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A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Geoffrey Chaucer
DREAM VISIONS AND OTHER POEMS

AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
CONTEXTS
CRITICISM

Selected and Edited by

KATHRYN L. LYNCH
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The Book of the Duchess

The *Book of the Duchess* occupies an important position at the head of Chaucer's poetic canon. His earliest significant narrative poem, it bears marks of the poet's youth and inexperience—in its comparatively ragged meter, for instance, and in its sometimes jarring mixture of courtly and comical themes—but at the same time it is a poem of undeniable emotional power, which skillfully draws upon classical sources and medieval French models. Although Chaucer does not present himself as a known poet at court, as he would in his later works, his narrative *persona*—untutored, self-deprecating, even foolish—is fully realized and consistent. He moves within the conventional form of the dream vision with the confidence and originality of a master poet. Chaucer innovates within the form by having his narrator fall asleep over a classical story that itself contains a dream that foreshadows the one he is about to experience. Then, like a series of cleverly constructed Chinese boxes, the black knight's story of his lady's loss nestles inside a parallel narrative of a h(e)art hunt, which rests within the dreamer's untold story of his mysterious affliction. The complexity of the poem's form is in meaningful tension with the simplicity of its message: death is final, and the grief it causes unspeakable.

These features are remarkable considering the likely early date of the *Book of the Duchess*. Of all Chaucer's poems, it is the one most securely linked to a specific occasion, the death of John of Gaunt's wife, Blanche of Lancaster, from the plague on September 12, 1368.[1] Although early editions titled the poem "The Dreame of Chaucer," in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (418), the poet himself calls it "the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse." Blanche is thus clearly the identity of the lady "Whyte," described at length by the man in black within the poem. More word play confirms this identification later, when we are told that a king rides, at the conclusion of a hunt, to "a longe castel with walles whyte, / By Seynt Johan, on a riche hille" (1318–19). Critics agree that John is here identified as John of Gaunt, Earl of Richmond ("riche mont" is French for "riche hille") and Duke of Lancaster (imaginatively derived from "longe castel"). These references have implications, of course, for the poem's date. Since the *Book of the Duchess* commemorates Blanche after her death, it cannot have been written earlier than 1368, and most scholars believe that it is unlikely to have been written after 1372, when Gaunt would no longer have held the title Earl of Richmond, though there is less than unanimous agreement about this second date. An early date is also suggested by the fact that the poem is written in a four-beat line, rather than the five-beat line Chaucer favored in his later verse. At all events, the poem was most likely written when Chaucer was a relatively young and untested poet, probably just in his mid twenties. His patron, John of Gaunt, would also have been a young man, only twenty-eight at the time of his wife's death.

The young poet took on a difficult and ambitious theme. Death is hard to to accept at any point in life; the death of a young person is especially painful, and even though the Middle Ages was a time of political marriages among the

1. J. L. N. Palmer, "The Historical Context of the *Book of the Duchess*," *The Chaucer Review* 8 (1974):

nobility, nothing suggests that John of Gaunt did not care deeply about his lovely young wife. Two marriages later, one a union of deep affection to Chaucer's own sister-in-law, Katherine Swynford, Gaunt still specified, in the burial instructions that formed part of his will, his wish that he be laid to rest beside his "most dear late wife Blanche."[2] But Blanche not only died young; she fell to a frightening and gruesome disease. The plague that swept through Europe in the late fourteenth century, wiping out one third of its population, brought mortality in an especially terrifying form. Consolation must have been hard to formulate. Furthermore, in presuming to offer comfort to the highly placed John of Gaunt, son of Edward III and a man later acknowledged as the most powerful political force in England, Chaucer, a comparative nobody at court, set himself a particularly challenging task. The human side of the *Book of the Duchess* is thus important to keep in mind. Far from a sterile exercise, the poem weaves its art from threads of real life and death.

It is easy to forget this important point, because the *Book of the Duchess* is also a highly literary and conventional piece. In it, Chaucer reaches back to the canonical works of the Latin past, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. These he recasts in a dream vision form popularized by some of the greatest European poets of the Middle Ages, especially in the French tradition. The narrator's dream is literally refracted through this double lens as he awakens inside his dream to find the sun streaming down upon him through stained glass images of the story of Troy and the widely known thirteenth-century French dream vision the *Romance of the Rose*, representing the universal literary themes of war and love. Less directly, Chaucer pays homage to a French writer from the generation just ahead of him, Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377), whose *dits amoureux* (tales of love, sometimes cast in visionary form) the *Judgment of the King of Bohemia*, *Fortune's Remedy*, and the *Fountain of Love* deeply inform its structure, language, and imagery.[3]

In addition to being a poem of great literary sophistication, the *Book of the Duchess* draws on other texts and fields of learning as well: Aristotelian epistemology, Boethian philosophy, the dream theory of Macrobius,[4] medical practice and physiology derived from Galen and Hippocrates, the Bible, and the rules of chess. But all this erudition is easy to miss in the presence of a narrator as artfully obtuse as the one here. His dream experience progresses as a series of misreadings, beginning with his interpretation of his bedtime story, Ovid's tale of Ceyx (the Chaucerian Seys) and Alcyone, as a prophylactic against insomnia and continuing through his literalization of the chess allegory used by the grieving man of black, whom he enounters in a lush dream landscape, to convey the loss of his queen to the goddess Fortune. "What are you so upset about?" exclaims the dreamer; "no sane person would wax suicidal over the loss of a few chess pieces" (721 ff.)! But if the dreamer is guilty of overliteralizing in these cases, at other times he seems unable to grasp even the most tangible and obviously stated truth. The first words, for example, that he hears out of the mysterious black knight's mouth are lamentations over the loss of his "lady bright" who is "fro me deed" (477, 479). Nonetheless, as the man in black repeatedly observes, the dreamer's subsequent conversation shows that he knows little about the nature of the knight's loss, which is far greater than the dreamer understands it to be (743–44, 1137–38, 1305–06).

The dreamer's slowness creates the narrative space that permits the knight to rehearse the history of his relationship with the lady Whyte and to celebrate

2. Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), 78; also 420.
3. Of the works listed in this paragraph, relevant sections from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (the story of Ceyx and Alcyone), the *Romance of the Rose*, and Machaut's *Fountain of Love* are included in the Contexts section of this Norton Critical Edition.

and finally to commemorate her physical and moral beauty. The catharsis comes near the end of the poem, in lines 1309–10, when the knight is pressed to acknowledge his loss without art or equivocation—"She is deed"—and the dreamer to produce the only comfort possible in such circumstances, a simple expression of fellow feeling—"By God, it is routhe [pitiable]." To grant this much, however, is only to approach the mystery at the center of the poem; it is not to solve it. Readers continue to disagree about the extent and intent of the dreamer's clumsiness. Does he merely pretend to ignorance as a strategy for drawing out the ailing knight? Is he offering, as perhaps lines 553–54 might suggest (". . . to make yow hool / I wol do al my power hool . . ."), an opportunity for a talking cure? Or, alternatively, are we meant to take the dreamer's obtuseness straight? Is the bumbling dreamer perhaps Chaucer's vehicle for tactfully expressing comfort and counsel to his noble patron?

A related question is just how comforting the message of the poem truly would have been. Notably absent from the world of "Kynde" or nature that the poet describes is any mention of the Christian afterlife, leading some readers to speculate that Chaucer remains critical of the response of both the dreamer and the man in black to the lady's death. The dreamer's exclamation of pity seems to these and other readers insufficient to the enormity of the loss described in the poem. Are either or both of these two characters ultimately seen as lacking, spiritually, morally, or socially? Or is the slippage in the poem a feature of the poet's own artistic immaturity? Perhaps he had not yet learned how to harmonize such comic moments as the awakening of Morpheus in the cave of sleep with the serious themes of love and death; there are many such odd disjunctions in the poem, extending even to its bathetic final line: "This was my sweven [dream]; now it is doon" (1334). With his promise to put his curious dream into rhyme (1330–33), the narrator returns us to the poem's opening, but without having resolved any of the key questions raised there or having indicated whether the dreamer has made progress in addressing his lassitude and insomnia. As with any great but imperfect poem, part of the delight in reading the *Book of the Duchess* lies in exploring such unanswerable questions. Even the cause of that lassitude—the narrator's cryptic eight-year sickness—ultimately remains obscure.

Recent readers have extended critical inquiry to the poem's celebration of the beautiful lady Whyte and its commitment to the feminine values she represents. In a poem whose ostensible purpose is to eulogize a woman, real women are notably absent. Whyte herself remains something of a cipher, beautiful, elusive, difficult to interpret; for all her presence in the poem, it is her absence that remains significant. Recollected and interpreted by others, the only word she actually utters is the one-word negative, "Nay" (1243), and even that is reported speech. Her abstract beauty is balanced by the equally stereotyped treachery of the goddess Fortuna, who embodies the wiliness and faithlessness commonly associated with women in medieval misogynist literature. It is a decidedly negative view of woman barely kept at bay here by the praise of the knight's lost lady, who often seems good only because she does not engage in the "knakkes smale" ("petty tricks") that come so easily to other craftier females. Although the dreamer's Ovidian bedtime story suggests through the character of Alcyone that a woman's sorrow and desire can be as urgent and deeply felt as a man's, Alcyone, like Whyte, dies, and the relationship that finally takes over the poem is the one between the two men, the dreamer and the man in black. The realm of the female, ostensibly the poem's subject, is all but effaced. One might even say, as Steven Kruger does in an essay included here in the Contexts section, that the poem is not just about men but about masculinity.[5] To the extent that the dreamer is passive, mel-

ancholic, confined to his bedchamber, he is feminized and in need of correction. His dream gives him access to a naturalized, courtly world where he can again take charge as a man helping a friend come to terms with the loss of his wife. Thus, the ambivalent attitude toward women so pervasive in Chaucer's later work—for example, in the *Legend of Good Women*—emerges even here, in his first major poem.

To some extent that ambivalence is inevitable; it is a feature of Chaucer's time period and of the language available to him to describe the relationship between the sexes. The very form in which he worked—the philosophical dream vision—carried assumptions about the right subordination of imaginative and bodily experience to a unitary spiritual truth that was bound to work ultimately against an over-valuation of romantic love. The ultimate prototype of this kind of poem was the *Consolation of Philosophy* by the late classical philosopher Boethius, in which the allegorical figure of Lady Philosophy comes to the suffering writer, imprisoned and victimized by political persecution, to banish from his soul any attachment to the capricious world of Fortune. Compared to many other medieval poems that similarly worked within the Boethian tradition, the *Book of the Duchess* finally demonstrates an admirable originality and independence in its use of the form. Although framed within a very specific aristocratic world with values much different from our own, it is not only a humanist poem, but a human one. For in this poem, no figure of Philosophy (or as she is styled in other texts, Reason or Nature) comes to guide the dreamer out of his quandary or to explain to the black knight why he should give up his grief. Instead, with uncommon poignancy, two mortal men struggle to find a way to console each other. Their communication at once dignifies poetic tradition and exposes its limitation—its silence in the face of Fortune's ultimate weapon and the final blow that Nature has in store for all her creatures.

The text here is based chiefly on the version found in the Fairfax manuscript (Fairfax 16, Bodleian Library).

The Book of the Duchess

I have gret wonder, by this light° — *daylight (a mild oath)*
How that I live,° for day ne night — *stay alive*
I may nat° slepe wel nigh nought,° — *cannot / nearly at all*
I have so many an ydel° thought — *pointless, meaningless*
Purely° for defaute° of slepe — *Simply / lack*
That, by my trouthe,° I take no kepe° — *honestly / do not care*
Of nothing,° how it cometh or goth,° — *about anything / comes or goes*
Ne me nis nothing leef nor loth.
Al is yliche good to me,[1]
Joye or sorwe,° wherso it be,° — *sorrow / whichever it may be*
For I have feling in° nothinge, — *emotions about*
But as it° were a mased° thing — *(I) am like / dazed*

of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare, ed Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 51–83; a similar discussion of feminization and male homosocial relationships, though not in the *Book of the Duchess*, is also offered by Elaine Tuttle Hansen in another essay in the Contexts section: "The Feminization of Men in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1989), 51–70; Hansen specifically discusses the *Book of the Duchess* in *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992), 58–86.

