

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Book of the Duchess

Translated by A. S. Kline © 2007 All Rights Reserved
This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically
or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.

I wonder greatly, by this day's light,
How I still live, for day and night
The sleep I gain is well nigh naught,
I have so many an idle thought,
Simply through default of sleep,
That, by my troth, I take no heed
Of anything that comes or goes,
Nor anything do like or loath.
All is of equal good to me,
Joy or sorrow, whichever be,
For I have feeling now for nothing,
But am, as it were, a dazed thing
Ever on the point of dropping down
For sorrowful imagination
Always wholly grips my mind.

And well you know, against kind
It is to live in this manner,
For Nature will never suffer
A single earthly creature
Any long time to endure
Without sleep, and be in sorrow;
And I cannot, by night or morrow,
Sleep, and am so melancholy
That I'm afeard I may die;
Default of sleep, and heaviness
Have killed my spirit's liveliness,
So that I lose all life instead.
Such fantasies are in my head
I know not what is best to do.

Yet men might ask why so, too,
I cease to sleep, and what's amiss?
Yet nonetheless who asks me this
Fails in his questioning, truly.
I myself cannot tell why,

Forsooth, yet truly as I guess,
I hold it to be a sickness
Which I have suffered eight year,
And yet my cure is nowhere near;
For of physicians there is but one
Who can heal me, yet that's all done.
Till later we must wait, bereft,
What cannot be must needs be left;
Better to our first theme to keep.

Thus when I found I could not sleep
But lately now, the other night,
Upon my bed I sat upright,
And bade someone bring me a book,
A romance, and this I took
To read and drive the night away,
Since I thought it better, I say,
Than chess or backgammon tables.
And in this book were written fables
That scholars had in ancient times,
And other poets, set in rhymes
To read and preserve in mind
When men still lived by law of kind.
This book spoke only of such things
As the lives of queens and kings,
And like matters without fail.
Among all these I found a tale
That I thought a wondrous thing.

This was the tale: there was a king
Whose name was Ceyx, had a wife,
The best one that might suffer life,
And this queen was Alcyone.
So it befell and that quite swiftly
The king went travelling overseas.
To tell it briefly, when that he
Was on the sea thus, in this wise,
Such a tempest began to rise
It broke the mast and made it fall

And cleft the ship and drowned them all,
That never was found, as it befell,
Plank, nor man, nor nothing else.
And thus this King Ceyx lost his life.

Now to speak of Alcyone his wife:
The lady, who was left at home,
Worried that the king had not come
Home, for he'd been long at sea,
Soon in her heart began to grieve,
Because her thought was, always,
It was not well he was long away,
She so longed after the king
That it would be a piteous thing
To tell of the deeply sorrowful life
That she led, this noble wife,
Loving him, alas, of all the best.
So she sent both east and west
To seek him, but they found naught.

'Alas,' quoth she, 'that I was wrought!
And is my lord, my love, now dead?
I swear I shall never eat bread,
I make this vow to my god, here,
Unless I of my lord shall hear!'
To her such sorrow this lady took
That truly I who made this book
Felt such pity and such ruth
Reading of her sorrow, in truth,
I fared the worse on the morrow
Thinking, after, of her sorrow.

So when this lady heard no word
And no man could find her lord,
Full oft she swooned and said 'Alas!'
For sorrow full nigh mad she was,
Nor had she remedy but one,
Down on her knees she fell at once,
And wept: a pity it was to hear.

'Ah, mercy, sweet lady dear!'

Quoth she to Juno, her goddess;
‘Help me out of this distress,
And give me grace my lord to see
Soon, or know where he might be,
Or how he fares, and in what wise,
And I shall make you sacrifice,
And I’ll be at your beck and call;
With goodwill, body, heart and all;
And if you will so, lady sweet,
Send me grace to sleep, and meet
In my sleep some faithful dream,
Through which I may surely see
Whether my lord be quick or dead.’
With that she hung down her head,
And fell a-swooning, cold as stone.
Her women caught her up as one,
And carried her to bed all naked;
And she, from crying and waking,
Was weary, and a deathly sleep
Fell upon her while she did weep,
Sent by Juno, her prayer’s boon,
Who sent her to sleep full soon.

For as she prayed, so was it done
In fact; for Juno quite as soon
Called thus her messenger
To do her errand, who was near.
When he was come, she bade him thus:
‘Go quick,’ quoth Juno, ‘to Morpheus,
You know him well, the god of sleep;
Now understand well, and take heed.
Say thus, on my behalf, that he
Must speed away to the Great Sea,
And bid him, first of anything,
To take up Ceyx body, the king’s,
Who lies full pale and nothing ruddy.
Bid him creep into the body,
And have it go to Alcyone

The queen, where she lies solitary,
And show her swiftly, the briefest way,
How he was drowned the other day;
And make the body speak, right so,
His speech, as it was wont to flow,
All the while he was alive.
Go now, and full swiftly fly!’

The messenger took leave and went
Upon his way, did not relent,
Till he came to the dark valley
That between twin cliffs lies deeply,
Where never yet grew corn or grass,
Nor tree, nor aught worth a mass,
Beast, nor man, nor any else,
Save there were a few wells
Came pouring from the cliffs a-down,
That made a deathly drowsy sound,
And flowed down right by a cave
That underneath a rock was grave
Amid the valley wondrous deep.
There these gods lay asleep,
Morpheus and Eclympasteyre,
Who was the god of sleep’s heir,
And slept and did no other work.

