

The Book of the Duchess
Geoffrey Chaucer



I wonder and wonder, by the light of the moon, how I stay alive, for I can hardly sleep at all, day or night. I have so many idle thoughts, all for lack of sleep, that, I swear, I care about nothing at all--whether anything comes or goes. There is nothing dear nor despised for me--it's all alike to me--joy or sorrow, it doesn't matter. For I feel nothing about anything, as if I am some sort of dazed thing, always on the brink of falling over; for sorrowful visions and images are always and everywhere fully in my mind. 15

And well you should know, it is against nature to live this way, for nature would not allow any earthly creature to endure for such a long time to be without sleep and in sorrow. And as I can not sleep, neither by night nor morning, I am melancholy and afraid that I shall die. Lack of sleep and heaviness¹ have slain my spirit of liveliness, so that I have lost all joy and vigor. My head is so full of fantasies that I don't know what's best to do. 29

But one might ask me why I can not sleep and what is wrong with me. But nonetheless, whoever asks this truly wastes his question. I, myself, can not tell why. But surely, the truth is that I maintain it is a sickness, I suppose, that I have suffered these eight years; and yet my remedy is never the nearer, for there is but one physician who can heal me--but enough about that. Let's pass over this until later. (What will not come about must be left behind.) It's best to return to our first subject. 43

So, recently, the other night, when I saw that I could not sleep, I sat up in my bed and bid someone to bring me a book², a romance. And he brought it to me to read and drive the night away; for it seemed to me a better activity than playing either at chess or backgammon. And in this book were written fables that clerks and other poets had in old times (when people loved the law of nature) put into rhyme to be read and remembered. This book spoke primarily of

queen's lives and king's lives, and many other smaller matters. 59

Among all this I found a tale that seemed to me an amazing thing. This was the tale. There was a king named Ceyx, and he had a wife, the best who ever lived, and this queen was named Alcyone. So it happened soon thereafter, this king would venture over the sea. To tell it shortly, when he was thus at sea, such a tempest rose up that their mast was broken and it toppled. It cleft their ship in two and drowned them all. They were never found, as the book says, ship nor man nor nothing else. In this way this King Ceyx lost his life. 75

Now, to speak of Alcyone, his wife: this lady, who was left at home, wondered why the king didn't come home, for it was a long time. Soon her heart began to grieve, as she believed more and more that he did not fare well. She so longed for the king that it is a pitiful thing to tell the exceedingly sorrowful life that she, this noble wife, had, for, alas, she loved him best of all. 87

Soon she sent messengers to seek him both east and west, but they found nothing. "Alas!" she said, "that I was created! If only I could know whether or not my lord, my love, is dead. Surely, I will never eat one crumb of bread, I make a vow to my god here, unless I might hear of my lord!" Such sorrow this lady took to herself that, truly, I, the person who wrote this book, had such pity and such sorrow to read of her sorrow that, I swear, I fared all the worse the entire morning afterwards to think about her sorrow. 100

So when this lady received no word and as no man had found her lord, very often she swooned and cried "Alas!" When she was nearly out of her mind for sorrow, she could think of only one plan of action; she set down on her knees and wept so tenderly that it was a pity to hear. "O, mercy, sweet lady dear!" she said to Juno³, her goddess, "Help me out of this distress, and give me grace to see my lord soon, or to know where he may be, or how he fares, or in what manner, and I shall make you a sacrifice and become wholly yours, with good will, body, heart, and all. And, if you would, lady sweet, please send me grace to sleep, and dream in my sleep a clear vision whereby I may know for certain whether my lord is alive or dead." 121

With that word she hung down her head and fell a-swoon, as cold as stone. Her women caught her up quickly, undressed her, and brought her to bed, and she, exhausted from weeping and lack of sleep, was so

¹ Heaviness. Spiritual heaviness (melancholy).

² Book. Probably Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

³ Juno. The goddess of women and the wife of Jupiter. Also known as Hera.

weary that a dead sleep fell on her before she noticed, thanks to Juno, who had heard her prayer and made her fall straight asleep. For as Alcyone prayed, just so was the deed done; for Juno immediately called her messenger⁴ to do her errand, and he came without hesitation. 134

When he had come, she instructed him thus: "Go quickly," said Juno, "to Morpheus--you know him well, the god of sleep. Now listen carefully and remember well! Say this on my behalf: that he must go fast into the Great Sea⁵, and bid him that, above all, he take up Ceyx, the king's, body, which lies so pale and lacking all color. Bid him creep into that body and make it go to Alcyone the queen, where she lies alone, and show it to her briefly, so that there is no denying how he was drowned days ago. And make the body speak just as it used to do when it was alive. Go now quickly, and hurry!" 152

This messenger took leave, went upon his way, and never stopped until he came to the dark valley that stood between two rocks where there never grew wheat nor grass nor trees nor nothing that was anything. There was no beast, man, or anything else,, but there were, running down from the cliffs, a few springs which made a lifeless, sleeping sound. And the waters ran down next to a cave that was carved under a rock amidst the deep valley. There these gods, Morpheus and Eclympasteyr (the god of sleep's son), who sleep and do no other work, lie and sleep. This cave was also as dark as the pit of hell all around. They had the fine leisure to snore away, as if to contend over who could sleep best. Some hung their chin upon their breast and slept upright, their head hidden, and some lay undressed in their bed and slept all day long. 177

This messenger came flying fast and cried, "Awake! Awake now!" It was for nought: none heard him there. "Awake!" he said, "who is lying there?" And he blew his horn right in their ears, and cried "Awake!" extremely loud. This god of sleep looked up with his one eye and asked, "Who calls there?" 185

"It is I," said this messenger. "Juno instructed that you should go." And he told him what he should do (as I have told you before--there is no need to rehearse it again) and went his way when he had said this. Immediately this god of sleep jumped out of his slumber and started to go, and did as he had been bidden to do: he took up the drowned body and bore it forth to Alcyone, his wife the queen, where she lay, exactly three hours before dawn, and stood at the foot

of her bed. And he called her by her very name and said, "My sweet wife, Awake! Leave your sorrowful life, for in your sorrow there lies no remedy; for, surely, sweet, I am surely dead. You shall never see me alive. But, good sweet heart, see that you bury my body, for at a certain time you can find it beside the sea. Farewell, sweet, my world's bliss! I pray to God to lessen your sorrow. Our bliss lasts for so short a time!" 211

