituals. In *communitas*, people stand together "outside" society, and society is strengthened by this (169)

³⁹ Wright's translation (124).

(98-9). Lebeuf also noted that before the chant started, the dean would place his amice over his head and the ball rested on his chest, supported by his left hand. The dean “was probably in the middle of the ring clad in all his distinctive vestments and ornaments” (98-9). According to Wright, documents at Chartres describe the dance as Christ’s harrowing of Hell, in which the clergy would also shout at the dean, and he, in turn, would shout back (149). While it appears that the dancers are re-creating Christ’s *catabasis* into hell in accordance with the Christ-Theseus myth, it is unclear which members of the clergy represent Christ and which ones represent Satan. The dean in the center is repeatedly being attacked by the ball, and may represent Satan, but there is also the possibility that he represents Christ who is being attacked by a multitude of demons (represented by the dancers). In either case, this appears to be a humiliation ritual, or rite of passage, in which the dean (a higher rank than the clerics) places the amice over his head in humility. Maneuvering the ball in the left hand might also be difficult, and therefore humbling for the dean. In turn, if the dean represents Satan being continually attacked by Christ (the clergy’s constant throwing of the ball), this would also act as a humiliation, as the leader of the church is forced act out the character of Satan. In this ritual, several key liminal markers are present: putting on of clothing (amice), season and time (Easter at one or two o’clock), movement from one space to another (the ball throwing with the dance), and unusual place (labyrinth). In the liminal period, the passenger must undergo a change; perhaps the ball being caught continually by the dean (the authority figure outside the ritual space) places him in a passive state, while the clergy (subjects of the dean’s authority) move into an active state by throwing the ball at him. The ball signifies a transfer of power from one participant to another.

A key component of the liminal state, according to Turner, is that the bringing low, or humiliation, of a person of high rank, is a condition often associated with ritual powers and with the total community seen as undifferentiated. These are *rituals of status reversal* (167). The ball dance ritual functions as a liminal process with the group of clergymen as witnesses to the dean's transition, as the individuals in the group are seen as equals during the ritual- the dean willingly stoops to their level. The dance moves of the clerics connect to Theseus' victory dance on Ariadne's dance floor, in celebration of Christ (Theseus) saving humanity (the Athenian youth) from certain death (the Minotaur and the labyrinth). While the participants will return to their former state (authority and subjects) after the ritual concludes, they will gain the understanding that according to Christian doctrine, they are all made equal in Christ. For the dean, the lesson echoes the advice of Aquinas to remain humble in the quest for theological knowledge, lest he succumbs to the same fate of Icarus (*Metamorphoses* 8.183-235). For the Christian, the understanding that humanity is subject to God is central to the faith. Turner explains, "traces of the *passage* quality of the religious life remain in such formulations as, 'the Christian is a stranger to the world, a pilgrim, a traveler, with no place to rest his head.' Transition here was a permanent condition" (107). In this way, the ritual ball dance in the cathedral works toward the stabilization of the community and provides a restored sense of order necessary to a religious community, such as at Chartres.

The ritual space of the labyrinth in the AL poem also functions as a liminal space in which order is disrupted in an effort to upset the current power structure. The labyrinth setting provides the allusion to Theseus, establishing the scene for the narrator's *catabasis*. Several marks of ritual appear as early as the first line of the poem: a specific

time and turn of season (“In Septembre, at fallyng of the leef, / The fressh season was al to-gydre done.” (1-2)), a specific time (“abowte tweyne after none” (4)), a collection of witnesses (“There were ladyes walkyng, as was ther wone, / Four in nombre, as to my mynde doth falle, / And I the fift, symplest of alle” (5-7)). It should be noted that the narrator describes herself as the simplest woman of the group, identifying her as a humble and willing participant in the rite of passage, or initiation, about to occur.

The narrator proceeds to describe the action in the scene: four other “gentil wymmen” (8) are present, along with knights and squires. The labyrinth, or hedge-maze, setting is realized as the knight asks the narrator who she seeks (twice). Her reply signals her location of the “mase” (14). Present in the maze are more witnesses to the ritual, four other “gentil wymmen” and other knights and squires (8). At this point, the knight begins the ceremony with his questioning, much like the new canon’s ball toss to the dean begins the ball dance ritual. She remarks that he is “hasti” (28) in his manner of questioning, in other words, blunt. On top of this, he also mentions that she has turned pale. While turning pale is a sign of being in the presence of one’s beloved, according to the rules of courtly love, the knight’s mentioning this in the narrator’s presence would appear rude. In ritual, specifically van Gennep’s *rites de passage*, the passenger is put down, or humiliated, often by “speaking evil or harsh words against [the passenger]” (Turner 100). This could explain the knight’s unchivalrous behavior: the knight’s role in the ritual is to humiliate the narrator.

As the narrator tells her tale, the ritual begins. Throughout much of her tale, in both waking and dream states, she remains separated from the group. She mentions the other women walking in twos, while she travels the maze alone. She breaks farther away with

“a litel avauntage” (44) to the center of the maze, but her efforts cause her to succumb to exhaustion. In the liminal phase, the passenger is often put through a physical or mental test- a hazing of sorts. Reaching the center of the labyrinth may have been part of a test. Previously, she describes her companions’ difficulties with maneuvering through the maze; like the clergy of the ball dance, their status (mental) also shifts in the maze. They play an active role in the ritual, as the narrator shifts to a passive state. Here, she recounts her *catabasis* experience in the third frame of the poem (the dream vision (78-449)). She becomes completely separated from the group, then descends into the unconscious (passive) state of sleep to dream of being in the maze.