1. Nor is anything pleasing or displeasing to me. Everything is equally desirable to me (that is, I am without desire for any of it).

Alwey in point to° falle adoun, — *about to*
For sorwful imaginacioun
Is alwey hooly in my minde.[2]
And wel ye wote,° ageynes kynde° — *know / against nature*
It were to liven in this wyse,° — *manner*
For nature wolde nat suffyse° — *permit*
To noon erthely° creature — *any earthly*
Nat longe tyme to endure
Withoute slepe and be in sorwe;° — *(so much) sorrow*
And I ne may,° ne night ne morwe,° — *cannot / morning*
Slepe, and thus melancolye[3]
And drede° I have for to dye;° — *fear / die*
Defaute° of slepe and hevinesse° — *Lack / dullness, dejection*
Hath slayn° my spirit of quiknesse,° — *Have deprived / liveliness*
That° I have lost al lustihede.° — *So that / enjoyment (of life)*
Swiche° fantasies ben° in myn hede — *Such / are*
So° I noot° what is best to do. — *That / do not know*
But men myght axe° me, why so — *ask*
I may nat slepe, and what me is?[4]
But natheles,° who aske° this — *nevertheless / whoever asks*
Leseth° his asking° trewely. — *Gains nothing from / question*
Myselven° can nat telle why — *I myself*
The sooth,° but trewely as I gesse,° — *In truth / guess*
I holde it be° a siknesse° — *to be / sickness*
That I have suffred this eight yere,° — *for eight years*
And yet my bote° is never the nere;° — *cure / no nearer*
For ther is phisicien but oon,° — *only one*
That may me hele,° but that is doon.° — *heal / over and done with*
Passe we over until efte;
That wil nat be, mot nede be lefte;
Our first matere is good to kepe.[5]
So whan I saw I might nat slepe
Til now late this other night,° — *just the other night*
Upon my bedde I sat upright
And bad oon recche° me a booke, — *someone fetch*
A romaunce,[6] and he it me tooke° — *brought*
To rede and dryve the night awey,° — *pass the time*
For me thoughte it better pley

2. For sorrowful imagination entirely dominates my mind. (The imagination was a specific faculty in the mind in classical and medieval psychology, responsible for processing the images perceived in daily life and for producing the images seen in dreams; these images are also called "phantasms" or "phantasies"—see line 28.)
3. In medieval physiology, the emotional state of sorrow and anxiety brought on by an excess of the natural humor of black bile. Melancholy could produce a disordered imagination.
4. I cannot sleep, and what is the matter? (Lines 31–96 are not found in any of the three surviving manuscripts of the poem; they first appear in the 1532 edition of William Thynne. For additional discussion, see the Preface of this Norton Critical Edition.)
5. Let's skip over (that part) until later; that which will never be must be left behind. Better to stick to our original topic. (This cryptic passage has excited many different interpretations. What is the poet's mysterious eight-year illness? Is he lovesick, or is his malady moral or spiritual in nature? He promises to return to the subject "eft" [i.e., at another time], but never does explain the cause of his melancholy.)
6. The original of the book that the narrator takes up to read here is Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (11. 411–748), but the generic term "romance" would be more appropriate to Guillaume de Machaut's *Fountain of Love*, which also recounts the story of Ceyx and Alcyone (544–698). Both sources are included in the Contexts section of this Norton Critical Edition.

Than pleyen either at chesse or tables.[7]
And in this book were wryten fables° — *fictional stories*
That clerkes° hadde, in olde tyme, — *scholars, writers*
And other poets, put in ryme° — *rhyme*
To rede and for to be in minde° — *preserve for memory*
Whyl° men loved the lawe of kinde.[8] — *A time when*
This book ne spake but° of swiche° thinges, — *spoke only / such*
Of quenes lyves and of kinges
And many othere thinges smale.° — *of little importance*
Amonge al this I fonde a tale
That me thought a wonder° thing. — *wonderful, amazing*
This was the tale: There was a king
That hight° Seys, and hadde a wyf, — *was named*
The beste that mighte bere lyf,° — *could exist*
And this quene hight Alcyone.
So it befel° therafter sone° — *happened / soon*
This king wol wenden over see.° — *travel across the sea*
To tellen shortly, whan that he
Was in the see thus in this wyse,° — *manner*
Swich a tempest° gan to ryse° — *Such a storm / arose*
That brak hir mast° and made it falle — *their (ship's) mast*
And clefte° hir ship and dreynt hem° alle, — *split apart / drowned them*
That° never was founden,° as it telles, — *So that / there found*
Borde° ne man ne nothing elles.° — *Board, plank / else*
Right thus° this king Seys loste his lyf. — *Just so*
Now for to speke of Alcyone his wyf:
This lady that was left at home
Hath wonder,° that the king ne come — *was perplexed, worried*
Hoom,° for it was a longe terme.° — *Home / time*
Anoon° hir herte began to erme,° — *Soon / grieve*
And for that hir thoughte° evermo — *because it seemed to her*
It was nat wel he dwelte so,° — *stayed away so (long)*
She longed so after° the king — *for*
That certes° it were° a pitous° thing — *truly / would be / pitiful*
To telle hir hertely sorweful lyf° — *deeply sorrowful existence*
That she had, this noble wyf,
For him, allas, she loved alderbest.° — *best of all*
Anoon° she sente° bothe est and west — *Immediately / sent messengers*
To seke him, but they founde nought.° — *nothing*
"Allas!" quod° she, "that I was wrought!° — *said / created*
And wher my lord, my love, be deed?
Certes, I nil never ete breed,
I make a vowe to my god here,
But I mowe of my lord here!"[9]
Swich sorwe° this lady to hir took — *Such sorrow*

7. Than to play either chess or backgammon (or a similar board game).
8. The "lawe of kinde" or natural law governed virtuous pagans in ancient times; it was distinct from but not incompatible with Christian law.
9. And is my lord, my love, dead? Indeed, I will never again eat bread, so I vow to my god here, unless I may hear (something regarding) my lord. (The word "wher" is a form of the conjunction "whether"; the fact that Alcyone does not know whether or not Seys is dead causes her to fast in order to persuade her special goddess, Juno, to bring her knowledge of his fate.)

That trewely I that made this book
Had swich pitee and swich routhe° — *compassion*
To rede° hir sorwe, that, by my trouthe,° — *In reading about / truly*
I ferde° the worse al the morwe° — *got on / morrow (morning, day)*
After, to thinken on° hir sorwe.° — *from thinking about / sorrow*
So whan this lady coude here° no word — *hear*
That no man mighte finde hir lord,
Ful ofte she swowned° and seyd "Allas!" — *swooned, fainted*
For sorwe ful nigh wood° she was, — *almost crazy*
Ne she coude no reed but oon,[1]
But doun on knees she sat anoon,° — *at once*
And weep, that pitee was to here.° — *(she) wept piteously*
"A mercy, swete lady dere!'
Quod° she to Juno, hir goddesse; — *Said*
"Help me out of this distresse,
And yeve° me grace my lord to see — *give*
Sone,° or wite wherso° he be, — *Soon / know where*
Or how he fareth,° or in what wyse,° — *how he is doing / manner*
And I shal make yow sacrifyse,
And hooly° youres become I shal — *completely*
With good will, body, herte, and al;
And but thou wilt this, lady swete,[2]
Send me grace to slepe and mete° — *dream*
In my slepe som certeyn sweven,° — *a trustworthy dream*
Wherthurgh that° I may knowe even° — *Through which / simply*
Whether my lord be quik or ded."° — *is alive or dead*
With that word she heng doun the hed,° — *lowered (her) head*
And fil a-swown° as cold as stoon.° — *swooned, fainted / stone*
Hir women caught° hir up anoon° — *lifted / at once*
And broughten hir in bed al naked;
And she, forweped and forwaked,
Was wery, and thus the dede slepe
Fil on hir er she tooke kepe,[3]
Thurgh° Juno, that had herd hir bone° — *Caused by / prayer*
That made hir to slepe sone.° — *quickly to fall asleep*
For as she preyde, right° so was doon° — *just / it done*
In dede;° for Juno right anoon° — *In deed, in fact / immediately*
Called thus hir messagere° — *messenger*
To do hir erande, and he com nere.° — *approached closer*
Whan he was come, she bad° him thus: — *asked, commanded*
"Go bet,"° quod° Juno, "to Morpheus,[4] — *quickly / said*
Thou knowest hym wel, the god of slepe;
Now understond wel, and tak kepe.° — *pay attention*
Sey thus on my halfe,° that he — *behalf*

1. Nor was she able to come up with any solution except for one (i.e., the solution of praying to Juno, traditionally the goddess of married women).
2. And if you wish to do only this, sweet lady.
3. And she was exhausted from weeping and sleeplessness, and thus a deathly sleep fell upon her before she knew it. (The prefix "for" is an intensifier. As reflected in line 125, it was common practice during the Middle Ages to sleep without clothing; also 176, 293.)
4. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (11. 633–72), Morpheus is one of the sons of Somnus, god of sleep; Morpheus's special skill is his ability to assume specific human form. In contrast, Chaucer makes Morpheus himself the god of sleep and has him re-animate Seys's literal dead body (see 144–45).

Go faste° into the Grete See,° *quickly / i.e., the Mediterranean*
And bid° him that, on alle thing,° *instruct / above all else*
He take up Seys body the king° *the body of King Seys*
That lyth° ful pale and nothing rody.° *lies / not at all ruddy*
Bid him crepe into° the body, *creep inside*
Aud do it goon° to Alcyone *cause it to go*
The quene, ther° she lyth° alone, *where / lies*
And shewe hir shortly,° it is no nay,° *quickly / beyond denial*
How it was dreynt° this other day; *drowned*
And do° the body speke right° so *make / just*
Right as it was woned to do° *used to do*
The whyles° that it was alyve. *During the time*
Go now faste, and hye thee blyve!"° *hurry along quickly*
This messager took leve and wente *took his leave*
Upon his wey and never ne stente° *stopped*
Til he com° to the derke valey *Until he came*
That stant° bytwene roches twey,° *stands / two rock formations*
Ther° never yet grew corne° ne gras, *Where / grain*
Ne tree, ne nothing that ought° was, *amounted to anything*
Beste,° ne man, ne nought elles,° *Beast / anything else*
Save° ther were a fewe welles *Except that*
Came renninge° fro the cliffes adoun,° *Which came flowing / down from*
That° made a deedly slepinge soun,° *(And) which / soporific sound*
And ronnen° doun right by a cave *they ran, flowed*
That was under a rokke y-grave° *hollowed out*
Amid° the valey wonder depe.° *In the middle of / wondrously deep*
There these goddes laye and slepe,° *slept*
Morpheus, and Eclympasteyre,[5]
That was the god of slepes heyre,° *heir*
That slepe° and did noon° other werk. *Who slept / no*
This cave was also as° derk *just as*
As helle pit overal aboute;° *throughout, everywhere*
They had good leyser° for to route° *plenty of leisure time / snore*
To envye° who might slepe beste; *compete as to*
Some henge hir chin° upon hir breste *hung their chins*
And slepe upright,° hir heed y-hed,° *(sitting) upright / slumped forward*
And some lay naked in hir bed° *in their beds*
And slepe whyles° the dayes laste. *as long as*
This messager come fleeing° faste *flying*
And cryed, "O how,° awake anoon!"° *O ho! / at once*
It was for nought;° ther herde him noon.° *to no avail / nobody*
"Awak!" quod° he, "Who is lyth° there?" *said / is it who lies*
And blew his horne right in hir ere° *their ears*
And cryed "awaketh!" wonder hye.° *incredibly loudly*
This god of slepe, with his oon eye° *one of his eyes*
Cast° up and axed,° "Who clepeth° there?" *Looked / asked / calls*
"It am I," quod this messagere;
"Juno bad thou shuldest goon"°— *asked that you go*
And tolde him what he shulde doon° *should do*

5. Although Ovid's *Metamorphoses* names four of the thousand sons of the god of sleep, Eclympasteyre is not among them; the name is taken from Jean Froissart's poem *The Paradise of Love*.