With that she cast up her eyes and saw nothing. "Alas!" she said for sorrow, and died within the third morning. But what else she said in that anguish I may not tell you now--it would be too long to dwell on it. 217

I will return you to my original subject, the reason why I have told this story of Alcyone and Ceyx the king, for I dare say this much: I would have been entirely buried and dead, because of lack of sleep, if I had not read and heeded this tale. And I will tell you why: for I could not, for comfort or suffering, sleep before I had read this tale of this drowned Ceyx the king and of the gods of sleeping. When I had read this tale well and looked over every bit of, it seemed amazing to me that it would be so, for I had never heard mention before then of any gods that could make people sleep, nor to wake, for I had known only one god. 237

And in my amusement I said then (and yet I had little desire to play) rather than I should so die through lack of sleep, I would give this Morpheus, or his goddess, Lady Juno, or some other creature, I care not who--"Make me sleep and have some rest, and I will give him, or her, the best gift anyone ever hoped to receive. And into his possession, immediately, if he will make me sleep a little, I will give him a feather-bed of down of pure white doves, arrayed with gold and finely covered in fine black satin from abroad, and many pillows, and every pillowcase of linen from Reynes⁶, to sleep softly--he will not need to toss and turn so often. And I will give him everything that belongs to a bedchamber, and all his rooms I will have painted with pure gold and arrayed with many matching tapestries. All this shall he have (if only I knew where his cave is) if he can make me sleep soon, as he did for the goddess, queen Alcyone. And thus this same god, Morpheus, may gain from me more rewards than he ever won; and to Juno, who is his goddess, I shall so do, I believe, whatever will please her." 269

⁴ Messenger. Probably Iris, as mentioned in Chaucer's sources.

⁵ Great Sea. The Mediterranean.

⁶ Reynes. In France. Famous for its textiles.

I had hardly said that word, exactly as I have told it to you, that suddenly, I know not how, such a desire overtook me to sleep that I fell asleep right on my book, and then I dreamed so inwardly sweet a dream, so wonderful a dream that I believe that no one has ever had the insight to interpret my dream correctly. No, not Joseph of Egypt⁷, without a doubt, who interpreted the Pharaoh's dream--no more than could the least of us; no, not even Macrobius⁸ (who wrote all of the vision that he dreamed, about King Scipio the African, the noble man, of such marvels that happened then), could even interpret my dreams, I believe. Lo, thus it was; this was my dream. 290

It seemed this way to me: that it was May, and in the dawning of day I lay (I dreamed this) in my bed all undressed and looked about, for I was waked by a great heap of small birds that had startled me out of my sleep through the sound and sweetness of their song. And, as I dreamed, they sat together upon my chamber roof outside, upon the tiles, all over, and sang, each one in its own manner, the most solemn service, in harmony, that ever a person, I believe, has heard, for some of them sang low, some high, and all of one accord. In short, in a word, there was never heard so sweet a voice unless it had been a creation of heaven--so merry a sound, so sweet the tunes, that surely I would not have believed it for all the town of Tunis⁹ unless I had heard them sing. For all of my chamber began to ring through the singing of their harmony. There was nowhere to be heard a sound half so sweet in instrument or voice, nor half as agreeable. For none of them pretended to sing, as each of them made great pains to find merry and skillful notes. They spared not their throats. 320

And the truth be told, my chamber was carefully decorated with pictures, and with glass were all the windows brightly glazed, not a flaw in any of them, so that to behold them it was a great joy. For the entire story of Troy¹⁰ was wrought in the glasswork thus: of Hector and of King Priam, of Achilles and of King

⁷ Joseph of Egypt. Interpreted the Pharaoh of Egypt's dreams. See Genesis 41.

⁸ Macrobius. *The Dream of Scipio*, the African King, was originally written by the Roman Cicero and later expanded via lengthy commentary by Macrobius. In the dream Scipio, visited by the spirit of his grandfather, is shown a vision of the universe. The topic of the work the discordant and limited nature of human existence in a world which is otherwise harmonious.

⁹ Tunis. He is punning: Tunis, tunes, towns. Tunis is in northern Africa.

¹⁰ Troy. Of the Trojan War. The ancient war between the Greeks (or Achaeans) and the Trojans, fought over Helen, wife of Menelaus, the King of Sparta, whose wife was seduced and taken by the Trojan Paris back to Troy. The story is best-known from its telling in Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid*. Hector was the military champion of Troy and son to Priam, king of Troy, who was

Laomedon, and also of Medea and of Jason, of Paris, Helen, and of Lavinia. And on all the walls were painted with fine colors the entire Romance of the Rose¹¹, both text and gloss¹². My windows were all shut, and through the glass the sun shone upon my bed with bright beams, with many pleasant golden streams. And the sky was so fair, blue and bright, the air was clear and truly temperate, for it was neither too hot nor too cold, and there was not a cloud in the sky. 343

And as I lay thus, I thought I heard a hunter attempt to blow his horn tremendously loud to tell if the horn were clear or hoarse in its sound. And I heard men, horses, hounds, and other things going up and down, and all the men speaking of hunting--how they would slay the hart with their strength, and how the hart would at length become exhausted from the hunt--I don't remember what else. 353

As soon as I heard that, how they would go a-hunting, I was rather glad, and right away I took my horse and went forth out of my chamber. I never stopped until I came to the field outside. There I overtook a great company of hunters and foresters, with many chasing hounds and tracking hounds. They rushed to the forest, and I, with them. So finally I asked one of them who led a tracking dog: "Say, fellow, who shall hunt here?" I said, and he answered, "Sir, the Emperor Octavian¹³," he said, "and he is near here." 369

"In God's name, in good time!" I said, "Let's go quickly!" and began to ride. When we came to the edge of the forest, every man right away went about doing what hunters are supposed to do. The master-hunter then, without delay, blew three notes with a great horn at the release of his hounds. Within a while the hart is sought, halooed after, and pursued for a great time; and so, at last, this hart deceived them and stole away from all the hounds a secret way. The hounds had overshot him completely and were defeated because of the lack of a scent. And so, at last, the hunter quickly blew his horn. 386

the son of Laomedon. Achilles was the military champion of the Greeks. Aeneas was the Trojan prince, nephew of Priam, who, upon the fall and destruction of Troy, sailed to Italy and founded what eventually became the Roman Empire. There he married Lavinia. Medea, magician and princess of Colchis, who married Jason, leader of the Argonauts who sought and won the Golden Fleece (with Medea's help), but later, after they were married and had two children, he deserted her. Eventually she kills Jason, his lover, and her own two children by Jason.

