Forms and Celestial Motion in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*

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THE MOVEMENTS OF THE STARS AND PLANETS MIGHT BE PREDICTable, but Troilus cannot help watching them anyway:

> He stood the brighte moone to byholde,
> And al his sorwe he to the moone tolde,
> And seyde, "Ywis, whan thow art horned newe,
> I shal be glad, if al the world be trewe!"
> (Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* 5.648–51)

> He stood watching the bright moon
> And told the moon all of his sorrow
> And said, "Indeed, when you are newly horned,
> I will be happy, if this world is trustworthy."[1]

The fifth book of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* depicts Troilus nervously watching the clock. Instead of simply trusting the moon to wane and wax over the ten days he waits for Criseyde to return to Troy, Troilus watches it change, talking to it, using its changing phases to organize his emotions. He nervously waits for the moment when it begins to wax again. Troilus cannot speed the moon up, so what does he gain by watching it so closely? This question frames another: What do we gain by paying close attention to literary texts?

The past decade of criticism has seen repeated calls for a return to sustained close reading and a renewed attention to form. At the same time, many critics have also developed accounts of form according to which the formal features of a poem are, by definition, not subject to the perspective of the individual reader. For example, Frances Ferguson explains that the octave of a sonnet "could be said to be formally achieved, in that it would not disappear simply because you were not attending to it" (234), assigning an ontological

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consistency to literary forms that also underpins Caroline Levine's recent work. Levine observes that "configurations and arrangements organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context or audience" (13). And yet, at the same time, attention itself remains a central tenet of many calls for renewed discussion of form. Marjorie Levinson finds that much new formalist criticism shares the desire to "reinstate close reading . . . as the opening move, preliminary to any kind of critical consideration" (560).[2] This combined emphasis on the need to attend to form and on form's indifference to the individual observer might have an analogue in Troilus's helpless gaze. Troilus observes the monthly phases of the moon in painstaking detail, describing its motion—even taking pleasure in it—but asserting no power over it.

Troilus cannot change the way the moon moves, but his gaze does affect the way that motion seems to him. Though the moon's motion is cyclical, Troilus does not experience it as a cycle. Rather, his anticipation waxes as the moon wanes so that time itself seems distorted into a new arrangement. The days become so long that Troilus fears that "the sonnes sone, Pheton, be on lyve, / And that his fader carte amys he dryve" ("the Sun's son, Phaeton, is alive / And is driving his father's chariot awry" [5.664–65]). When the moon finally appears again, it brings this drawn-out period to a painful conclusion. Troilus's lunar countdown, which treats the moon's changing phases as a progression toward a specific moment, might itself satisfy Levine's definition of form: "an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping" (3). Insofar as celestial motion can be said to have this form, it only has it as Troilus watches it. Closely observing a subset of the moon's phases but neglecting the larger, cyclical patterns of lunar motion, Troilus perceives a form in the cosmos different from that which governs the movements of the spheres. He blames Phaeton for this, but Troilus is actually the one giving an unnatural form to celestial cycles. And, unlike Phaeton, Troilus comes by this form without moving a single star. Rather, his close observation of the sky produces disorder—or, rather, an illusion of a different order—within the regular motion of the spheres.

The forms perceived in celestial events may offer an analogue for forms perceived in literary works. As Samuel Otter observes, we might usefully describe literary form, not in the abstract, but rather as it is accessed through reading:[3]

> "Form" . . . opens, rather than closes, questions about the relations of parts to wholes and inside to outside. As Raymond Williams observes in *Keywords*, "form" spans "the whole range from the external and superficial to the inherent and determining." To attend to form, an object of sense and of thought, is to press those relations and to assess the circumstances of their perception. (120)

If the "inherent and determining" form of the sun and moon's motion is nothing other than the regular course of the celestial spheres, Troilus's observation of the sun and moon reflects their appearance as objects of "sense and of thought." Chaucer's astronomical poetry—specifically, the short, poetic account of a planetary conjunction known as *The Complaint of Mars*—can further a critical understanding of forms that emerge at the intersection of close observation and ontological necessity.[4] For Chaucer, the stars and planets move according to a single, overarching plan. They enact, within time, an eternal order that can be reduced to mathematical principles. But close observation transforms this one, eternal form into many temporary forms. Observation enables the recognition of temporary patterns that seem to emerge within celestial motion as it unfolds in time. A similar tension between the contingent, temporary perception of patternings and the presence of inherent, ontologically stable forms emerges in the process of reading *Mars*.