As I have tolde yow heretofore°— *before this*
It is no nede reherse it more°— *repeat it again*
And wente his wey whan he had seyd.° *after he had spoken*
Anoon this god of slepe abreyd° *awakened, started up*
Out of his slepe and gan to goon,° *began to get going*
And did as he had bede him doon:° *asked him to do*
Tooke up the dreynte° body sone° *drowned / straightway*
And bar° it forth to Alcyone, *carried*
His wif the quene, theras° she lay, *where*
Right even a quarter bifore day,[6]
And stood right at hir beddes fete,° *the foot of her bed*
And called hir, right as she hete,° *was called*
By name, and seyde, "My swete wyf,
Awak! Let be° your sorweful° lyf, *Give up / sorrowful*
For in your sorwe there lyth no reed,° *can be found no remedy*
For certes, swete, I am but deed.[7]
Ye shul me never on lyve y-see. *(again) see me alive*
But good swete herte, look° that ye *take care*
Bury my body, for swich a tyde° *at such and such a time*
Ye mowe° it finde the see besyde;° *may / next to the sea*
And farewel, swete, my worldes blisse!
I preye God your sorwe lisse;° *relieve, lessen your sorrow*
Too litel whyl° our blisse lasteth!" *short a time*
With that hir eyen up she casteth,
And sawe nought.° "Allas!" quod° she for sorwe, *nothing / said*
And deyde° within the thridde morwe.° *died / three days*
But what she seyde more in that swowe° *swoon*
I may nat° telle yow as nowe;° *cannot / at this time*
It were too longe for to dwelle;
My first matere I wil yow telle
Wherfore I have told this thinge[8]
Of Alcyone and Seys the kinge.
For thus moche dar° I sey wel: *this much dare*
I had be dolven everydel
And deed right thurgh defaute of slepe,[9]
If I ne had° red and take kepe° *had not / taken heed*
Of this tale next bifore.° *just preceding*
And I wol telle yow wherfore:° *the reason*
For I ne might,° for bote ne bale,° *could not / good or bad*
Slepe er° I had red this tale *before*
Of this dreynte° Seys the kinge *drowned*
And of the goddes of sleping.
Whan I had red this tale wel
And overlooked it everydel,° *looked it over fully*
Me thoughte wonder° if it were so,° *it a marvel / true*
For I had never herde speke er tho° *heard tell before then*

6. At exactly three hours before daybreak. ("Quarter" refers to one quarter of a twelve-hour night; according to standard medieval dream theory, dreams that occur in the early hours of the morning, just before dawn, are the most trustworthy.)
7. For certainly, (my) sweet, I am quite dead.
8. It would delay (us) too long. I will return to our first topic—the reason I am narrating the story.
9. I would have been dead and buried simply for lack of sleep.

Of no goddes° that coude make — *any gods*
Men to slepe ne for to wake,° — *awaken*
For I ne knewe never God but oon.[1]
And in my game° I seyde anoon°— — *playfully / at once*
And yet me list right evel to pleye[2]—
"Rather than that I shulde deye° — *die*
Thurgh defaute° of sleping thus, — *the lack*
I wolde yive thilke° Morpheus — *would like to give this same*
Or his goddesse, dame Juno,
Or som wight elles, I ne rought who,[3]
To make me slepe and have som reste,
I wil yive° him the alderbeste° — *give / very best*
Yift° that ever he abode° his lyve, — *Gift / received during*
And here onwarde,° right now as blyve,° — *as a pledge / at once*
If he wol make me slepe a lyte,° — *little*
Of downe of pure doves whyte° — *pure white doves*
I wil yive him a fether bed,
Rayed° with golde and right wel cled° — *Decorated / wrapped*
In fyn blak satin doutremere, — *from overseas*
And many a pilow, and every bere° — *pillowcase (to be made)*
Of clothe of Reynes, to slepe softe;
Him thar nat nede to turnen ofte.[4]
And I wol yive him al that falles° — *is fitting*
To a chambre; and al his halles
I wol do peynte° with pure golde — *have painted*
And tapite hem ful many folde
Of o sute;[5] this shal he have,
If I wiste° wher were his cave, — *knew*
If he can make me slepe sone,° — *soon*
As did the goddesse° Alcyone. — *As the goddess (Juno) did for*
And thus this ilke° god Morpheus — *same*
May winne of° me mo fees° thus — *gain from / more payments*
Than ever he wan;° and to Juno, — *won (previously)*
That is his goddesse, I shal so do,° — *do so (much) that*
I trow° that she shal holde hir payde."° — *believe / herself pleased, satisfied*
I hadde unnethe° that word y-sayde° — *scarcely / uttered*
Right thus as I have told it yow,
That sodeynly,° I niste° how, — *Than suddenly / do not know*
Swich a lust anoon° me tooke — *desire abruptly*
To slepe, that right upon my booke
I fil aslepe, and therwith even° — *thereupon directly*
Me mette° so inly° swete a sweven,° — *I dreamed / thoroughly / dream*
So wonderful that never yit° — *yet, to this day*

1. For I never knew about any God except for one (that is, the Christian God). (This observation underscores the distinction between the ancient age of "kind" or nature, when the Ovidian story takes place, and the narrator's time period, the Christian Middle Ages. Despite his religious and philosophical advantages, however, the narrator brings a comically literal mind to his interpretation of the story.)
2. And yet I really did not feel in a playful spirit.
3. Or some other being, I'm not particular as to whom.
4. Of cloth from Rennes, (to cause him) to sleep softly. He will not be forced to toss and turn. (Rennes, in Brittany, was known for its production of fine linen.)
5. And hang them with a multitude of tapestries, all in one pattern.

I trow° no man had° the wit — *believe / has had*
To conne° wel my sweven rede;° — *to know how / to interpret*
No, nat Joseph, withoute drede,
Of Egipte, he that red so
The kinges metinge Pharao,
No more than coude the lest of us;
Ne nat scarsly Macrobeus,
He that wroot al th'avisioun
That he mette, King Scipioun,
The noble man, the African—
Swiche mervailes fortuned than—
I trowe arede my dremes even.[6]
Lo, thus it was, this was my sweven.° — *dream*
Me thoughte thus: that it was May,
And in the dawning° I lay, — *dawn*
Me met° thus, in my bed al naked, — *I dreamed*
And looked forth,° for I was waked° — *around / had been awakened*
With° smale foules° a grete hepe° — *By / birds / crowd*
That had affrayed° me out of my slepe — *startled*
Thurgh° noyse and swetnesse of hir° songe; — *By (their) / their*
And, as me mette,° they sate amonge° — *I dreamed / sat together*
Upon my chambre-roof withoute,° — *bedroom roof outside*
Upon the tyles overal aboute,° — *everywhere on the roof-tiles*
And songen everich in his wyse° — *each in his fashion*
The moste solempne° servyse — *solemn, ceremonious*
By note° that ever man, I trowe,° — *in song / believe*
Had herde, for som of hem song lowe,° — *low notes (in pitch)*
Som high, and al of oon acorde.° — *in perfect harmony*
To telle shortly, at o worde,° — *in a word*
Was never y-herd so swete a steven° — *voice*
But° it had be° a thing of heven; — *Unless / been*
So mery a soun,° so swete entewnes,° — *sound / such sweet melodies*
That certes, for the toune of Tewnes,
I nolde but I had herd hem singe,[7]
For al my chambre gan to ringe° — *rang out, resounded*
Thurgh singing of hir armonye.° — *their harmony*
For instrument nor melodye
Was nowher herd° yet half so swete, — *Has not been heard anywhere*
Nor of acorde° half so mete,° — *concord / agreeable*

6. No, without a doubt, not Joseph of Egypt, he who interpreted the dreams of the (Egyptian) Pharoah—he could no more (interpret my dream) than could the least (skilled reader of dreams). Hardly could Macrobius (himself), I believe, interpret my dream properly—he who wrote the whole vision that was dreamed by King Scipio, that noble man, the African—such marvels happened in those days. (For the story of how Joseph interpreted the Pharoah's dreams, see Genesis 41:1–36. "Macrobius" was the author of a famous fifth-century commentary on Cicero's "Dream of Scipio," the conclusion of Cicero's *De re publica*; Chaucer here conflates Macrobius with Cicero, the author of the dream proper, perhaps suggesting a lack of direct familiarity with the primary texts at this point in his career. "King Scipioun" is the Roman general Publius Cornelius Scipio the Younger, whose dream about his distinguished grandfather, Publius Cornelius Scipio the Elder, is also described, more accurately, by Chaucer in the *Parliament of Fowls*, where it is the elder Scipio who is called "African." Both the "Dream of Scipio" by Cicero and a section from the beginning of Macrobius's *Commentary* are included in the Contexts section of this Norton Critical Edition.)
7. That truly I would not trade the town of Tunis for the experience of hearing them sing. (Tunis, in North Africa, was probably chosen for the rhyme, but the city was also known for its wealth and culture.)

For ther was noon of hem° that feyned° — *not one of them / pretended*
To singe, for ech° of hem him peyned° — *each / took pains*
To finde out° mery crafty° notes; — *invent / skillful*
They ne spared nat hir throtes.° — *i.e., they did not hold back*
And, sooth to seyn,° my chambre° was — *truth to tell / bedroom*
Ful wel depeynted,° and with glas — *beautifully decorated, painted*
Were al the windowes wel y-glased,° — *glazed*
Ful clere,° and nat an hole y-crased,° — *Very clear / broken*
That° to beholde it was gret joye. — *So that*
For hooly al the story° of Troye — *the entire story*
Was in the glasinge y-wrought° thus, — *worked in stained glass*
Of Ector and of Kinge Priamus,
Of Achilles and Kinge Lamedoun,
Of Medea and of Jasoun,
Of Paris, Eleyne, and Lavyne.
And al the walles with colours fyne
Were peynted, bothe text and glose,
Of al the Romaunce of the Rose.[8]
My windowes weren shet echoon,° — *each shut*
And thurgh the glas the sonne shoon° — *sun shone*
Upon my bed with bright bemes,° — *beams*
With many glade gilde stremes;° — *golden streams (of light)*
And eek the welken° was so fair; — *also the sky*
Blew,° bright, clere was the air, — *Blue*
And ful atempre, for soothe,° it was; — *truly very mild*
For nother° too cold nor hot it nas,° — *neither / was not*
Ne in al the welken° was a cloude. — *the whole sky*
And as I lay thus, wonder° loude — *wondrously, incredibly*
Me thoughte° I herde an hunte° blowe — *It seemed to me / huntsman*
T'assaye° his horn and for to knowe° — *To test / to find out*
Whether it were clere or hors of soune.° — *hoarse, rough-sounding*
And I herd goinge, both up and doune,
Men, hors,° houndes, and other thinge,° — *horses / things*
And al men speke° of huntinge, — *all the men spoke*
How they wolde slee the hert° with strengthe, — *slay the hart*
And how the hert had upon lengthe° — *after a while*
So moche embosed,° I noot° now what. — *become exhausted / do not know*
Anonright° whan I herde that, — *Immediately*
How that they wolde on hunting goon,° — *go*
I was right° glad and up anoon° — *very / at once*

8. Text and gloss mean literally the script of the story and commentary on it; in this context, probably pictures and captions. The figures listed each have some connection to the story of Troy: Hector and Paris were the sons of the Trojan king Priam, and Lamedon was his father. Achilles was a great Greek warrior who fought against Troy. Helen was the Greek queen whose abduction by Paris was the cause of the Trojan war. Lavinia was the Trojan Aeneas's bride later in Latium. The ill-fated lovers Jason and Medea, though not participants in the ancient story of Troy, are described in medieval Trojan romances; Medea helped Jason win the Golden Fleece and was later betrayed by him; Chaucer tells their story in the *Legend of Good Women* 1580–1679. The *Romance of the Rose* was a famous thirteenth-century allegory of love by Guillaume de Lorris, continued by Jean de Meun; many details of Chaucer's description of the *locus amoenus* (the beautiful place) where he now finds himself are taken from the description of the Garden of Love in this poem; included in the Contexts section of this Norton Critical Edition are lines 1347–1410, which include trees, birds, and other forest animals such as are found in passages coming up.