This cave was just as deep and dark
As hell’s pit everywhere throughout;
They’d leisure there to snore aloud
Competing as to who slept best;
Some hung their chin upon their breast
And slept upright, with nodding head,
And some lay naked on their bed
And slept away, while day did last.

The messenger came flying fast
And cried, ‘Oh now, awake anon!’
It was for naught, there heard him none.
‘Awake!’ quoth he, ‘Who’s sleeping here?’
And blew his horn right in their ear,

And cried 'Awake now!' loud and high.
The god of sleep, with one dull eye
Looked up, and asked: 'Who calls us here?'
'It is I' quoth the messenger;
Juno asks that you might go' –
Then told him what must be so
As I have told you heretofore,
No need for me to tell it more –
And went his way when all was said.

The god of sleep he raised his head
Out of his sleep and set off to
Act just as he had bid him do:
Took up the drowned corpse readily
And bore it to Alcyone,
His wife the queen, where she lay,
Three hours before the break of day,
And stood right at her bed's feet,
And called her, right by name, as she
Was called, and said: 'My sweet wife,
Awake! Leave off this sorrowful life,
For in sorrow there's no remedy
Be sure, my sweet, I'm dead indeed.
Alive you'll never again see me.
But good sweet heart, look that ye
Bury my body, for at such a tide
You will find it the sea beside;
And farewell, sweet, my world's bliss!
I pray God your sorrow grows less;
But little while our bliss does last!'

At that her eyes up she did cast,
And saw naught. 'Alas!' quoth she for sorrow,
And died before the third morrow.
But what more she said in that swoon
I cannot tell you, near or soon;
It would take too long to tell;
On my first matter I will dwell
The reason why I told this thing

Of Alcyone and Ceyx the king.
For this much I dare say also:
I would have been brought full low,
Dead and buried, through lack of sleep,
If I'd not read and taken heed
Of the tale that's gone before.
And I will tell you wherefore;
For I could not, for good nor bale,
Sleep ere I had read this tale
Of drowned Ceyx, the king,
And of the gods of sleeping.
When I had read the tale full well,
And looked it over, as I tell,
I thought it wondrous if it were so,
For I had never heard speak below
Of any god that could make
Men to fall asleep or wake,
For I know never a God but one.
And playfully I said anon –
And yet not in the mood to play –
'Rather than that I should die
Through default of sleeping, thus,
I'd give this same Morpheus
Or his goddess, Dame Juno,
Or someone else, I know not who,
So I may sleep and take some rest,
A gift, and one of the very best
Gifts he ever had in his life,
As a pledge, right now, and blithe,
If he would let me sleep a while,
A gift, of down of doves so white,
I will give him, a feather bed,
Trimmed with gold and right well made
Wrapped in fine black satin rare
And many a pillow, and everywhere
Of cloth of Rennes, to sleep soft;
So that he need not turn and toss.

And I will give him all that falls
Fit for a chamber; all his halls
I'll have painted with pure gold,
Tapestries hung in many a fold
All of a kind; this shall he have,
If I knew where was his cave,
If he would make me sleep soundly,
As the goddess made Alycone.
And thus this same god Morpheus
May win of me more payment thus
Than ever he won; and to Juno,
Who is his goddess, I'll give so,
I think she'll find herself well paid.'

Scarcely had I that word said
Right thus as I have told it you,
When suddenly, I know not how,
Such a desire at once me took
To sleep, that right upon my book
I fell asleep, and therewith seemed
To dream so wholly sweet a dream,
So wonderful that never yet
I think has any had the wit
To know how my dream be read;
No, not Joseph, be it said,
Of Egypt, he that deciphered so
The dreams of the king, Pharoah,
No more than the least of us;
No, scarcely could Macrobius,
He who wrote the whole vision
Scipio dreamed, of that noble man
He who was called the African –
Such marvels happened then –
Read my vision, it would seem,
Lo, thus it was, this was my dream.

I thought thus: that it was May,
And in the dawning I lay,
So I dreamed, in my bed all naked,

And looked round, for I'd been wakened
By small birds, a great heap,
That had startled me out of my sleep
With sound and sweetness of their song;
And, as I dreamed, they perched along
My chamber roof there without,
Upon the tiles and all about,
And sang each in its own way
The most solemn roundelay
Of notes that ever man below
Has heard, for some of them sang low,
Some high: and all of one accord.
To tell it briefly, in a word,
Was never heard so sweet a leaven,
Unless it were a thing of heaven;
So merry a sound, tunes so sweet,
That more than Tunis town complete,
I'd have given to hear them sing,
For all my room began to ring
With the music of their harmony.
And instrument nor melody
Was nowhere heard one half so sweet,
Nor a concord half so meet,
For there was none of them that feigned
To sing, for each of them took pains
To find out merry, skilful notes;
They spared not their feathered throats.
And, truth to say, my chamber was
Full well adorned, and with glass
Were all the windows neatly glazed,
Full clear, and not a pane was crazed,
That to behold it was great joy.
For all the whole story of Troy
Was in the glass wrought thus,
Of Hector and King Priamus,
Of Achilles and King Lamedon,
Of Medea and of Jason,

