

“Beauty That Must Die” Some of the most poignant poetry of the Middle Ages results from a combination of two extreme attitudes toward life, expressing at once appreciation for the beauty of the world and acknowledgment that this beauty is so transitory that, viewed against the background of eternity, it is scarcely more than an illusion. In poetry of this sort, an important part is often played by the *ubi sunt* device, which takes its name from the first two words of the Latin sentence, *Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt?* (“Where are they who before us were?”). In asking the question the poet evokes for a moment the splendor of life, symbolized by famous persons of the past, and then, by his inevitably grim answer, condemns it to death. The tone of such poems will vary from the austere monitory to the hauntingly sad, depending upon how the poet describes the “they” of the question, and how he phrases his answer: whether he sides with death or with life or tries to balance delicately between them.

[Ubi Sunt Qui ante Nos Fuerunt?]

Where beeth they biforen us weren,
 Houndes ledden and hawkes beren,^o bore
 And hadden feeld and wode?
 The riche ladies in hir bowr,
 5 That wereden ^o gold in hir tressour,^o wore / hair
 With hir brighte rode,^o faces

Eten and drunken and maden hem glad;
 Hir lif was al with gamen ylad;¹
 Men kneeleden hem biforen:
 10 They beren hem wel swithe hye.²
 And in a twinkling of an ye
 Hir soules weren forloren.

FRANÇOIS VILLON: The Ballad of Dead Ladies³

Tell me now in what hidden way is
 Lady Flora the lovely Roman?⁴
 Where's Hipparchia, and where is Thaïs,⁵
 Neither of them the fairer woman?
 5 Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
 Only heard on river and mere—
 She whose beauty was more than human?⁶ . . .
 But where are the snows of yesteryear?

1. With pleasure led.

2. Very proudly.

3. Villon (b. 1431), a French poet and vagabond, regarded as the first and one of the greatest of French lyricists. This translation of his *Ballade du Temps Jadis* is by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

4. Probably the Roman goddess of flowers and spring, later thought of as a wealthy and beautiful woman.

5. Hipparchia was the wife of Crates, Greek Cynic philosopher (3rd century B.C.). Thaïs is either the courtesan who accompanied Alexander the Great on his Asian expedition or the Egyptian courtesan who became a saint.

6. Echo was the nymph who pined away for Narcissus until nothing was left of her except her voice.

Where's Héloïse, the learned nun,
 10 For whose sake Abeillard, I ween,
 Lost manhood and put priesthood on?⁷
 (From Love he won such dule and teen!)
 And where, I pray you, is the queen⁸
 Who willed that Buridan should steer
 15 Sewed in a sack's mouth down the Seine? . . .
 But where are the snows of yesteryear?

White Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies,
 With a voice like any mermaidén⁹—
 Bertha Broadfoot, Beatrice, Alice,
 20 And Ermengarde, the lady of Maine¹—
 And that good Joan whom Englishmen
 At Rouen doomed and burned her there²—
 Mother of God, where are they then? . . .
 But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Nay, never ask this week, fair lord,
 Where they are gone, nor yet this year,
 Except with this for an overword—
 "But where are the snows of yesteryear?"

7. Héloïse fell in love with her teacher, Pierre Abeillard (1079–1142), scholastic philosopher and theologian; they were secretly married in order not to hinder Abelard's advancement in the church. Héloïse's uncle, in revenge, had Abelard emasculated in order to make him canonically incapable of ecclesiastical preferment. Abelard became a monk and Héloïse a nun. "Dule and teen": grief and pain.

8. Marguerite de Bourgogne, heroine of the legend of the Tour de Nesle, according to which she

had her numerous lovers killed and thrown into the Seine; Jean Buridan, rector of the University of Paris, escaped.

9. Perhaps Blanche of Castille, mother of Louis IX of France (1226–70).

1. Names of famous medieval ladies; Bertha Broadfoot was mother of Charlemagne, king of the Franks and emperor of the West (742–814).

2. Joan of Arc; she saved France from conquest but was later imprisoned and burned at the stake for heresy and witchcraft in 1431.