¹¹ *Romance of the Rose*. The most famous medieval French poem (which Chaucer translated). In this poem is contained "all things related to love".

¹² Gloss. A footnote or commentary on the text.

¹³ Octavian. Augustus Caesar. Founder of the Roman Empire, which he ruled from 27 BC until his death in 14 AD.

I walked away from my assigned tree¹⁴, and as I went, there came near me a whelp, that fawned on me as I stood there. It had followed me and did not know what to do. It came and crept toward me humbly, just as if it had known me. He held down his head and put back his ears and laid his hair down all smooth. I wanted to catch it, but quickly it fled from me and was gone. And I followed him, and it went forth down by a flowery green path, soft under my feet, thick with grass, soft and sweet, with many flowers, and rarely tread upon. So it seemed, for both Flora and Zephyrus¹⁵--the two who make flowers grow, had made their dwelling there, I believe; for it was, to behold it, as though the earth would contend to be more ornate than the heavens, as it had more flowers, seven times as many, as there are stars in the sky. It had forgotten the poverty that Winter, through his cold mornings, had made it suffer, and the sorrows he brought; all was forgotten, and that was visible, for all the woods had grown green; the sweetness of the dew had made it grow. 415

There is no need to ask me if there were many green branches or thickets of trees full of leaves; every tree stood by itself, ten to twelve feet from the next. Such great trees, such immense strength; of forty or fifty fathoms high, neatly maintained, without a stray bough or twig, with crowns equally broad and thick--they were not an inch apart, so that it was entirely shady underneath. And many harts and hinds¹⁶ were both before me and behind. The wood was full of fawns, sorrels, bucks, and does, as were there many roes, and many squirrels that sat high upon the trees and ate, making many feasts in their own fashion. In short, it was so full of beasts that, even if Albus, the noble mathematician¹⁷, were to sit in his counting house and calculate with his ten numerals--for by those numerals all may learn, if they are sharp enough, to count and calculate--he would still fail to calculate correctly the wonders I dreamed in my dream. 442

But I roamed very quickly through the wood, until at last I became aware of a man in black, who had turned his back to a huge oak tree and sat. "Lord," thought I, "who may that be? What ails him to sit here so?" Quickly I drew up close to him; then I found him sitting upright, a striking, attractive knight--so was my impression of him--well-proportioned, and moreover

rather young, twenty-four years old, with little hair in his beard, and he was clothed all in black. 457

I stalked directly behind him and I stood there as still as possible, so that, to tell the truth, he didn't see me; so he hung his head down, and with a deadly sorrowful sound he made a complaint¹⁸ of ten or twelve rhymed verses to himself, the most pitiful, the most doleful, I ever heard; for, I swear, it is a great wonder that Nature might allow any creature to have such sorrow and not be dead. So piteously pale and lacking any ruddiness, he spoke his lay, a kind of tune, without music, without song; and this was it, for I can repeat it word for word--it began like this: 474

"I am by sorrow so much undone
That I get joy forever none,
Now that I see my lady bright,
Whom I have loved with all my might,
Is from me dead and is gone.

"Alas, death, what so ails thee,
That thou wouldn't have taken me,
When thou took my lady dear,
That was so fair, so fresh, so free¹⁹,
So good that all may well see
Of all good folk she had no peer!" 486

When he had thus made his complaint, his sorrowful heart quickly became faint and his spirits grew dead; his blood had fled, for pure dread, down to his heart, to make him warm--for well it felt the heart had grief--to learn also why it was terrified, by nature, and to make it glad again, for it is the principal organ of the body. And this rush of blood made his entire hue change and grow green and pale, for there was no blood to be seen in any of his limbs. 499

As soon as I saw this--he fared so poorly, as he sat there--I went and stood right at his feet and greeted him; he spoke nothing, but argued with his own thoughts, and in his mind disputed firmly why and how his life might continue, as his sorrows seemed to him so painful and lay so coldly on his heart. So, his sorrow and gloomy thoughts made him so that he did not hear me--for he had pretty nearly lost his mind; even Pan²⁰, whom we call the god of nature, was never so disturbed for his sorrows. 513

¹⁴ Tree. He was posted, for the purpose of the hunt, at a tree, towards which, supposedly, the hart would be driven.

¹⁵ Flora and Zephyrus. Emblems of the beginning of Spring. When Flora is ravished by Zephyrus, the West Wind, the flowers return.

¹⁶ Hart and Hind. Male and female deer.

¹⁷ Albus. The inventor of Arabic numerals.

¹⁸ Complaint. A type of poetry which expresses some type of sorrow or hardship.

¹⁹ Free. Noble.

²⁰ Pan. Lost his beloved Syrinx when she was turned into the reeds. He then created a musical instrument (the pan-flute) by twining together seven reeds.