Tooke my hors,° and forth I wente. — *horse*
Out of my chambre° I never stente° — *bedroom / stopped (going)*
Til I com to the feld withoute.° — *field, open country outside*
Ther overtook I a grete route° — *company, crowd*
Of huntes° and eek of foresteres,° — *hunters / also game trackers*
With many relayes and lymeres,°
And hyed hem° to the forest faste, — *they hurried*
And I with hem.° So at the laste — *them*
I asked oon, ladde° a lymere, — *one who led*
"Sey, felow, who shal hunte here?"
Quod° I, and he answerd ageyn;° — *Said / back*
"Sir, th'emperour Octovyen,"[1]
Quod he, "and is° here faste by."° — *he is / nearby*
"A Goddes halfe," in good tyme," quod I, — *For God's sake*
"Go we° faste!" and gan° to ryde. — *Let's go / we began*
Whan we came to the forest syde,° — *edge*
Every man dide, right anoon,° — *right away*
As to hunting fil to doon.° — *as required by the hunt*
The maister hunte° anoon, fote-hote,° — *chief huntsman / very quickly*
With a gret horne blew three mote° — *notes*
At the uncoupling° of his houndes. — *unleashing*
Within a whyl the herte founde is,
Y-halowed° and rechased° faste — *chased with shouts / pursued*
Longe tyme;° and so at the laste — *for a long time*
This hert rused° and stal° awey — *retraced his steps / crept*
Fro° al the houndes a privy wey.° — *From / to a hidden place*
The houndes had overshote hem alle° — *all passed up (the hart)*
And were on a defaute y-falle;° — *had lost the scent*
Therwith° the hunte wonder faste° — *With that / huntsman very quickly*
Blew a forloyn° at the laste. — *the note of recall*
I was go walked fro° my tree, — *had gone walking*
And as I wente ther cam by me
A whelp,° that fauned° me as I stood, — *puppy / fawned on*
That hadde y-folowed° and coude no good.° — *followed me / didn't know better*
It come and crepte to me as lowe° — *low to the ground*
Right as° it hadde me y-knowe,° — *Just as if / knew me*
Held doun his hede and joyned° his eres° — *brought together / ears*
And leyde al smothe doun his heres.° — *fur*
I wolde have caught it, and anoon° — *but all at once*
It fledde and was fro me goon,° — *gone away from me*
And I him folwed, and it forth wente
Doun by a floury° grene wente° — *flowery / path*
Ful thikke of° gras, ful softe and swete, — *Very thick with*
With floures fele,° faire under fete,° — *many flowers / feet*

9. Lymeres: hounds led on a leash who track game by scent. Relayes: hounds positioned in advance on the probable course of the hunt to replace dogs grown tired.

1. The Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar (63 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), the adopted heir of Julius Caesar, was born Gaius Octavius. He was the first and one of the most important and famous Roman emperors. Octavian also figures in Christian interpretations of the poem, as he was the ruler of Rome at the time of the birth of Christ.

And litel used, it seemed thus;° *so it seemed*
For bothe Flora and Zephirus,[2]
They two that make floures growe,
Had made hir° dwelling ther, I trowe;° *their / believe*
For it was on to beholde° *to look upon*
As though th'erthe envye wolde° *the earth wanted to compete*
To be gayer° than the heven,° *more beautiful / the sky*
To have mo floures swiche seven° *seven times the flowers*
As in the welken° sterres be.° *sky / are stars*
It had forgete° the povertee *forgotten*
That winter thurgh his colde morwes° *with its cold mornings*
Had made it suffre, and his sorwes.° *its sorrows*
Al was forgeten, and that was sene° *apparent*
For al the wode was waxen° grene; *had grown*
Swetnesse of dewe had made it waxe.
It is° no need eek° for to axe° *There is / also / ask*
Wher° ther were many grene greves° *Whether / groves*
Or thikke of° trees so ful of leves; *a multitude of*
And every tree stood by himselve° *itself*
Fro other° wel ten feet or twelve. *Away from the others*
So grete trees, so huge of strengthe,
Of fourty or fifty fadme lengthe,
Clene withoute bough or stikke,
With croppes brode, and eek as thikke[3]—
They were nat an inche asonder°— *apart*
That it° was shadwe overal under;° *So that there / everywhere underneath*
And many an hert and many an hinde
Was both bifore me and bihinde.
Of founes, sowres, bukkes, does
Was ful the wode, and many roes,[4]
And many squirels that sete° *sat*
Ful high upon the trees and ete° *ate*
And in hir° maner made festes.° *their / had feasts*
Shortly,° it was so ful of bestes° *Briefly / beasts, animals*
That though Argus,[5] the noble countour,° *mathematician*
Sete to rekene° in his countour,° *calculate / counting house*
And rekene with his figures ten°— *i.e., the Arabic numerals*
For by tho° figures mowe al ken,° *those / all may know*
If they be crafty,° rekene and noumbre° *skillful / enumerate*
And telle° of every thing the noumbre— *tally*
Yet shulde he faile to rekene even° *exactly*
The wondres me mette° in my sweven.° *I dreamed / dream*
But forth they° romed wonder° faste *i.e., the deer / wondrously*

2. Respectively, the goddess of flowers and of the west wind.
3. Such great trees, so very strong, forty to fifty fathoms in height, (their trunks) clear of branch or twig, their tops wide and likewise full. (A fathom is a measurement of about six feet, based on the distance between a man's fingertips when his arms are extended.)
4. The list of deer includes harts (mature male red deer), hinds (female red deer), fawns (male fallow deer, one year old), "sowres" (male fallow deer, four years old), bucks (mature male fallow deer), does (female fallow deer), and roes (roe deer).
5. Muhammad ibn-Musa al-Khwarizmi, a ninth-century Arab mathematician and author of astronomical tables; his name here is taken from the Old French "Algus," in the *Romance of the Rose* 12760.

Doun° the wode, so at the laste *through*
I was war° of a man in blak *became aware*
That sat and had y-turned his bak° *with his back turned*
To an oke,° an huge tree. *oak*
"Lord," thoughte I, "who may° that be? *can*
What aileth him° to sitten here?" *What is the problem causing him*
Anonright° I wente nere;° *Immediately / nearer*
Than fond° I sitte even upright° *found / sitting up straight*
A wonder wel-faringe° knight, *handsome, well formed*
By the° maner me thought so,° *In his / seemed so to me*
Of good mochel° and right yong therto,° *size / also quite young*
Of the age of foure and twenty yeer.[6]
Upon his berde° but litel heer,° *beard / little hair*
And he was clothed al in blak.
I stalked even unto° his bak, *walked quietly right up to*
And ther I stood as stille as ought,° *anything*
That,° sooth to seye,° he saw me nought, *So that / truth to tell*
Forwhy° he heng his hede° adoune. *Because / hung his head*
And with a deedly sorweful soune° *deathly sorrowful sound*
He made of° ryme ten vers° or twelve *composed in / ten verses, lines*
Of a compleynt° to himselve,° *complaint, lamentation / himself*
The moste pite,° the moste rowthe,° *pitiful / moving*
That ever I herde; for, by my trowthe,° *in honesty*
It was gret wonder that nature
Might suffre° any creature *allow*
To have swich sorwe° and be nat deed. *experience such sorrow*
Ful pitous,° pale, and nothing reed,° *pitiful / not at all ruddy*
He seyde a lay,° a maner° song, *short narrative poem / kind of*
Withoute note,° withoute song,° *musical notes / melody*
And was this,° for ful wel I can *here it is*
Reherse° it; right thus° it began: *Repeat / just so*
"I have of sorwe so grete woon° *such great abundance*
That joye gete I never noon,° *any at all*
Now that I see my lady bright,
Which I have loved with al my might,
Is fro me deed and is agoon,
And thus in sorwe lefte me aloon.[7]
Allas, Deeth, what aileth thee° *ails you*
That thou noldest° have taken me *did not want to*
Whan thou took my lady swete
That was so fair, so fresh, so free,° *generous*
So good that men may wel y-see° *see, perceive that*
Of al goodnesse she had no mete!"° *equal*
Whan he had made thus his complaynte,° *lament*

6. The man in black's prototype, the English prince John of Gaunt, would have been twenty-eight at the time of his wife's death in 1368; the discrepancy in age may be due to miscopying.
7. Has died and left me and gone away, and thus abandoned me to sorrow. (Although the man in black makes it clear that his lady has died, the narrator mysteriously does not seem to take his meaning; explanations for this misunderstanding vary from the narrator's tact to his obtuseness, or perhaps the dreamer takes the knight's expression here to be mere poetic convention. Line 480 first appears in the 1532 edition of William Thynne and so may not be original to Chaucer; see also the note to lines 31–96.)

His sorweful herte gan faste faynte,° *quickly became faint*
And his spirites wexen dede;
The blood was fled, for pure drede,
Doun to his hert to make him warm[8]—
For wel it feled° the hert had harm— *felt that*
To wite eek° why it was adrad,° *find out also / frightened*
By kinde,° and for to make it glad, *nature*
For it is membre principal° *the chief organ*
Of the body. And that° made al *i.e., that process*
His hewe° chaunge and wexe° grene *complexion / grow, become*
And pale, for ther no blood is sene
In no maner lime° of his. *any of his limbs*
Anoon therwith° whan I saw this, *At the very moment*
He ferde thus evel there° he sete, *got on so badly there where*
I wente and stood right at his fete° *feet*
And grette° him, but he spak nought,° *greeted / said nothing*
But argued with his owne thought,
And in his witte° disputed faste° *mind / intently*
Why and how his lyf might laste;° *could continue*
Him thoughte° his sorwes were so smerte° *It seemed to him / painful*
And lay so colde upon his herte;
So, thurgh his sorwe and hevy thought,° *gloom, sadness*
Made him that he ne herde me nought,° *not at all*
For he had wel nigh° lost his minde, *almost entirely*
Though Pan,[9] that men clepe° god of kinde,° *call / nature*
Were° for his sorwes never so wrooth.° *might be / angry*
But at the laste, to seyn right sooth,° *quite truly*
He was war° of me, how I stoode *became aware*
Bifore him, and dide of myn hoode,° *doffed my head covering*
And grette him,° as I best coude.° *greeted / knew how*
Debonairly° and nothing° loude. *Graciously / not at all*
He seyde, "I prey thee, be nat wrooth,° *angry*
I herde thee nat,° to seyn the sooth, *did not hear you*
Ne I saw thee nat,° sir, trewely." *Nor did I see you*
"A goode sir, no fors,"° quod° I, *no problem / said*
"I am right° sory if I have ought° *very / in any way*
Destroubled° yow out of your thought; *disturbed*
Foryive me if I have mistake."° *done wrong, made a blunder*
"Yis, th'amendes is light° to make," *amends are easy*
Quod he, "for ther lyth noon° therto; *there are none*
Ther is nothing misseyd nor do."[1]
Lo, how goodly spak° this knight, *becomingly spoke*

8. And his (animal) spirits deadened; the blood had fled, from absolute fear, down to his heart to make it warm. (Chaucer describes a specific Galenic physiology of swooning; the man's vital spirits, which regulate what we would call his "central nervous system," gather at his heart—the organ where he is suffering—to bring it assistance, causing a loss of consciousness by depriving the brain and limbs of energy and motion.)
9. Pan, Mercury's son and the classical god of shepherds, was known in the Middle Ages as the general god of nature. The sense is that the man in black gives himself up to grief even though the god of nature would be angry with him for this abandonment of natural balance in his emotions.
1. You have not said or done anything wrong. (Throughout this exchange note how the difference in status between the dreamer and the man in black is registered in the pronouns they use to address one another: The dreamer uses the formal "you" and the knight the familiar "thou.")