Of Paris, Helen, Lavinia, mine,
And all the walls with colours fine
Were painted, text and gloss disclosed,
All of the Romance of the Rose.
My windows were shut each one
And through the glass shone the sun
Upon my bed with bright beams,
With many glad gilded streams;
And the heavens too were so fair;
Blue, bright, clear was the air,
And full temperate, forsooth, it was;
For neither too cold nor hot it was,
Nor in all the heavens was a cloud.
And as I lay thus, wondrous loud
I thought I heard the huntsman blow
To try his horn and for to know
Whether it was clear or hoarse in sound.
And I heard going, both up and down,
Men, horses, hounds, and other things,
And all men speaking of hunting,
How they would slay the hart in strength,
And how the hart had at length
Become so weary, I know not what.
And right anon when I heard that,
How that they would a-hunting go,
I was right glad and swiftly rose,
Took my horse and forth I went.
Out of my chamber without stint
Till I came to the field without.
There overtook I a great rout
Of huntsmen and of foresters,
With many relays and trackers,
And off they hied to the forest fast,
And I with them. So at the last
I asked one lad, a tracker,
'Say, fellow, who does hunt here?'
Quoth I and he answered again;

‘Sir, the Emperor Octavian,’
Quoth he, ‘and he is here fast by.’
‘For God’s sake, in good time,’ quoth I,
‘Go we fast!’ and began to ride.
When we came to the forest side,
Every man did, right anon,
As to hunting, what should be done.
The master of the hunt, hot foot,
On a great horn blew three notes
At the unleashing of his hounds.
In a while the hart found is,
Hallooed, and pursued as fast
A longish time; till at the last
The hart turned back and slipped away
From all the hounds to hidden place.
The hounds had overshot, and all
On a false scent they did fall;
At which the huntsman wondrous fast
Blew a recall at the last.

I had gone walking from my tree,
And as I went there came by me
A whelp, that fawned on me as I stood,
That followed, and naught understood.
It came and crept to me down low
Just as if me it did know,
Held down its head and dropped its ears,
And laid down, all smooth, its hairs.

I would have caught it, but at once
It fled and from me was gone,
And I did follow, and forth it went
Down by a flowery green path bent
Full thick with grass, full soft and sweet,
With flowers filled, fair under feet,
And little used, it seemed thus;
For both Flora and Zephyrus,
They who make the flowers grow,
Had made their dwelling there, I know;

For it was such to behold
As if the earth in envy would
Be gayer now than the heavens,
To have more flowers, times seven,
Than in the sky stars there be.
It had forgot the poverty
That winter with his cold morrows
Had made it suffer, and his sorrows.
All was forgot, as could be seen,
For all the wood had waxed full green;
Sweetness of dew had made it wax.
So there is no need to ask
If there were many green trees
Or wooded thickets full of leaves;
And every tree stood by itself
From all the others ten feet or twelve.
Such great trees, so huge of strength,
Of forty or fifty fathom length,
Clean without branch or stick,
With broad crowns, and likewise thick –
They were not an inch asunder –
And there was shadow all ways under;
And many a hart, and many a hind
Were both before me and behind.
Of fawns, four-year-olds, bucks, does,
The wood was full, and many roes,
And many squirrels there that sat
High in the trees, and grew fat,
And in their own way made their feast.
Briefly, it was so full of beasts
That though Albus, the noble counter,
Had set to reckoning that encounter,
And reckoned with his numerals ten –
For by those numerals all may ken,
If they be skilful, all the sum there
And tell of everything the number –
Yet even he would fail to reckon

The wonders that in dream did beckon.
But forth they roamed wondrous fast
Down the wood, till at the last
I was aware of a man in black
That sat there, and turned his back
Against an oak: a huge tree.
'Lord,' thought I, 'who may this be?
What ails him so that he sits here?'
And right anon I went full near;
Then found I sitting there upright
A handsome and well-formed knight,
In his manner I thought him so,
Of good size and young and lo
Of the age of four and twenty year.
Upon his beard but little hair,
And he was clothed all in black.
I walked softly at his back,
And there I stood as still as aught,
That, truth to tell, he saw me naught,
Because his head was hanging down.
And with a deathly sorrowful sound
He made in rhyme ten verses or twelve
Of lamentation to himself,
Most pitiful, most full of ruth,
That ever I heard, for by my truth,
It was great wonder that Nature
Might suffer any creature
To have such sorrow and not be dead.
Full piteous, pale, and nothing red,
He spoke a lay, a kind of song,
Without a note, it was not sung,
And it was this, for full well I can
Repeat it; right thus it began.
'I have of sorrow so much won
That joy I have never none,
Now that I know my lady bright,
Whom I have loved with all my might,

Is from me, dead, and is gone,
And thus in sorrow left me alone.

Alas, Death, what ails thee
That you could not have taken me
When you took my lady sweet
Who was so fair, so fresh, so free,
So good, as all men might see here,
Of all goodness she had no peer!

When he'd made thus his complaint,
His sorrowful heart began to faint,
His spirits waned as one dead;
The blood was fled, for pure dread,
Down to his heart to see it warmed –
For well it felt the heart was harmed –
To find out also why it felt bad,
By nature, and for to make it glad,
For it is the member principal
Of the body. And that made all
His hue change and wax green
And pale, for there no blood was seen
In any manner of limb of his.

