

Is there a Sixth Sense in the Lady and the Unicorn Tapestries?

To Marvi

Woven of silk and wool, combining warmth and luster, the six Unicorn tapestries that were transferred to the Paris Cluny Museum from the moldy *château de Boussac* in the late XIXth century fascinate us by their beauty but also their mystery. Who designed them? Where were they executed? For what purpose? With what intention? We sense that they communicate an urgent but lost meaning, perhaps even a paradox related to desire. Why, for example, if the tapestries depict the five senses, does the protagonist in the tapestry depicting Taste taste nothing?

Scholars believe that the tapestries were commissioned in the late XVth century by a member of the Le Viste family, most likely by the successful magistrate Jean Le Viste, perhaps to mark his advent as head of the family in 1484 or perhaps to mark his appointment as President of the Court of Aids in 1489.¹ With regard to their content, a variety of hypotheses have been put forth. The standard view is that the tapestries depict the five senses, to which is added a sixth sense, possibly moral judgment, *liberum arbitrium*.² Elaborating on this interpretation, Michel Serres has argued that the sixth sense is the “internal sense” that marks the beginning of personal identity and language.³ Anna Nilsén, in turn, has argued that the theme of the five senses is combined with “the eternal human struggle between moral ideals (the unicorn) and bodily inclinations (the lion).” Nilsén thus denies that any sixth sense is depicted, interpreting the panel with the inscribed pavillion to introduce the theme of moral battle.⁴ The far-fetched interpretation that the tapestries depict the Virgin Mary likewise does away with the idea of a sixth sense,⁵ as does Kristina Gourlay’s interpretation that the tapestries depict a courtly romance and were commissioned as a wedding present.⁶ The most severe blow against the idea

¹See Alain Erlande-Brandebourg (Conservateur au Musée de Cluny) *La Dame à la Licorne* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1978).

²See A. F. Kendrick, “Quelques remarques sur les tapisseries de la Dame à la Licorne du Musée de Cluny,” *Actes du Congrès d’Histoire de l’Art*, III, Paris, 1924, p. 662.

³See Michel Serres, *Les Cinq Sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985), pp. 52–60.

⁴See Anna Nilsén, “The Lady with the Unicorn. On Earthly Desire and Spiritual Purity” in *Studies in Art History 16*, eds. Marja Terttu Knapas and Asa Ringbom (Gummerus Kirjapaino Jyväskylä, Finland, 1995) pp. 213–235.

⁵See Phyllis Ackerman, “The Lady and the Unicorn,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 66, No. 382 (Jan., 1935), pp. 35–36.

⁶See Kristina E. Gourlay, “La Dame À La Licorne: A Reinterpretation,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 139 (1997), pp. 47–72.

of a sixth sense, however, came with Marie-Elizabeth Bruel's compelling evidence that the tapestries represent, not the senses, but six courtly virtues drawn from the *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris.⁷ A problem with Bruel's otherwise solid argument, however, is that she dismisses the sumptuous night-blue pavillion inscribed with *A Mon Seul Désir* as a background element without special iconographic importance. Since the tapestries, she argues, were used not only to furnish a room of the Le Viste residence but also to adorn outside walls during special public festivities, the night-blue pavillion merely publicizes the high status of le Viste family.⁸ Bruel explains away the inscription on the pavillion as the beginning of a family motto that wraps around the tent, sufficiently well-known to XVth century viewers to be recognized.⁹

Is there really *no* spiritual dimension to the tapestries? Are the six scenes as wholly profane as Bruel insists? And is the hypothesis of a sixth sense thus finally put to rest? I want to suggest that the tapestries *start* with six courtly virtues from the *Roman de la Rose*, but then deliberately connect these virtues one by one to the five senses in order to transform the profane ethos of courtly love promoted by Guillaume de Lorris into a higher spiritual ethos closely inspired by the teaching of Jean Gerson.

