

The Dream Visions

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God turne us every drem to goode! — The House of Fame

What does it mean to turn a dream to good? Dreams are subject to interpretation: they can be “turned” for the better or for the worse. As a literary genre, the dream vision requires the reader to work alongside the author to extract meaning from the dream: a process that can be done well, “to goode,” or poorly. Chaucer’s *House of Fame* opens with a prayer (perhaps closer to an oath) for a good — an accurate or benevolent — interpretation that acknowledges the difficulty of finding any stable meaning in a text. In other words: God help us. This noisy opening illustrates the dynamic relation between text and commentary, central to medieval literary theory, that motivates Chaucer’s four dream visions: the *Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and *Legend of Good Women*.¹

A dream vision is a poem that relates a curious dream as a pretext for an extended poetic and philosophical discussion of a more abstract subject: usually, but not always, the nature of love. One of the first medieval examples of the genre is the *Roman de la Rose*, an extremely influential Old French poem begun by Guillaume de Lorris circa 1237 and completed by Jean de Meun circa 1278.² An allegorical treatment of the art of seduction inspired by Ovid’s *Remedia Amoris*, it concerns the efforts of Amant, the lover, to win the favor

of his beloved lady, Rose, who is sequestered in a garden. The characters he encounters on the way have such names as Daunger (Resistance) and Bel-Accueil (Fair Welcome), representing different stages of courtship. Although the *Roman* reflects the love medieval poets had for classical literature, and especially for Ovid, its focus on love and courtship illustrates the growing demand by educated audiences at court for poems written in the vernacular that reflected themselves and their own concerns. The *Roman* was a major source and model for the fourteenth-century *dits amoureux* (love stories) by such French poets as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart, and it was extremely popular in England: Chaucer translated it into English as one of his first literary projects. Following the examples of Machaut and Froissart, Chaucer and his contemporaries such as John Gower and William Langland adapted the genre of the dream vision for their own poetic purposes.

Chaucer composed his dream visions at significant stages in his public as well as literary life. The *Book of the Duchess*, his first substantial poetic work, was written sometime between 1368 and 1372, when the twenty-something Chaucer was working as a member of the household of Edward III. The *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* date from 1378–80, at the height of Chaucer's career as an international diplomat, during which time he made frequent trips to France and Italy on behalf of Richard II. The *Legend of Good Women*, written in 1386, represents a new phase: now living at some distance from the royal courts, serving as justice of the peace in rural Kent. Although each, in its own way, represents a milestone in Chaucer's successful career, a profound sense of self-consciousness, even diffidence, comes out in these poems. Chaucer is profoundly aware that he is using English to write poems that he associates with the French. Whereas such French dream visions as the *Roman de la Rose* adapt classical material to the needs of medieval readers, Chaucer's poems reveal the influence of both classical and French predecessors.³

The French origins of the dream vision genre were a constant reminder of the pervasive presence of French language and culture in England during the Middle Ages. After the Norman Conquest in 1066, the French language possessed high social, political, and literary status in England. For three hundred years, French was the language of England's royal and legal courts and the vernacular of choice in such institutions as the Church and the universities. Some of the most important literary works from this period were written in Anglo-Norman, the particular dialect of French spoken in medieval England. And many scholars believe that Chaucer's earliest poems were written in French.⁴ In the *Book of the Duchess*, the Dreamer awakens in a chamber with walls painted with scenes from the *Roman de la Rose*: a powerful visual image of the feeling of being surrounded by French sources. The experience of immersion in French literature is dramatized by the bedtime reading that typ-

ically prompts Chaucer's dream visions: they call attention to Chaucer's initial experience as a reader and an observer of the genre of the dream vision, rather than a full participant. As a result, Chaucer's dreamers often seem insecure, painfully aware of their shortcomings, and passively willing to be led and guided by the authority of others.⁵ They participate in the dream world, but they always remain a little detached from it.

An allegory of the processes of reading and writing, Chaucer's dream visions dramatize the experience of being a writer in late-fourteenth-century England. Raising questions concerning inspiration and transmission, as well as interpretation and authority, they destabilize tradition instead of reaffirming it. Highlighting the ongoing and productive tension between continental literary forms and the impulse to experiment with English poetry, and addressing the confusions as well as opportunities of cultural in-betweenness, Chaucer's dream visions explore the idea of English authorship. They move between imitation and innovation, carving out a space for Chaucer's unique contribution to the genre as an English author and, together, confronting the revolutionary idea of using the English language as a medium for courtly poetry.

The Book of the Duchess: *Love and Death*

A dream vision, by definition, requires a dream. It comes as a bit of a surprise, then, that the *Book of the Duchess* opens with a discussion of insomnia, an affliction that is, in this case, tantamount to writer's block. Rather than marveling at the dream that he has just had (as he does at the beginning of the *House of Fame*), the Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* starts off by wondering why it is that he can't dream at all. The cause of his insomnia is an eight-year-long "sickness" (line 36) that only one "phisicien" (line 39) can cure: conventional metaphors for unrequited love or an unhappy love affair. These metaphors may have appeared tired or overused, even in Chaucer's day; nevertheless, Chaucer's account of his symptoms offers a strikingly up-to-date description of depression:

... I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.
Al is ylyche good to me—
Joye or sorowe, wherso hyt be—
For I have felynge in nothyng. (lines 6–11)

With devastating simplicity, Chaucer's defines "melancholye," the medieval word for depression, as "felynge in nothing": an incapacity to be pleased, or roused, to any feeling at all. Chaucer's account of depression sets the stage for

the poem's major theme: bereavement and the loss of love. It sets the Dreamer up for his encounter with the Man in Black, who shares his symptoms. The Dreamer's experience of insomnia, moreover, works as a metaphor for his relationship to the poetic process as a whole; it is an inauspicious beginning that expresses his sense of unsuitability to the genre of the dream vision and the feeling of being out of place in the literary tradition in which he seeks a place.

Such anxieties are understandable, considering that Chaucer is writing his first major work. The *Book of the Duchess* was written to commemorate Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who died of the plague in 1368.⁶ Chaucer uses an anglicized version of her name, "White" (line 948), to identify her in the poem, and he encodes the name of her husband, John of Gaunt (who is known, throughout the poem, as the Man in Black) in the following riddling couplet: "A long castel with walles white, / Be Seynt Johan, on a ryche hill" (lines 1318–19).⁷ Chaucer's lines refer to Gaunt's first name, John, and to his titles, Duke of Lancaster (the "long castel") and Earl of Richmond (the "ryche hill").⁸ One of the seven sons of Edward III, John of Gaunt was one of the most important men in England during Chaucer's lifetime. Enriched by his marriage to Blanche, which also made him Duke of Lancaster, he was a gifted military strategist and, later, a trusted adviser to Richard II. Written early in Chaucer's career, at a time when he was working hard in the service of the king, the *Book of the Duchess* is likely a bid for attention or patronage from the court and aristocracy. Chaucer may have wished, at a purely personal level, to offer John of Gaunt consolation following his bereavement: he had served as part of John of Gaunt's army during the wars in France. However, he may also have written the poem from a distance, with the passing of the lovely Blanche providing the occasion for a more wide-ranging poetic meditation on love and death. Either way, Chaucer's efforts paid off: in 1374, John of Gaunt awarded him a life pension of ten pounds.

In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer develops the narrative persona of the outsider, in but not of the world that surrounds him, naive and easy to underestimate. This persona dovetails with the poem's relation to its literary sources, as Chaucer consistently goes against the flow in his handling of the French dream vision. For example, to pass the hours before dawn, the Dreamer asks an anonymous "oon" (line 47)—a servant, perhaps—to bring him a book, "a romaunce" (line 48). The precise definition of the book is subject to scholarly debate. What Chaucer tells us is that it contains "fables / That clerkes had in olde tyme, / And other poetes, put in rime" (lines 52–54) and that these fables concern the lives of royalty: "Of queenes lives, and of kinges" (line 58). Based on this description, some scholars identify the book as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; others

propose that the book is actually the *Ovide Moralisé*, a medieval redaction of Ovid that combined the classical story with a moral, Christian interpretation.⁹

Regardless of whether he is reading Ovid or the moralized Ovid, Chaucer's account of his reading material contains changes, omissions, and apparent misunderstandings that work against the expectations of his readers. For example, Chaucer's account of the visit of Juno's messenger to the cave of Morpheus, the god of sleep, constitutes a rather inappropriate comic addition to the story of Alcione's dream, in which her husband makes an appearance in order to inform her that he has drowned at sea. Moreover, as Chaucer tells it, the story of Ceyx and Alcione has no obvious "moral." Where medieval authors typically included extended allegorical commentaries and descriptive set pieces, the Dreamer instead draws to an abrupt conclusion: "But what she seyede more in the swow, / I may not telle yow as now; / Hyt were to longe for to dwelle" (lines 215–17). Instead of presenting an interpretation of the story as an allegory of, for example, the soul's separation from Christ, the Dreamer reads it as a source of information concerning possible cures for insomnia:

For I had never herd speke or tho
Of noo goddes that koude make
Men to slepe, ne for to wake,
For I ne knew never god but oon. (lines 234–37)

It would appear, then, that Chaucer's Dreamer is simply not getting the point. He views a well-known tale of eternal love, in which faithful spouses are tragically separated by death, through the lens of his preoccupations. This prompts him to consider what kinds of offerings he might make to persuade Morpheus to bring him sleep: a feather bed, a pillow, a beautifully furnished bedchamber (lines 245–69)?