Anon therewith when I saw this,
He fared so badly where he sat,
I went and stood right at his feet
And greeted him, but he spoke not,
But argued with his own thought,
And in his mind disputed fast
Why and how his life might last;
He felt his sorrows did so smart
And lay so cold upon his heart;
So, through his sorrow and heavy thought,
It seemed that he had heard me not,
For he had well nigh lost his mind,
Though Pan, that men call god of kind,
Might at his sorrows be ever so wrath.

Yet at the last, to say right sooth,
He was aware of me, where I stood

Before him, and did doff my hood,
 And greeted him, the best I could,
 Debonairly, and nothing rude.
 He said, 'I pray you, be not wrath,
 I heard you not, to tell the truth,
 Nor did I see you, sir, most truly.'
 'Ah, good sir, naught ill,' quoth I,
 'I am right sorry if I by aught
 Have stirred you out of your thought;
 Forgive me if I did mistake.'
 'Why, your amends are easy to make,'
 Quoth he, 'for there is naught to do;
 Nothing ill said or done by you.'
 Lo, how goodly spoke the man,
 As if he was another person;
 Neither proud nor too polite
 I saw, and warmed to the knight
 And found him so agreeable,
 Wondrous reasonable and rational,
 It seemed to me, for all his ills.
 I straight began to speak at will
 To him, to see if I in aught
 Might have knowledge of his thought.
 'Sir,' quoth I, 'the sport is done;
 I think that the hart is gone;
 The huntsmen nowhere can it see.'
 'I take no thought of that,' quoth he;
 My mind thereon it does not dwell.'
 'By our Lord,' quoth I, 'I know that well,
 So from your face it does appear,
 But, sir, one word will you hear?
 Methinks in great sorrow I you see;
 But truly, good sir, if you to me
 Would show something of your woe,
 I would, if the wise God help me so,
 Amend it, if I can or may;
 You may prove it by assay.

For, by my troth, to make you whole,
I will do all my powers may hold.
Tell me of all your sorrow's smart;
Peradventure it may ease your heart,
That seems full sick beneath your side.'

With that he looked on me aside,
As if to say, 'Nay, that will not be.'
'Grant mercy, good friend,' quoth he
'I thank you that you'd do so,
But it will no swifter make it go;
No man my sorrow gladden may,
That makes my hue to fall and fade,
And has my understanding shorn,
That woe is me that I was born!
Naught can keep my sorrows hid,
Not all the remedies of Ovid,
Nor Orpheus, god of melody,
Nor Daedalus, his artistry;
No help for me from the physician,
Neither Hippocrates nor Galen;
Woe is me that I live hours twelve.
But whoso would prove to himself
Whether his heart can take pity
On any sorrow, let him view me.
I, wretch, that death has flayed
Of all the bliss that ever was made,
Am become the worst of all sights,
Who hate my days and my nights;
My life, my joys to me are loathsome,
For all welfare and I apart run.
Death itself is so much my foe
That my death it wills not so;
For when I follow it, it will flee;
I would have death, it wants not me.
This is my pain, all remedy fled,
Always dying, yet never dead,
Such that Tityus, there in hell,

May not of more sorrow tell.
And whoever knew all, by my truth,
Of my sorrow, and had not ruth
And pity on my sorrow's smart,
He would have a fiend's heart.
For whoso sees me on a morrow
May say that he has met with sorrow;
For I am sorrow and sorrow is I.

Alas, and I will tell you why:
My song is turned to complaining,
And all my laughter to weeping,
My glad thoughts to heaviness,
To travail turned my idleness
And my rest too; my weal is woe,
My good is harm, and evermore so
Into wrath is turned my playing,
And my delight into sorrowing.
My health is turned into sickness,
To dread all my contentedness.
To dark is turned all my light,
My wit is folly, my day is night,
My love is hate, my sleep waking,
My mirth and my meals are fasting,
My good countenance is folly,
And all's confounded where I be,
My peace is argument and war,
Alas, how might I fare ill more?
My boldness is turned to shame,
For false Fortune has played a game
Of chess with me, alas, the while!
The traitress false and full of guile,
Who promises yet delivers naught;
She walks upright and yet she halts,
Who squints all foul and gazes fair,
The disdainful and debonair
Who scorns full many a creature!
An idol of false portraiture

Is she, for she will soon awry,
She is the monster's head say I,
As filth over-strewn with flowers.
Her highest honour and her flower is
To lie, for that is her nature,
Without faith, law, or measure.
She is false and ever laughing
With one eye, and the other weeping.
All that is raised, she brings down.
I liken her to the scorpion,
That is a false, flattering beast,
For with his head he seems to feast,
But all amidst his flattering
With his tail he will sting
And envenom, and so will she.
She is the envious charity
That's ever false yet seems to heal;
So she turns her false wheel
About, for it is never stable –
Now by the fire, now at table;
For many a one blind she has sent.
She is the play of enchantment,
That seems a thing, and is not so,
The false thief! What did she though,
Dost think? By our Lord, I will say.
At chess with me she began to play;
With her false moves diversely seen
She stole upon me and took my queen.
And when I saw my queen away,
Alas, I could no longer play,
But said, 'Farewell, sweet, by this,
And farewell all that ever there is!'
Therewith Fortune said, 'Check, here!'
And 'Mate!' to me in mid-career
With an errant pawn, alas!
Full craftier at play she was
Than Athalus, that first the game

