“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,  
And hadden feeld and wode? 
The riche ladies in hir bowr,  
That wereden gold in hir tressour,  
With hir brighte rode,  
Eten and drunken and maden hem glad;  
Hir lif was al with gamen ylad;  
Men kneeleden hem biforen:  
They beren hem wel swithe hye.  
And in a twinkling of an ye  
Hir soules weren forloren.

FRANÇOIS VILLON: The Ballad of Dead Ladies

Tell me now in what hidden way is  
Lady Flora the lovely Roman?  
Where’s Hipparchia, and where is Thaïs,  
Neither of them the fairer woman?  
Where is Echo, beheld of no man,  
Only heard on river and mere—  
She whose beauty was more than human?  
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 lyrists. 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,
For whose sake Abeillard, I ween,
Lost manhood and put priesthood on?
(From Love he won such dule and teen!)
And where, I pray you, is the queen?
Who willed that Buridan should steer
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 mermaidén—
Bertha Broadfoot, Beatrice, Alice,
   And Ermengarde, the lady of Maine—
And that good Joan whom Englishmen
   At Rouen doomed and burned her there—
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 Abé
lard (1079–1142), scholastic philosopher and the
ologian; they were secretly married in order not to
hinder Abelard’s advancement in the church. Héloïse’s uncle, in revenge, had Abelard emasculat
ed 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 leg
end 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.