As it° had been another wight;° *As if / a different person*
He made it nouther tough ne queynte,[2]
And I saw that, and gan m'aqueynte° *feel on friendly terms*
With him, and fond him so tretable,° *receptive, agreeable*
Right wonder skilful° and resonable, *Most amazingly rational*
As me thoughte, for al his bale.° *suffering*
Anonright° I gan finde a tale° *At once / thing to say*
To him, to look wher° I might ought° *see whether / in any way*
Have more knowing of° his thought. *knowledge about*
"Sir," quod° I, "this game° is doon; *said / sport (i.e., the hunt)*
I holde that this hert be goon;° *hart has gone (away)*
These huntes° conne him nowher see." *hunters*
"I do no fors therof,"° quod he; *don't care about that*
"My thought is theron never a del."° *not about that at all*
"By our Lord," quod I, "I trow° yow wel, *believe*
Right so me thinketh by° your chere.° *so it seems from / face*
But, sir, o° thing wol ye here?° *one / hear*
Me thinketh in gret sorwe° I yow see; *sorrow*
But certes,° good sir, if that ye *truly*
Wolde ought discure me° your wo, *reveal to me any of*
I wolde, as wis God° help me so, *the wise God may*
Amende it, if I can or may;° *know how or am able*
Ye mowe preve° it by assay.° *may test / trying (me)*
For, by my trouthe,° to make yow hool,° *honestly / bring you health*
I wol do al my power hool.° *whole*
And telleth me of your sorwes smerte;° *sharp, grievous*
Paraventure° it may ese° your herte, *Perhaps / bring ease to*
That semeth ful seke° under your syde." *very sick*
With that he looked on me asyde,° *askance*
As who seyth,° "Nay, that wol nat be." *Like a person who says*
"Graunt mercy,° goode frend," quod° he, *Pardon me / said*
"I thanke thee that thou woldest so,° *you want (to do) so*
But it may never the rather be do;[3]
No man may my sorwe glade,° *turn to gladness*
That maketh my hewe to falle and fade,° *complexion grow pale and dim*
And hath myn understonding lorn,° *ruined*
That me is° wo that I was born! *So that I have*
May nought° make my sorwes slyde,° *Nothing can / pass away*
Nought al the remedies of Ovyde,
Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,
Ne Dedalus, with pleyes slye;
Ne hele me may no phisicien,
Nought Ypocras ne Galien;[4]

2. He behaved neither arrogantly nor with exaggerated politeness. (His courtesy and kindness make it hard for the dreamer to recognize the man who was so recently entirely overcome with grief.)
3. But it cannot be done the more quickly. (I.e., despite your wish to help me, my recovery will not happen any faster.)
4. The "remedies" of Ovid are tongue-in-cheek countermeasures against love described in the *Remedia Amoris*; the mythic Orpheus charmed the rulers of the underworld with the music of his lyre to win back his wife Eurydice; Daedalus was famous in classical mythology for his inventions ("pleyes slye"), most prominently for the wings he built to enable himself and his son Icarus to escape from danger in Crete; Ypocras (Hippocrates) and Galien (Galen) were respectively doctors in the fifth century B.C.E. and second century C.E., known for founding the practice and science of medicine.

Me is wo° that I live houres twelve. *Woe is me*
But whoso wol assaye° himselve *whoever wishes to test*
Whether his hert can have pitee
Of° any sorwe, lat him see me. *On*
I wrecche,° that deeth hath mad al *miserable one*
naked° *wholly deprived*
Of al the blisse that ever was maked,° *there was*
Y-worthe° worste of al wightes,° *(I have) become / creatures*
That hate my dayes and my nightes;
My lyf, my lustes be me loothe,° *pleasures are hateful to me*
For al welfare and I be wroothe.° *are at odds*
The pure deeth° is so ful my fo° *death itself / fully my foe*
That I wolde° deye, it wolde nat so; *wish to*
For whan I folwe° it, it° wol flee; *follow / i.e., death*
I wolde° have him, it nil nat° me. *want to / does not want*
This is my peyne withoute reed,° *remedy*
Alwey deynge° and be nat° deed, *to be dying / not to be*
That Tesiphus, that lyth in helle,
May nat of more sorwe telle.[5]
And whoso wiste° al, by my trouthe,° *whoever knew / truly*
My sorwe, but he hadde routhe° *unless he had compassion*
And pitee of° my sorwes smerte,° *pity for / painful sorrows*
That man hath a feendly herte.° *fiendish, devilish heart*
For whoso seeth° me first on morwe° *whoever sees / in the morning*
May seyn° he hath met with sorwe;° *say that / sorrow*
For I am sorwe and sorwe is I.
Allas, and I wol telle thee why:
My song is turned to pleyning,° *lamentation*
And al my laughter to weping,
My glade thoughtes to hevinesse,° *sadness*
In travaile° is myn ydelnesse° *Turned to labor / leisure*
And eek° my reste; my wele is wo,° *also / joy is (turned to) woe*
My goode is harm, and evermo
In wrathe is turned my pleying,[6]
And my delyt° into sorwing.° *delight / sorrowing*
Myn hele° is turned into seknesse,° *health / sickness*
In drede° is al my sikernesse.° *anxiety / (sense of) security*
To derke is turned al my light,
My wit° is foly,° my day is night, *reason, understanding / foolishness*
My love is hate, my slepe waking,
My mirthe and meles° is fasting, *meals*
My countenaunce° is nicete,° *self-possession / silliness, folly*
And al abawed° wherso° I be, *rattled, confounded / wherever*
My pees,° in pleding and in werre.° *peace / arguments and conflicts*
Allas, how mighte I fare werre?° *worse*
My boldnesse° is turned to shame, *courage*

5. To the extent that Tesiphus, who lies in hell, cannot recount greater sorrows than can I. (Tesiphus appears to be a conflation of Tityus, punished in Tartarus by a vulture tearing at his entrails, and Sisyphus, whose infernal punishment was repeatedly to roll a stone up a hill, only to have it slide down again.)
6. The good things in my life have come to grief, and at all times my merrymaking has turned to anger.

For fals Fortune[7] hath pleyd a game
At the chesse° with me, allas, the whyle!° *chess / the time*
The traiteresse fals and ful of gyle,° *guile, deceit*
That al behoteth° and nothing *promises everything*
halte;° *holds to, delivers*
She goth° upryght and yet she halte,° *walks / limps*
That baggeth° foule and looketh faire,° *squints / casts lovely glances*
The dispitouse debonaire° *disdainful courteous one*
That scorneth° many a creature! *casts scorn upon*
An ydole of fals portraiture[8]
Is she, for she wil sone wryen;° *turn away, become unresponsive*
She is the monstres° hed y-wryen,° *monster's / covered over*
As filth over y-strawed° with floures.° *strewn, spread / flowers*
Hir moste worship° and hir flour° is *honor / crowning achievement*
To lyen, for that is hir nature,
Withoute feyth, lawe, or mesure.° *moderation*
She is fals, and ever laughinge
With oon° eye, and that other° wepinge. *one / other (eye)*
That° is brought° up, she set al doun. *All that / raised*
I lykne° hir to the scorpioun, *liken, compare*
That is a fals, flateringe beste,° *beast, animal*
For with his hede° he maketh feste,° *head / acts in friendly manner*
But al amid° his flateringe *in the middle of*
With his taile he wol stinge
And envenyme,° and so wol she. *poison*
She is th'envyouse charite° *spiteful benevolence*
That is ay° fals and seemeth wele;° *always / good*
So turneth she hir false whele
Aboute,° for it is nothing° stable— *Around / not at all*
Now by the fyre, now at table;
For many oon° hath she thus y-blent.° *a one / blinded*
She is pley° of enchauntement, *a trick of*
That semeth oon° and is nat so, *to be one thing*
The false theef! What hath she do,° *done*
Trowest thou?° By our Lord, I wol thee sey. *(What) do you think?*
At the chesse° with me she gan to pley;° *chess / began to play*
With hir false draughtes divers° *various false moves*
She stal° on me and took my fers.° *stole up / queen*
And whan I saw my fers awey,° *i.e., had been taken*
Allas, I couthe no lenger° pley, *could no longer*
But seyde, "Farewel, swete, ywis,° *darling, indeed*
And farwel al that ever ther is!"
Therwith Fortune seyde, "Chek° here!" *Check*

7. The goddess Fortune governs earthly power and mutability. Many featues of her description here are taken from popular medieval convention, especially the description of the wheel that she operates (see 644), on which she elevates the rich, powerful, and lucky in love as a prelude to plunging them into mischance and adversity. The most famous and influential source of the medieval idea of Fortune is Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, where she is described in opposition to the figure of Philosophy, whose stoicism and eye to higher values offers an antidote to Fortune's miseries; relevant passages from the *Consolation* and also from the thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose* are printed in the Contexts section of this Norton Critical Edition.
8. An idol (to be worshipped like a god) deceptively pictured.

And "Mate!"° in mid° pointe of the chekkere° — *Checkmate / central chess board*
With a poune erraunt,° allas! — *mating pawn*
Ful craftier to pley she was
Than Athalus,[9] that made the game
First of the chesse; so was his name.
But God wolde° I had ones or twyes° — *I wish to God / once or twice*
Y-coud and knowe° the jeupardyes° — *i.e., studied and learned / pitfalls*
That coude° the Greke Pictagores,° — *knew / Pythagoras*
I shulde have pleyd the bet° at ches — *better*
And kept my fers° the bet therby. — *guarded my queen*
And though wherto?° For trewly, — *yet to what purpose?*
I hold° that wish nat worth a stree!° — *consider / straw*
It had be never° the bet for me, — *could never have been*
For Fortune can so many a wyle,° — *knows so many tricks*
Ther be but fewe can hir begyle,° — *who can outwit her*
And eek° she is the lasse° to blame; — *also / less*
Myself I wolde have do° the same, — *done*
Bifore God, had I be as she;° — *i.e., in her shoes*
She oughte the more excused° be, — *more easily excused*
For this I sey yet more therto:° — *in addition, about that*
Had I be° God and mighte have do° — *been / done*
My wille, whan she° my fers caughte,° — *i.e., Fortune / captured*
I wolde have drawe° the same draughte,° — *made / chess move*
For, also wis God yive me reste,[1]
I dar wel swere° she took the beste. — *make bold to swear*
But thurgh that draughte° I have lorne° — *through that move / lost*
My blisse; allas, that I was borne!
For evermore, I trowe° trewly, — *believe*
For° al my wille, my lust hooly° — *Despite / pleasure wholly*
Is turned,° but yet what to° done? — *overturned / is to be*
By oure Lord, it is to deye sone.° — *die soon*
For nothing I leve° it nought, — *believe in*
But live and deye right° in this thought. — *I live and die simply*
For there nis° planet in firmament,° — *is no / the heavens*
Ne in aire ne in erthe noon element,
That they ne yive me a yift echoon
Of weping whan I am aloon.[2]
For whan that I avyse me° wel, — *think it over*
And bethinke° me everydel° — *remember / everything*
How that ther lyth in rekeninge
In my sorwe for nothinge,[3]
And how ther leveth° no gladnesse — *remains*
May glade° me of° my distresse, — *gladden, cheer / out of*

9. Named by the *Romance of the Rose* (6631–6726) as the inventor of chess in an allegorical passage (concerning a battle between Manfred of Sicily and Charles of Anjou and Provence) that provides many of the details of the chess game mentioned here.
1. For, as surely as (I hope for) God to give me rest.
2. Nor do any of the elements that compose the air or earth not bestow upon me the gift of weeping when I am alone.
3. How there is nothing on account (on the positive side of the ledger) to balance against (the deficit) of my sorrow.