Of chess made; such was his name.
I wish to God that once or twice
I'd studied, learnt the pitfalls thrice
Known to the Greek Pythagoras,
I'd have played the better at chess
Guarded my queen better thereby.
Yet, in truth, I say, what for and why?
I hold that wish not worth a straw.
It would never have aided me more,
For Fortune knows many a wile,
There are but few can her beguile,
And then she is the less to blame;
I myself would have done the same,
Before God, had I been as she;
She should be pardoned more easily,
For this I say, adding thereto:
Had I been God and able to do
My will, when she the victor proved,
I would have made the same move,
For, as I hope God will give me rest,
I dare well swear she chose the best.
But through that move I am shorn
Of bliss; alas, that I was born!
For evermore think I truly,
Despite my wish, my joy is wholly
Overturned, but what's to be done?
By our Lord, to die and soon be gone.
For nothing I believe in, naught,
But to live and die with that thought.
For there's no planet in the firmament,
Nor in air or in earth no element,
That does not give me a gift each one
Of weeping when I am alone.
For when I consider well,
And bethink me of what befell,
How that there lies in reckoning
To my sorrows' credit nothing,

And how there is left no gladness
To lift me out of my distress,
How I've lost contentment's measure,
How, again, I have no pleasure,
Then I may say that I have naught.
And when this passes through my thought,
Alas, then I am overcome,
For what is done is not to come.
I have more sorrow than Tantalus.'

And when I heard him tell it thus,
His pitiful tale, as I you tell,
Scarce there could I longer dwell,
It caused my heart so much woe.
'Ah, good sir,' quoth I, 'say not so.
Have some pity on human nature
That created you as a creature.
Remember how once Socrates
Counted not a straw, not three,
Aught that Fortune could do.'

'No,' quoth he, 'I can not so.'
Who so, good sir, by God!' quoth I,
'Nay say not so in truth, for, why,
Though you had lost queens twelve,
And then for sorrow slain yourself,
You would be damned in this case
As rightly as Medea of Thrace,
Who slew her children for Jason;
And Phyllis who for Demophon
Hung herself, well-away,
Since he had failed on that day
To come to her. Another rage
Had Dido too, Queen of Carthage,
Who slew herself since Aeneas
Was false, what a fool she was!
And Echo died since Narcissus
Would not love her, and right thus
Many another has folly done.

And for Delilah died Sampson,
 Who slew himself beneath the pillar.
 But there is none alive here
 Would for a queen feel this woe!
 'Why so?' quoth he; 'it is not so,
 You know full little what you mean;
 I have lost more than you can see.'
 'Lo,' quoth I, 'how that may be,
 Good sir, tell me all the story
 In what wise, how, why, and wherefore
 You have your bliss thus no more.'
 'Blithely,' quoth he, 'come sit you down;
 I'll tell you upon one condition
 That you shall wholly with your wit
 Do your best to hearken to it.'
 'Yes, sir.' 'Swear your oath thereto.'
 'Gladly.' 'Now then, hold hereto!
 'I shall right blithely, as God me save,
 Wholly, with all the wit I have,
 Listen as closely as I can.'
 'For God's sake!' quoth he, and began:
 'Sir,' quoth he, 'since first in truth
 I showed a spark of wit in youth
 Or the natural understanding
 To comprehend anything
 Of what love was, in my own wit,
 I have, without a doubt of it,
 Been a vassal and paid my rent
 To Love entirely with good intent,
 And through pleasure become his thrall
 With goodwill, body, heart and all.
 All this service to him I paid,
 As to my lord and did homage;
 And full devoutly I prayed too
 That he bestow my heart so
 That it was joy to him clear
 And honour to my lady dear.

And it was for long and many a year
Ere mine heart was fixed anywhere,
That I did thus, and knew not why;
I think it came but naturally.
Peradventure I was at it most able
As a white wall is or a table,
For such is ready to catch and take
All that men will thereon make,
Whether men will draw or paint,
Be it never so rare in intent.

And at that time I fared right so:
I was fit to have learned though
And understood as well or better
Perhaps some other arts or letters.
But because love came first in thought
Therefore I forgot it naught.
I chose love as my first craft,
Therefore it bides with me at last.
Because I took to it at a young age
When malice had not my courage
Reduced, with time, to nothing
Through excess of knowing;
For then Youth, my mistress,
Governed me in idleness,
For it was in my first youth,
And though little good I knew;
For all my works were fleeting,
And all my thoughts changing,
All things to me were equal good
That I then knew; yet thus it stood:

It happened that I came one day
Into a place where I saw stray,
Truly, the fairest company
Of ladies that ever man might see
All together in one place.
Shall I call it luck or grace
That brought me there? Nay, Fortune,

The greatest liar under the moon,
The false traitress perverse,
Would I might call her something worse!
For now she worked me full woe,
And I will swiftly tell why so.