The Dreamer's omissions and misreadings do more than make him appear foolish: they call attention to the possibility of a variety of textual interpretations, and thus imply how an "English" reading of a certain text may differ from its "French" counterparts. The dream that follows dramatizes this experience of cultural alienation. The Dreamer encounters the Man in Black, whose mournful garb and demeanor make him utterly out of place in his sunny, lush surroundings. Their dialogue, moreover, proceeds from a misunderstanding: the Dreamer is unable to comprehend the Man in Black's poetic and allusive mode of speech. The Dreamer presents the events that unfold without couching them in any kind of allegorical interpretation.

Morpheus listens to his pleas, and the Dreamer finds himself lying in bed, naked, on a bright May morning (the typical time for dream visions). He stares at the painted ceiling, with sunlight streaming in through the windows, listen-

ing to the music that wafts in from outside. These pleasurable scenes and images signal the Dreamer's entry into the conventional world of the dream vision. The sound of a hunting horn prompts him to seize the horse that appears, out of nowhere, in his bedroom, and join in the chase, and a little dog leads him to a flower-strewn grove. These events have a symbolic meaning that is suited to the genre's thematics of love: hunting deer, with the Middle English pun on "hart" and "heart," was a popular medieval metaphor for courtship, and the dog was a popular image of constancy and, specifically, marital fidelity. These are dreamy symbols of the ideals of love and marriage addressed by the Ceyx and Alcione narrative; however, we cannot expect the Dreamer to make the connection: after all, for him, it was just a story about sleep aids. Chaucer here uses the cognitive gap between the Dreamer and his dream to play with the idea of a readership who can be expected to "get it" and a narrator who doesn't.

As Chaucer develops the notion of cultural alienation to address his relationship to his literary influences, he also applies it to the subject of death and bereavement. Although Ovid's story is about eternal love, it is also about the inevitability of pain and death, and Chaucer's opening account of separation from sleep, from love, and from the beloved prepares the reader for this major theme. The Dreamer finds himself in a grove from where the pains of winter appear to have been banished:

Hyt had forgete the poverttee
That wynter, thorgh hys colde morwes,
Had mad hyt suffre, and his sorwes;
All was forgotten. (lines 410-13)

Among such images of growth and renewal lurks the Man in Black, his back to an oak tree (a symbol of long life and prosperity). When the Dreamer observes, "Hit was gret wonder that Nature / Myght suffre any creature / To have such sorwe and be not ded" (lines 467-70), he draws an intuitive connection between the experience of bereavement and death itself. Mourning his dead wife, the Man in Black appears, in terms that recall Chaucer's account of his own depression, close to death: "His hewe change and wexe grene / And pale, for ther noo blood ys sene / In no maner lym of hys" (lines 497-99). Alienated from pleasure, and even from life as it swells around him, the Man in Black performs a series of poetic lamentations that for the most part directly translate the works of Machaut and Froissart.

It often comes as a surprise to readers of the *Book of the Duchess* that so much of it is a translation. It is a kind of poetic patchwork, with the *Roman de la Rose*, Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*, and Machaut's *Jugement du Roy de*

Behaingne, *Confort d'Ami*, and *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse* (among others) providing the main swatches.¹⁰

In the first long speech, the Man in Black's description of melancholy contains a catalogue of oppositions, such as "My song ys turned to pleynnyng" (line 599), that the Italian poet, Francis Petrarch, developed to describe the experience of love-longing. He also uses the metaphor of having lost a game of chess with Fortune: a popular metaphor showcased in Machaut's *Jugement du Roy de Behaingne*. Chess jargon such as "draughtes" (aggressive moves, line 653), "fers" (queen, line 654), and "jeopardyes" (chess problems, the root of our modern "jeopardy," line 666), confirm the extent to which Chaucer is gesturing toward, and relying on, a set of borrowed lines and imported conventions to describe the Man in Black's experience.¹¹ Having reached a state of death-in-life, the Man in Black regards his world through the poetic vocabulary of past generations.

As the Man in Black's bereavement sets him apart from the wood, so his rarified language alienates him from the Dreamer. At first awestruck by the Man in Black's appearance and manner — "A wonder wel-farynge knyght, — / By the maner me thoughte so —" (lines 452-53) — the Dreamer's solicitous and deferential behavior toward a man who seems rather oblivious to him dramatizes their respective class identities. Mirroring, perhaps, Chaucer's behavior around John of Gaunt, the Dreamer is careful to mind, as it were, his p's and q's: "Y gret him as I best koude, / Debonayrly, and nothyng lowde" (lines 517-18). He immediately places himself at the Man in Black's service:

... yif that yee
Wolde ought discure me youre woo,
I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
Amende hyt . . . (lines 548-51)

However, his limitations are quite evident: although the Dreamer tries to show off his learning with a little collection of classical references to famous figures who have died for love — such as Dido, who killed herself for "fals" Aeneas, "which a fool she was!" (line 734) — he just can't figure out why the Man in Black is in such deep mourning for the loss of a chess piece. The Man in Black's recurring refrain, "Tho wost ful lytel what thou menest, / I have lost more than thou wenest" (lines 743-74, see also 1137-38 and 1305-6), protests that he is talking about more than the Dreamer could possibly know. At one level, this refrain refers to the Dreamer's literal-mindedness, which prevents him from understanding the story of Ceyx and Alcione metaphorically. On another, it calls attention to the larger lapses in understanding that take place when the Dreamer seeks to make sense of the Man in Black, who, apparently, can speak

nothing but French poetry. The Dreamer cannot understand a literary and symbolic world that is far beyond his experience.

The Dreamer's inability to understand the Man in Black's chess metaphors forces the Man in Black to say more than he intended: had his interlocutor been less obtuse he could have left it at the chess pieces, with an unspoken understanding. However, the Dreamer forces the Man in Black to move out of the realm of literary allusion, and into vivid autobiographical detail. Thanks to the Dreamer's questions, we are treated to the details of her compelling eyes, swanlike neck, and perfect proportions, her intelligence, excellent manners, and, most important, of the sheer pleasure he derived from her presence:

I sawgh hyr daunce so comlily,
Carole and synge so swetely,
Laughe and pleye so womanly,
And loke so debonairly,
So goodly speke and so frendly,
That certes y trowe that evermor,
Nas seyn so blysful a tresor. (lines 848-54)

She was the only one for him, she was his "soleyn fenix of Arabye" (line 982). But, because he was immature ("in my firste youthe," line 799), he could not speak his love, and worshipped her, for years, from afar. With details that bring this paragon to life, reflecting on her joie de vivre, "Therwith hir lyste so wel to lyve, / That dulnesse was of hir adrad" (lines 848-50), and recalling how she got more beautiful every day (line 906) the Man in Black explains how his beloved interfered with his will to death.

Many scholars discuss the extent to which the Dreamer is playing a role, and for whose benefit.¹² For some, the Dreamer is pretending to be a little daft in order to draw out the Man in Black; others believe it simply takes the Dreamer that long to understand what the Man in Black is saying. It seems that the Dreamer both knows and doesn't know: he understands about loneliness, but it is not quite the same as bereavement. He understands about not being able to have what you want (after all, he can't sleep) but he doesn't know what it is not to have whom you want, what it is to be separated from your lover forever. We can compare the Dreamer's situation to his bedtime reading: he may comprehend the words, but he doesn't necessarily get their meaning. However, the Man in Black also has something to learn from this encounter. The Dreamer's slow discovery that White is dead works in tandem with the Man in Black's psychological process of letting go. As he relives these joyous images of White, he is reconciled to the fact of her passing. When the Dreamer asks, "where is she now?" (line 1298), the Man in Black is forced to say, bluntly, "She ys

deed!" (line 1309). The Dreamer has had to wring it out of him. But, finally, the Man in Black is speaking with an unadorned honesty that previously had eluded him.

A horn sounds, heralding the end of the "hert-hunting" (line 1313). This brings to a close the literal hunt that frames the poem, as well as the quest, on the part of the Dreamer and the Man in Black, for their heart's delight. As the Man in Black returns to his "long castel" on the "ryche hill," he responds to the harsh truth of love's impermanence by retreating behind the illusory permanence of lands and a title. As the Dreamer awakens with the book on his lap, he, too, returns to the life he momentarily left behind. But now he knows how to read the story of Ceyx and Alcione. He has learned that books are for more than curing insomnia: they teach us about life and death, love and loss, and about the connections between ecstasy and pain and between sorrow and sweetness. Most important, they show us the virtue of honesty.

The House of Fame: *Love and Lies*

The *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* are generally believed to be the poetic products of a series of trips to Italy that Chaucer made in the 1370s.¹³ Diplomatic affairs in Lombardy would have given him access to the great libraries of his hosts, the Visconti. In Florence on government business, Chaucer would have been exposed to the works of Petrarch (1304-74) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), as well as with those of the revered poet of the previous century, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). It is tempting to imagine, however unlikely, that Chaucer actually met Petrarch and Boccaccio on his first trip to Italy, in 1373. They were alive and living in Florence at the time. At the very least, they all breathed the same air.