But at last, to tell the absolute truth, he became aware of me, as I stood before him and took off my hood, and had greeted him courteously and humbly, as best I knew how. He said, "I pray you, be not upset. I heard you not, to tell the truth, nor did I see you, sir, truly." 521

"Ah, good sir, it does not matter," I said, "I am quite sorry if I have at all disturbed you from your thought. Forgive me, if I have made a mistake." 525

"Yes, but it is easy to make amends," he said, "for no offense has been taken; nothing wrong has been said or done." 528

Lo, how well this knight spoke, as if it had been another person; he presented himself as neither blunt nor strange. As I noticed this, I began to acquaint myself with him, and he seemed to me, for all his suffering, so agreeable, so very knowledgeable and reasonable. Straightaway I began to search, to look where I might, for a worthy subject for discussion, so that I could get to know him better. 538

"Sir," I said, "this game is done. I maintain that this hart is gone; these hunters can find him nowhere." 541

"I do not care about that," he said; "my thoughts are not the least bit on that." 543

"By our Lord," I said, "I believe you well; that seems plain to me in your face. But, sir, will you listen to one thing? It seems to me I see you in great sorrow; but surely, sir, if you would reveal to me your woe, I would remedy it, if I can or may. You can test it by trying; for, by my word, to make you whole and well, I will give it all of my power. Please tell me of your painful sorrows; by chance it may ease your heart, which seems so sick within." 557

With that he looked on me askance, as one who says, "No, that will not be." 559

"Grant mercy, good friend," he said, "I thank you for wishing it so, but it may not be done so soon. No one may lighten my sorrow, which makes my hue to lessen and fade, and which has made me to lose my

understanding, so that I am woeful that I was ever born! Nothing can make my sorrows slide away, not all the remedies of Ovid²¹, nor Orpheus²², the god of music, nor Daedalus with his ingenious inventions²³; no physician may heal me, not Hippocrates nor Galen²⁴. Woe is me that I should live even another twelve hours! But whoever wishes to try his hand to see if his heart can have pity for my sorrow, let him see me. I am a wretch whom death has stripped naked of all the bliss that ever was made and made lowest of all creatures, so much so that I hate all my days and my nights! 580

"All my pleasures, indeed, my whole life, are loathsome to me, for myself and my welfare are at odds. Death itself is so surely my foe that if I would say I want to die, he would say no; for when I pursue him, he flees; I wish to have him, but he will not have me. This is my pain without comfort, always dying and not dead, and so much so that not even Sisyphus²⁵, who lies in hell, has no more sorrow to tell. And whosoever might come to know all my sorrow, I swear, unless he should sympathize and take pity on my painful sorrows, that man has a fiendish heart. For whosoever sees me tomorrow may say he has met with Sorrow, for I am Sorrow, and Sorrow is I. 597

"Alas! And I will tell you why: why my song is turned to lament, my laughter to weeping, my glad thoughts to sad ones; why all my work is also my idleness and my rest; why my wellness is woe, my good is harm; and why my joyful pastimes are turned into wrath, my delight into sorrow. So too my good health is turned into sickness, my security into dread, all my light to dark; my wit is folly, my day is night, my love is hate, my sleep waking, my mirth and meals are fasting; my self-confidence is turned to foolishness and I am entirely disconcerted, wherever I may be; my peace is turned into lawsuits and war. 615

"Alas, how would I ever fare in war? My boldness is turned to shame, for false Fortune has played a game of chess with me. Alas, the time it happened! The traitoress, false and full of guile, she who promises everything and delivers nothing, who walks upright and still limps, who squints so foully and still looks lovely, the disdainful and gracious one, who scorns so

²¹ Ovid. Author of the *Remedies of Love*, more famous for his *Metamorphoses*.

²² Orpheus. Well-known for his love of Euridice, who, bitten by a snake, is taken to the underworld, Hades, where she is rescued by Orpheus, whose beautiful lyre music pleases (or puts to sleep) the god of the underworld. As they exit the underworld, Orpheus looks back at his wife, and she must return to Hades, where Orpheus later joins her after his own death. In the medieval version of *Sir Orfeo*, she was snatched by the fairy king, and, after the descent to the underworld, Orfeo and Heurodis live happily ever after.

²³ Daedalus. Mythical inventor (whose name means "cunning inventor"). Invented wings with which his son Icarus could fly. But Icarus flew too close to the sun, the wax on them melted, and he plunged to his death.

²⁴ Hippocrates, Galen. Famous Greek and Roman physicians. (Thus the Hippocratic Oath.)

²⁵ Sisyphus. For his misdeeds on earth, he was condemned to eternal punishment in Hades, where he rolled to the top of a hill a large stone, which when it reached the summit rolled down again.

many creatures! She is an idol of false self-portraiture, for she would gladly deceive; she is the monster's head pleasantly disguised, like a dung-heap over-strewn with flowers. Her most innate and representative quality is her lying, for that is her nature; she is false--without sincerity, lawfulness, or moderation, as she is ever laughing with one eye, and weeping with the other. Whatever rises, she knocks down. I liken her to the scorpion, a false, flattering beast, for with his head he makes merry, but as he is flattering you, he will sting and envenom you. Fortune is the hostile charity, who is always false and seems true. So she turns her false wheel around, for it never remains stationary--at one moment you are being served at the table, at another you are a servant standing by the fire. She has blinded many: she is an enchantress, who seems to be one thing and is another. 649

"The false thief! What has she done? What do you suppose? By our Lord I will tell you: she began to play with me at chess; and with her various little cheating moves, she tricked me and stole away my queen. And when I saw my queen had been taken away, alas, I could not figure out how to continue playing, but said, 'Farewell, sweet, surely, and farewell everything, now and forever!' 658

"At that moment Fortune said, 'Check her!' And check-mated me, with an errant pawn, in the mid-point of the checker board! Alas, craftier at play was she than Attalus²⁶, so was his name, who invented the game of chess. But I wish to God that I could have understood, just once or twice, the chess problems the way that the Greek Pythagoras²⁷ might have. I should have played better at chess and thereby kept my queen better. But what does it matter? For truly, I say that wish isn't worth a straw! It would have turned out no better for me, for Fortune knows so many tricks that there are few who can beguile her; and she is also the less to blame; myself, I would have done the same, as God is my witness, had I been her; she ought, I suppose, to be more excused than me. For I must say a bit more about this: had I been God and might have done as I wished when she captured my queen, I would have made the same move. For, as surely as