Among these ladies thus each one
Truth to tell, I saw one
That was like none round about,
For I dare swear, without a doubt,
That as the summer's sun bright
Is fairer, clearer and gives more light
Than any planet there in heaven,
The moon or the stars seven,
In all the world so did she
Surpass them all in her beauty,
In manners and in comeliness,
In stature and in fitting gladness,
In excellence, and form's display –
In short, what more can I say?
By God and his apostles twelve,
She was my sweet, her very self!
She had such steadfast composure,
Such deportment and behaviour.
And Love had granted me its boon,
Had discovered me so soon,
That she full soon into my thought
So help me God, I swiftly caught,
So suddenly that naught I took
Of instruction but by her look
And from my heart; because her eyes
So gladly, I say, my heart surprised
That then indeed my own thought
Said it were best serve her for naught
Than with another fare, though well.
And it was true, as I may tell,
In all respects, hear why from me.
I saw her dance so gracefully,

Carol and sing so sweetly,
Laugh and play all so womanly,
And look so debonairly,
So goodly speak, and so friendly
Indeed I thought there had never
Been seen so blissful a treasure.
For never a hair upon her head,
Truth to tell, was of red,
Neither of yellow or brown it was;
I thought that most like gold it was.
And what eyes my lady had!
Debonair, good, true and glad,
Modest, of good size, not too wide;
And then they never glanced aside,
Nor askance, but directed well
Drew to her, and charmed as well
All who looked on her where she stood.
Her eyes seemed as though she would
Take mercy on them – fools thought so –
But nevertheless she did not, though.
It was no counterfeited thing;
It was her own way of looking,
For the goddess, dame Nature,
Only opened them a measure,
Slightly; for were she ever so glad,
Her glance was never foolish mad,
Nor wild, though cast about in play;
But ever, I thought, her eyes did say,
'By God, all cause of wrath I forgive!'
Therefore she so loved life to live,
That dullness was of her afraid.
Never too glad, nor too dismayed;
In all things more true measure
Had never, I think, any creature.
But many a one with her glance she hurt,
Though that little troubled her at heart,
For she knew nothing of their thought:

Though whether she knew or knew it not,
She gave not a straw for all, you see!
To win her love no closer was he
At home, than one who in India pined;
The foremost one was ever behind.
But good folk above all others
She loved as men love their brothers;
Of which love she was generous rarely
In certain places that proved worthy.
But what a sweet face had she thereto!
Alas, my heart's so woeful, true,
That I'm unable to describe it!
I lack both the English and the wit
Thus to reveal it at the full,
And then my spirits are too dull
So great a thing for to devise.
I have no skill that will suffice
To comprehend her beauty;
But this much dare I say, that she,
Was white, rosy, fresh and bright of hue,
And her beauty every day was new.
And her face was almost perfection,
For Nature, indeed, in her creation
Took such pleasure, that truly she
Was her chief pattern for beauty,
The chief example of all her work,
And model; for be it ever so dark,
I think I evermore do see her.
And moreover though every other
That ever lived were now alive,
None would be able to descry
In all her face a wicked sign,
For it was true, innocent and kind.
And what a goodly, soft speech
Had that sweet one, my life's leach!
So friendly and so well grounded
Upon true reason so well-founded,

And so tractable to all good,
That I dare swear, by the rood,
Of eloquence was never found
So sweet a fluency of sound,
None truer tongued, nor scorning less,
Who better could heal, that by the Mass
I dare swear, though the Pope it sung,
That there was never yet by her tongue
Man or woman greatly harmed;
As for her, there was all harm hid,
No less flattering in her word,
So that her simple pure record
Was found as true as any bond
Or pledge from any man's hand.
Nor chided she whatever befell,
That knows all the world full well.

But such a fairness of her neck
Had that sweet, that bone nor fleck
Was there none seen unfitting, for that
It was white, smooth, straight and flat,
Without hollow or collar-bone,
So that it seemed she had none.
Her throat that I see in memory,
Seemed a round tower of ivory
Of good size, yet not too great.

And good fair White, I state,
That was my lady's name aright.
She was both fair and bright:
Her name indeed did her no wrong.
Right fair shoulders and body long
She had, and arms; every limb
Rounded, fleshy, not over-thin;
Right white hands, and nails red,
Round breasts, and of good breadth
Her hips were: a straight flat back.
I know in her no other lack
To mar her perfect being,

Insofar as I had knowing.
And then she so loved to play
When she wished, that I dare say,
That she was like to a torch bright,
From which every man may take light
Enough, yet it shines never the less.
In manner and in her comeliness
Right so fared my lady dear,
That every person from her manner
Might learn enough if he were bold,
If he had eyes her to behold.
For I well dare say, if that she
Amongst ten thousand were to be,
She would be at the very least
The chief mirror of all the feast,
Though they all stood in a row
Before the gaze of men who know.
For wherever men play or wake
I would deem the fellowship naked
Without her, whom I saw then
As a crown that needs no gem.
Truly to my eye she seemed
The solitary phoenix of Araby,
For at one time lives only one,
And such as she, know I none.
To speak of goodness, truly she
Had as much of graceful quality
As ever Esther had in the bible,
And more if more were possible.
And, truth to tell, there with all
She had a mind so liberal,
So wholly inclined to all good
That all her mind was set, by the rood,
Without malice upon gladness;
And thus I never saw a less
Harmful person than she in doing.
Yet I do not say she was unknowing

