

Geoffrey Chaucer

Selected Poems

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Truth

Or 'Ballade de bon conseil' (To Sir Philip de la Vache)

Flee from the crowd, and dwell with truthfulness,
Let your thing suffice, though it be small;
Hoarding brings hatred, climbing fickleness,
Praise brings envy, and wealth blinds overall;
Savour no more than 'tis good that you recall;
Rule well yourself, who others advise here;
And truth shall deliver you, have no fear.

Trouble you not the crooked to redress,
Trusting in her who wobbles like a ball.
Well-being rests on scorning busyness;
Beware therefore of kicking at an awl;
Strive not like the crockery with the wall.
Control yourself, who would control your peer;
And truth shall deliver you, have no fear.

That which is sent, receive in humbleness,
Wrestling for this world asks but a fall.
Here's not your home, here is but wilderness.
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beast, out of your stall!
Know your country: look up, thank God for all;
Hold the high way, and let your spirit steer,
And truth shall deliver you, have no fear.

Envoy

Therefore, La Vache, cease your old wretchedness;
To the world cease now to be in thrall;
Cry Him mercy, that out of his high goodness
Made thee from naught, on Him especially call,
Draw unto Him, and pray in general
For yourself, and others, for heavenly cheer;
And truth shall deliver you, have no fear.

Nobleness

Our first stock, the father of nobleness –
Whatever man desires nobility,
Must follow his footsteps, and his wits address
To loving virtue, and all vice must flee.
For to virtue belongs worth's dignity,
And not the reverse, I safely claim,
Whether of mitre, crown or diadem.

Our first stock was full of righteousness,
True, sober, generous, and full of pity,
Pure in spirit, one who loved busyness,
To counter the vice of sloth, honourably;
And unless his heir loves virtue as did he,
He's not noble though wealth be his and fame,
Whether of mitre, crown or diadem.

Vice may well be the heir to old riches;
But there is no man, as men well see,
Who can bequeath his heir his nobleness;
That is no degree's sole property,
But is the first father's in his majesty,
Who makes his heirs of those he does name,
Whether of mitre, crown or diadem.

Lack of Steadfastness

Once this world was so steadfast and so stable
That a man's word was his obligation,
And now it is so false and mutable,
That word and deed, in their conclusion,
Are unlike, for so turned upside down
Is all this world, by gain and selfishness,
That all is lost for lack of steadfastness.

What makes this world of ours so variable
But the pleasure folk take in dissension?
Amongst us now a man is thought unable,
Unless he can, by some vile collusion,
Wrong his neighbour, or wreak his oppression.
What causes this but such wilful baseness,
That all is lost for lack of steadfastness?

Truth is put down: reason is held a fable;
Virtue has now no domination,
Pity is exiled, no man is merciful.
Through greed men blind discretion;
The world has made such a permutation
Of right to wrong, truth to fickleness,
That all is lose for lack of steadfastness.

Envoy (to King Richard II)

O Prince, desire to be honourable,
Cherish your folk, and hate extortion!
Order that nothing which may prove shameful
To your office, be done in your kingdom.
Show openly your sword of castigation,
Dread God: seek law, love truth and worthiness,
And wed your folk again to steadfastness.

To Rosamund

Madame, you are of all beauty the shrine
Within the circle of the *mappamund*;
For as the crystal glorious you shine,
And like ruby are your cheeks round.
And therewith you're so merry and jocund
That at a revel when I see you dance,
It is a salve for my every wound,
Though you with me suffer no dalliance.

For though I fill a cask with tears of mine,
Yet that woe may my heart not confound;
Your demi-voice that so small you twine
Makes my thought with joy and bliss abound.
So courteously I go with love bound,
That to myself I say, in penance,
It suffices me to love you, Rosamund,
Though you with me suffer no dalliance.

Never did pike so wallow in galantine
As I in love do wallow, and am wound,
For which full oft I of myself divine
That I am truly Tristan the second.
My love will not grow cold or be unsound;
I burn with amorous pleasure, at every chance.
Do what you will, I will your thrall be found,
Though you with me suffer no dalliance.

Fickleness

(Attributed to Chaucer by Skeat)

Madame, through your new-fangled-ness,
Many a servant you have put out of grace.
I take my leave of your un-steadfastness,
Full well I know, while you fill life's space,
You cannot love a half-year in one place.
To new things your desire is ever keen;
Instead of blue, thus may you wear all green.

Just as a mirror nothing may express,
Unless light as it comes it goes apace,
So fares your love, and your work bears witness.
There is no faith that may your heart embrace;
But, like a weathercock, that turns its face
With every wind, you fare, and it is seen;
Instead of blue, thus may you wear all green.

You could enshrine, as showing fickleness,
More than Delilah, Cressida, or Candace,
For ever in changing lies your stableness;
That defect from your heart none can erase.
If you lose one, two others you well purchase.
All light for summer, you know well what I mean,
Instead of blue, thus may you wear all green.

Merciless Beauty

(Merciles Beaute)

Your eyes two whole slay me suddenly;
I may the beauty of them not sustain
So wounds it, throughout my heart keen.

Unless your word will heal, all hastily,
My heart's wound while it is yet green,
Your eyes two whole slay me suddenly;
I may the beauty of them not sustain.

By my truth, I tell you faithfully
That you are of my life and death the queen,
For at my death the truth shall be seen:
Your eyes two whole slay me suddenly;
I may the beauty of them not sustain,
So wounds it throughout my heart keen.

So has your beauty from your heart chased
Pity, that it avails not to complain,
For Pride holds your mercy by a chain.

Though guiltless, my death you have purchased.
I tell you truly, needing not to feign,
So has your beauty from your heart chased
Pity, that it avails not to complain.

Alas, that Nature has in you placed
Such great beauty that no man may attain
To mercy though he die from the pain,
So has your beauty from your heart chased
Pity, that it avails not to complain,
For Pride holds your mercy by a chain.

Since I'm from Love escaped yet so fat,
I never plan to be in his prison lean;
Since I am free, I count it not a bean.

He may answer and say this and that;
I care not: I'll speak just as I mean.
 Since I'm from Love escaped yet so fat,
 I never plan to be in his prison lean.

Love strikes my name from his slate flat,
And he is struck out of my books clean
For evermore; my sole course it has been.
 Since I'm from Love escaped yet so fat,
 I never plan to be in his prison lean;
 Since I am free, I count it not a bean.

Notes:

1. Mappamund is mappa mundi, a map of the known world encircled by the ocean. Rosamund is rosa mundi, the rose of the world.

2. Merciless Beauty, one of the great glories of English poetry, is particularly difficult to translate without damage. I have chosen here, for the sake of clarity, to substitute eyes for eyen, thus losing some of the music, and to use the modern sustain replacing sustene thus destroying the strict rhyme.