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A focus on perception allows for an expanded account of how forms travel between different material contexts. Understood purely as abstract shapes or arrangements, the forms *Mars* identifies in celestial motion have much in common with the ontologically stable forms that Ferguson and Levine describe. Ferguson, for instance, describes the marriage plot of Jane Austen's *Emma* as "formal to an extraordinary new degree," constituting a fully developed "formation" that does not rely on any one text for its articulation. Instead, the marriage plot helps define the actions and attitudes available to the characters in the novel (239–40). In *Mars*, the plot of an interrupted affair has a similar stability. It is so conventional an arrangement of action that it can travel between contexts, shaping the way that the very planets seem to move. But how exactly does this migration take place? Levine explains that "forms travel across time and space in and through situated material objects" (10). *Mars* shows how it might be possible to expand this formulation. Forms may, sometimes, traverse time and space in and through the act of perceiving. Existing forms may gain the potential to exhibit new arrangements based on how they seem from within time. In *Mars*, the form of the interrupted affair inheres in celestial motion only because of how that motion appears to an observer.

Understanding more about the relation between form and perception might enhance our understanding of the affordances of form. As Levine explains, particular forms have certain affordances—that is, "potential," or "latent," "uses or actions" (6). The affordances of a given thing are determined not only by its form but also by its material (9). Perceived forms offer their own specific affordances. Since these forms exist only in the time that they are observed, they lack the stability that makes the forms Levine describes such powerful sources of social control and organization. Instead, they carry an innate sense of their own fragility. Part of the pathos of Troilus's countdown to the waxing moon is that the sense of an ending the moon offers lasts only as long the wait itself. When Criseyde fails to return to Troy, the long-awaited deadline dissolves into nothing but the regular, unmarked passage of time. In *Mars*, similarly, perceived forms convey the sense of loss that comes when illusions give way to reality.

The Complaint of Mars finds a familiar story in an unlikely place. The poem describes an affair between Mars and Venus interrupted by the sun. Though the poem's protagonists think and act like (humanized) gods, its details indicate that it also refers to the movements of the planets Mars and Venus. Between February and April 1385, Mars and Venus moved into conjunction in the sign of Taurus. Just as they were parting, the sun entered Taurus.[5] Venus, the faster planet, soon left the sign, leaving Mars alone with the sun. *Mars* frames its account of this motion through a series of inset quotations: a nameless narrator quotes a bird, who in turn quotes Mars. The bird, who delivers the poem's main narrative, describes these celestial events as a tryst interrupted by a light-bearing porter.[6] It then supplies Mars's subsequent complaint, delivered in the planet's first-person voice, which interrogates the cause of his own pain and asks for compassion. Although plot is clearly not the same as form, I would suggest that here it may be possible to think about this celestial series of events, reflecting a familiar, well-trod narrative in which adulterous lovers flee daybreak, as a form. This arrangement of material can be found in the heavens much as a constellation or a shape in the clouds can be found: by recognizing a familiar pattern within a much larger, more complex set of events.

Treating the love plot as a form helps explain the extent to which it constitutes its own distinct arrangement of celestial motion, with boundaries that do not correspond with any innate cosmic principle. As the avian narrator

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explains, the action the poem describes has a double origin, beginning "whilom the thridde hevenes lord above, / As wel by hevenysh revolucioun / As by desert, hath wonne Venus his love" ("when the third heaven's lord on high, / Both by celestial revolution / And by merit, has won Venus, his love" [lines 29–31]). Mars's "desert" implies that the conjunction comes as a reward earned through amorous service, but "hevenysh revolucioun" suggests just the opposite: a tryst brought about by the predetermined, mechanical motion of the spheres (Patterson, "Writing" 64; Van Dyke). The difference between these two accounts extends to more than simply a question of Mars's and Venus's agency. The "whilom" with which the celestial action might be said to begin depends on what the observer recognizes in the sky: an interrupted love affair or the harmonious motion of the celestial spheres. If the observer sees a love affair, the celestial motion the poem describes could be said to begin on 15 February 1385, when Mars's and Venus's "rays" (an astrological term describing the sphere of a planet's influence) first touched (North 320). The love plot supplies a pattern, perceived in celestial motion by observers who care about events like Valentine's Day, that determines the beginning and ending of the events the poem describes.[7] If, however, the observer sees only the regular motion of the spheres, the celestial affair has no distinct beginning in time. Rather, the planets move as a result of the mathematical principles that dictate the movement of each sphere. These eternal principles, rather than any one subset of planetary movements, supply the pattern, or form, of celestial motion.