In the absence of more specific evidence, it is this tangible Italian influence that scholars use to date the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*. Details such as the "man of gret auctorite" (line 2158) who is supposed to deliver tidings of love at the end of the *House of Fame*, and the deferred marriage decision that concludes the *Parliament of Fowls*, have led scholars to suppose that the poems were written in response to the marriage negotiations of King Richard II to Anne of Bohemia in 1380, as well as, possibly, to discussions about the betrothal of John of Gaunt's daughter, Philippa, to King John I of Portugal.¹⁴ This is a time in Chaucer's life when he was deeply invested in the events of court: his continental travels, to France as well as to Italy, and his involvement in high-level negotiations of everything from marriage to commerce produced poems that are worldly, sophisticated, and notoriously difficult to pin down.

A combination of Italian and French literary influences produce the mutually reinforcing preoccupations of love and empire that motivate the *House of Fame*, just as the international intrigue of an ambassadorial trip to Italy was complemented by the marriage issue at home in England.¹⁵ The *House of Fame* is traditionally viewed as marking the end of Chaucer's "French" period, represented by the *Book of the Duchess*, and the beginning of his "Italian" period, which includes *Troilus and Criseyde*. Yet these poems reflect less a self-conscious movement away from the French and toward the Italian, than an accumulation of their influences. The *House of Fame* replaces the cozy bedroom and intimate forest bower of the *Book of the Duchess* with the landscape of the skies and desert. Although its interest in the allegorical depiction of emotional conditions retains the amatory preoccupations of the *Roman de la Rose*, its emphasis on external, epic action is more consistent with Chaucer's Italian sources. The poem's structure reflects the more expansive framework of Dante's *Commedia*, which narrates the poet's journey from a "selva oscura" (dark wood) to hell, through purgatory, and finally to paradise.¹⁶ The strange tutelary relationship between Chaucer and the Eagle, who picks him up in his talons and carries him to the heavens, also comes from the *Commedia*, in which the poet Dante makes his journey in the company of his literary idol, Virgil, whose epic *Aeneid* charts the foundation of Rome. The Eagle, who symbolizes clarity of vision and power, reinforces the authority of the poem's classical roots.¹⁷ Yet Chaucer is not content merely to emulate. The *House of Fame* transforms the formal, serious dialogues between Dante and Virgil in the *Commedia* into comic banter, as the Eagle complains about the weight of his charge and professes authority (albeit flimsy) on a variety of topics.

However, Chaucer uses the *House of Fame* not to switch allegiances from France to Italy but, instead, to make a declaration of literary independence. In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer was content to translate and imitate literary sources; in the *House of Fame*, he calls these authorities into question. From the beginning, therefore, Chaucer distinguishes the *House of Fame* from the *Book of the Duchess*. Unlike his insomniac counterpart in the *Book of the Duchess*, the dreamer in the *House of Fame* accomplishes the task of getting to sleep in a mere couplet: "Whan hit was myght to slepe I lay / Ryght ther as I was wont to done" (lines 112-13). Whereas the Man in Black memorializes his dead wife with decorous metaphors in the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer describes the goddess Venus quite simply, even bluntly, as "naked fletynge in a see" (line 133) in the *House of Fame*. And while Chaucer expects the readers of the *Book of the Duchess* to recognize the Man in Black's allusions to the French dit amoureux, the *House of Fame* announces its intertextual relationship to Virgil's *Aeneid* explicitly. Chaucer's dreamer—whom scholars dis-

tinguish from Chaucer the author by referring to him as "Geffrey"—discovers the first lines of the *Aeneid* engraved on a brass tablet in the Temple of Venus: "I wol now synge, yif I kan, / The armes and also the man" (lines 143-44; in Latin, *Arma virumque cano*). With this engraving, Chaucer signals to his reader that the *Aeneid* will provide an important point of entry and interpretative framework for what follows. Whether you read "yif I can" as an expression of diffidence or of false modesty, the inscription signals to the reader that he is writing about the project of writing English poetry. Chaucer makes it clear that inscribed on the brass tablet is an English translation of the Latin original. But he is not translating the Latin to help his readers. Chaucer is very comfortable with sprinkling Latin phrases throughout his work, and in any case, these lines in Latin would have been familiar to anyone with a rudimentary education. Instead, he is calling attention to the fact that what follows offers an English perspective on Virgil, just as Dante composed an Italian one.

Chaucer proceeds to question the Virgilian source material that inspires the *House of Fame*. While, like the *Aeneid*, the *House of Fame* addresses such grave and grand themes as war and the prehistory of the Roman Empire, what really interests Chaucer is the complexity of human relationships. He makes this clear by means of *ekphrasis*: an extended poetic description of paintings, or art.¹⁸ The "curious portreytures" that adorn the walls of the Temple of Venus present a fairly straightforward account of the fall of Troy: an event that forced Aeneas, Virgil's hero, to flee and, eventually, to found a new Trojan colony in Rome. The walls depict the flight from Troy of Aeneas with his father, Anchises, and his son, Askanus, the storm they encounter at sea, and their arrival at Carthage (lines 140-238). However, this *ekphrasis* develops into a more extended commentary on the *Aeneid*, treating it as a love story rather than an imperial epic. Chaucer's focus on the amatory side of the story is anticipated by his encounter with Venus, whom he addresses as "my lady dere" (line 213) at the beginning of the *House of Fame*. The goddess Venus plays a major role in the *Aeneid*, as she is the mother of Aeneas, who directs him to the shores of Carthage, in North Africa. There he meets his lover, Dido, queen of Carthage. For Chaucer, Dido is the true hero of the *Aeneid*, and he proceeds from his dry account of the events of the Trojan War to a lengthy, sympathetic discussion of her plight: duped by Aeneas, who assured her that they would be married someday, she "let him doo / Al that weddyng longeth too" (lines 243-44). According to Chaucer, she acted like any woman in love. She trusted Aeneas, which gave him all the power: "Made of hym shortly at oo word / Hyr lyf, hir love, hir lust, hir lord" (lines 257-58). Yet Aeneas betrays her, leaving Carthage when duty calls, choosing his mandate to found Rome over his love interest.

Chaucer's lengthy digression on the subject of Dido, a character who appears in just one of the *Aeneid's* twelve books, reflects the influence of the many translations of, and commentaries on, the *Aeneid* in the Middle Ages. Translations and adaptations of the *Aeneid* into vernacular languages assimilated the epic to the contemporary taste for literature about love. Scholarly commentary on the story of Dido and Aeneas prompted a centuries-long debate concerning the chastity of Dido and the virtue of Aeneas: Was Dido a loose woman? Was Aeneas a cad?¹⁹ Orthodox Christian interpretations of the *Aeneid* viewed Aeneas's love affair with Dido as an allegory for the ensnarement of the human soul in sin: his abandonment of Dido represented the soul removing itself from sin to join the church, which, in the *Aeneid*, is symbolized by Aeneas's foundation of Rome.²⁰ Other commentators placed blame on Dido's morality: only a loose woman would allow Aeneas to anticipate the rights of marriage. However, many writers, notably Ovid, expressed deep sympathy for Dido. Ovid's treatment of Dido in his *Heroides* prompted many medieval authors to come down hard on Aeneas as an example of the worst kind of male cowardice. Influenced by the ideals of courtly love, they blamed him for what they considered to be his intensely unchivalrous treatment of his girlfriend/fiancée. This is the position Chaucer takes. As in the *Book of the Duchess*, his dreamer claims to know precious little of love:

"What shulde I speke more queynte,
Or peyne me my wordes peynte
To speke of love? Hyt wol not be;
I kan not of that faculte. (lines 245-48)

This gives him an edge as a (self-professedly) unbiased observer and a transparent, ingenuous writer. From this position, Chaucer makes his case for Dido. He sternly admonishes men who are only after sex, who will say anything to get it, and who flee silently — or make up some lame excuse when they find they are in too deep: "And swere how that she ys unkynde, / Or fals, or privy, or double was" (lines 284-85).

The story of Dido raises the issue of truth and lies. It is an opportunity for Chaucer to question the authorities who have written accounts of her. As Dido laments, "O have ye men such godlyhede / In speche, and never a del of trouthe?" (lines 330-31). Aeneas first lies to Dido, and then he lies about her mendacity in order to wriggle out of his responsibility to her. Dido, in contrast, insists that she has always been an open book to him: "We wretched wymmen konne noon art" (line 335), and concedes that her one mistake was to put her trust in him before their relationship was formalized publicly. Moreover, she fears that their affair has ruined her reputation:

For thorgh yow is my name lorn,
And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al thys lond, on every tonge,
O wikke Fame! (lines 346-49)

The last thing she wants is to be known as Aeneas's ex-girlfriend. By raising the question of Dido's honesty, and Aeneas's lack thereof, Chaucer participates in a trend among medieval authors, and particularly vernacular ones, to defend Dido and seek to recuperate her reputation — a trend that responds to and reflects the growing audience of female readers and patrons.

Chaucer's defense of Dido is one of the reasons why Chaucer earned the reputation as "evere . . . wemenis friend" (ever friend to women): a phrase coined by the early-sixteenth-century Scottish poet Gavin Douglas.²¹ Of course, it removes itself entirely from the narrative of war and empire-formation that Geoffrey sees depicted on the walls of the Temple of Venus. While his ekphrasis may be intended as a corrective to the overtly masculinist focus of the paintings (and of the original narrative), Chaucer's alternative perspective on the events of the *Aeneid* develops the questions of interpretation, misunderstanding, and the potential for multiple interpretations that Chaucer raised in the *Book of the Duchess*. For the story of the *Aeneid* looks different, depending on one's perspective. Viewed through the lens of empire, whether earthly or spiritual, Aeneas is simply doing what was expected of him. Viewed through the lens of love, Aeneas is a faithless, heartless liar.