And how I have lost suffisaunce,° — *satisfaction, contentment*
And therto° I have no plesaunce,° — *also / pleasure, delight*
Than may I sey I have right nought.° — *absolutely nothing*
And whan al this falleth in my thought,° — *comes to mind*
Allas, than am I overcome,
For that is doon is nat to come.
I have more sorwe than Tantale."[4]
And whan I herde him telle this tale
Thus pitously,° as I yow telle, — *movingly, pitifully*
Unnethe mighte° I lenger dwelle,° — *Scarcely could / stay (there)*
It dide° myn hert so moche wo. — *caused*
"A! goode sir," quod° I, "sey nat so. — *said*
Have some pitee° on your nature° — *leniency / (human) nature*
That formed yow to° creature. — *as a*
Remembre yow of° Socrates, — *Remember*
For he ne counted nat three strees° — *didn't give three straws*
Of nought° that Fortune coude do." — *For anything*
"No," quod he, "I can nat so."
"Why so, good sir? Yis, pardee!"° quod I, — *by God, indeed*
"Ne sey nought° so, for trewly, — *Do not say*
Though° ye had lost the ferses twelve,° — *Even though / twelve (chess) queens*
And° ye for sorwe mordred yourselve,° — *If / murdered yourself*
Ye sholde be dampned° in this cas° — *would be damned / situation*
By as good right as Medea was,
That slow hir children for Jasoun;
And Phyllis also for Demophoun
Heng hirself, so welaway,
For he had broke his terme day
To come to hir. Another rage
Had Dido, the quene eek of Cartage,
That slow hirself for Eneas
Was fals, which a fool she was!
And Ecquo dyed for Narcisus
Nolde nat love hir, and right thus
Hath many another foly don.
And for Dalida died Sampson,
That slow himself with a pilere.[5]
But ther is noon alyve° here — *nobody living*
Wolde for a fers° make this wo!" — *Who would for a (chess) queen*
"Why so?' quod° he; "it is nat so, — *said*

4. For what is gone will never come again. I have more sorrow than Tantalus. (Tantalus was a mythological figure whose punishment in hell was lying near a tree of fruit and a pool of water just out of his reach.)
5. By as proper a justice as was Medea, who killed her children for Jason, and Phyllis also who, for Demophon, hung herself, alas, because he had delayed past the promised time he had agreed to return to her. Another (similar kind of) madness had Dido, the Queen of Carthage, who killed herself because Aeneas was false to her—what a fool she was! And Echo died because Narcissus did not love her, and just so have many other (lovers) foolishly done. And for Delilah died Samson, who killed himself with a pillar. (Medea revenged herself on Jason when he was false to her by killing their two children [see the *Legend of Good Women* 1580–1679]; the story of Phyllis and Demophon is told in the *Legend of Good Women* 2394–2561; Dido killed herself after having been betrayed by Aeneas [see the *Legend of Good Women* 924–1367]. Echo died because Narcissus did not return her love; and the biblical Samson perished by pulling the pillars of a hall down upon himself after he had been betrayed by Delilah [see Judges 16].)

Thou woste ful litel° what thou menest; *know very little*
I have lost more than thou wenest."° *think, comprehend*
"Lo, howe that may° be," quod I, *can that*
"Good sir, telle me al hooly° *completely, the whole story*
In what wyse,° how, why, and wherfore° *manner / the reason*
That ye have thus your blisse lore."° *lost*
"Blythly,"° quod he, "come sit adoun;° *Happily / down*
I telle thee up a° condicioun *will tell you on one*
That thou shalt hooly° with al thy wit° *completely / mind*
Do thyn entent° to herken° it." *your best / attend to*
"Yis, sir." "Swere thy trouthe therto."° *Take an oath to that*
"Gladly." "Do than holde herto!"° *keep that promise*
"I shal right blythly,° so° God me save, *quite gladly / as*
Hooly° with al the witte I have, *Entirely*
Here° yow as wel as I can." *Listen to*
"A Goddes half!"° quod he, and began: *For God's sake*
"Sir," quod he, "sith° first I couthe° *since / was able to*
Have any maner wit fro° youthe *kind of intelligence from*
Or kindely° understondinge *natural*
To comprehende,° in any thinge,° *To perceive, grasp / aspect*
What love was, in myn owne wit,
Dredeles,° I have ever yit *Doubtless*
Be tributary° and yive rente° *Been a vassal / paid tribute*
To Love hooly° with goode entente,° *entirely / intention*
And thurgh plesaunce° become his thral° *pleasure / servant, slave*
With good will, body, hert, and al.
Al this I putte in his servage° *service*
As to my lorde and did homage;
And ful devoutly I preyde him to° *to him that*
He shulde besette° myn herte so° *bestow / in such a way*
That it plesaunce to him were,
And worship° to my lady dere. *honor*
And this was longe,° and many a yeer *for a long time*
Er that° myn herte was set o-wher,° *Before / committed anywhere*
That I did thus, and niste° why; *did not know*
I trowe° it cam me kindely.° *believe / to me naturally*
Paraventure I was therto most able
As a whyt wal or a table,
For it is redy to cacche and take
Al that men wil therin make,
Whether so men wol portreye or peynte,
Be the werkes never so queynte.[6]
And thilke° tyme I ferde right° so: *at that / behaved just*
I was able to have lerned tho° *then*
And to have coud° as wel or better, *come to understand*
Paraunter other° art or letter.° *Perhaps another / subject of study*
But for° love cam first in my thought, *because*

6. Perhaps I was most receptive (to Love), (being) like a white wall or a (blank) tablet, for it is ready to take and receive all that men want to put there, whether men wish to draw or paint (and) no matter how elaborate (the design). (The Aristotelian image of the untutored mind as a blank slate was widely known in medieval philosophy, in writers from Boethius to William of Ockham; it also appears in secular texts, like Guillaume de Machaut's *Remède de Fortune*.)

Therfore I forgat it nought.
I chees° love to° my firste craft, *chose / to be*
Therfor it is with me y-laft.° *remains with me*
Forwhy I took it of so yong age
That malice hadde my corage
Nat that tyme turned to nothinge
Thurgh too mochel knowlechinge;[7]
For that tyme Youthe, my maistresse,° *mistress, instructor*
Governed me in ydelnesse,
For it was in my firste youthe,
And tho ful litel good I couthe;[8]
For al my werkes° were flittinge,° *activities / always changing*
And al my thought varyinge.° *thoughts (were) unsettled*
Al° were to me y-liche° good, *All things / equally*
That I knew tho,° but thus it stood: *then*
It happed° that I came on a day *happened, chanced*
Into a place ther that° I say,° *where / saw*
Trewly, the fairest companye
Of ladies that ever man with eye
Had seen togedres° in o° place. *together / one*
Shal I clepe° it hap other° grace *call / luck or*
That brought me there? Nay, but Fortune,
That is to lyen ful comune,° *a notorious liar*
The false traiteresse pervers,° *wicked, perverted*
God wolde I coude clepe hir° wers! *call her something*
For now she worcheth° me ful wo,° *causes / great woe*
And I wol telle sone why so.
Amonge these ladies thus echoon,° *each one*
Sooth° to seyn, I sawe oon° *Truth / one*
That was lyk noon° of the route,° *like none / crowd*
For I dar° swere, withoute doute,° *dare / a doubt*
That as the someres sonne bright
Is fairer, clerer,° and hath more light *brighter*
Than any other planete in hevene,
The mone° or the sterres sevene,° *(Than) the moon / i.e., the Pleiades*
For al the worlde so had she
Surmounted hem° al of° beaute, *Surpassed them / in*
Of maner° and of comlinesse,° *In manners / in loveliness*
Of stature° and of wel set° gladnesse, *form / fitting*
Of goodlihede° and so wel beseye°— *excellence, virtue / beautiful*
Shortly,° what shal I more seye? *In short*
By God and by his halwes twelve,° *the twelve apostles*
It was my swete,° right al hirselve!° *sweetheart / her very self*
She had so° stedfast countenaunce,° *such / bearing, composure*
So noble port° and meyntenaunce.° *deportment / conduct, behavior*

7. Because I took to (Love) at such a young age that malice had not yet reduced my heart to rubbish from knowing too much. (The word "malice" is hard to interpret. Does Chaucer suggest that more knowledge and experience of life leads a lover to malice—i.e., to wickedness? Or does the man in black imply that age and experience subject one to the malice of others—i.e., to suffering? The *Middle English Dictionary* supports both readings, but the moral implications for the poem's treatment of Love are quite different.)
8. And then I had little idea how to behave.

And Love, that had herd my bone,° *prayer, request*
Had espyed° me thus sone,° *found / so quickly*
That she ful sone in my thought,° *into my thoughts*
As helpe me God, so was y-caught° *caught up*
So sodeinly° that I ne tooke *suddenly*
No maner reed but at° hir looke *kind of instruction except from*
And at myn° herte; forwhy° hir eyen *from my (own) / because*
So gladly, I trow,° myn herte seyen° *believe / saw*
That purely tho° myn owne thought° *absolutely then / my own mind*
Seyde it were bet° serve hir for nought° *would be better to / nothing*
Than with another to be wel.° *get on well, be successful*
And it was sooth,° for everydel° *true / in all respects*
I wil anonright° telle thee why. *at once*
I saw hir daunce so comlely,° *gracefully*
Carole° and singe so swetely, *dance or sing in a round*
Laughe and pley so womanly,° *in such a womanly way*
And looke so debonairly,° *graciously*
So goodly speke° and so frendly *speak so courteously*
That certes,° I trow,° that evermore° *certainly / believe / never*
Nas seyn° so blisful a tresore.° *has been seen / glorious treasure*
For every heer upon hir hede,° *hair on her head*
Sooth° to seyn, it was nat rede,° *truth / red*
Ne nouther° yelow ne broun it nas;° *Nor either / was not*
Me thoughte most lyk gold it was.
And which eyen° my lady hadde! *such eyes*
Debonair,° goode, glade, and sadde,° *Gracious / steadfast, true*
Simple,° of good mochel,° nought too wyde; *modest / size*
Therto° hir looke nas nat asyde° *Also / was not sidelong*
Ne overthwert,° but beset so wele,° *nor askance / so well directed*
It drew° and took up everydele° *attracted / completely charmed*
Al that° on hir gan beholde.° *All who / looked upon her*
Hir eyen° semed anoon° she wolde *eyes, gaze / soon*
Have mercy°—fooles wenden so°— *i.e., in love / believed that*
But it was never the rather do.° *nevertheless not so*
It° nas no countrefeted thing;° *i.e., her gaze / pretense, affectation*
It was hir owne pure° looking, *perfect, genuine*
That the goddesse, dame Nature,
Had made hem° opene by mesure,° *i.e., her eyes / moderately*
And close; for, were she never so glad,° *however happy she was*
Hir looking was nat foly sprad,° *foolishly open-eyed*
Ne wildely, though that she pleyde;° *was having fun*
But ever, me thought,° hir eyen seyde, *it seemed to me*
"By God, my wrathe is al foryive!"[9]
Therwith hir liste so wel to live,° *life so pleased her*
That dulnesse° was of hir adrad.° *boredom / afraid*
She nas° too sobre° ne too glad;° *was not / serious / cheerful*
In alle thinges more mesure° *moderation*

9. By God, I forgive any cause of anger! (The man in black interprets his lady's demeanor in the terms of courtly love, where haughtiness or anger was part of the game of aloofness that made the lady ever more appealing; this is a misinterpretation, however, for he learns his lady is not playing love games and bears a virtuous affection toward all mankind.)