Of what harm was, or else she
 Could know no good, it seems to me.
 And truly, to speak of truth,
 If she'd lacked that, what pity forsooth.
 Thereof so much in her did dwell,
 And I dare say, and swear it well,
 That Truth himself, and over all,
 Had chosen his manor principal
 In her who was his resting place.
 And then she had the most grace
 In showing steadfast perseverance
 And temperate self-governance,
 That ever I knew or witnessed yet,
 So long-suffering was her wit.
 And reason gladly she understood,
 It followed well she knew the good.
 She used, gladly, to do well;
 These were her ways, as I tell.
 And then she so well loved the right,
 She'd do no wrong though she might;
 No one could bring upon her shame,
 She so loved her own good name.
 She wished to trifle with no man,
 No, be sure, she would not stand
 That any should live in suspense
 With half-hints or sly countenance,
 Unless one told of her a lie:
 Nor send a man to Walachia nigh,
 To Prussia, or to Tartary,
 To Alexandria or Turkey,
 And bid him, swift enough, that he
 Go hoodless into the dry Gobi,
 And come home by the Quara Na'ur;
 Then say, 'Sir, take especial care
 That I may of you hear people say
 Fine things 'ere you come again!'

She'd no such petty tricks, I say.

But why do I tell my tale?
 On this same lady, as I have said,
 Was all my love wholly laid,
 Indeed she was, like a sweet wife,
 My joy, my passion and my life,
 My fortune, health, and all my bliss,
 My world's welfare, and my goddess,
 And I was hers wholly, as I do tell.
 'By our Lord,' quoth I, 'I believe it well.
 Assuredly your love was well set,
 I know not how you might better it.'
 'Better it? No nor do so well!' quoth he.
 'I well believe it,' quoth I, 'pardee.'
 'Nay, believe it well!' Sir, I do indeed;
 I can well believe that truly
 You thought that she was the best
 And to behold the very fairest,
 To whomever might see her with your eyes.'
 'With mine? Nay, all that her descried
 Said and swore that it was so.
 And if they had not, I would though
 Have loved best my lady free,
 Though I had all the beauty
 That ever had Alcibiades,
 And all the strength of Hercules,
 And thereto had the worthiness
 Of Alexander and all the riches
 That ever were in Babylon,
 In Carthage or in Macedon,
 Or in Rome, or in Nineveh,
 And thereto as brave might be
 As Hector was, may I have joy,
 Whom Achilles slew at Troy –
 And therefore was slain also,
 In a temple, for both the two
 Were slain, he and Antilochus,
 And so says Daryes Frygius,

For love of Polyxena –
Or was as wise as Minerva,
I would always, you may trust,
Have loved her, for needs must!
Need? Nay, truly, I gabble now,
No ‘need’, and I will tell you how,
For of good will my heart desired,
And then to love her I was fired,
She being the fairest and the best.

She was as good, may I have rest,
As Penelope of Greece was ever
Or the noble wife Lucretia,
That was the best – so he tells us,
The Roman, Titus Livius –
She was as good, and yet unique,
Though their stories are authentic;
As Lucretia, leastways, she was true.

But why was I telling you
Of when I first saw my lady?
I was right young, truth to say,
And a great deal had to learn;
If my eager heart would yearn
To love, it was vast enterprise.
But as my means must suffice
According to my childish wit,
Forgoing doubt, I applied it
To love her in my best wise,
To worship her and serve, as I
Then best could, by my troth,
Without feigning: without sloth.

For wondrous gladly I would see
Her face, so much it cheered me,
That when I saw her first, a-morrow,
I was healed of all my sorrow
The whole day after, till it was eve;
I thought nothing could me grieve,
However my sorrows might smart.

And yet she dwelt so in my heart
That by my troth I would not
For all this world, out of my thought
Banish my lady; no, truly!

‘Now, by my truth, sir,’ quoth I,
It seems to me you seek the chance
Of confession without repentance.’

‘Repentance! Nay, fie,’ quoth he;
‘Should I now repent me
Of love? Nay, then I’d act less well
Than ever did Achitophel,
Or Antenor, may I have joy,
The traitor that betrayed Troy,
Or the false Ganelon,
He that worked treason
On Roland and Oliver.

Nay, while I am alive here
I shall never forget her though.’

‘Now, good sir,’ quoth I, ‘so
You have told me heretofore –
There’s no need to rehearse it more –
How you saw her first and where.
But will you tell me the manner
Of what to her was your first speech –
Thereof I would you beseech –
And how she first knew your thought,
As to whether you loved or not,
And tell me again what you have lost;
I heard you tell of that at first.’

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘a greater woe;
I have lost more than you know.’

‘What loss is that?’ quoth I then;
‘Will she not love you? Is that the pain?
Or have you done aught amiss,
That she has left you? Is it this?
For God’s love, tell me all.’

‘Before God,’ quoth he, ‘and I shall.

I say exactly as I've said,
In her was all my love vested,
And yet she knew not, as I tell,
For a long time: believe it well.
For be quite certain, I dared not,
For all this world, tell her my thought,
No, that would have angered her, truly.
Do you know why? She was the lady
Ruled my body; she owned the heart,
And who has that, has every part.
But to keep free of idleness,
Truly I acted out my business
And made songs, as best I could,
And often time sang them aloud,
And made of songs thus a great deal,
Although I could not compose well,
Nor knew the art of songs all
As did Lamech's son Jubal,
Who first found out the art of song,
For, as his brothers' hammers rung
Upon the anvil up and down,
Thereof he copied the first sound.
But Greeks say that Pythagoras,
The very first inventor was
Of the art; *Aurora* tells us so.
But pay no mind to those two.
Leastways songs thus I made then
Of my feelings, my heart to gladden;
And lo, this was the very first,
I know not that it is the worst:
"Lord it makes my heart light,
When I think of my sweet delight
Who is so beautiful to see;
And wish to God it might so be,
That she would take me as her knight,
My lady, that is so fair and bright!"
Now have I sung you, truth to say,