The idea that an event or text can have a variety of different, and competing, interpretations motivates Geoffrey's subsequent adventures. In the poem's opening lines, the discussion of the diversity of dreams and their interpretations highlights the variety of words that can be used to describe the same phenomenon: "Why that is an avisoun / And why this a revelacioun, / Why this a drem, why that a sweven" (lines 7-9). Moreover, Chaucer's account of his dream offers a series of obscure details that fairly beg to be interpreted. For example, Chaucer ascribes to his dream the rather strange date of 10 December (line 111), a date opposite to the dream vision's typical May morning. According to the astrological calendar, 10 December falls in the middle of Sagittarius, a sign identified with the centaur, half-man, half-horse. This auspicious sign, associated with learning, friendship, and travel, is dominated by the benevolent planet of Jupiter. Jupiter's jovial aspect recalls Chaucer's opening prayer that every dream may be "turned to good," or given the best possible interpretation among the many that exist. Moreover, Sagittarius presides over the countries of Spain and Libya, which fits in with the desert surroundings in which Geoffrey discovers himself after he leaves the Temple of Venus in Book 1:

Then sawgh I but a large feld,
As fer as that I myghte see,

For all the feld nas but of sond,
As smal as man may se yet lye,
In the desert of Lybye; (lines 482–88)

Like 10 December, the desert is a contrarian move: it opposes the lush gardens that constitute the typical setting for a dream vision. However, Chaucer does not offer a specific explanation for his choice of 10 December, leaving it open to the interpretation of his readers or, perhaps, after the Sagittarian fashion, distancing himself from the conventions of the dream vision entirely and striking out on his own.

When Geoffrey leaves the greenhouse-like Temple of Venus and finds himself in the desert, he makes a little prayer: “O Crist,” thoughte I, “that art in blysse / Fro fantome and illusion / Me save” (lines 492–94). His prayer acknowledges the potential for the wrong interpretation of events to obfuscate the truth. He does not want to be like Dido, who believes in an impossibility. He just wants the truth. The Eagle appears as an answer to his prayers. When Geoffrey describes the Eagle’s appearance he insists that his account is “as sooth as deth” (line 502), and the Eagle appears to respond in kind, with an overwhelming list of facts. First, he lists the different kinds of information that they will encounter at the House of Fame: from lies to truth and from gossip to promises. He goes on to describe the house and its location (ideally situated between heaven and earth to catch all the information that flies up), concluding with a pseudo-scientific account of how speech, which is a kind of sound, travels up to the House of Fame, its rightful home, according to the laws of nature, or “kynde” (line 749). Yet the Eagle is not quite as knowledgeable as his impressive vocabulary and sheer loquacity would suggest. His frequent repetition of the words “kynde” covers up the fact that he has no real understanding of how, and why, sound moves up to the House of Fame. All he can do is assert that it just is that way, and insist that it is nature’s way: “kyndeliche.”

Ironically, the Eagle’s rather nervous attempts to win his student’s approval, and to get Chaucer to believe what he’s saying, only confirm the capacity of language to deceive, and the limitations of the authoritative tradition that he represents. Just as Chaucer himself insists that he cannot celebrate love in flowery language (even as he pens a dream vision that accomplishes precisely that), so, too, does the Eagle, in long speeches rife with rhetoric, insist that he has sidestepped rhetorical flourishes to offer a simple proof. Geoffrey is wise to agree with the Eagle: “Yis” (line 864). After all, he is flying through the air with only the Eagle’s talons to hold him. Nevertheless, Geoffrey’s “yis” is no more

honest than the Eagle’s prolix speechifying. Its very simplicity, which recalls the Dreamer’s “she ys ded” in the *Book of the Duchess*, calls attention to the absurdly comic lengths the Eagle has gone to make his point. It even inspires the Eagle to boast about his ability to adjust his speech to appeal to his listener, “I can / Lewedly to a lewed man / Speke” (lines 865–67), just like Shakespeare’s Prince Hal can “drink with any tinker in his own language.” When the Eagle crows, “Be Seynte Jame, / Now wil we speken al of game!” (lines 885–86) (as if what had preceded it were high seriousness), he barrels into a joking account of the Milky Way, comparing it to “Watlying Street” (line 939), the name of the ancient Roman road that goes through London. His references to the ill-fated flights of Phaethon, who crashes the sun chariot belonging to his father, Apollo, and of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and fell into the sea, are explicitly designed to cast fear into the heart of his cargo, and are about as funny as an air traveler today making jokes about bombs. This is not the faithful Virgil on whose guidance Dante relied.

As the Eagle flits restlessly from one subject or opinion to another, refusing to alight on any perspective or position for very long, Geoffrey’s reaction ranges from the monosyllabic (“yis”) to the concrete. His account of what can be seen as one flies through the air is highly plausible, if unsurprising: “Now ryveres, now citees, / Now tounes, and now grete trees” (lines 901–2). In the absence of a reliable guide or authority, Geoffrey has only himself. His flight through the heavens makes him think, not of Dante, but of his own work. At this time, Chaucer’s *Boece*, a translation of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*, might have been an incomplete project lying on his desk or, perhaps, was just occupying his mind:

And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,
That writ, ‘A thought may flee so hye
With fetheres of Philosophie,
To passen everych element,
And whan he hath so fer ywent,
Than may be seen behynde his bak
Cloude’ — and al that y of spak. (lines 972–78)²²

Chaucer recalls a passage in which Boethius describes how a thought can fly to the heavens in search of truth: it clothes itself in feathers and moves up, away from the earth, past the clouds, to behold the heavens. While these lines have been read as yet another indication of Chaucer’s modesty about his own capacities, because he fails to mention how the thought can see God, we can also read Chaucer’s omission as an indication of confidence in his own authority. “And al that y of spak” might even suggest that he expects the reader to know

that he has translated the text, which would help scholars fix the chronology of Chaucer's work in the late 1370s and early 1380s. Note the slippage as the line begins with recalling what Boethius wrote and ends with referring to what Chaucer himself said. Ending with clouds at his back instead of with, as the passage reads in his translation, "the verray knowleche of God," Chaucer gestures toward the cloudiness of thinking that has characterized this section of the poem. Although the *House of Fame*, from its opening line to its classical roots, raises the expectation of firm, quantifiable facts and the solid truths that uphold historical tradition, the poem's first thousand-odd lines have succeeded in thwarting any kind of certainty or clarity. Moving from a position of indebtedness to French sources, Chaucer uses images such as being alone in a desert or flying chaotically through the air to express the terrifying, vertiginous feeling of being alone in the world.

Yet although we readers may accept, as authoritative, Geoffrey's account of the Eagle's absence of authority, Chaucer refuses to allow us even this certainty. If we are questioning authority, we must also question him. Having established his legitimacy as author and as reporter, Chaucer makes the Eagle, finally, the sensible one. Ever the avid tour guide, the Eagle offers Geoffrey the opportunity to see for himself the constellations of Arion and Castor and Pollux: constellations that he has read about in books: "How all these arn set in hevene; / For though thou have hem ofte on honde, / Ye nostow no wher that they stonde" (lines 1008–10). But Geoffrey demurs: it would be too bright; it would ruin his eyesight. He is content with the knowledge he has received from his books and, if it weren't for the Eagle in this case, would have missed out on the experience. Chaucer thus refuses to allow his reader to feel comfortable anywhere or to fully trust anyone, even himself. Book 2 is the intellectual, or readerly, equivalent of having the ground removed from beneath your feet and finding yourself, suddenly, flying through the air.

The *House of Fame* has drawn attention to the different ways of processing a particular event, calling various forms of knowledge—literary, historical, experiential—into question. We have seen how events from the *Aeneid* are as pliable as play-dough, and how words themselves can be fashioned at will and mean the opposite of what they purport to say. Geoffrey and the Eagle's interplay between plain words and prolix rhetoric illustrates the immensely unstable quality of speech itself. As they reach the House of Fame itself, words are reduced to mere sounds. The "tydynges, / Both of feir speche and chidyng, / And of fals and soth compounded" (lines 1027–29) that fly up to the house produce a kind of white noise that is compared to the "betyng of the see" (line 1034). With no apparatus to discern between true and false things, the information that is collected in the House of Fame resembles nothing so much as

the Internet.²³ As the Eagle leaves Geoffrey before the palace, he wishes him luck figuring the whole thing out: "And God of heven send the grace / Some good to lernen in this place" (lines 1087–88).

Fame's physical dimensions, however, are as fickle as her affections:

Me thoughte that she was so lyte
That the lengthe of a cubite
Was lengere than she semed be.
But thus sone in a whyle she
Hir tho so wonderliche streighte
That with hir fet she erthe reighte,
And with hir hed she touched hevene. (lines 1369–75)

One moment shorter than a cubit (the length between the elbow and tip of the middle finger) and another long enough to touch heaven, Fame is difficult to visualize. Compounding the problem is the fantastic detail of her multiple ears and tongues: "fele upstonyng eres / And tonges, as on bestes heres" (lines 1389–90). With her countless tongues and unchartable size, Fame defeats Geoffrey's capacity for description: a problem that plagues him throughout this final book.