Her sleep begins the transformative shift in status, as her state changes from awake (active) to asleep (passive). The humiliation continues as she is led through the dream by Perseverance, and later, Diligence, where she is subjected to complete obedience to her guides. On the way to the court, the narrator asks to rest and to devoutly pray for Saint Julian (patron saint of hospitals) (224). Then she is led to a “hospital” (231) where she is commanded by Diligence to rest for a while. In the liminal phase, the passenger is often made to appear infirm and weak; the mention of the hospital fulfills this aspect of the ritual, while the prayer fulfills the requirement of reciting a memorized oath or creed. She is provided new clothing (the blue dress); often, the passenger in the liminal state will be stripped of all possessions and made to wear a uniform- the narrator’s blue dress will equalize her status with the rest of the group in the dream, as they will also be required to wear blue. The commands to rest and wear blue are just a few of the directions the narrator is given as she travels; in ritual, the passenger must obediently follow a series of detailed instructions.

The description the narrator gives of the council of Lady Loyalty's court is extensive and lengthy compared to the rest of the poem, as she describes each member and their attributes (260-371). In the ritual context, this is the drawn-out ceremony in which the passenger is presented to the council members. Often, the members already established in the power structure of the group must give their position title and job description as part of the ceremony, while at other times, the initiate must memorize and recite these titles and positions.

As she reaches the court of Lady Loyalty, she is reunited with the group (now dressed in blue, but she is still in the dream state). Here she is fully submerged in her *catabasis*, since the court is as far as she travels in the dream state. She is told that Lady Loyalty will inspect each woman's bill of complaint. This may symbolize a final judgement before passing through the initiation. Throughout the dream, the narrator has been completely obedient, which is required of the passenger, but when Lady Loyalty asks for her motto, she adamantly refuses. This can be explained as the passenger taking an oath of silence, just before the transformation is complete and the ritual finished. This silence represents the *tabula rasa* character of the passenger to make room for the newly acquired knowledge of the ritual. Finally, the narrator awakens from the dream to feel a splash of water on her face (baptism or purification) (736-7). Emerging from the *catabasis* ritual, her status has changed. She has transformed from one who was reluctant to tell her tale into the author of "this booke" (740).

The labyrinth, like liminality, represents a series of binary oppositions, such as order and chaos. The narrator's sleep (rest) in the middle of the labyrinth mirrors her waiting (rest) at the court. The labyrinth's center is the site of liminality, not unlike the

rosette center of Chartres, where one is purified before entering new and glorified state. By passing through the liminal phase, the narrator transitions from silence to speech, represented by the writing of her tale. More importantly, her status is elevated in her acquisition of narrative authority. To write the words down is a ritual in itself, as writing implies a commitment to the ideas expressed, just as words spoken in the course of the ritual take on grave significance.

While female authorship was not unheard of in the fifteenth century, it was rare. For the narrator (and possibly, the female author of AL) to accept her new position in the system of literary discourse, she must disrupt the status quo of literary patriarchy. Unlike the clergy at Chartres who revert back to their earthly positions after the ritual, the AL narrator ascends to an elevated state, where the rest of this society's members must shift their status in relation to her new status. This season of chaos will eventually settle into a new order. This is the law of the labyrinth-so artfully illustrated by Aquinas' two types of order: the order of individual objects and the order of those objects in relation to one another.

For the AL narrator, her *catabasis* exists in the dream vision; however, the initiation was real, if only in her mind. Dream visions function as a catalyst for *catabasis*. The dream world is a type of submersion into sleep or unconsciousness, where another realm or reality is present. As in *catabasis*, the dream-vision hero emerges with acquired knowledge. In, AL the narrator's emergence from her dream reaffirms her status as she returns with knowledge that qualifies her as the author of the book. This gives her narrative authority. Like the ball dance ritual teaches the virtue of humility in matters of faith, the dream vision (and the ritual played out there) teaches the narrator the

importance of humility as she ascends to literary authority. To participate in the literary discourse, one must join the ranks of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid- a task with a heavy burden of transmitting the past to the future. In *communitas*, structure is rooted in the past and extends to the future through language, law, and custom (Turner 113). Like the idea of the labyrinth, these concepts are continually filtered and passed down in the form of symbol, speech, and text.

The labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral and the labyrinth setting of AL function as sacred spaces where ritual is performed. In the ball dance ritual of the cathedral and the ritual performance of the AL narrator, their respective communities experience a shift in power, as the ritual passenger transforms through the *catabasis* experience. The result is a temporary disorder, eventually balancing into a new order. The labyrinth's dual nature of chaos and order perfectly illustrates these shifts. As this project continues to develop, an examination of English garden hedge mazes of the fifteenth century may provide useful information on the labyrinth's influence on medieval thought and culture. Its deep roots in ancient history and association with Greek myth, serve to establish the authority of Christian belief at Chartres and the narrative authority of the AL narrator.

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