My first song. Upon a day
I bethought me what woe
And sorrow I suffered so
For her, and yet she knew it not,
Nor dare I tell her of my thought.
“Alas!” thought I, “all hope is fled
Unless I tell her, I am but dead;
And if I tell her, to say sooth,
I am a-feared she will be wrath;
Alas, then what shall I do?”
In this distress I was so low
I thought my heart would burst as well!
So at the last, truth to tell,
I bethought me that Nature
Had never in any creature
Formed such beauty, truly,
And goodness, yet left out mercy.
In hope of that, my tale I told
With sorrow, as one made bold
By need, that I risked my head
To tell her, or I must fall dead.
I know not how I first began,
Nor more rehearse it now I can;
And it, so help me God, did fall
In the evil days, the ‘dismal’
Of the ten plagues of Egypt,
For many a word I over-skipped
In my tale, simply through fear,
Lest my words unfitting were.
With sorrowful heart to wounds wed,
Softly, quaking for pure dread
And shame, and halting in my tale
For fear, and my hue all pale,
Full oft I waxed both pale and red.
Bowing to her, I hung my head;
I dared not once look thereon,
For wit, manner and all were gone.

I cried “mercy” and no more;
It was no game, it pained full sore.
So at the last, truth to say,
When I came to myself again,
To tell briefly all my speech,
With my whole heart I did her beseech
That she would be my lady sweet
And swore to her, with fervent heat
Ever to be steadfast and true
And love her always freshly new
And never other lady have
And all her honour for to save
As best I could; I swore her this:
“For yours is all that ever there is
For evermore, my heart sweet!
And never false, except in sleep,
I’ll be, surely as God help me so!”
And when I had my tale all told,
God knows, she gave never a straw
For all my tale, so I thought.
To tell it briefly just as it is,
Truly her answer it was this:
I cannot now well counterfeit
Her words, but this was the gist
Of her answer: she said: “Nay”
All utterly. Alas, that day
The sorrow I suffered and the woe!
– That truly Cassandra, who so
Bewailed the destruction
Of Troy and of Ilium,
Had never such sorrow as I knew.
I dared no more say thereto
For pure fear, but slipped away.
And thus I lived full many a day,
That truly to go I had no need
Further than my bed indeed
Every day to seek out sorrow;

I found it readily ever morrow,
Because I loved her so dear.
So it befell, another year,
I thought once I'd try my hand
At making her know and understand
My woe; and she well understood
That I desired nothing but good,
And honour and to guard her name
Above all things, keep her from shame,
And was so eager her to serve;
A pity if I should die of her,
Since I willed her naught amiss.
So when my lady knew all this,
My lady showed me all fully
The noble gift of her mercy,
Guarding her honour in all ways;
Fear not, I mean no other phrase.
And therewith she gave me her ring;
I think it was the foremost thing.
And whether my heart began to wax
Glad, there is no need to ask!
So help me God, I was blithe,
Raised as if from death to life,
Granted of fates the very best,
The gladdest: the heart's rest.
For truly, that sweet light,
When I was wrong and she right,
She would always so courteously
Forgive me, so debonairly.
In my youth, whatever did chance,
She took me under her governance.
Therewith she was always so true,
Our joy was ever endless new;
Our hearts were so even a pair
That neither was contrary, I swear
Ever to the other, despite all woe.
For truly they suffered alike so

One bliss, and one sorrow both;
Equally glad and vexed both.
All was one, no quarrelling there.
And thus we lived full many a year
So well, I cannot tell you how.’
‘Sir,’ quoth I, ‘where is she now?’
‘Now?’ quoth he, and ceased at once.
Therewith he seemed dead as stone,
And said: ‘Alas that I was born!
This was the loss that here before,
I told you that I now bore.
Remember I said heretofore,
“You know but little, I’ve greater woe;
I have lost more than you know.”
God knows, alas, that it was she!’
‘Alas, sir, how? How may that be?’
‘She is dead.’ ‘Nay!’ ‘Yes, by my troth.’
‘By God, then I pity you for your loss.’
And with that very word, right soon
The horns rang out. And all done,
At that time, was the hart’s hunting.
With that I thought me that the king,
Begun swiftly homeward for to ride
Unto a place quite near beside,
Not far from us, would there alight:
A long castle with walls white,
By Saint John, on a rich hill,
So I dreamed, and this befell.
Right thus I dreamed, as I you tell,
That in the castle was a bell,
And as it struck hours twelve,
Thereupon I woke myself,
And found I was lying in my bed;
And the book in which I’d read
Of Alcyone and Ceyx the king
And of the gods of sleeping,
I found it in my hand, I mean.

Thought I: 'This is so strange a dream
That I will, in process of time,
Strive to put this dream in rhyme
As best I can, and that full soon.
This was my dream; now it is done.

End of the Book of the Duchess

Note: The Duchess was Blanche (*White*), the wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (*long castle*) and Earl of Richmond (*rich hill*), who was Chaucer's patron, and a son of Edward III. She died of plague on September 12th 1368.