God may give me rest, I dare well swear she took the best. But through that move I have lost my bliss; alas, that I was born! 686

"Forevermore, I truly believe, in spite of all my wishes, my joy is entirely reversed; but yet, what can I do? By our Lord, the only option seems to be to die soon. For I care nothing about anything, but live and die right in this thought; for there is no planet in the firmament, nor in the air nor in the earth or elements, that does not give me a gift of weeping when I am alone. For when I consider everything, how there is nothing owing to me in matters of sorrow, and how there exists no merriment that may relieve me of my distress, and how I have lost all my contentment, and how for all that I have no delight, then may I say I have absolutely nothing. And when all this comes into my mind, alas, then I am overcome! For whatever is done can not be changed. I have more sorrow than Tantalus²⁸." 709

And when I heard him tell this tale so pitifully, as I have told you, hardly could I remain there longer, as it gave my heart so much woe. "A, good sir," I said, "do not say so! Have some pity on your Nature that formed you as a creature. Remember Socrates²⁹, for he considered anything that Fortune could do to be worth three straws." 719

"No," he said, "I don't think so." 720

"Why so, good sir? Yes, by God!" I said; "do not say so, for truly, even if you had lost twelve queens, and you murdered yourself for sorrow, you should be damned in this case, as was Medea, who slew her children on account of Jason³⁰; and Phyllis, who was so desperate that she hung herself for Demophoun, for he had broken his appointed day to come to her. Another such rage had Dido, the queen of Carthage, who, because Aeneas was false to her slew herself--for which she was a fool³¹! And Echo died because Narcissus would not love her³², and likewise have many others done such folly; and Samson, who slew himself with a pillar, died for Dalilah³³. But there is no

²⁶ Attalus. Attalus Philometer, king of Cappadocia

²⁷ Pythagoras. Greek philosopher and ruler who greatly advanced fields of mathematics and geometry.

²⁸ Tantalus. For stealing the nectar of the gods and for revealing their secrets, he was punished by being placed, hungry and thirsty, in Hades, under fruit trees which moved when he tried to pick them and in a river which receded when he tried to drink it.

²⁹ Socrates. Greek philosopher who argued that self-control, not Fortune, brought us pleasure.

³⁰ Medea and Jason. Knowing that her children would be slain by Jason's followers--since she had just slain Jason (unfaithful to her) and his bride--Medea slew her children.

³¹ Dido and Aeneas. Their love is the topic of the opening books of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Though he pledged himself to Dido, Aeneas deserted her when he was reminded of his divine mission to found Rome.

³² Echo and Narcissus. Narcissus, a beautiful youth, would love none but hit own reflection in the water. Echo loved him but died in despair because her love was unrequited.

³³ Samson and Dalilah. Biblical story in which the strong man Samson is betrayed by the enemy Dalilah, who seduces him to find out the secret of his strength (his hair).

man alive today who would undergo such woe for a queen!" 741

"Why so?" he said, "it is not so. You know full little what you mean by your words; I have lost more than you think." 744

"Lo, tell me how that may be?" I said; "Good sir, tell me entirely, how, why, by what cause, and in what ways you have thus lost your bliss." 748

"Gladly," he said; "come sit down! I'll tell you upon the condition that you shall wholly, with all your wit, carry out your intention to listen carefully to it." 752

"Yes, sir." 753

"Swear your promise to do so." 753

"Gladly." 754

"Then you better keep your word!" 754

"I shall, with great joy, God save me, wholly, with all the wit I have, listen to you as well as I can." 757

"In God's name!" he said, and began. "Sir," he said, "ever since I first could in my youth by learning or natural understanding in any way comprehend what love was, doubtless, I have ever since been a vassal to and paid tribute to Love, with entirely good intentions, and with great pleasure become his servant, body, heart, and soul, with good will. All this I committed to his service and did homage to him as my lord; and I prayed to him devoutly that he might employ my heart in such a way that it would be a delight to him and an honor to my dear lady. 774

"And I remained in his service many years before my heart was set anywhere in particular, and I knew not why; I believe it came to me naturally. Perhaps I was most capable in this respect, as is a white wall or slate, for it is ready to accept and receive anything that one will put there, whatever one wishes to paint or portray, no matter how elaborate the works may be. 784

"And at this time I fared well, so that I was able to have learned all about love, and I learned it as well or better than any other art or science; as love always came first in my mind, I never forgot it. I chose love as my first craft; therefore it has remained with me. Since I took it up at such a young age, my heart had no trouble with it, and time did not erase it, as I had

studied too much for that to happen. Up to that time, Youth, my governess, instructed me in idleness; for it was in my early youth, and I knew very little worth knowing then, for all my works were impermanent at that time, and all my thoughts were changeable. Everything that I knew then was equally good; but that is how it was. 804

"It happened that I came one day into a place where I saw truly the fairest company of ladies assembled in one place that ever a man had seen with eye. Shall I call it chance or grace that brought me there? No, only Fortune, who is so accustomed to lie, the false perverse traitress! I wish to God I could call her worse, for now she makes me woeful, and I will soon tell you why. 816

"Among these ladies, to tell the truth, I saw one who was like none of the rest; for I dare swear, without a doubt, that as the summer's bright sun is fairer, clearer, and has more light than any other planet in the heavens, the moon or the seven stars³⁴, so had she, for all the world, surmounted them all in beauty, in demeanor, in graciousness, in stature, in cheerfulness--in short, in excellence so well bestowed upon her--what more can I say? By God and his twelve apostles, this was my sweet, her very self. She had such a steadfast countenance, such noble deportment and bearing, and Love, who had listened so carefully to my request, had looked upon me so quickly, that she was, so help me God, so swiftly caught in my mind that I didn't need to ask for advice from anywhere, but only looked to her and to my heart; for when her eyes so gladly beheld my heart, I believe, my own thought then, without a doubt, said it would be better to serve her for nothing than to serve another and be well-rewarded. And it was so, for I will tell you why right now in full detail. 847

"I saw her dance so becomingly, to sing and join in carols so sweetly, to laugh and play so womanly, to carry herself so graciously, and to speak so friendly and kindly, that surely I believe that never was seen so blissful a treasure as she. For every hair on her head, to tell the truth, was not red or yellow or brown; it seemed most like gold. 858

"And what eyes my lady had! Stately, kind, glad, sincere, and true, well-proportioned, and not too wide. Thus her eyes looked directly, not aside or askance, but so carefully settled on things that they entirely ennobled everything they beheld. Her eyes seemed to say that she would have mercy³⁵ on me--fools would

³⁴ Seven stars. Probably the seven other known heavenly bodies in the Milky Way. Or, perhaps the Pleiades.