Jean Gerson, who was made chancellor of the University of Paris in 1395, was not only the most prominent theologian in Paris in the first quarter of the 15th century, but was politically active in court circles where members of the Le Viste family occupied important positions. Like the Le Viste family, moreover, Gerson had close ties to Lyons, where he died in 1429, venerated locally as a saint. His younger brother, a Celestine monk in Lyons, tirelessly promoted his teaching. By the end of the XVth century, Gerson's Complete Works had undergone no less than five editions.¹⁰ Gerson's chief project, tied to his Conciliarism, was to make mystical theology accessible to laymen and laywomen, precisely in the hope of counteracting the profane influence of courtly authors.¹¹ Why might Jean Le Viste, a prosperous magistrate from an emerging *bourgeois* family located in both Lyons and Paris have commissioned a cycle of tapestries aimed at transforming the profane virtues of the *Roman de la Rose* into the spiritual virtues of Gerson's *Theologia mistica*? By associating himself and the Le Viste family with Gerson's project of reforming

⁷See Marie-Elizabeth Bruel, "Les tapisseries de *La Dame à la Licorne*, une représentation des vertus allégoriques du *Roman de la Rose*," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Decembre 2000, pp. 215-232.

⁸M.-E. Bruel, *Les Tapisseries de La Dame à la Licorne*," p. 217: "Le pavillon et ses tenants n'ont donc rien à voir avec la scène plaquée devant."

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰See Jean-Luc Solère, "Jean Gerson," *Dictionnaire du Moyen Âge*, eds. Claude Gauvard, Alain de Libera et Michel Zink (Paris: PUF, 2002), 762-764. Solère describes Gerson as "one of the most famous theologians and preachers of the end of the Middle Ages."

¹¹See Christine de Pisan, Jean Gerson, Jean de Montreuil, Gontier et Pierre Col, *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose*, éd. E. Hicques (Paris: Champion, 1977).

Christian mores, Jean le Viste may have wished to anchor his own worldly success in spiritual practices, forestalling criticism and envy, but also promoting a new religious humanism to replace the archaic values of the old feudal nobility.¹²

Taste

In the tapestry depicting Taste, the Lady reaches out to a chalice-like dish presented to her by her maidservant. Is she about to pick a sweet and taste it? A bird, perched on her left hand, clutches a piece of the white candy to its breast, no doubt a gift from the Lady. In the foreground, a monkey lifts a red berry to its mouth. Sitting on the folds of the Lady's dress, a lapdog wearing a jewelled collar looks up at her eagerly, hoping to receive a treat. So far, so courtly: the lap dog is a gift from the suitor to his Lady, symbol of fidelity, and the elegant parrot is a symbol of the suitor himself. The *verdure*, in turn, with its *mille fleurs* and exotic fauna, represents the pleasure garden where the courtly virtues are found.¹³ The lion, however, watches the Lady greedily, its jaws open, its tongue voracious. The courtly garden (*Deduit's* orchard) is subtly disrupted by the hint of a wilder, less innocent Nature. Animal creation is depicted as vibrant with appetite, either prone to gratify itself impulsively (the monkey) or to seek gratification from an external source, more or less ruthlessly.

In sharp contrast to the lion, the unicorn addresses the viewer directly with its gaze, as though welcoming an outside witness. A witness to what? The Lady is frozen in a suspended gesture. The choice to taste or not to taste, to give or not to give, is hers. The Spirit blows elegantly in her veil, marking her as an allegory of the virtue of *Franchise*, which is to say “nobility of character.” *Franchise* is the distinctive hallmark of free persons, as opposed to *vilenie*, baseness, which is associated with serfs (*vilains*).¹⁴

What possible connection is there between *Franchise* and the sensory faculty of Taste? By preparing herself to taste, or not, *Franchise* discovers that nobility of character stems precisely from the power to abstain – the power to interrupt the whole spontaneity of material appetite through the exercise of free agency. The maidservant inflects her knee in recognition of the soul's spiritual dignity. Roses bloom on the trellis behind *Franchise*, marking the place where she stands as a *place franche*, a place of rational autonomy within the cosmic island – an “enclosed garden” where the soul has burst upon the idea of its freedom. Taste, which requires a deliberate gesture to insert a foreign substance into the mouth, initiates the soul into its power of free volition – the power to regulate desire,

¹²On Gerson's project of cultivating lay piety, see Dorothy Catherine Brown, *Pastor and Laity in the Theology of Jean Gerson* (Cambridge, UK.: Cambridge U. Press, 1987).