Understood as a set of principles dictating the way that events unfold in time, the form of celestial motion has often been compared to the form of medieval poetry. The six planetary spheres of Chaucer's geocentric universe, along with the sphere of the sun, were thought to be distanced proportionally from one another, their orderly motion constituting a kind of conceptual music (Johnson 31). Medievalists have shown that certain poems, including important influences on Chaucer and sources that he drew on in his poetry, seem to aspire to a similar transcendence (Wimsatt 16; Johnson 30–37; Scarry; Chamberlain). The same proportions that organize the heavens were thought to underpin human music and by implication poetry as well. Poetry might therefore reveal the continuity between the rhythms and hierarchies of celestial motion and those that govern literary form. However, as James I. Wimsatt emphasizes, this relation requires the reader to neglect the effects of a particular poem and instead attend to the abstract principles and eternal proportions used to produce those effects (16; see also Holsinger 9–10). This traditional connection between poetry and planets relies on a willingness to reduce both to nothing more than examples of abstract principles.

Mars, in contrast, focuses on a single, observable celestial event. To be clear, an observer of the medieval universe does not have to be a literal stargazer. The movements of the planets, including the conjunction that Chaucer describes, can be calculated in advance or retrospect. But even these calculations can be understood as a kind of observation insofar as they turn abstract principles into intelligible events that take place in time. A quick overview of the medieval universe shows how this works. Chaucer's geocentric universe consists of nested celestial spheres. The outermost of these, surrounding the sun, the planetary spheres, and the sphere of the fixed stars, is the invisible primum mobile, whose swift rotation imparts motion to all the other spheres.[8] The primum mobile circles the earth once every twenty-four hours, a pace that no other sphere can maintain. Though each planet moves with constant angular velocity, over time it gradually loses ground to the primum mobile, a shift that can be measured against the ecliptic, a narrow track of a few degrees' longitude, divided into the zodiac, which is traced around

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the circumference of the primum mobile. This motion relative to the ecliptic is regular and can be used as a "clock" (Cornish 98). Also like a clock, the motion of the spheres reflects a single, overarching arrangement. Any appearance of other patterns that emerge as time unfolds (such as the 11:11 on a digital clock face) are illusory, based on how time seems, not what it is.

Identifying conjunctions and describing their appearance, as Chaucer does in *Mars*, subject the steady celestial clock to the standards of individual perception. Chaucer probably used the Alphonsine tables to produce the observations that inform *Mars*.[9] Based on Arabic handbooks of tables (*zījes*), these tables were assembled in the late thirteenth century at the court of Alfonso X of Castile. They reached northern Europe by about 1320, where they were accompanied by new, Latin canons (instructions) produced in Paris (Swerdlow; Chabás and Goldstein; Poulle).[10] These remarkable tables are capable of calculating up to eighty thousand years of planetary and stellar movements (North 87–133). They achieve their elegant compression by treating the positions of the planets as functions of time. The tables supply the positions of the planets along the ecliptic on a set date known as a radix, or root, date. Their user finds the time elapsed since the root date, uses the tables to determine how much motion a planet would undergo during this time, and adds this figure to the planet's root-date position to estimate its new position. The resulting figure, known as *medius motus*, is then adjusted by further calculations to account for the eccentricity of the planetary sphere, epicyclic motion, and the location of the equant point.[11] The Latin canons to the Alphonsine tables explain that to find the date of a conjunction, an astronomer must begin by choosing a probable date for the event "per estimationem" ("by estimation" [Poulle 96]). (An estimation could be achieved by comparing the time each planet takes to complete a circuit of the ecliptic.) Next, the astronomer calculates the true position of each planet on that date. From there, a careful process of dividing the distance between the planets by the speed at which they close that gap produces the day, hour, minute, and second that the two planets will be at the same point on the ecliptic. It is not possible to begin with a conjunction and figure out the particular time that would have caused it.[12] Rather, the astronomer looking for a conjunction calculates the positions of the planets, then adjusts them until they reflect a certain configuration that seems significant by human standards. It does not necessarily matter exactly who finds a conjunction: in the case of *Mars*, Chaucer could have done the calculations himself, or someone could have done them for him. But without the presence of an observer applying this standard to celestial motion, a conjunction has no distinct standing among every other configuration of the planets.

Mars singles out not only a conjunction but a particular one embedded in a specific arrangement of the celestial spheres. The poem encodes this arrangement, perceived in celestial motion, into poetry by means of veiled allusions. Venus is said to rush toward Mars, moving "as faste in her weye / Almost in oo day as he dyde in tweye" ("almost as quickly along her way / In a single day as he did in two" [69–70]), a measurement too mathematical to apply to fully anthropomorphized characters—but one that describes the calculable speeds of the planets Venus and Mars in February 1385 (North 320). The lovers go to bed in a temple decorated with white bulls, indicating the sign of Taurus. After Venus flees, Mars blames "this twelfte daye of April" for his misfortune (139). The date confirms that *Mars* is an occasional poem, providing an initial data point for readings that attempt to find as many points of congruence between the poem and a specific celestial event as possible. However, it is also the exception that demonstrates the poem's reliance