³⁵ Mercy. In the language of courtly love, for a woman to have mercy on a man is to allow him fully into her heart.

think so--but she would never do so hastily. But her look was not counterfeit; it was her own pure way of looking, a way in which the goddess, Lady Nature, had made her eyes open and close moderately; for even if she was delighted, her glances were not spread about foolishly or wildly, even if she was being playful; but, it seemed to me, her eyes said, 'By God, all of my ill-will is gone!' 877

"In this way she loved to live so fully that dullness was afraid of her. She was not too sober nor too glad; in all things she had more moderation, I believe, than any other creature. She hurt many men with her look, but that sat lightly on her heart, for she knew nothing of their thoughts; but whether she knew it or not, she nonetheless considered it as much as she would a piece of straw! To get her love, no nearer was he who dwelled at home than he who was in India; the first in line was always the last. But she loved good people, above all others, as one may love his brother; and she was very generous in this kind of love, especially in appropriate times and places. 894

"But what a face had she! Alas, my heart is so woeful that I can't describe it! I lack both the English and the wit to unfold it fully; and my spirits are also too dull for me to devise so great a thing. I have no wit that can suffice to comprehend her beauty. But I dare say this much, that she had a fresh, lively complexion, and every day her beauty renewed. And her face was nearly the best of all, for surely Nature had such desire to make that beautiful that truly she was the chief example and pattern of Nature's beauty--and of all her work; for though her image seems so dark and distant, I think I see her always. And, moreover, even if everyone who ever lived were now alive, they would be unable to discover any fault, any wicked sign, in her face, for it was sincere, honest, and kind. 918

"And such a fine, soft voice had my sweet one, the savior³⁶ of my life! So friendly, and so well-instructed, so well-grounded in reason, and so agreeable to all good people that, I dare well swear, by the cross, there was never found such eloquent speech, nor so sweet a tongue, nor one that scorned others less, nor could heal them more nor less falseness in her word, that in her simple promise alone was found as true as any bond or oath from any man's hand; nor could she chide anyone, not even one word. (I swear by the holy mass--even if the Pope himself sang it--that there was never any man nor woman harmed by her tongue; and as for

³⁶ Savior. Chaucer uses the word "leche," which means Physician or healer.

her, all harm was hidden from her.) The whole world knows this well. 938

"But such a lovely neck had that sweet one, every inch perfectly shaped, without a blemish. It was white, smooth, straight, and even, without hollows or collar-bone, as it seems she had none. Her throat, as I remember, seemed a round tower of ivory, full, but not too full. 947

"And she was called the good faire "White"; truly that was my lady's name. She was both fair and bright; there was nothing inaccurate about her name. She had nice soft shoulders and a long body, and arms as well; every limb was well-rounded and fleshy, but not too much so; nice white hands, and red nails; round breasts; and firm broad hips; and a straight, flat back. I knew of no other fault, as far as I could tell, other than her limbs were not perfectly in proportion. 960

"She knew how to present herself so well, when she pleased, that I dare say that she was like a bright lamp from which everyone might receive an abundance of light, and never less. In manners and behavior my lady was so excellent that anyone who caught a glimpse of her remembered her fully; for I dare well swear, if she had been one among ten thousand standing in a row at a feast, she would have been, at the least, a chief paragon in the eyes of all; for wherever people gathered together without her, it seemed to me that the company was entirely lacking, like a crown without gemstones. Truly she was to my eye the solitary Phoenix of Arabia³⁷, for there is only one of those, and I know of none other like her. 984

"To speak of goodness, truly she had as much graciousness as ever had Esther³⁸ in the Bible, and more, if more were possible. And, to tell the truth, she had in this way a wit so congenial, so fully inclined to goodness, that all her thoughts were fixed, by the Cross, without malice and upon gladness; and thus I never saw one less harmful than she. I don't mean that she did not know what harm was, or else she would not have known so well what good was. 998

"And truly, speaking of truth, if she had not truth, it would have been a pity. She had such a great portion of truth--and I dare well swear it--that Truth himself had chosen her, over one and all, as his principal manor and resting place. And thus she gracefully and calmly persevered, reigning the most moderately I

³⁷ Phoenix. In legends of the Phoenix, the bird which consumes itself in fire then is reborn of its own ashes, there is much emphasis placed on its solitary nature.

³⁸ Esther. Biblical model of wifely virtue. See Book of Esther.

have ever seen, so kind and tolerant was her mind; and she gladly understood reason; and, of course, she knew goodness well. She used to do good deeds gladly; these were her custom in everything. 1014

“Since she loved justice so well, she would do no wrong to anyone. No creature could do any shame to her, as she loved and honored her own name. She would not encourage anyone with false hopes, nor, be sure of this, would she strive to hold any creature in suspense with half-truths or false-seeming--unless anyone would lie about her. She sent no men to Rumania, Prussia, Mongolia, Alexandria, or Turkey, nor bid him to rush off and go bare-headed into the Gobi Desert and come home the long way, by the Kara-Nor, and say, ‘Sir, be sure that you have praiseworthy deeds to report before you return here!’ She used no such petty tricks. 1033

“But why do I tell my tale? For this very reason, as I have said: my love was entirely set on her. For surely she was, this sweet wife, my source of contentment, my joy, my life, my good fortune, my health, and all my blessing, the welfare of the world, and my goddess, and I was wholly hers, body and soul.” 1041