¹³See *Le Roman de la Rose par Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meung*, ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris, 1920), II, p. 31, line 590, to p. 38, line 726.

¹⁴M.-E. Bruel identified *Franchise* based on two chief elements, namely the Lady's dress (“souquenille”) and floating veil. See “Les Tapisseries de *La Dame à La Licorne*,” 219–221.

to abstain from devouring, and thus the capacity to act nobly, freely, rather than basely and under compulsion. The courtly virtue of *Franchise* thus implies the higher and more fundamental spiritual virtue of *Liberum Arbitrium*, standing its ground mid-way between two opposing forces: natural appetite, symbolized by the lion's predatory teeth, tongue, and tempestuous mantle, and pure reason, symbolized by the unicorn's ivory body and billowing mantle, ready to take flight. *Franchise*, transformed by self-awareness into moral freedom, will have to learn to discern what to welcome, what to reject, what to give, what to withhold. How?

Hearing.

The tapestry depicting the courtly virtue of *Liesse* (Joy, Mirth) associates Joy with Hearing. Why is *Liesse* immobilized, attentive to her musical instrument, rather than dancing the *carole*, as she does in the *Roman de la Rose*? The soul must rise above what is given passively to natural sense and learn to grasp "in a more abstract manner the rules of arts and sciences"—or so at least Jean Gerson argued, convinced that the art of music, above all other arts, promotes sublimation.¹⁵ *Liesse* must focus her attention on both producing and hearing the music of the spheres – the divine *logos* that pervades creation but remains inaudible until human artistry labors to intervene.

In discussing contemplative theology, Jean Gerson explains that *Meditatio* and music are analogous. Both meditation and music strive to "regulate and calm bestial appetites" by developing a science of limits, which brings raw impulses, sounds, colors and gestures under the rule of rational composition.¹⁶ According to Gerson, Orpheus represents the power of Meditation. Orpheus charms brute instincts with his lyre and strives, by means of music, to rescue the intellect (Eurydice) from the captivating underworld of profane sensualism.¹⁷ Eurydice, in turn, is "the faculty of intellect that is given to human beings for the purpose of contemplating higher things."¹⁸ Without Orpheus's lyre calling it to rational joy, the intellect would wander forever among profane pleasures.

The focus of the tapestry depicting Hearing is *Liesse*'s marvelous concentration, which spreads out to the garden and its inhabitants. Fox and hound refrain from tormenting a nearby rabbit. The lion is appeased, its jaws closed, its eyes bewildered by an unfamiliar experience. The unicorn is bathed in music as though in baptismal waves. The Lady's *harmonium*, significantly, serves now as a means to connect, even to reconcile, our two

¹⁵See Joyce L. Irwin, "The Mystical Music of Jean Gerson," *Early Music History*, Vol. 1 (1981), pp. 187–201; and Jean Gerson, *Sur la Théologie mystique*, ed. Marc Vial (Paris: Vrin, 2008) p. 140: "intelligentes abstractius regulas artium et scientiarum."

¹⁶See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 122.

¹⁷Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 122.

¹⁸*Ibid*: "Accomodatius Euridicem accipiamus vim intellectualem datam homini ad considerationem supernorum."

warring opposites, lion and unicorn, telluric energy and abstract purity, appetite and reason, matter and spirit. *Liesse*, transformed into Gersonian *Meditatio*, uplifts all of creation. The maidservant assists *Meditatio* by taking charge of the mechanical aspects of the instrument – perhaps alluding to philosophy’s role as helpmate to theology. By extension, *Liesse*, profane joy, assists *Meditatio* by imbuing rational effort with a solemn but deep joy.

Sight.