Indeed, Geoffrey appears to be defeated by language itself. In his account of Fame's palace, he spends more time explaining how he cannot reproduce its effect in language than on the details of its terrible beauty:

... al the men that ben on lyve
Ne han the kunnyng to describe
The beaute of that ylke place,
Ne coude casten no compace
Swich another for to make,
That myght of beaute ben hys make,
Ne so wonderlych ywrought;
That hit astonyeth yit my thought,
And maketh al my wit to swynke. (lines 1167–75)

And he goes on. The rhetorical term for this kind of passage is *occupatio*: the space intended for a description is filled—occupied—with complaints of unwillingness or inability to describe. It is one of Chaucer's favorite devices: we saw it in the *Book of the Duchess*, when Chaucer refused to elaborate on Alcione's reaction to her dream, or on the shipwreck that drowned Ceyx. It occurs with great frequency in this part of the *House of Fame*. The progressive erosion of certainty through the poem has infected Chaucer. This lack of confidence produces daunting, phantasmagorical images such as the twenty-foot-thick book that describes the embroidered coats of arms of the suppliants

of the goddess Fame (line 1335) or the windmill under the walnut shell (lines 1281–82)—images that attest to his sense that language is unequal to the task of reproducing his experience. Reporting on the musical instruments played by the minstrels that surround the palace, Chaucer questions whether it is even worth his (and our) time:

Of which I nyl as now not ryme,
For ese of yow and los of tyme.
For tyme ylost, this knowen ye,
Be no way may recovered be. (lines 1255–58)

These impossible images, along with the rhetorical device of *occupatio*, subvert Chaucer's promise to describe his dream in language unclouded by fancy rhetoric or poetical turns of phrase:

But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,
Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,
Though som vers fayle in a sillable;
And that I do no diligence
To showe craft, but o sentence. (lines 1096–1100)

With phrases such as “yght and lewed” (easy and unsophisticated) and “o sentence” (just the meaning, just the facts), Chaucer is going to great lengths in this passage to distinguish his writing from the kind of allegorical, metaphorical language performed by the Man in Black in the *Book of the Duchess*. Yet Book Three not only lapses frequently into obscure metaphors, it operates in the realm of allegory by sheer generic affiliation. The dream vision derives its meaning, its “sentence,” from symbolic language, a kind of poetic “craft.” Chaucer's promise to pay homage to the laurel (line 1107) if he succeeds in communicating his dream relies on a well-known symbol for poetic achievement. Moreover, as Chaucer loads up on apparently extraneous details, he sets up the reader to look for meaning behind every little fact:

And somme corouned were as kynges,
With corounes wroght ful of losenges;
And many ryban and many frenge
Were on her clothes trewely. (lines 1316–19)

Even if it is not immediately clear what is intended by the lozenge-shaped crown, and the ribbon-bedecked outfit, the reader of the dream vision is expected to figure it out.

Chaucer cannot hold it all together. He starts off with a well-constructed and detailed account of the historians and poets who are the “pillars” of the House of Fame, but it just breaks down. The material that constructs the

author's pillar is symbolically appropriate: for example, Ovid's pillar is copper, the metal of Venus; the metal of the Jewish historian Josephus is lead and iron, the former tied to a medieval association of the Jews with Saturn, whose metal is lead, and the latter to Mars, god of warfare. It begins with order and hierarchy: Josephus comes before Virgil on the basis of seniority; Virgil comes before Ovid because empire trumps love. Chaucer could go on like this forever. But the sheer volume of information he must convey and the poetic powers it requires defeat him:

What shulde y more telle of this?
That halle was al ful, ywys,
Of hem that writen olde gestes,
As ben on treës rokes nestes. (lines 1513–16)

Fame thus devolves into chaotic, ever-changing, multiplicity: pillars become trees, poets birds' nests.

This imagery of dissolution extends to the foundation of melting ice, which Chaucer observes is a “feble fundament” (line 1132) for such a structure. Famous people's names are engraved on the rock, but some have melted away, “so unfamous was woxe her fame” (line 1146), while others are “as fressh as men had writen hem here / The selve day ryght” (lines 1156–57). This image of the melting rock anticipates the arbitrariness of Fame, who decides randomly who will be spoken ill of and who will be remembered well or not at all. A group of idlers asks to be remembered as people who have accomplished a great deal (and as having been very attractive to women):

Thogh we may not the body have
Of wymmen, yet, so God yow save,
Leet men gliwe on us the name—
Sufficeth that we han the fame. (lines 1759–62)

Fame says, no problem. Yet when the next group asks for the same thing, she abuses them: “Ye masty swyn, ye ydel wrechches, / Ful of roten, slowe teches!” (lines 1776–77). She is completely aware that her choices lack coherence. When the next group of wicked traitors appears, asking for good fame, she responds: “Al be ther in me no justice, / Me lyste not to doo hyt now, / Ne this nyl I not graunte yow” (lines 1820–22). Fame is not a system where the just receive their due.

Chaucer's overarching concern with truth and lies hinges on the question of poetic reputation. His claim that authors are universally praised “folk of digne reverence” (line 1426) is undermined by a rumour about the reputation of Homer, a pillar of the House of Fame: “Oon seyde that Omer made lyes, /

Feynyng in hys poetries" (lines 4176–77). More importantly, the figure of Lollius (line 148) casts doubt on Chaucer's honesty. Even if Chaucer believed that Lollius was a genuine authority on the Trojan War (his name was actually derived from a misreading of some Latin verses in the *Epistles* of Horace), he knows perfectly well that he's never read a word of him.²⁴ The example of Lollius points out the extent to which all writing is suspect, given the universal temptation to invoke imperfectly known authorities in order to appear learned. What clinches it, at the end of the poem, is the swearing of a truth and a lie to eternal brotherhood. In the cramped House of Rumour, a veritable hothouse of speech, where everyone is whispering in everyone else's ears, a truth and a lie attempt to make a getaway. Stopped, as they would be if they were trying to escape an authoritarian regime, they are not allowed to leave: "Thus saugh I fals and soth compounded" (line 2108). Strange bedfellows, indeed.

Chaucer began his dream vision in search of good news. He opened his poem with the prayer "God turne us every drem to goode!" and at regular intervals throughout the poem, he has paused and repeated and clarified his intention. When asked what he is doing in the House of Fame, he states his benighted desire for glad tidings: "Somme newe tydynges for to lere, / Somme newe thinges, y not what, / Tydynges, other this or that, Of love or such thynges glade" (lines 1886–89). The idea of glad tidings (translated by some as good news) recalls the angel Gabriel's words to the Virgin: "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to shew thee these glad tidings" (Luke 1:119). But Chaucer doesn't get an angel; he only gets an eagle: longing for revelation, he remains stuck in the real world. When the Eagle reappears at the end of the poem, ready to take him home, Chaucer tries to buy himself more time: "For yit, paraunter, y may lere, / Som good theron, or sumwhat here / That leef me were, or that y wente" (lines 1997–99). But the good news never arrives. The poem's final line, which leads most readers to the conclusion that Chaucer left the poem unfinished, announces the appearance of "a man of gret auctorite" (line 2158). Even if the man of great authority did come up with a great annunciation of glad tidings, after Chaucer has called knowledge, language, and truth into question, who would believe him?

The Parliament of Fowls: *Love and Marriage*

The *House of Fame* opens with a positive, hopeful exhortation, and ends in cynicism and uncertainty. But the *Parliament of Fowls*, which exudes energy and good humour, starts off on a sour note: "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne, / Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge" (lines 1–2). Read as an

account of the vocation of poetry, the speaker is marveling at how much work he has done, how much his accomplishments have fallen short, and how far his ambitions exceed his capacities. Yet this description of arduous labor and swiftly passing pleasures applies also to the difficulties of love, and these plaintive lines provide a somber point of entry for a poem that anticipates and celebrates the rites of marriage. Again Chaucer casts his speaker in the role of someone with more experience with books than with love: "I knowe nat Love in dede" (line 8). As the opening lines attest, however, this is a false opposition. Certainly Chaucer's sources would suggest that this is the case: the *Roman de la Rose* presents itself as a traveler's guide to seduction, and Dante's *Inferno* depicts the famous lovers Paolo and Francesca falling in love over shared reading. We read, in fact, to find out how to love. And when we love we compare our experience to what we have found in books. Yet love, like writing, disappoints as much as it rewards. Although a fantastic adventure promises to follow, Chaucer starts off the *Parliament of Fowls* with some sober home truths.

Amazing as it sounds, the *Parliament of Fowls* could be the first poetic treatment of Valentine's Day, a Hallmark-card holiday that to this day blends love with poetry. Yet a reader of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame* will find much that is familiar. Like the *Book of the Duchess*, the poem begins with the dreamer reaching for a book in order to get to sleep. In this case, however, it is Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*: a classical text known to medieval readers by the extensive commentary on it composed by the fifth-century grammarian Macrobius. Like the other dream visions, the *Parliament of Fowls* is the product of a mixture of influences. Dante's work informs the poem's very structure: Chaucer's movement from the dark Temple of Venus to the bright park where the birds have gathered for their parliament recalls Dante's pilgrimage from the terrifying circles of the *Inferno* to the revelatory *Paradiso*. This Dantean structure works alongside the French genre-within-a-genre of the bird debate, which inspired English poets since the twelfth-century poem *The Owl and the Nightingale*. And there are the unmistakable traces of the *Roman de la Rose*: the account of the Temple of Venus and its surroundings, with Cupid standing under a tree, his bow and arrow tossed aside in a classic emblem of submission to the exigencies of love and eros (lines 211–17), and allegorical figures such as Youth and Beauty adorn the idealized landscape (lines 225–31). For all its immersion in this continental heritage, however, the poem remains conscious of its Englishness. Praying for Venus's help transmitting the poem to verse, Chaucer requests: "As wisly as I sey the north-north west, / Whan I began my sweven for to write, / So yif me myght to ryme, and endyte!" (lines 117–19). While giving his French and Italian influ-

ences their due, Chaucer is placing his poetic production firmly in England, the “north-north west” of Europe. This view from the margins, from the north-north west, rather than from the center, reinforces Chaucer’s status as an outsider: as a poet and as a lover.