“By our Lord,” I said, “I well believe you! Assuredly, your love was well bestowed; I don’t know how you might have done better.” 1044

“Better? No creature has ever done half so well,” he said. 1045

“I understand it well, sir,” I said, “by God!” 1046

“No, *believe* it well!” 1047

“Sir, yes, I do; I believe you well, that truly you thought that she was the best, and the fairest of all to behold, for anyone who looked on her with your eyes.” 1051

“With *my eyes*? No, *all* saw her said and swore it was so. And even if they had not, I would still have loved my noble lady best. And even if I had had all the beauty that Alcibiades³⁹ ever had; all the strength of Hercules; all the worthiness of Alexander⁴⁰; all the

riches that ever were in Babylon, Carthage, Macedonia, Rome, or Ninevah; all the courage of Hector⁴¹ (whom Achilles slew at Troy, and so too was he slain in a temple, for both he and Antilochus were slain--so says Dares Frygius--for the love of Polixena)⁴²; or all the wisdom of Minerva, I would forever, without a doubt, have loved her, for I must. 1074

“‘*Must*?’ No, truly, I speak nonsense now; Not ‘*must*’-and I will explain why: because my heart *wished* it through good *will*, and because I was obliged to love her as the fairest and the best. She was as good, God rest my soul, as ever was Penelope⁴³ of Greece, or as the noble wife Lucrece⁴⁴, who was the best (so says the Roman, Titus Livus⁴⁵). She was as good, though nothing like her, except in goodness (though their stories are true); nonetheless she was as faithful as she. 1087

“But why don’t I tell you about the first time I saw my lady? I was rather young, to tell the truth, and still in great need of learning; when my heart would yearn to love, it was a great enterprise. As fitting with my young childly mind, I boldly set all my mental energy, as well as my brain could manage, on loving her in the best way I knew how, to honor and serve her in the best way I knew at the time, I swear, without being false or slothful in any way, for I wished to see her more than anything. So greatly did seeing her affect me that when I first saw her in the morning I was cured of all my sorrow for the entire day; even into the evening it seemed nothing could grieve me, regardless of how painful my sorrows might be. And yet she sat so in my heart that, I swear, I would not for all the world leave this lady out of my thought; no, truly!” 1111

“Now, I swear, sir,” I said, “it seems to me you are in such a position to make your confession without repentance.” 1114

“Repentance? No, fy!” he said, “Should I now repent my love? No, surely! I’d be worse off than

³⁹ Alcibiades. Athenian politician, remembered mostly for his good looks.

⁴⁰ Alexander. Alexander the Great of Macedon, ruler of much of the Eastern Mediterranean in the Fourth Century B.C.

⁴¹ Hector. Trojan hero. His death at the hands of Achilles is the climax of *The Iliad*.

⁴² Antilochus and Achilles. For the killing of Troilus and Hector, they were ambushed at the temple of Apollo where Achilles wished to marry Polixena.

⁴³ Penelope. Faithful wife of Odysseus, hero of *The Odyssey*. She waited him, though he was gone for over ten years and many men sought her hand.

⁴⁴ Lucrece. Faithful wife of Collatinus. Raped by Superbus, who cut out her tongue. She revealed the crime to him in her weaving, then took her life. Superbus’ crime was then revenged.

⁴⁵ Titus Livius. Livy (59 BC – AD 17), author of *Ab Urbe Condita* (*From the Founding of the City*), which included the story of Lucrece, or Lucretia.

Achitophel⁴⁶, or Antenor⁴⁷, (the traitor who betrayed Troy), or the false Ganelon⁴⁸, (who secured the treason of Roland and Oliver). No, while I am alive here, I will not forget her--nevermore." 1125

"Now, good sir," I said then, "You have told me well before; there's no need to repeat again how you first saw her, and where. But would you tell me the manner in which you first spoke with her--this I ask you--and how she first came to know your thoughts, whether you loved her or not? And tell me also what you have lost, as I heard you mention earlier." 1136

"Yes!" he said, "you know not what you mean by your words; I have lost more than you think." 1138

"What loss is that?" I said then; "Will she not love you? Is it so? Or have you done something wrong, that she has left you? Is it this? For God's love, tell me everything." 1143

"Before God," he said, "I shall do so. I say, just as I have said, on her was all my love bestowed, and yet she did not know it, not a bit, not for a long time, believe me! For be assured, I wouldn't dare, not for all this world, reveal my thoughts to her, nor would I have upset her, truly. Would you like to know why? She had control over my body: as she held my heart, I could not escape. But to keep myself from idleness, I went about my business in making songs, as best I knew how, and often I sang them aloud; and I made a great number of songs, although I could not make them so well, as I didn't know all the art of it, as did Lamech's son Tubal⁴⁹, who originated the art of song; for as his brother's hammers rang up and down upon the anvil, from this he took the first tune--though Greeks say it was Pythagoras⁵⁰ who was the founder of the art (Aurora⁵¹ says so); but what does that matter? Nevertheless, I made songs from my feelings to gladden my heart. And listen, here was the first of all--and perhaps the worst of all: 1174

'Lord, it makes my heart light
When I think on that sweet wight⁵²
Who is so lovely to see;
And wish to God it might so be

⁴⁶ Achitophel. Counseled Absalom to rebel against his father David. The rebellion failed and Absalom was killed in the Battle of Ephraim Wood. See 2 Samuel 17.

⁴⁷ Antenor. His treachery caused the downfall of Troy. As a peace offering, he sent the statue of Pallas Athene, the patron of Troy, to Ulysses.

⁴⁸ Ganelon. His treachery caused the great French hero Roland to be slain by the Saracens, as told in *The Song of Roland*.

⁴⁹ Lamech's son Tubal. Actually Jubal: called the "father of all such as handle the harp and organ" (Genesis 4.21).