Had never, I trowe,° creature. *I believe, any*
But many oon° with hir looke° she herte,° *a one / glance / wounded*
And that sat hir ful litel at herte,° *little concerned her*
For she knew nothing of hir thought;° *about their thoughts*
But whether she knew or knew it nought,
Algate° she ne roughte of hem a stree!° *Anyway / didn't give a straw*
To gete hir° love no neer° was he *win / nearer, closer*
That woned at hoom° than he in Inde;° *dwelled at home / India*
The formest° was alwey behinde. *first*
But goode folk over al other° *above all others*
She loved as man may do his brother;
Of whiche love she was wonder large° *wondrously generous*
In skilful° places that bere charge.° *well chosen / were worthy*
But which a visage° had she therto!° *what a (beautiful) face / also*
Allas, myn herte is wonder wo° *woeful, distressed*
That I ne can descryven° it! *am not able to describe*
Me lakketh° bothe Englissh° and wit *I lack / i.e., the language*
For to undo it at the fulle,° *disclose, explain it fully*
And eek° my spirits be so dulle° *also / wits are too slow*
So greet a thinge for to devyse.° *describe*
I have no witte that can suffyse° *is adequate*
To comprehende° hir beautee; *put into words*
But thus moche dar I seyn, that she
Was whyte, rody,° fressh, and lyvely hewed,° *rosy / i.e., sparkling*
And every day hir beautee newed.° *renewed itself*
And nigh hir face was alderbest,[1]
For certes,° Nature had swich lest° *certainly / took such pleasure*
To make° that fair° that trewly she *In creating / beautiful one*
Was hir cheef patron of° beautee *most important pattern for*
And cheef ensample° of al hir werke° *illustration / works*
And moustre;° for, be it never so derke, *the model, exemplar*
Me thinketh° I see hir evermo.° *It seems to me / always*
And yet moreover, though alle tho° *those*
That ever lived were now alyve,
Ne sholde have founde to descryve
In al hir face a wikked signe,[2]
For it was sad, simple, and benigne.° *steadfast, innocent, and kind*
And which° a goodly, softe speche° *what a / way of speaking*
Had that swete,° my lyves leche!° *sweet one / healer, protector*
So frendly and so wel y-grounded,° *based*
Up° al resoun so wel y-founded,° *Upon / established*
And so tretable° to alle goode,° *receptive / everything good*
That I dar° swere by the roode° *dare / (Christ's) cross*
Of eloquence was never° founde *has never been*
So swete a souninge facounde,° *Such sweet-sounding fluency*
Ne trewer tonged, ne scorned lasse,
Ne bet coude hele, that by the masse
I durste swere, though the Pope it songe,

1. And her face was approaching perfection.
2. (Nobody) would have been able to discover in her face (anything he could) describe as a sign of wickedness.

That ther was never yet thurgh hir tonge
Man ne woman greetly harmed;
As for hir, ther was al harm hid,[3]
Ne lasse flateringe° in hir worde,° *less flattery / words*
That° purely hir simple recorde° *So that / testimony*
Was founde as trewe as any bonde° *covenant, commitment*
Or trouthe° of any mannes honde. *pledge*
Ne chyde° she coude never a dele,° *scold, nit-pick / not at all*
That knoweth al the world ful wele.
But swich° a fairnesse of a nekke° *such / neck*
Had that swete that boon° nor brekke° *bone / blemish*
Nas° ther noon sene that missat.° *There was / was unbecoming*
It was whyte, smothe, streight, and pure flat,° *completely smooth*
Withouten hole° or canel-boon,° *hollow / collar bone*
As by seming,° had she noon. *So that it seemed*
Hir throte, as I have now memoire,° *memory*
Semed a round tour of yvoire,[4]
Of good greetnesse,° and nought too grete.° *size / large*
And goode faire Whyte she hete,° *was called*
That was my lady name right.° *lady's proper name*
She was bothe fair and bright;
She hadde nat hir name wronge.
Right faire shuldres,° and body longe° *beautiful shoulders / tall*
She had, and armes; every lith° *limb*
Fattissh, flesshy,° nat greet° therwith; *Rounded, plump / (too) large*
Right whyte handes and nailes rede,° *reddish*
Rounde brestes, and of good brede° *width*
Hir hippes were, a streight flat bakke.° *back*
I knew on hir noon other lakke° *no other defect*
That al hir limes nere pure sewing,
In as fer as I had knowing.[5]
Therto° she coude so wel pley° *In addition / have fun*
Whan that hir liste,° that I dar sey, *it pleased her*
That she was lyk to torche° bright, *like the candle, torch*
That every man may take of light° *take light from*
Ynough,° and it hath never the lesse. *Plentiful, sufficient*
Of° maner and of comlinesse° *In (her) / beauty*
Right° so ferde° my lady dere, *Just / fared*
For every wight of° hir manere *person from*
Might cacche° ynough if that he wolde,° *take / wished*

3. Nor (anyone) more likely to speak the truth or less likely to scorn others, nor (anyone) who could bring more comfort, so much so that I would venture to swear by the (holy) mass, even if it were sung by the Pope (himself), that through her tongue no man or woman was ever greatly harmed. As far as she was concerned, no harm was in evidence. (The last probably means that she never slandered or spoke anything to harm others.)
4. The image of a "round tower of ivory" has its ultimate source in the biblical Song of Solomon 7:4, and was used in medieval times as an image of the virgin Mary. It may also recall the chess imagery from earlier in the poem. The color of ivory and the lady's name (Whyte, 148) are used here in remembrance of the historical Blanche (French for "white") of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's wife (see my introduction to the poem).
5. That would result in her limbs being anything other than perfectly proportioned, inasmuch as I had knowledge. (The man in black here completes his physical description of the lady with the decorous, though somewhat coy, admission of what, in honor, he cannot know at this point about the extent of her beauty. The description of the lady "Whyte" has followed the standard rhetorical format of the "blazon" or "effictio," which itemizes female beauty from head to toe.)

If he had eyen° hir to beholde. *eyes*
For I dar swere wel, if that she
Had amonge ten thousand be,° *been*
She wolde have be at the leste° *least*
A cheef mirour of° al the feste,° *model for / the party*
Though they had stonde° in a rowe *stood*
To mennes eyen° coude have knowe. *In the eyes of men (who)*
For wherso° men had pleyd or waked° *wherever / stayed up (partying)*
Me thoughte the felawship as naked *was as lacking*
Withouten hir, that° saw I ones,° *as that which / once*
As a coroune° withoute stones.° *crown / gems*
Trewly she was to myn eye
The soleyn fenix of Arabye,[6]
For ther liveth never but oon,° *one (at a time)*
Ne swich° as she ne know I noon. *such*
To speke of goodnesse, trewly she
Had as moche debonairte° *grace*
As ever had Hester[7] in the bible
And more if more were possible.
And, sooth° to seyne, therwithal° *truth / besides*
She had a wit° so general,° *mind, understanding / liberal*
So hoole° enclyned to alle goode° *completely / benefit of others*
That al hir wit was set, by the roode,° *(Christ's) cross*
Withoute malice° upon gladnesse;° *ill will / happiness*
Therto° I saw never yet a lesse *Also*
Harmful° than she was in doing.° *Mischievous, injurious person / action*
I sey nat that she ne had knowing° *the knowledge of*
What harme was, or elles° she *else*
Had coud no good,° so thinketh me. *Wouldn't have understood virtue*
And trewly, for to speke of trouthe,° *honor, honesty*
But° she had had,° it had be routhe.° *Unless / possessed (it) / a pity*
Therof she had so moche hir dele,° *portion, share*
And I dar seyn° and swere it wele, *dare say*
That Trouthe himself, over al and al,° *over and above all others*
Had chose his maner principal° *main residence*
In hir, that was his resting place.
Therto° she hadde the moste grace° *Also / greatest favor*
To have° stedfast perseveraunce *Of possessing*
And esy atempre governaunce° *temperate self-control*
That ever I knew or wiste yit,° *was aware of to date*
So pure suffraunt° was hir wit.° *utterly tolerant / understanding*
And reson gladly she understoode,
It folowed wel she coude goode.° *knew what was best*
She used gladly to do wel;
These were hir maners everydel.° *in every respect*
Therwith she loved so wel right,° *what was proper, just*
She wrong do wolde° to no wight;° *intended wrong / person*
No wight might do hir no° shame, *could bring upon her any*

6. The solitary phoenix of Arabia. (The phoenix is a mythical Arabian bird, only one of which can exist at a time; when one phoenix dies, the new one arises out of its ashes.)
7. The biblical Esther was a model of womanliness and sacrifice on behalf of others.

She loved so wel hir owne name.° *reputation*
Hir lust° to holde no wight in honde,° *She wished / toy with*
Ne, be thou siker, she wolde nat fonde° *try*
To holde no wight in balaunce° *any person in suspense, uncertainty*
By half word° ne by *verbal insinuation*
countenaunce,° *outward expression*
But if° men wolde upon° hir lye; *Unless / about*
Ne sende men into Walakye,
To Pruyse, and into Tartarye,
To Alisaundre, ne into Turkye,
And bidde him faste anoon that he
Go hoodless into the Drye See,
And come hoom by the Carrenare;[8]
And seye, "Sir, be now right ware° *take particular care*
That I may of yow here seyn° *hear said*
Worship er° that ye come ageyn!" *A favorable report before*
She ne used no swich knakkes smale.° *such petty ruses*
But wherfor that I° telle my tale? *why do I*
Right on this same,° as I have seyde, *this very same (lady)*
Was hooly° al my love leyde,° *entirely / laid, placed*
For certes,° she was, that swete wyfe,° *certainly / woman*
My suffisaunce,° my lust,° my lyfe, *contentment, satisfaction / desire*
Myn happe,° myn hele,° and al my blisse, *good fortune / health*
My worldes welfare, and my goddesse,
And I hooly° hires, and everydel."° *entirely / in every way*
"By our Lord," quod° I, "I trowe° yow wel. *said / believe*
Hardely° your love was wel beset,° *Assuredly / placed*
I noot° how ye might have do bet."° *don't know / done better*
"Bet? Ne no wight so wel!"° quod he. *man (had done) as well*
"I trowe it, sir," quod I, "pardee."° *indeed, by God*
"Nay, leve° it wel!" "Sir, so do I; *Believe*
I leve yow wel, that trewly
Yow thoughte° that she was the beste *It seemed to you*
And to beholde the alderfaireste,° *most beautiful*
Whoso° had looked hir with° your eyen." *Whoever / seen her through*
"With myn? Nay, alle that hir seyen° *who saw her*
Seyde and swore it was so.
And though° they ne had,° I wolde tho° *even if / had not / then*
Have loved best my lady free,° *noble, generous*
Though I had had al the beautee
That ever had Alcipyades
And al the strengthe of Ercules,
And therto had the worthinesse
Of Alisaundre and al the richesse
That ever was in Babiloyne,
In Cartage or in Macedoyne,

8. The locations listed are, in order, Walachia (in southern Romania), Prussia, Outer Mongolia (land of the Tatars), Alexandria (in Egypt), Turkey, the Gobi Desert (in Outer Mongolia), and the Qara Na'ur ("Black Lake" on the far side of the Gobi). All were areas either of Christian/Muslim conflict or distantly situated on the medieval trade route to the Far East, and are here mentioned as far-away and dangerous regions, not suitable for a romantic quest. Going to any of them "hoodless" or without head protection would be particularly foolish.

Or in Rome, or in Ninive,
And therto also hardy be
As was Ector, so have I joye,
That Achilles slow at Troye—
And therfor was he slayn also
In a temple, for bothe two
Were slayn, he and Antilegius,
And so seyth Dares Frigius,
For love of Polixena—
Or ben as wys as Minerva,[9]
I wolde ever,° withoute drede,° *always / without a doubt*
Have loved hir, for I most nede!° *needs must (do so)*
Nede? Nay, trewly, I gabbe° now, *speak nonsense*
Nought 'nede,' and I wol telle how,
For of good wille myn herte it wolde,° *wished for, desired*
And eek° to love hir I was holde° *also / obliged*
As for° the fairest and the beste. *to*
She was as good, so have I° reste, *as I may have*
As ever was Penolopee of Grece
Or as the noble wyfe Lucrece,
That was the beste—he telleth thus,
The Romayne Tytus Livius—
She was as good, and nothing lyke,[1]
Though hir° stories be autentyke;° *their / trustworthy, authoritative*
Algate° she was as trewe as she.° *In any case / i.e., as Lucrece*
But wherfor° that I telle thee *why is it*
Whan I first my lady sey?° *saw*
I was right yong,° sooth to sey,° *quite / truth to tell*
And ful greet need° I had to lerne;° *a very great deal / learn*
Whan my herte wolde yerne° *eagerly longed*
To love, it was a greet empryse.° *undertaking, enterprise*
But as my wit° coude best suffyse,° *understanding / suffice*
After° my yonge childly° wit, *In accord with / childish*
Withoute drede,° I besette° it *Without a doubt / applied*
To love hir in my beste wyse,° *fashion*
To do hir worship° and servyse *the honor*
That I tho coude,° by my trouthe,° *then knew how / faith*
Withoute feyning outher slouthe.° *pretense or sloth*
For wonder fain° I wolde° hir see, *wondrously gladly / wished to*
So mochel° it amended° me, *much / cheered, restored*

9. Alcibiades, the son of an Athenian general and statesman in the fifth century B.C.E., was renowned for his beauty; the mighty Hercules was legendary for his strength; by the time of his death in 323 B.C.E. at the age of thirty-three, Alexander the Great controlled an empire that reached from Greece to India; Babylon, Carthage, Macedonia, Rome, and Nineveh were all cities or regions known for their extraordinary wealth; "hardy" (brave) Hector, slain on the battlefield by Achilles, was the eldest prince and preeminent warrior of Troy; Achilles and Antilochus were slain together, in revenge for Hector's death, as they attempted to woo the Trojan princess Polyxena in a medieval retelling of the Trojan story by Dares Frygius; Minerva was the goddess of wisdom.