The idea of a mixture — of literary influences as well as of emotions — motivates the poem. For just as love and authorship are mixed processes, so, too, is marriage: a mixture of blood, of families, of personalities and genders. Chaucer’s use of rhyme royal, with its seven lines of iambic pentameter, in the *Parliament of Fowls* is an important example of this mixed style. Chaucer used rhyme royal for the first time in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Inspired by Boccaccio’s ottava rima, the eight-line stanza of his *Teseida* and *Filostrato*, Chaucer went on to use it in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Prioress’s Tale*, and the *Man of Law’s Tale*. Whereas the octosyllabic rhyming couplets that Chaucer used for the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame* recall the French poetic tradition of the dits amoureux (and, hence, the tradition of love poetry), rhyme royal is associated with high seriousness. However, just as the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame* use the tail-rhyme to handle such serious topics as mourning, melancholia, and mendacity, the *Parliament of Fowls* brings the epic stanza down to the level of comedy. The elaborate, processional quality of the stanzas, mixed with the themes and conventions of love poetry, lends the poem an air of mockery, even parody. The sexual energy of the god Priapus and the goddess Venus, “naked from the breast unto the head” (line 269), along with the chattering birds, bring the aspirations of rhyme royal down a notch or two (although another way of looking at it is that rhyme royal dignifies the otherwise risible birds). And even if the classic comic conclusion of a marriage is deferred, as it is at the end of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, there is still the promise of a happy ending, which always feels a little cheeky.

For a poem that ends with courtship and talk of marriage in a sun-drenched field, the poem has a surprisingly bookish, even fusty opening. Chaucer may not know much about love, but he certainly knows his books: Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis*, written in 51 B.C., which Chaucer calls “Tullyus of the Drem of Scipion” (after Cicero’s full name, Marcus Tullius Cicero) was one of the best-known classical texts in the Middle Ages. Whereas the rest of Cicero’s *De Republica* (Concerning the Republic) was considered lost until the early nineteenth century, the *Somnium*, a portion of its sixth book, was preserved. The *Somnium* is a dialogue between the Roman consul Scipio Aemelianus and his grandfather Scipio Africanus the Elder, a hero of the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage. It covers such matters as the structure of the cosmos, the harmony of the celestial spheres, the importance of patriotism and

the virtuous life, and the immortality of the soul. Chaucer summarizes Scipio the Elder’s feelings about the rewards for the just in the afterlife:

... what man, lered other lewed,
That lovede commune profyt, wel ithewed,
He schulde into a blysfyl place wende
There as joye is that last withouten ende. (lines 46–50)

Macrobius’s much-studied commentary on the text pursues the discussion of the divinity of the soul with reference to contemporary Neoplatonist philosophy and astronomy. This is serious reading material for someone who has love on his mind: it would be more suited to the dreamer of the *House of Fame*.

Reflecting on the importance of his literary sources, “For out of olde felde, as men seyth, / Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yer” (lines 22–23), Chaucer raises the key question of the *Parliament of Fowls*: What is the relationship between the grave preoccupations of Scipio and Chaucer’s more light-hearted theme? Mentioned briefly as a dreamer in both the *House of Fame* and the *Book of the Duchess*, Scipio Africanus appears in the *Parliament of Fowls* as a guide, like the Eagle in the *House of Fame*. Like the Eagle, he regards his charge with a healthy measure of condescension. However, Scipio is a ghostly and taciturn presence, a far cry from the *House of Fame*’s caustic and irrepressible Eagle. He counsels the rejection of the pleasures that the world has to offer, a doctrine Chaucer takes the time to describe in detail: “syn erthe was so lyte, / And dissevable and ful of harde grace, / That he ne schulde hym in the world delyte” (lines 64–66). Yet the *Parliament of Fowls* offers a vivid account of a variety of pleasure zones, from the steamy Temple of Venus to the lush park, places “so attempre . . . / That never was grevaunce of hot ne cold / There wex ek every holsom spice and gras; / No man may there waxe sek ne cold” (lines 204–7). Many scholars have sought to reconcile this question by referring to the doctrine of “commune profit” (lines 47, 75, and elsewhere) that Chaucer ascribes to Scipio. The walls of the Temple of Venus are adorned with portraits of people who have wasted their time pursuing pointless relationships, such as Dido, whose lover couldn’t commit, or Tristan and Isolde, the famous adulterers. Scipio’s altruistic doctrine would harness the sexual instinct celebrated in the Temple of Venus to procreation, the creation of life, and hence, to Scipio’s overall concern for cosmic harmony and the greater good. Yet we may also regard this tension as a productive contradiction, rather than as a potential synthesis. Chaucer’s opening account of the pain of life and the eternity of the afterlife lends an important perspective on the festivities that follow. With commandments such as “Know thyself first immortal” (line 73) framing the “likeros folk” (line 79) as well as the cacoph-

onous parliament, Chaucer offers a stern, serious corrective that makes the quest for everything from erotic pleasure to satisfying human relationships seem fleeting and fruitless.

This sense of a productive tension, with one side complementing and modifying the other, extends to the dream vision proper. Scipio leads Chaucer to “a park walled with grene stone” (line 122). In another example of the poem’s indebtedness to Dante, Chaucer encounters two contradictory inscriptions over its gate. In terms that recall the *Roman de la Rose*, the first offers “the welle of grace” (line 129), complete with an eternally “grene and lusty May” (line 130) and promises of “good aventure” (line 131). The second leads to “Disdayn and Daunger” (line 136), a wasteland where “nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere” (line 137). Yet this does not place Chaucer “right as bitwixen adamauntes two” (line 148). For Scipio sees, as plain as the nose on his face, how an “errour” (line 156) in the past exempts Chaucer from either fate.²⁵ An outsider in the arts of love, Chaucer can observe but not fully participate in what he is about to see: “Yit that thow canst not do, yet mayst thow se. / For many a man that may nat stonde a pul / Yet liketh hym at wrastlyng for to be” (lines 162–65).

As Chaucer moves from the artificial atmosphere of the Temple of Venus, with its jasper pillars and painted murals, to the park where the goddess Nature presides, he is once again in but not of his surroundings. Of course, as Scipio points out, this is the best position for a writer: “And if thow haddest connyng for t’endyte, / I shal the shewe mater of to wryte” (lines 167–68). Yet Chaucer’s account of his vision is very different from the impressionistic, almost offhand quality of the *House of Fame*. The high formality of rhyme royal contributes to Chaucer’s detached, even analytical comments, such as his elegant account of Nature’s flowery hill, which he implicitly contrasts with the “prive corner” of Venus: “Of braunches were here halles and here boures” (line 304). As a foil to the catalogue of ill-fated lovers, Chaucer presents a catalogue of birds choosing their partners on this lovely Valentine’s Day. In this case, lovers are not longing for the forbidden or else simply unsuitable Other. Instead, like seeks like. The lengthy list of birds which proceeds in descending order from the “royal eagle” (line 330) to the “feldefare” (line 364), a kind of thrush, classifies the birds rather brutally as if according to social class: there is the “gentil falcon” (line 337), and the “cukkow ever unkynde” (line 358), a member of the lower orders. Chaucer draws on the time-honored attributes of folklore — “The stork, the wreker of avouterye; / The hote cormeraunt of gloteny” (lines 361–62) — pairing his birds off, rigidly, according to their “kynde” (line 365).

The only bird with any choice in the matter is the formel (female) eagle, a perfect and beautiful specimen who must choose, with Nature’s supervision,

among three tercel (male) suitors. Many scholars identify the formel as Anne of Bohemia, the future wife of Richard II, who had two other suitors: Charles of France and Friedrich of Meissen.²⁶ The first tercel eagle, a worthy fellow, describes his feelings for the formel in the language of the Petrarchan lover: “For certes, longe may I nat lyve in paine” (line 424). A master of manners, this princeling performs the classic conventionry of courtship, for which the formel rewards him with another conventional response: a deep blush, “Right as the freshe, rede rose newe” (line 442). The royal eagle’s courtly speech, however, opens up the issue of infidelity: if he ever proves untrue, he insists, let him be rent asunder: “That with these foules I be al torent” (432). The idea of being untrue to the formel returns us to the insecure shadow-world of the Temple of Venus and the *House of Fame*. And once raised, it requires the response of the next suitor. This tercel, of a lower order, cuts to the chase: “That shal nat be!” (line 450). His simple, monosyllabic speech protests: “At the lest I love hir as wel as ye” (line 452), and makes the age-old claim: I saw her first. Acknowledging, once again, the potential in marriage for lies and deception, the second tercel imagines, even promises, a violent end for himself if he should transgress (line 461).