That she would have me for her knight,
My lady, who is so fair and bright!' 1180

"Now have I told you, to tell the truth, my first song. One day I thought to myself about the woe and sorrow I suffered to that point for her, and yet she knew nothing about it, nor did I yet tell her my thoughts. 1186

"'Alas,' I thought, 'I know no remedy; unless I tell her, I am nothing but dead; and if I tell her, to tell the very truth, I am afraid she will be upset with me. Alas, what shall I do then?' 1191

"I was so woeful in this debate, it seemed my heart would burst in two! So, at long last, to tell the truth, I determined that Nature never formed in any creature so much beauty, truly, and goodness, without mercy. In hope of that, I made my speech to her, but I told it badly and in a way that I never should have: for necessity, and against my own advising, I had to tell her, or die. I can hardly remember how I began; I can retell it only hazily; and, so help me God, I think it was an unlucky day--there were *ten* wounds of Egypt that day⁵³--for I skipped, out of pure fear, over many words in my speech, lest my words would be poorly said. With sorrowful heart and deadly wounds, meekly and quaking for pure fear and shame, and stammering in my speech for fear, and my hue growing entirely pale--I often grew both pale and red--bowing to her, I hung my head; I dared not once look on her, for my wits, manners, and everything were gone. I said 'Mercy!' and no more. It was not amusing; it sat sorely on me. 1220

"So at last, to tell the truth, when my heart returned to me, to summarize, with all my heart I beseeched her to be my sweet lady; and swore, and promised her heartily to be always steadfast and true, and to love her always newly, freshly, and never have any other lady, and to preserve her honor, as best I could. I swore this to her: 'For your honor is all that ever there is for me evermore, my heart sweet! And I'll never be false to you, unless I am dreaming, so help me dear God!' 1235

⁵⁰ Pythagoras. Greek philosopher and ruler who greatly advanced fields of mathematics and geometry.

⁵¹ Aurora. Twelfth-century versified Latin paraphrase and commentary on parts of the Bible by Peter of Riga (1140-1209).

⁵² Wight. Creature, person.

⁵³ Ten wounds of Egypt. According to a late medieval belief, there were two unlucky days (*di[e]s mal* in French) per month, on which people were afflicted with wounds or plagues (as were the Egyptians in the time of Abraham). Black is having ten of these days at once.

“And when I had completed my speech, God knows, she valued it not so much as a straw, so it seemed. To be brief, her answer, truly, was this--I can not now counterfeit her words, but this was the main point of her answer: she utterly said ‘No.’ Alas, the sorrow and the woe I suffered that day, so much so that truly Cassandra⁵⁴, who so bewailed the destruction of Troy and of Ilium, never had such sorrow as I did then. I dared not say another word at that point, for pure fear, but stole away; and thus I lived many a day, so that truly I had no need to go further than the head of my bed to seek sorrow; I found sorrow readily every morning, as my love for her never wavered. 1267

“So it happened, another year passed, and I thought I would try once to let her know and comprehend my woe; and she came to understand well that I intended nothing but good, and honor, and to preserve her name above all things; and that I dreaded her disdain; and was so eager to serve her; and it would be a pity if I should die, since, surely, I intended no harm. So when my lady knew all this, she gave me the noble gift of her mercy entirely, without ever any offense to her honor. Without a doubt, I would have it no other way. 1272

And with that she gave me a ring; I think it was the most memorable thing; of course, there’s no need to ask if my heart grew glad! So help me God, I was quickly raised, as if from death to life; of all possible fortunes, I found the best of all, the gladdest, and the most enjoyable. For truly that sweet creature, when I was wrong and she was right, would always forgive me so kindly and graciously. In all my youth, in all events, she took me into her service. And there she was always so true, and our joy was ever renewed; our hearts were so equally paired that never would either of us be contrary to the other for any woe. For truly, both our hearts shared one bliss and one sorrow alike; they were both glad and sad the same; all was one for us, without a doubt. And thus we lived many years so well I can not tell how.” 1297

“Sir,” I said, “where is she now?” 1298

“Now?” he said, and stopped at once. With that he grew as dead as stone and said, “Alas, that I was born! That was the loss that I told you before that I had lost. Remember how I said earlier, ‘You know full little what you mean by your words; I have lost more than you think.’ God knows, alas! She was that very person!” 1307

“Alas, sir, how? How may that be?” 1308

“She is dead!” 1309

“No!” 1309

“Yes, by my word!” 1309

“Is that your loss? By God, that is such a pity!” 1310

And with that word they quickly began to sound the hunting signal to head home; all the hart-hunting was done for that time. 1313

With that I thought that this king began to ride homeward to an adjacent place which was a short way from us--a long castle with white walls, by Saint John, on a rich hill, so I dreamed; but thus it happened. I dreamed just as I tell you: in the castle there was a bell, and as it struck twelve, I awoke and found myself lying in my bed. And the book I had read, of Alcyone and Ceyx the king, and of the gods of sleep, I found wide open in my hand. I thought, “This is so strange a dream that I will, in the course of time, attempt to put this dream into rhyme as best I can, and do so soon.” 1333

This was my dream; now it is done. 1334

Translated and Edited by Gerard NeCastro
© Copyright, 2007, All Rights Reserved

Citation. Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Book of the Duchess*.
NeCastro, Gerard, ed. and trans. eChaucer:
<https://medievalit.com/home/eChaucer/modern-translations/the-book-of-the-duchess/>

⁵⁴ Cassandra. Trojan prophetess, sister of Hector and Troilus. Was given the gift of prophesy by Apollo, who, when she spurned his

love, condemned her to the fate that no one would believe her predictions. Ilium: the citadel or fortress of Troy.

Troilus and Criseyde. The Book of the Duchess. The Parliament of Fowls. Links for further study on The Book of the Duchess. Links for further study on the works of Chaucer: Essays, introductions, summaries, backgrounds, audio files, biographies, bibliographies, etc. About The Book of the Duchess: The Book of the Duchess is the first of Chaucer's major poems. Scholars are uncertain about the date of composition.Â The poet asks the knight some questions and realizes at the end of the poem that the knight was talking symbolically instead of literally: the black knight has lost his love and lady. The poet awakes and decides that this wonderful dream should be preserved in rhyme. In the hypertext below, click on a hyperlinked word.