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on readerly perception and judgment. As John North notes, the sun entered Taurus on 11 April 1385, not 12 April. North proposes that Chaucer intended to identify the day that the sun's rays began to "oppress" Mars—and that Chaucer miscalculates this date, which was in fact 13 April (321). Whether or not one accepts this explanation, the discrepancy underscores the complex relation between *Mars*'s love story and the mathematical reality of celestial motion. The poem engages with celestial events that actually occurred. However, the boundaries that Chaucer perceived in that motion and the hierarchies that he used to organize it are individualized and subjective. Reconstructing the celestial form encoded in *Mars* means recovering a specific perception of the heavens and attempting to determine how the movements of the planets once seemed to someone else.

Can the close observation of poetry also generate perceived forms? Otter has demonstrated the extent to which the critic's own "circumstances of perception" help determine both the hierarchies of observations that inform close readings and the "confidence" that we have in these hierarchies (120, 122). As Otter's description of his own reading process demonstrates, the perception of form occurs within time. The arrangements and hierarchies that reading creates as it unfolds in time are in dialogue with, but not necessarily the same as, the arrangements and hierarchies that appear in the text itself. Describing the process of reading a paragraph from *Moby-Dick*, Otter writes, "[M]y eyes are drawn to the digression . . . within a digression . . . ; to the unexpected analogy . . . ; to the tone of jocular authority . . . and, most of all, to the parentheses at its center" (122). This catalogue of objects of perception reflects but also revises the order in which these various elements appear in Melville's text. Otter moves from the digressive structure of the passage as a whole to the analogy with which it concludes, notes its overall tone, and then finally ends at the passage's center. The process of observation transforms the static structure of a passage that places its most important observation at its center into a dynamic hierarchy developed over time. Otter's reading, by passing over the center before returning to it, constructs the time of reading as a linear hierarchy that builds up to its key observation.

I would like to apply Otter's approach to the reading of *Mars* and, also, to suggest that *Mars*'s focus on observing natural processes enables a metacommentary on the forms that emerge in the time of reading. From the poem's outset, *Mars* generates tension between the temporary impressions that poetry produces as it is read and the larger patterns that actually govern its structure. The poem begins with its avian narrator calling out to his fellow birds:

> Gladeth, ye foules, of the morowe gray;
> Lo, Venus, rysen among yon rowes rede.
> And floures fressh, honoureth ye this day,
> For when the sunne uprist then wol ye sprede.
> But ye lovers, that lye in any drede,
> Fleeth, lest wikked tonges yow espye.
> Lo, yond the sunne, the candel of jelosye! (1–7)

> Rejoice, birds, at the dim morning.
> Look, Venus, risen among those red rays,
> And you, fresh flowers, honor this day
> For when the sun rises you open.
> But you lovers, who lie in any kind of peril,
> Flee, lest wicked tongues see you.
> Look there, the sun, the candle of jealousy.

This stanza manifests multiple, layered verbal arrangements, each becoming perceptible at a different point in time. Beginning by intertwining the images of birds, the reddening heavens, and the opening flowers, the poem creates the impression of a natural world governed and organized by the celestial clock. It pairs this imagery with a hint of alliterative meter: line 1 alliterates on *g*, line 2 on *r*, 3 on *f*, 4 on *s*, and 5 on *l*. This relatively direct appeal to the senses sets the stage for an opposition between the first and second sections

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of the stanza. Whereas birds are called on to sing when the sun rises, the adulterous lovers are warned to flee for fear of discovery. Following on the emphatic "but" that divides the stanza, alliteration begins to drop away and instead Chaucer metaphorizes the natural world, replacing the sun with a candle that is, itself, figurative: the "candel of jelosye." Other people are reduced by synecdoche to nothing but their tongues, sprouting eyes that might "espye" lovers. And yet the end of the stanza embeds this opposition in a larger continuity, one most apparent when the entire stanza is seen in a single glance (Patterson, "Writing" 63). Predicting the way that lovers will react to the sunrise as easily as he predicts the reactions of birds and flowers, the poem's avian narrator calls out to people in language whose syntax and lexicon mirror that of his address to the birds: "ye foules," "ye lovers," "Gladeth," "Fleeth," "Lo, Venus," "Lo, yond the sonne." This subtle anaphora has organized the stanza all along, but it becomes more apparent after reading than during it. As the passage unfolds, it articulates a strong opposition between the human and natural worlds that resolves into inclusivity.