The mind is now sufficiently pure to *see*. Speculative theology, Gerson explains, ascends through three consecutive steps. It starts with rational self-discovery (*cogitatio*), develops through the effort of focused meditation (*meditatio*) and culminates in contemplation (*contemplatio*).¹⁹ Symbolically, the Lady is seated, hosting the unicorn on her lap and holding a mirror up to it. At a first level, she represents *Oiseuse*, Idleness, who invites the poet into the Pleasure Garden. But our Lady is *Oiseuse* of a more spiritual sort than the courtly figure of the *Roman de la Rose* and will usher the soul into a higher garden. Contemplation, Gerson explains, is a “high mountain” where the intellect, soaring above the earthly senses, sees all things in perspective.²⁰ No longer in need of discursive reason (the maidservant), the soul recovers its perfect sight. The unicorn contentedly rests its front legs on the Lady’s lap and smiles at its own reflection in the Lady’s mirror, symbol of the intellect’s purity but also of its immediate reflexivity.²¹

Contemplation thus achieves a first type of hospitality. The intellect is host: Truth is guest, begging to enter. By means of pure intelligence, the intellect immediately intuits first axioms and thus the seeds of science. Why, then, is *Oiseuse*, transformed into *Contemplatio*, forlorn? The pure intellect sees itself in her mirror, but she herself cannot see it, as though robbed of her own insight. What is lured “optically” into the intellect’s hospitality is only an intentional object, the *idea* of God, the *image* of God, not God. *Contemplatio* recognizes the ultimate vanity of her speculative effort, the futility of a purely intellectual cognition. Her achievement is real – she sees not with the fleshly eye but with the mind’s timeless eye – but her grasp of first truths leaves her sterile, separate, alone with *simulacra*. According to Gerson, the chief benefit of contemplative theology is to disclose that the mind’s “capture” of pure Truth leaves the soul infinitely distant from God. The sterility of science reveals God’s absence. *Voluptas*, happiness, is not

¹⁹See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 128.

²⁰Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 128; “Pro cuius manuductione palpabili ymaginemur, conformiter ad divinum Augustinum in suo *De Trinitate*, quod sit aliquis supra montem excelsum valde ad cuius cacumen neque venti neque nubes attingant, sicut de Olympo narrat Aristotiles.” (“Let us imagine, in order to guide ourselves palpably, someone situated in a very high mountain, where neither winds nor clouds reach, as in the case of Olympus according to Aristotle.”)

²¹For the mirror as a symbol of contemplation, see Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 108.

in *Contemplatio's* garden. Contemplating Truth in the mirror of pure intelligence leaves the soul disconsolate. From now on, the soul will set knowledge aside and turn to the “irrational wisdom and folly” of the heart.²²

The perfume of flowers.

The three remaining tapestries outline, symmetrically, the three main steps of mystical theology. Mystical theology starts with amorous desire, develops through mortification and culminates in ecstatic love.²³ Once again, we will see that three courtly virtues are transformed into three spiritual virtues. According to Gerson, while speculative theology depends on the intellect and seeks Truth, mystical theology depends on the affect and seeks to know God experientially. Mystical theology, Gerson says, is as superior to speculative theology as the will is superior to the intellect and as Charity is superior to Faith.²⁴ And although mystical theology is higher than speculative theology and provides the supreme and most perfect knowledge of God, mystical theology is not the exclusive prerogative of monks and *doctores* but is accessible to all equally, calling laymen and women to perfection.²⁵

The tapestry that depicts the courtly virtue of *Biauté* associates beauty, not simply with flowers as in the *Roman de la Rose*, but with the *perfume* of flowers and with the sense of Smell. To the XVth century viewer, perfume symbolized what is made volatile and more intense by heat, radiating outward as a spiritualized substance. As Gerson explains, as long as the soul remains contained in itself, confined by the intellect to its cognitions, the soul remains cold, isolated, sterile. But when celestial rays act on it, love is kindled, and the soul starts to jubilate and exult.²⁶ Alchemically speaking, love “volatilizes” the soul. Through the impulse of love, the soul leaves itself and expands outward, “as though dancing and fluttering.”²⁷ To explain the effects of amorous desire, Gerson appeals to the physiological effects of sensory delight: the faculty of sense “abandons itself to a pleasant sensation and strives to find the desired object in order to melt into it, transport itself

²²See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 148: “Theologia mistica est irrationalis et amens, et slutla sapientia.”