Like Cordelia in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the third bird says he can boast of “nothing” (line 470). He cannot compete in terms of the length of his devotion, but the depth of his feeling can compete with that of someone who has been lovelorn for twenty years. He can’t compete in terms of service, either, but he promises there has been no truer love than his. Most important, he makes his marriage vow to her up front: “til that deth me sese, / I wol ben heres, whether I wake or wynke” (lines 481–82). As far as this eagle is concerned, he’s already married. He made his commitment before the formel had even accepted him. Chaucer seems to approve of what he calls his “gentil ple” (line 485), which is disarmingly honest, and which, rather than projecting creative punishments for a potential infidelity, insists, simply, that he is “trewe” (line 483).

The debate that follows, however, undermines the validity of such speeches: some birds complain that they offer no concrete proof for their claims; others don’t want to interfere in the decision at all. The waterfowls comment on the fickleness of men: “But she wol love hym, / Lat hym love another!” (line 566), while the turtledove is hopelessly idealistic: “Yet lat hym serve hir ever, til he be ded” (line 585). The falcon, chosen to sum up the position of the parliament, wants to abandon the contest: “I can not se that argumentes awayle: / Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle” (lines 538–39). As the responses to the eagles’ speeches undermine the seriousness of the entire process, devolving into hilarious ad hominem invective, Nature intervenes. Words, once again, have accomplished little: “For I have herd al youre opynyoun, / And in effect

yt be we nevere the neer" (lines 618–19). Although the choice rests (as it always did) with the formel eagle, Nature cannot resist making a plea in favor of the royal tercel: "As seyde the tercelet ful skylfully, / As for the gentilleste and most worthi" (lines 634–35). Her evaluation of the tercel places conventionality above passionate sincerity—an accurate reflection, perhaps, of the public, performative demands that such a high-level marriage makes on its participants. Or perhaps it is because, by being the most conventional, the tercel is also being the most honest.

While the *Parliament of Fowls* places the formal, ritualized rhythms of courtship and marriage at the forefront, its open-ended conclusion, in which the formel eagle remains "quyt" (line 663), or free, for another year, and in which Chaucer returns to his reading, resists the kind of closure that its structures lead us to expect. The self-destructive side of eros lurks in the background of the marriage negotiations, reminding us of the potent yet chaotic drives that marriage seeks to mitigate. The formel remains unfettered, and there is no telling what events might take place in the coming year that could, in a heartbeat, compromise her value in the marriage marketplace. As Chaucer gamely takes up his books, it is not clear that he has gained much from this dream vision, either. With the *Book of the Duchess*, the dreamer received an education in the arts of reading; with the *House of Fame*, he came to the startling but enabling discovery that nothing is reliable or certain apart from the self. With the *Parliament of Fowls*, the results are mixed, as the destiny of the formel remains open. Chaucer has cleared space for English poetry, yet he is still casting about, trying to figure out how to fill it. In the roundel, a short poem in which the first line recurs as a refrain in the middle and at the end, the summer overtakes the winter in the eternal cycle of the seasons: "Now welcome, somer, with thy sonne softe, / That hast thes wintres wedres overshake" (lines 695–96). Possibly based on the French lyric "qui bien aime a tard oublier" (those who love well are slow to forget), the roundel acknowledges the inexorable return of the winter with a glance back at insomnia: "longe nyghtes blacke" (line 692). Like the return of spring, the dream vision interrupts a long, black, sleepless night with sunshine and gardens. But this interruption is never permanent. And so, when Chaucer rises at dawn reaches for yet another volume, "I hope, ywis, to rede so som day / That I shal mete som thyng for to fare / The bet" (lines 697–99), he optimistically, yet hopelessly, continues his quest for eternal summer.²⁷

The Legend of Good Women: Love and Loss

Think of the *Legend of Good Women* as a Janus face. The *Prologue* looks back at the three dream visions that precede it, and the nine stories of the

"good women" that follow it anticipate the *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories that are distinct yet linked. The *Legend of Good Women* was composed in 1386, a number of years after the *Parliament of Fowls*.²⁸ Since the *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer had composed *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as a number of the poems that would become the *Canterbury Tales*. Perhaps it is this long lapse between dream visions that makes many readers find the *Legend of Good Women*, to put it bluntly, very dull.²⁹ A number of scholars explain its incomplete state by conjecturing that Chaucer himself got bored with the project and abandoned it. Its mixed critical reputation has meant that it remains the least well known and the least taught of Chaucer's dream visions. Indeed, sometimes a farewell or a finale can be a letdown. However, there are also many attempts to improve the poem's status, which argue that it cleverly bids farewell to the dream vision, and suggest that its attitude to the so-called good women offers a critical perspective on the traditional social structures and expectations for women, as the tales range from the earnest to the playful, the ironic to the satirical.³⁰

Perhaps the germ of the idea for the *Legend of Good Women* came in the catalogue of unhappy lovers in the Temple of Venus in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Chaucer's lines, "and al here love, and in what plyt they dyde" (line 294), perfectly encapsulate what brings his good women together. For the *Legend of Good Women* attacks head-on an issue that is more occasional or tangential in his earlier dream visions: women who are unlucky in love. Dido, for example, appears in the *Parliament of Fowls* as one of the unhappy lovers painted on the walls of the Temple of Venus, and in the *Book of the Duchess* in the Dreamer's catalogue of women who have died for love. She provides an important example, in the *House of Fame*, of multiple, conflicting interpretations of the same event. Yet in the *Legend of Good Women*, her story gets the full treatment.³¹ We have seen how interpretations of Dido's story shift according to the agenda of the author, and the *House of Fame* highlighted the fluidity of reputation and the contingency of historical narrative. Whereas Dido is a negative example in the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Book of the Duchess*, in the *Legend of Good Women*, she is a paragon of loyalty and virtue.

The *Legend of Good Women* represents the culmination of Chaucer's dream visions. It contains all of the conventional structures of reading, dreaming, and supernatural encounters: the bookish narrator and his classical reading material; the royal dedicatee or pretext; the extensive continental influences (both French and Italian); and, most important, a self-consciousness about and affirmation of the potential of English. It is on this last issue that the *Legend of Good Women* has made the most progress. Rather than dwelling on marginality, as in the case of the *Parliament of Fowls*, or begging for inspira-

tion, as in the *House of Fame*, Chaucer now thanks his lucky stars that he has English to use for his poetic purposes: "Allas, that I ne had Englyssh, ryme or prose, / Suffisant this flour to preyse aryght!" (lines 66-67). He seems to be saying, God only knows where I'd be without it.

The *Legend of Good Women* places particular emphasis on the priority of books: their status as source and inspiration, as the occasion for interpretation, and, now that Chaucer is more advanced in his literary career, as objects to be produced: "On bokes for to rede I me delyte, / And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence, / And in myn herte have hem in reverence" (lines 29-32). The poem addresses the importance of reading and the value of books: "Wel ought us thanne honouren and beleve / These bokes, there we han noon other preve" (lines 27-28). This opening note pays homage to Chaucer's literary sources, while also setting Chaucer himself up for his reception of his work by subsequent generations: we must take his word for it. The author of the *Legend of Good Women* is not the same man as the author of the *Book of the Duchess*: he is now someone with a reputation as a poet that he must promote as well as preserve.

The question of truth and falsehood, raised with such words as "credence," "beleve," and "preve," is, as we have seen, a longstanding Chaucerian preoccupation. Yet what is different in the *Legend of Good Women* is Chaucer's certainty about the value of books, and their potential for truth. The poem's opening lines, about "joy in hevene and peyne in hell" (line 2), concede that these are experiences that one only reads about in books. However, Chaucer goes on to point out that things are not untrue just because they haven't been witnessed: "thing is never the lasse sooth, / Though every wight ne may it nat ysee" (lines 14-15). Yet Chaucer tempers his case by stating that one should not consider books the only source of knowledge and, furthermore, that his esteem for books flies out the window in the month of May. It is at this time when he renounces the life of the mind and indulges in that of the body. Although Chaucer's opening validates books, which can transport him away from the quotidian world of sensory proof, it also offers a comment on the dream vision. Now professing not only the singularity of his vision but also, as it moves from the book to the body, the essential "truth" of its content, Chaucer claims for himself a kind of authority we have not seen in his earlier texts.

The *Legend of Good Women* proceeds out of Chaucer's existing reputation as an author. Writing books, however, doesn't exactly make him all-powerful. Chaucer is recognized by the god of Love, even though he is sitting unobtrusively, "as stille as any ston" (line 310). He is contemplatively sitting before Alceste, a representation of idealized, chaste femininity and, as a daisy, the central symbol of the marguerite poems, a subgenre of the French *dits amor-*

eux. We can imagine how this encounter could play out in the *Book of the Duchess*, with Chaucer meekly protesting his ignorance and incompetence before this daunting symbol of the French literary tradition. But here, Chaucer enters into active debate with the god of Love and Alceste, who each offer different interpretations of his texts. The god of Love is quite aggressive with Chaucer, addressing him as "my foo" (line 322) and accusing him of serious crimes against love:

... of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyest,
And hynderest hem with thy translacioun,
And lettest folk from hire devocioun,
To serve me, and holdest it folye
To serve Love. (lines 323-27)

Why, he complains, couldn't he tell stories that emphasized women's goodness instead of their wickedness? Why not tell happy stories about love instead of sad ones? Chaucer's dream visions certainly fit the god of Love's description: in the *Book of the Duchess*, love ends in death; in the *Parliament of Fowls*, love is shown to go wrong, and even if it looks as though it might eventually go right, it offers no assurances. For the god of Love, however, the real culprits are Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose*: "an heresy," he insists, "ayeins my lawe" (line 330) and *Troilus and Criseyde*, "that maketh men to women lasse triste" (line 333).