The forms that emerge in the time of reading, like those that appear in the sky, rely on how motion appears as it is observed. When Mars and Venus finally kiss, Chaucer writes, "This worthi Mars, that is of knyghthod welle, / The flour of feyrnesse lappeth in his armes, / And Venus kysseth Mars, the god of armes" ("This worthy Mars, the source of knighthood, / Wraps the flower of beauty in his arms / And Venus kisses Mars, the god of arms" [75–77]). Evoking the planets, the poem's lines seem to converge on a single word, as Chaucer rhymes "armes" with "armes." Yet the convergence of these lines, like that of the planets, relies on a time-bound and sensory perspective on events. The sonic repetition of "armes" and "armes" glosses over the difference in meaning between the two terms. Furthermore, the poem (like the planets) is actually still moving even as its language intimates completed action. The poem has moved on from Mars's "armes" by the time it gets to Venus's kiss in the next verse. Seen not in the moment of reading but rather as part of Chaucer's rhyme royal stanza, these lines simply pass each other by.

Chaucer's most overt metacommentary on observation comes in his account of the motion of the sun, the celestial observer that catches Mars and Venus in the act. As Chaucer writes, Mars and Venus are interrupted

> Throgh Phebus, that was comen hastely
> Within the paleys yates sturdely,
> With torche in honde, of which the stremes bryghte
> On Venus chambre knokkeden ful lyghte. (81–84)

> By Phoebus, who had come quickly,
> Boldly, within the palace gates,
> With torch in hand, whose bright beams
> Knocked, very lightly, on Venus's chamber.

This passage once again generates a sense of form within celestial motion by encoding a specific perception of that motion. Chaucer fills the passage with the language of seeming: adverbs (or adverbial phrases) supply three of the four rhyme words in the passage, and the fourth is an adjective. With these descriptors comes the impression that the sun's movement has a goal: it is rushed, bold, its beams bright, yet its knock is surprisingly tentative. Moreover, the sun's arrival not only seems like an interruption but also creates the impression that there is a tryst to interrupt. Conjunctions between Mars and Venus are relatively common; more than one occurred in the 1380s alone (North 320). But the addition of the sun transforms the 1385 event into a unique celestial love affair. The sun's movement thus offers an allegory for the role that perception plays in generating a sense of form. Meanwhile, closely reading the poem, I find a pattern in its manipulation of my own perceiving senses.

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As I read the passage, the description of sunbeams knocking on Venus's chamber causes light to seem like sound, only to set the stage for a synesthetic pun, as Chaucer's phrase "ful lyghte" causes the language of sound to evoke light. This chiastic pattern plays out through sense perception, appealing first to the eye (the image of the porter), then the ear (the knock), then the eye again (the light). This form is accessible not in the abstract but rather as an arrangement of sensory stimuli. It is not the object of perception but rather created in and through the time spent perceiving.

What might be accomplished by accounting for forms that emerge through observation? For the character Mars, it is not possible to explain his own affective experience of his celestial environment without acknowledging the patterns that emerge as he observes it. Mars is not a naive reader. He understands how the spheres work: even his lament "alas, / That evere so wyd a compas ys my spere" ("alas, / that my sphere has such a great circumference") acknowledges the predictable, cyclical, and unchanging nature of the motion driving both him and Venus (136–37). But this knowledge offers little consolation. Mars experiences these cycles as a source not of continuity but rather of alternating presence and absence. He compares Venus to the famously elusive brooch of Thebes, better known as the Necklace of Harmonia:

> The broche of Thebes was of such a kynde,
> So ful of rubies and of stones of Ynde
> That every wight, that sette on hit an ye,
> He wende anon to worthe out of his mynde;
> So sore the beaute wolde his herte bynde.
> Til he hit had, him thoghte he moste dye;
> And whan that hit was his, then shulde he drye
> Such woo for drede, ay while that he hit hadde,
> That wel nygh for the fere he shulde madde.
>
> And whan hit was fro his possessioun,
> Then had he double wo and passioun
> For he so feir a tresor had forgo. (245–56)
>
> The brooch of Thebes was of just such a nature,
> So full of rubies and Indian stones
> That every person who set eyes on it
> Soon began to go out of his mind.
> Until he had it, he thought that he would die.
> And when it was his, then he would endure
> Such agony from anxiety, the entire time he had it,
> That he would nearly go mad from the fear.
>
> And when it was out of his possession,
> Then he had double woe and suffering
> Because he had let such a fair treasure go.