²³See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 140–3.

²⁴See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 144: “perfectior quam theologia symbolica, sicut dilectio perfectior est cognitione, et voluntas intellectu, et caritas fide.”

²⁵See Jean Gerson, *Sur la Théologie mystique*, p. 157: “Quoniam theologia mistica, licet sit suprema atque perfectissima notita, ipsa tamen potest haberi a quolibet fidei, etiam si sit muliericula vel ydiota.”

²⁶See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 152: “Sic mens nondum amore calescens intra seipsam se continet, sed spiritu fervoris amore concepto, supergreditur quodammodo smetipsam, quasi extra se saltitans atque volitans.” (“Thus when the soul is not yet heated by love, it remains contained in itself; but when the spirit of fervor is born from love, the soul exceeds itself, as it were, as though dancing and fluttering outside of itself.”)

²⁷See *Ibid.*: “saltitans atque volens.”

to it, unite with it, penetrate inside it.”²⁸ In the special case of perfume, there is no material object to terminate sensorial desire, since perfume exists precisely as emanation. Perfume thus symbolizes amorous desire that cannot quench itself by its own effort but must receive gratification as a free gift.

In the *Roman de la Rose*, Beauty weaves garments of flowers for her special friend, Love. By associating *Biauté* with the perfume that emanates from flowers, the tapestry implies that the soul’s kindled capacity to delight in the invisible radiance of God’s handiwork makes it, in turn, *delightful* to God. As Gerson puts it, “mystical theology is the soul’s expansion towards God through amorous desire.”²⁹ Just as perfume is a flower’s *quintessence*, so the soul’s amorous desire is metaphorically the soul’s perfume, expanding upward to God like incense. While a monkey sitting on a bare wood bench vainly sniffs a stolen flower, *Biauté* no longer desires courtly love but Love Eternal, symbolized by the crown she composes – a discrete homage to the weavers of *mille fleurs* who have made her appear by desiring desire, anonymous lovers of paradise.

Touch

If perfume symbolizes the soul’s amorous desire and outward expansion towards God, spiritual Touch is the mystical sense *par excellence*, reached after a long journey of spiritual penance. The Lady, crowned with a royal diadem and dressed in a dark robe, represents *Richesse*. As Bruel remarks, *Richesse* wears a large *escarboucle*, which shines in the night, and her dress is adorned with precious stones reputed to have healing properties, known as *épreuves*, meaning “trials.”³⁰ In courtly terms, *Richesse* signifies that courtly love is the heart’s cure and the heart’s royal treasure, compared to which everything else is dross. Analogously, but at a higher level, spiritual *Richesse* signifies that love of God is the heart’s royal treasure, compared to which everything else is dross.³¹ Spiritual *Richesse* thus coincides with the healing power of contrition, beyond amorous desire, and is none other than perfect Mortification. Mortification not only crowns but *annoints* the soul, abolishing the distance between earth and heaven. Through mortification of the senses, Gerson argues, love that unites the soul with God becomes accessible to the least among the faithful.³²

²⁸ Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 150: “Hoc modo sensualitas aliquando se quasi capiens et se deserens, tota nititur in rem desideratam se effundere, se transferre, se unire, ymmo illam penitus quasi introrsus penetrare.”

²⁹ Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 146; “Theologia mistica est extensio animi in Deum, per amoris desiderium.”

³⁰ See M.-E. Bruel, “Les tapisseries de la Dame à la Licorne, pp. 221–222.

³¹ See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 210: “Quietatur anima in Deo atque stabilitur, possidens in eo omnia ceteraque contempens atque parvipendens.”

³² Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 158: “Simplices, qui quidem fidem habent, possunt ex ea

Spiritual *Richesse* stands very straight, very vigilant, fixed and transfixed, “hierarchical.” In the background, brute creation is bridled, chained and shackled. A triple *axis mundi* now connects time and eternity, bridging worlds. The lion’s energetic courage is no longer needed: the soul is healed, victorious over earthly touch. Spiritual *Richesse* firmly grasps the Le Viste standard that grows out of the island like a tree and with the other delicately takes hold of the Unicorn’s horn – symbolic of the purity that now protects the soul against the poison of profane wealth. The magic amulet of the horn mysteriously touches the Lady’s hand back, communicating its power but also signifying that the Le Viste family prospers only through God’s grace “which touches the soul.” The unicorn’s gaze is fixed affectionately on Lady Mortification, who gazes beyond the confines of space, to a point at infinity. Mystical theology, Gerson explains, is “an upward motion, an uplifting that guides the soul to God through a fervent and pure love.”³³ Mystical theology “guides us beyond the troubled sea of sensory desires and sets us on the firm shore of eternity, where we are stabilized forever in God.”³⁴ In XVth century alchemy, the long-awaited moment of “fixation,” when spirit and matter are permanently united, heralds the final metamorphosis, the point of no return and the imminent emergence of the philosopher’s stone.

The soul’s sixth sense.

The sixth panel, denominated by the inscription *À Mon Seul Désir*, depicts, as Bruel argues, the courtly virtue of *Largesse* (Liberality). Since, however, the five previous courtly virtues have each been explicitly coupled with a sense faculty in order to be spiritualized, might *Largesse* not lead us to a Sixth Sense? To start, the Lady is not arbitrarily “plastered” in front of the magnificent night-blue pavillion, as Bruel suggests, but mysteriously poised to enter it. Lion and unicorn now cooperate to hold the folds of the pavillion open. The pavillion streams with mysterious gold symbols, which have been variously interpreted: are they gold tears (alluding to the Virgin)? Or tongues of fire (referring to language)? Are they meant to evoke Danae’s gold rain (alluding to marriage)? Do they suggest *synderesis*, the scintilla of divine love that shines in the darkness of postlapsarian matter? Or do they symbolize the alchemist’s *potable gold*, itself symbolic of heavenly manna?

The pavillion carves out an inner space within the island, inspiring Michel Serres to interpret it as suggesting a sixth “internal” sense. The Lady, however, hardly appears to

consurgere ad unitivum amorem cum Deo. Quomodo sic? Nempe per fortem contritionem mortificativam sensualitatis.”

³³Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 146; “Theologia mistica est motio anagogica, hoc est sursum ductiva in Deum, per amorem fervidum et purum.”

³⁴Jean Gerson, *Théologie mystique*, 168; “Per theologiam mysticam sumus in Deo, hoc est in eo stabilimur et a mari turbido sensualium desiderorium ad litus solidum eternitatis adducitur.

be plunged in regret, as Serres's interpretation requires. Moreover, if she regrets giving away her jewels, how is she a figure of *Largesse*? In the courtly ethos of the *Roman de la Rose*, Liberality is the opposite of avarice. Liberality is the distinctive hallmark of courtly love since, as the French adage says, *Qui aime ne compte pas*. Courtly lovers give one another "everything," they "exchange hearts." Courtly *Largesse* thus mysteriously hints at a more absolute and final *gift of self*.

Our Lady does not seem to be giving her necklace away so much as discarding it. Her gesture of *self-divestiture* transforms courtly Liberality into the mystical virtue of *Pur Amour* – pure love that seeks no reward. Gerson explains that, unlike contemplative theology, which leaves the soul unfulfilled, mystical theology "ravishes and satisfies." Mystical theology is "an experiential knowledge of God through the embrace of unitive love."³⁵ Pure love, he explains further, "suffices to itself and seeks nothing except to love:" *nec aliud preter amare querit*.³⁶ As a figure of *Pur Amour* on the threshold of ecstasy, our Lady represents a paradox: her sole desire is to transcend desire that is hers. How can she *will* not to will? Thus she symbolically discards her necklace, symbolic of the self-volition that has become as superfluous and burdensome to her as earlier her intellect. Both the Lady and her maidservant are now dressed in red, the color of the perfect Charity. *Pur Amour* seeks nothing and has nothing of its own with which to seek.