The god of Love may have his problems with Chaucer, but it is Alceste, the queen, the daisy, who calls the shots. Widely considered to be a veiled and complimentary allusion to Queen Anne (the Anne of Bohemia represented by the formel eagle in the *Parliament of Fowls*), Alceste is not only a queen and a daisy but also a literary character: one to whom Chaucer has failed to do sufficient homage.³² The god of Love reminds Chaucer that he has met Alceste once before, in a book: "Hastow nat in a book, lyth in thy cheste, / The grete goodnesse of the quene Alceste, / That turned was into a dayesye" (lines 510-12). Alceste is named for the wife of Admetus, whose love for her husband was so great that she chose to die in his place, in reward for which she was turned into a daisy. Alceste therefore symbolizes the completely selfless love that the *Legend of Good Women* is meant to celebrate. Of course, as a literary character, she, too, is subject to interpretation: Chaucer says of her, "I see wel she is good" (line 506), and the god of Love agrees, "That is a trewe tale, by myn hood!" (line 507). A faithful wife, a daisy, a literary character, a queen, and an object of desire (as Chaucer puts it, "myn owene hertes reste," line 519), Alceste's many hats gesture towards the multivalent acts of interpretation required of readers of the dream vision.

The discussion that proceeds shows how, in the same way that a text is defined by an interpretation of it, so, too, do people define themselves by their reading of a text. Just as, in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the knight learns that "maistrie" (3.1040) is what women want, so, in the *Legend of Good Women*, the god of Love gallantly turns over all authority to Alceste: "Al lyth in yow, doth with hym what yow leste" (G.339). However, even though she is in a "dream" scenario, with the author sitting right there in front of her, completely willing to tell her exactly what he meant by the book, Alceste closes discussion down.³³ Rather than consciously working against the interests of women and love, Alceste claims, Chaucer wrote: "Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde" (G.345). Although Chaucer stands his ground, ready to defend his work and his good intentions, his evidence, from the horse's mouth as it were, does nothing to sway their interpretation of his books. Alceste does not dispute the god of Love's reading of Chaucer's texts; she just takes exception to his violent response to them, which she finds tyrannical. Alceste also takes Chaucer's point, that his dream visions educate people in the glory of love, "He hath maked lewed folk to delyte, / To serven yow, in preysyge of youre name (G.403-4). Nevertheless, she does not shift her appraisal of the others. Anyway, as she pragmatically points out, Chaucer is someone who has written "many a lay and many a thing" (line 420). So it should be no problem for him just to sit down and write another book, this time "a glorious legende / Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves, / that were trewe in lovyng al hire lyves" (lines 483-85).

The *Prologue* of the *Legend of Good Women* exists in two versions: the F, named for the version in the Fairfax manuscript at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and the G, named for the single manuscript of the revised version of the poem, Cambridge University Library MS Gg 4.27, completed about a decade after the poem's composition. Each version has its merits, and most editions of the poem present the *Prologue* as a parallel text. One of the key differences between the two versions, however, is in the final two lines. In the F version, Chaucer simply picks up his books and starts writing. He starts, at Alceste's request, with the story of Cleopatra, fitting what shall become a collection of tales into the genre of the dream vision. With the G version, however, Chaucer wakes up: "And with that word, of slep I gan awake / And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make" (G.544-45). Whether we read the tales that follow as part of the dream vision, or, following the revised version, as inspired by a dream vision (and composed in "waking life"), Chaucer's revision reflects the direction he had taken as a poet: the *Legend of Good Women* shows us how the dream visions gave birth to the *Canterbury Tales*.

NOTES

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1. The classic study of Chaucer's dream visions is Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*. See also St. John, *Chaucer's Dream Visions*, and Quinn, *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*; Minnis, with Scattergood and Smith, *Shorter Poems*; Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*; Edwards, *Dream of Chaucer*; Lynch, *High Medieval Dream*; Boitani, *English Medieval Narrative*; and Hieatt, *Realism of Dream Visions*. Also relevant are Windeatt, ed. and trans., *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, and Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation*.
2. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, trans. Dahlberg.
3. On Chaucer and French literature, see Williams, *French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*; Calin, *French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*; and Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*.
4. On the French lyrics in University of Pennsylvania MS French 15, see Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the Poems of "CH."*
5. See, for discussion, Anderson, "Narrators in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parlement of Foules*."
6. On the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Book of the Duchess* see Hardman, "Book of the Duchess as a Memorial Monument," and Palmer, "Historical Context of the *Book of the Duchess*." For a more wide-ranging discussion of Chaucer and mourning, see Fradenburg, "'Voice Memorial.'"
7. On White's name, see Travis, "White."
8. For discussion, see Ellis, "Death of the *Book of the Duchess*."
9. On Chaucer's reading material, see Wimsatt, "Sources of Chaucer's Seys and Alycyone"; Minnis, "Chaucer and the *Ovide Moralisé*"; and Williams, *French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, 23-24. On Chaucer and Ovid, see Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*.
10. The notes to the poem in *Riverside Chaucer* point out the passages that are direct translations; see, for discussion, Williams, *French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*; Calin, *French Tradition and the Literature of Medieval England*; and Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*.
11. See Connolly, "Chaucer and Chess."
12. See, e.g., Morse, "Understanding the Man in Black," and Cherniss, "Boethian Dialogue in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*."
13. On Chaucer and Italy, see Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, and *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*; and Boitani, ed., *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento*.
14. See Benson, "Occasion of the *Parliament of Foules*."
15. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*; Delany, *Chaucer's "House of Fame"*; Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*.
16. For a discussion of Chaucer's relationship to Dante, see Steinberg, "Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production."
17. On the Eagle, see Leyerle, "Chaucer's Windy Eagle."
18. On Chaucerian ekphrasis, see John Watkins, "'Neither of idle shewes, nor of false charmes aghast.'"

19. Important discussions of Dido include Ovid, *Heroides*, 7.7-14, and Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.13.
20. On literary appropriations of the *Aeneid* in the Middle Ages, see Desmond, *Reading Dido*, and Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England*.
21. See Gavin, *Eneados*, 1.Pro.448.
22. This is the passage as it appears in Chaucer's *Boece*: "I have, forthi, swicfe fetheris that surmounten the heighte of the hevene. Whanne the swift thought hath clothid itself in tho fetheris, it despiseth the hateful erthes, and surmounteth the rowndenesse of the gret ayr; and it seth the clowdes byhynde his back" (4.Metrum 1).
23. See Evans, "Chaucer in Cyberspace."
24. See the classic essay on Lollius by Kittredge, "Chaucer's Lollius," and, for a more recent discussion, Millet, "Chaucer, Lollius, and the Medieval Theory of Authorship."
25. Scipio observes: "It stondeth writen in thy face, / Thyn errour, though thou telle it not to me" (lines 155-56). It is, however, possible that Chaucer's "errour" in this case is not ignorance but transgression. The Cecily Chaumpagne case was resolved in 1380 as well (likely the date of the *Parliament of Fowls*). See the discussion in Christopher Cannon's chapter, "The Lives of Geoffrey Chaucer," in this *Companion*.
26. See Benson, "Occasion of the *Parliament of Fowls*."
27. On the poem's indeterminacy, see Leicester, "Harmony of Chaucer's *Parlement*"; Aers, "*Parliament of Fowls*"; and Sklute, "Inconclusive Form of the *Parliament of Fowls*."
28. On the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Prologue*, see Kellie Robertson, "Laboring in the God of Love's Garden."
29. See Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer*, and the editorial comments by Skeat, *Legend of Good Women by Geoffrey Chaucer*.
30. See Robert W. Frank, Jr., *Chaucer and "The Legend of Good Women"*; Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*; and Delany, *Naked Text*.
31. On Dido in the *Legend of Good Women*, see Gaylord, "Dido at Hunt, Chaucer at Work."
32. The F version makes it more specific that Alceste is the queen with reference to royal residences: "And whan this book ys maad, yive it the quene, / On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene" (lines 496-97).
33. On authorial intention in the *Legend of Good Women*, see Simpson, "Ethics and Interpretation."

Lyrics and Short Poems

BRUCE HOLSINGER

Thou pinchest at my mutabilitee. — "Fortune"

Throughout his career as a writer of long poems, from early works such as the *Book of the Duchess* to the great *Troilus and Criseyde* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer also composed, translated, revised, and adapted plenty of short ones. Although this chapter is devoted mainly to those Chaucerian works officially anthologized under the rubric of "short poems" (thus leaving aside some quite short nonlyric poems, such as the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Tale of Sir Thopas*), the writing of lyric — that is, to adapt a conventional definition, the formal isolation of subjective feeling and emotional state into a single, unified expression in verse — was a central and enduring part of Chaucer's identity and profession as an English poet, and those who study this strange corner of his oeuvre have recognized that the lyric mode suffuses his writing in practically all genres he engaged (or, as one critic has put it more strongly, "literature began with lyric, and so did Chaucer").¹ Among other examples treated below, the so-called *Canticus Troili*, the poem that the lovesick Troilus recites in Book 1 of *Troilus and Criseyde* (and that Chaucer translated from a sonnet of Petrarch), is in fact a lyric insertion into a larger poetic framework, as is the roundel from the *Parliament of Fowls*. The first stanza of the *Prioress's Prologue* paraphrases the first two verses of Psalm 8, a biblical lyric that