The association between Venus and the brooch of Thebes is based in myth. According to Publius Papinius Statius's epic *Thebaid*, which recounts the events of the Theban war, Vulcan crafts the brooch as revenge for the events that *The Complaint of Mars* describes: Mars and Venus's infidelity (2.267–98). Vulcan gives the brooch to the lovers' illegitimate daughter, Harmonia, at her marriage to Cadmus of Thebes. From that moment forward, the brooch attends, and in some cases catalyzes, the many disasters that characterize Theban history (Patterson, *Chaucer* 75–76). However, instead of emphasizing this diachronic, genealogical, and cyclical historical continuity, Mars describes the closed, linear pattern of desire, gain, loss, and regret that takes place from the perspective of any person unfortunate enough to "sette . . . an ye" on the brooch. He is interested not in historical continuities but rather in how history seems as it passes by. Mars describes the brooch as it is glimpsed, held, and lost from sight.

Comparing Venus to the brooch, represented as an object of perception, allows Mars to account for the impact of forms that might otherwise escape descriptive language. He claims that Venus and the brooch are of the same "kynde," a Middle English term with many possible, interrelated meanings, including the "essential character" of something; the "natural form, shape, or appearance" of something; the created universe and the laws

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that govern it; and a "class of creatures" or species ("Kinde," defs. 1, 4, 7, 9). Invoking the artificial, crafted brooch in terms of its *kynde*, while grammatically correct, calls attention to problems of classification (Crane 35–37). Is it possible, or appropriate, to describe this crafted, artificial object in terms of its innate nature? *Mars* skirts this problem by focusing on reception: the effect the brooch has on observers. But though a theory of the brooch's *kynde* based on its reception alone might be appropriate for a decorative object, created for no reason other than to be seen, it hardly suffices as an account of a planetary sphere. Venus, the planet, is not the same *kynde* of thing as the brooch. Her motion is not inconsistent and supplies no cause for desire or regret in and of itself. The comparison only holds up when Venus is seen from Mars's perspective. As it seems to Mars, Venus appears temporarily, enchants with her beauty, and then leaves a memory of her presence behind. Her motion seems to have a linear, rather than cyclical, form. This perception of planetary motion matters. As Megan Murton notes, Mars's experience would not be legible as a significant loss without it (93), and as Mars himself recognizes, the entire project of complaint is premised on loss: "ther mot be cause wherfore that men pleyne" ("there must be a reason for men to complain" [157]).[13] Mars has to be able to articulate the painful effect Venus's motion has on him in order to complain about it. His comparison allows for this pain by capturing an extra form, outside Venus's regular cyclical motion, that affects Mars. Premising the relation between Venus and the brooch on how each is perceived, the comparison creates linear form within Venus's cyclical motion. Without this form, Mars would not be able to account for his own experience.

Mars's experience of Venus's motion is excessive, layering perception over reality to create a multiplied effect. Mars explains that the unfortunate person who has the brooch only to lose it experiences "double wo." The phrase evokes Orpheus, another lover who could not stand to have his beloved out of his sight. At the close of book 3 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius describes the song that Orpheus uses to bring Pluto to tears and (temporarily) rescue Eurydice. The song is amplified by Orpheus's own emotions: "quod luctus dabat inpotens / quod luctum geminans amor" ("what powerless grief gave / what love, doubling grief" [meter 12, lines 24–25]). People grieve the most for things that they love, but why do these passages employ the language of multiplication? Nicholas Trevet, whose commentary on *The Consolation* guided Chaucer's own Boethius translation, explains, "[P]resencia enim nocivi causat simplicem luctum cui si assit absencia amati duplicatur luctus propter duplicem causam et ideo dicit amorem geminare luctum" ("[I]ndeed, the presence of harm causes simple sorrow; if the absence of the beloved is added to this, grief is doubled because of the double cause, and thus he says that love doubles sorrow").[14] The presence of harm (that is, the loss of the beloved) causes sorrow. But for Orpheus Eurydice's absence also takes on a causal force, as if it could act directly on him. Empty time seems different without her: instead of being blank, it registers her absence (cf. Astell 294). It might be too great a leap to describe this perceived absence as a form, but Trevet does at least demonstrate that perception alone can alter the patterns time seems to take, transforming the present into a constant, recursive reminder of how it differs from the past. These perceived patterns add to the affective impact that events have on observers. In Orpheus's case, these patterns literally become part of his song, enabling it to provoke Pluto's sympathy. Borrowing the mathematical language of "double wo," Chaucer captures this formal excess, multiplying the effects of the brooch's loss, and of Venus's movement, on the basis of how these events are perceived. He will use this same language in the first line of *Troilus and Criseyde*, prom-

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ising to tell the "double sorwe of Troilus," a sum that might encompass the tragic events that Troilus lives through as well as his agonizing perception of them (Rosenfeld; see also Patterson, *Chaucer* 136).