In order to help us picture the ecstatic union that brings mystical theology to its culmination, Gerson, like earlier teachers, evokes alchemy. Just as fire separates what is spiritual from gross matter, God's "vivifying" love preserves whatever in us is spiritual and divine, leaving foreign substances and impediments behind.³⁷ The soul, "thus assimilated to God and qualitatively transformed by love, in turn transforms the body and gives it its own spiritual properties." Thus *the body's own properties are abandoned or made inoperative*.³⁸ Made *weightless* by love and *selfless* by grace, the soul begins to recover its ethereal body and spiritual senses.

What, then, is the Sixth sense? Is it *synderesis*, which, in Augustine's words, cited by Gerson, is the soul's weight, *pondus meum amor meus*?³⁹ In numerous passages, Gerson identifies the soul's amorous desire, contrition and then unitive love with the soul's highest sense, *synderesis*.⁴⁰ But if *synderesis* is the soul's inclination to seek God and thus the soul's sense of its own exile, *synderesis* must in some sense vanish, or be transformed, when

³⁵ See Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 146.

³⁶ Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 180.

³⁷ Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, 202–205.

³⁸ Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 204. Emphasis added.

³⁹ See Marc Vial, "Théologie mystique et synderèse chez Jean Gerson," in *Vers la Contemplation*, ed. Christian Trottman (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007).

⁴⁰ See Marc Vial, "Théologie mystique et synderèse chez Jean Gerson," in Christian Trottman ed., *Vers la Contemplation* (Paris: Champion, 2007) pp. 215–232, especially pp. 217–225.

the ecstatic soul finds its rest in God's embrace. When the soul is purified, illuminated and tested, Gerson explains, "nothing prevents it from being transported by love to the One who is wholly desirable and lovable – *totaliter desiderabilem et totum amabilem*." When the soul is conjoined and united with God, Gerson pursues, "it embraces its supreme Good, its center, its destination and perfection. What else could it possibly need? What else could it desire?"⁴¹

The Lady stands poised to enter into a "luminous darkness," which already frames her face like a halo. Her gaze is focussed nowhere in this world. Stripped of her own self-will, her throat bare, *Pur Amour* has no resources left of her own and now depends wholly on God's hospitality. According to Gerson, ecstatic love is perfect prayer, which raises the soul "beyond desire" (*supra desiderium*).⁴² Perfect prayer "finds all that it seeks." When perfect prayer "knocks at the door, the door opens." Perfect prayer cannot be selfish since self-volition is discarded and tirelessly comes to the aid of selves in need, "feeding not just one or two individuals but the whole mystical body with a maternal benevolence." And *like a beggar who is always supremely welcome*, perfect prayer is never refused but obtains spiritual consolations inexhaustibly for all of creation.⁴³ The sixth sense is thus the sense that emerges beyond *synderesis*, in the radical selflessness of ecstatic prayer, namely the sense that, for God, "all things are possible."⁴⁴

Back in the garden, the lapdog stares grimly at the viewer, perched on a silk cushion that hides a plain wood bench. Its jewelled collar is gone. Michel Serres is right that Regret is not absent from the scene, but it is the lapdog's regret that haunts the pleasure garden, not *Pur Amour's*, who has discarded all possibility of regret along with self-volition. What have you done, the lapdog asks reproachfully, with courtly love? Amidst the *mille fleurs*, the birds of paradise, the trees, the rich brocades, the fire of the lion, the radiance of the unicorn, the lapdog is now a figure of the soul's exile, stuck with its body, its hope of reward, its inadequate fidelity and its five narrow senses. Profane virtues flatter us, but they pass through us, like a dream, leaving no trace – until the soul is moved to discover the country that will be shown to it. Where it will be a beggar, a guest, receiving everything. To Jean le Viste and to the Master of the Cluny cycle, *I myself* am the unwanted stranger, the lapdog of illusions, whom God has little reason to love or welcome.

⁴¹See Jean Gerson, *Theology mystique*, 206: *quid ergo aliud ipsa requireret, aut ad quid aliud ulterius inhiaret?*

⁴²Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 212.

⁴³Jean Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*, p. 219.

⁴⁴Thus Jean Gerson, in his last writings, sought to supersede *synderesis* with the idea that ecstatic love involves the whole essence of the soul, lifted by grace. See Marc Vial, "Théologie mystique et Synderèse chez Jean Geerson," pp. 229–232.