Paradoxically, Mars's pain derives not only from the perception that he has lost something real but also from the recognition that his possession of Venus was only an illusion. Having fallen in love with how the world seemed to him, Mars experiences the end of the affair as a painful return to reality. He laments that God is "lyk a fissher" ("like a fisherman") who "baiteth hys angle-hok with som plesaunce," ("baits his hook with something pleasurable") until fish bite and find themselves wounded "for evermore" (237, 238, 244).[15] The image of pleasure superficially concealing harsh truth suggests allegory, treating Venus's beauty, or perhaps the pleasure of spending time with her, as the false surface covering the reality of Mars's situation. A longer view of time would dissolve this perceived hierarchy, in which one moment is superior to another and in which present misery seems to have a greater truth value than past happiness. Mars has been in conjunction with Venus before and will be again (Murton 94–95). But, conversely, the very impression that the conjunction is special, the result of Mars's "desert," eliminates the comforts of the regularity of "hevenysh revolucioun." Mars took pleasure in a perceived form: the impression that Venus was moving toward him rather than simply moving. His disillusionment is a real loss.

Despite Mars's misperceptions, the poem never abandons its protagonist's perspective or overtly questions this sense of loss; rather, it concludes by soliciting empathy for its two celestial protagonists. Mars tells his listeners to complain on behalf of Venus, reminding them that she favors lovers and urging them to "kytheth therfore on her sum kyndenesse" ("show to her, therefore, some kindness" [298]). The poem makes perceived similarities between earthly and celestial events into the basis for an appeal to *kyndenesse* in the modern sense: kindness and care. At this point *Mars* has come almost full circle. The poem begins and ends with alliterating imperatives that ask listeners to respond to celestial events. The avian narrator's initial appeal to his fellow birds to "gladeth" in the "morowe gray" finds a parallel in Mars's call to the reader to "kytheth" kindness. This symmetry sets the poem's lack of narrative closure into relief. *Mars* never shifts back to its main narrative voice after its title character's first-person lament. The poem ends still speaking in Mars's voice, quoted by a bird, itself quoted by an anonymous narrator. Although this kind of open structure is not unusual in Chaucerian complaint, here it means that the planet Mars's perspective is not absorbed into a larger, more complete outlook.[16] "Kyndenesse," based on the poetic notion that planets and people share the experience of gain and loss, remains a possibility. A different kind of empathy with Mars, one based on the dissolution of this sense of intimacy, waits just beyond the poem's conclusion.

It may be possible to include some of the excess and fragility of *Mars*'s perceived forms in literary-critical accounts of textual forms. To do so, it would be necessary to open up the time of reading as more than a means to an end, treating it rather as the brief time in which perceived forms come into existence. Studies of form in the novel have already called for accounts of form that do not rely on static, spatial concepts but instead give form a temporal dimension (Gallagher; Ferguson; Bronstein). As these studies show, the dimension of time brings with it the question of perspective: Who are the readers, what do they know about form, and have they read the text before? Readerly knowledge matters in *Mars*; for example, basic astronomical knowledge allows the reader to calculate the poem's celestial analogue. But *Mars* also shows how people can perceive temporary forms while

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reading even if they already know the poem as a whole. Mars himself can know that Venus moves in a cycle and still perceive linear gain and loss as he watches that cycle go by; similarly, a reader can recognize that a poem moves forward from line to line and still perceive the repetition of rhyme words as recursion or stasis. Reading in time makes accessible certain arrangements that are not perceptible when a text is seen as if from above. The fact that some literary forms are ontologically stable need not exclude these perceived or contingent forms from critical consideration.

Medieval poetry offers a useful site for thinking through the importance of perception when it stages literary diversity against the backdrop of a single spiritual truth. *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, concludes by subjecting its detailed account of a pagan love affair to the rigorous standards of Christianity, insisting that what seemed like love, satisfaction, and loss to Troilus was nothing but an illusion. Are the poem's previous five books no longer relevant after this revelation? Would a reader already versed in Christian truth find the story of Troilus's earthly experiences pointless? A reading of *Troilus* that does not dismiss the vast majority of its content must allow for self-contradiction and excess. This excess is embodied in the poem's narrator, himself represented as a reader, who celebrates illusory, earthly love only to reject it abruptly for Christian piety. E. Talbot Donaldson has described this rapid, self-contradictory transformation as "a kind of nervous breakdown in poetry" (91). Though subsequent readers have disputed Donaldson's treatment of the *Troilus* narrator, the language of psychological instability captures the strange coexistence of truth and illusion in *Troilus* (Lawton; Spearing). Instead of adjudicating between perception and reality, *Troilus* includes them both.

Middle English literature in particular offers an opportunity to understand form in terms of perception because the form of Middle English texts is often difficult to discern. Christopher Cannon suggests that because "Middle English writers often had few (or no) vernacular models to rely upon, their productions are often *formally unique*," offering interpretative challenges to their readers with the "unusual and unpredictable figures they cut upon the page" (178; see also Nelson). For such texts, the identification of form is a difficult process, opening up the potential for temporary misperceptions. Although Middle English poetry may be exceptional in this respect, it is also potentially exemplary, for the process of discerning a text's form is not just a means to a literary-historical end. Rather, understanding the way we perceive form can help us think about the stakes and significance of time spent reading. The apparent patterns that emerge in the course of reading *Mars* might prove illusory, but omitting them from consideration would leave us with an impoverished account of the time we actually spend with texts. *Mars*'s excess and pathos both derive from how the poem seems as it is read.

Notes

I thank Thomas Dancer, Andrew Galloway, Joshua Gang, Alexandra Gillespie, Audrey Walton, and Daniel Wright for reading and commenting on this essay.

1. All unattributed translations are mine.

2. Studies that integrate the established relation between formalism and close reading into broader discussions of method include Bahr and Gillespie; Best and Marcus; and Johnson.

3. Critics who emphasize the historical, cultural, and aesthetic contexts in which we read and access literary form include Rooney; Stewart; Nolan; and Cannon.

4. Others have read *Mars* in relation to *Troilus*. Norton-Smith even describes the poem as "a miniature *Troilus*" (*Geoffrey Chaucer* 28). Murton has recently argued, as I do, that the poem is concerned with "experiences of time" (81; see also Patterson, "Writing," and Hardman). Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, together with the references to

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the stars and planets in his poetry, demonstrates his sustained interest in, and facility with, astronomy. See Chaucer, *Treatise*, for reviews of scholarship on his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (22–31) and on his astrology (37–40). For studies that treat astrological allusions in Chaucer's poetry as keys to understanding its significance, see Wood; Eade, *Forgotten Sky* and "'We Ben To Lewed'"; and North. See Wood 115–20 on conjunctions between Mars and Venus, which were thought to increase lust.

5. Planetary motion can be measured against the ecliptic, the 360-degree track that traces the sun's annual movement through the stars, beginning and ending with the vernal equinox. The ecliptic is divided into twelve thirty-degree sections, designated by the signs of the zodiac. These sections initially corresponded with the twelve constellations that gave the signs their names, but by Chaucer's time the equinoxes had slipped from alignment with the constellations. The sun or a planet is within a given sign when it can be found in that 30-degree section of the ecliptic.

6. Manly offered an early argument against connecting *Mars* with any actual celestial phenomenon, but North 318–25 and Parr and Holtz provide significant evidence in favor of associating the poem with the events of spring 1385.

7. It has been suggested that the association of Valentine's Day with lovers originates with Chaucer himself (Kelly; Oruch).

8. Astronomers including Albert of Saxony and Roger Bacon add a crystalline sphere between the fixed stars and the primum mobile to account for the precession of the equinoxes (Price 104–07; Grant 316).

9. The calculations informing *Mars* are relatively involved; for much of his astronomy Chaucer probably consulted sources such as *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn* (Nicholas) and *The Kalendarium of John Somer* (Somer).

10. Poulle argues that the Parisian tables developed independently of the Castilian ones; however, Swerdlow and Chabás and Goldstein demonstrate that the weight of the evidence supports a connection.

11. Those who wish to use the tables to carry out these calculations can do so using an early modern edition such as *Divi Alphonsi*.

12. Twenty-first-century astronomical resources similarly require the researcher to begin with a date to determine celestial positions, instead of working backward from positions to date. See, e.g., the catalog of celestial configurations in Tuckerman and the astronomical software *XEphem* ("XEPHEM").

13. The search for the true cause of the protagonist's pain is a conventional gesture in French poetry (e.g., Machaut, lines 722–860; see also Wimsatt 122). See Brantley on *Mars*'s use of this gesture to express skepticism.

14. This quotation from Trevet's commentary on book 3, meter 12, line 25 of *Consolation* is found on page 507 of an unpublished manuscript posted online by Yale University (cpb-us-west-2-juc1ugur1qwqqqo4.stackpathdns.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/0/249/files/2011/06/3m12.pdf). See Minnis on Trevet's importance to Chaucer.

15. This analogy may reflect the connection Capellanus makes in *De amore* (*On Love*) between *amor* and *hamus*, or "hook" (36; bk. 1, ch. 3).

16. Compare the poem with *The Complaint unto Pity*, which similarly ends without reintegrating its complaint section into the main narrative. See also *Anelida and Arcite*, where a later author appears to have added a narrative stanza following the poem's complaint section (Edwards; Norton-Smith, "Chaucer's *Anelida*").

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