1. She was as good (as they), and (at the same time really) nothing like (them). (The man in black consistently stresses his lady's uniqueness even as he elevates her through conventional comparisons. Penelope, the steadfast wife of Odysseus, was a standard example of wifely truth and forbearance; Livy (Tytus Livius) tells the story of the Roman noblewoman Lucretia (sixth century B.C.E.), who chose suicide rather than dishonor after being raped, and Chaucer retells it in the *Legend of Good Women* 1680–1885.)

That, whan I saw hir first a-morwe,° *in the morning*
I was warisshed° of al my sorwe° *healed, relieved / sorrow*
Of al° day after til it were eve;° *For the whole / was evening*
Me thoughte° nothing mighte me greve,° *It seemed / grieve, injure*
Were my sorwes never so smerte.[2]
And yet° she sit° so in myn herte *still / dwells, remains*
That, by my trouthe,° I nolde noughte,° *faith, honor / would not want*
For al this worlde, out of my thought
Leve° my lady; no, trewly!" *to give up, let go*
"Now, by my trouthe, sir," quod° I, *said*
"Me thinketh ye have swich a chaunce
As shrifte withoute repentaunce."[3]
"Repentaunce! Nay, fy,"° quod he; *fie, phooey*
"Shulde I now repente me° *repent*
To love? Nay, certes° than were I wel° *certainly / would I be much*
Wers than was Achitofel,
Or Anthenor, so have I joye,
The traitour that betraysed Troye,
Or the false Genelloun,
He that purchased the tresoun
Of Rowland and of Olyvere.[4]
Nay, whyl I am alyve here° *as long as I live*
I nil foryete hir nevermo."° *will never forget her*
"Now, good sir," quod I tho,° *then*
"Ye han° wel told me herbifore°— *have / earlier*
It is° no nede reherse° it more— *There is / to repeat*
How ye sawe hir first and where.
But wolde ye telle me the manere
To hir which was your firste speche°— *of your first words*
Therof I wolde yow beseche°— *beseech, beg*
And how she knewe first your thought,° *state of mind*
Whether ye loved hir or nought,
And telleth me eek° what ye have lore;° *also / lost*
I herde yow telle herbifore."° *talk (about that) before*
"Ye," seyde he, "thou nost° what thou menest; *do not know*
I have lost more than thou wenest."° *think, comprehend*
"What losse is that?" quod I tho;° *I said then*
"Nil she nat° love yow? Is it so? *Will she not*
Or have ye ought doon amis,° *done something wrong*
That° she hath left yow? Is it this? *So that*
For Goddes love, telle me alle."
"Bifore God," quod he, "and I shalle.

2. No matter how painful my sorrows might be.
3. It seems to me that you are taking a chance on confession without (first) undergoing penance. (The penitential comparison here is obscure, and admits of several alternative interpretations in addition to the translation above: It could also mean that the man in black wants to get off easily—to be shriven [absolved] without repenting first. Or it could mean that he is sorrowing even though he has nothing to repent.)
4. Nay, certainly, then I would be much worse than was Achitofel or Antenor, as I may have joy, the traitor who betrayed Troy, or the false Ganelon, he who brought about the treason against Roland and Oliver. (The biblical Achitophel attempted to betray David by advising his son Absalom to rebel against him [2 Samuel 15–17]; in various medieval sources, the Trojan Antenor was responsible for Troy's fall to the Greeks; Ganelon sold the battle position of the French heroes Roland and Oliver to the Saracen enemy in the Old French *Song of Roland*. All were notorious traitors.)

I sey right° as I have seyde, *just*
On hir was al my love leyde,° *laid, placed*
And yet she niste° it nat never a del,° *did not know / not a bit*
Nought longe° tyme, leve° it wel. *for a long / believe*
For be right siker,° I durste° nought *quite certain / dared*
For al this worlde telle hir my thought,
Ne I wolde have wratthed° hir, trewly. *angered*
For wostow° why? She was lady° *do you know / i.e., mistress*
Of the body; she had the herte,
And who hath that, may nat asterte.° *be eluded*
But, for to kepe me fro° ydelnesse, *from*
Trewly I did my besynesse° *acted diligently*
To make songes, as I best coude,
And ofte tyme° I songe hem loude,° *often / them aloud*
And made songes thus a grete del,° *deal*
Although I coude nat make so wel *compose as*
Songes, ne knowe the art al
As coude Lamekes sone Tubal,
That fond out first the art of songe,
For, as his brothres hamers ronge
Upon his anvelt up and doun,
Therof he took the firste soun.
But Grekes seyn Pictagoras,
That he the firste finder was
Of the arte; Aurora telleth so.
But therof no fors of hem two.[5]
Algates° songes thus I made *At any rate*
Of° my felinge, myn herte to glade;° *About / gladden, comfort*
And lo, this was alderferst,° *first (song) of all*
I noot wher that° it were the werst:° *don't know whether / worst*
'Lord, it maketh myn herte light,° *i.e., happy*
Whan I thinke on that swete wight° *being, creature*
That is so semely on to see;° *pleasing to look upon*
And wisshe° to God it might so be, *I wish, hope*
That she wolde holde° me for° hir knight, *take / as*
My lady, that is so fair and bright!'
Now have I told thee, sooth to saye,° *truthfully*
My firste song. Upon a daye° *One day*
I bethoughte me° what wo *considered*
And sorwe° that I suffred tho° *sorrow / had suffered then*
For hir, and yet she wiste it nought,° *knew nothing about it*
Ne telle hir durste I nat° my thought. *Nor dared I tell her*
'Allas!' thoughte I, 'I can no rede° *know no way out*
And, but° I telle hir, I nam but dede;° *unless / am simply dead*
And if I telle hir, to seye soothe,° *truly*

5. Nor (did I) know the art as well as did Lamech, the son of Tubal, he who first invented the craft of composing songs, for as his brother's hammers rang out, going up and down on the anvil, from that Lamech took the first (musical) sound. But the Greeks say that Pythagoras was the first inventor of that art; so says Aurora. But pay no mind to those two. (One of the sons of the biblical Lamech was Jubal, reputed inventor of music; another son Tubalcain invented brass and iron [Genesis 4:16–24]. The *Aurora* [shorthand for a work by the twelfth-century Peter of Riga] names both Jubal and Pythagoras as founders of music.)

I am adred° she wol be wroothe;° *afraid, terrified / angry*
Allas! What shal I thanne° do?' *then, in this case*
In this debat° I was so wo° *inner turmoil / distraught*
Me thoughte° myn herte braste atweyne!° *It seemed / would burst in two*
So atte laste, sooth to seyne,° *truth to tell*
I bethought me° that nature *considered, thought*
Ne formed never° in creature *Had never formed*
So moche beautee, trewly,
And bountee,° withoute mercy. *goodness, benevolence*
In hope of that, my tale I tolde
With sorwe, as that I never sholde,
For nedes, and maugree my heed,
I moste have told hir or be deed.[6]
I noot° wel how that I began, *do not know*
Ful evel reherse it I can;
And eek, as helpe me God withal,
I trowe it was in the dismal,
That was the ten woundes of Egipte,[7]
For many a word I overskipte° *skipped, stumbled over*
In my tale, for pure fere° *fear*
Lest my wordes missete were.° *be unsuitable, misplaced*
With sorweful herte and woundes dede,° *deadly*
Softe° and quaking for pure drede *Softly*
And shame, and stinting° in my tale *halting*
For ferde,° and myn hewe° al pale, *fear, dread / complexion*
Ful ofte I wex° bothe pale and rede.° *often I grew / flushed*
Bowing to hir, I heng the hede;° *hung my head*
I durste nat ones° looke hir on,° *dared not once / upon*
For wit, manere,° and al was gon. *manners, proper conduct*
I seyde 'mercy,' and no more;
It nas no game,° it sate me sore.° *joke / moved me to pain*
So at the laste, sooth to seyne,° *truth to tell*
Whan that myn herte° was come ageyne,° *heart, inner self / had returned*
To telle shortly° al my speche, *recount briefly*
With hool° herte I gan hir beseche° *(my) whole / asked, prayed her*
That she wolde be my lady swete,
And swore, and gan hir hertely hete° *earnestly, fervently promised*
Ever to be stedfast and trewe
And love hir alwey fresshly newe° *anew*
And never other lady° have *any other lady to*
And al hir worship° for to save° *honor / protect, preserve*
As I best coude; I swore hir this:
'For youres is al that ever ther is
For evermore, myn herte swete!
And never to false° yow but I mete,° *be false to / unless I'm dreaming*
I nil,° as wisse° God helpe me so!' *will not / surely as*

6. In expectation of (her mercy), I told my story in sorrow, as one who would never have spoken unless forced, and so in spite of myself, I had to (reveal my secret) to her or I would have died.
7. Quite badly can I repeat it now; and also, so help me God, I believe that it happened during the unlucky days (the "dismal," probably from the French "evil days"), which constitute the ten wounds of Egypt. (In this complex reference, Chaucer connects the medieval superstition that some days are unlucky with biblical allusions—see Exodus 9, 12—to the plagues [or "wounds"] of Egypt.)

And whan I had my tale y-do,° *done, finished*
God wote,° she acounted nat a stree° *knows / didn't give a straw*
Of° al my tale, so thoughte me.° *For / it seemed to me*
To telle shortly right° as it is, *briefly just*
Trewly hir answere, it was this;
I can nat now wel countrefete° *repeat exactly*
Hir wordes, but this was the grete° *gist, upshot*
Of hir answere: she seyde, 'Nay'
Al utterly. Allas, that day
The sorwe° I suffred and the wo! *sorrow*
—That° trewly Cassandra, that so *So much that*
Bewailed° the destruccioun *lamented*
Of Troy and of Ilioun,[8]
Had never swich° sorwe as I tho.° *such / had at that time*
I durst° no more sey therto° *dared / about that*
For pure fere, but stal away.° *I slipped away*
And thus I lived ful many a day,
That° trewly, I hadde no nede *(In such state) that*
Ferther than my beddes hede° *bed's head*
Never a day to seche sorwe;° *to seek out sorrow*
I fonde it redy every morwe,° *morning*
Forwhy° I loved hir in no gere.° *Because / light, changeable fashion*
So it befel,° another yere, *came about*
I thoughte ones° I wolde fonde° *once (more) / attempt*
To do° hir knowe and understonde *make*
My wo; and she wel understoode
That I ne wilned° nothing but goode° *desired / goodness*
And worship° and to kepe hir name° *honor / preserve her reputation*
Over° al thing, and drede hir° shame, *Above / protected her from*
And was so besy° hir to serve; *eager, attentive*
And pitee were I shulde sterve,
Sith that I wilned noon harme ywis.[9]
So whan my lady knewe al this,
My lady yaf° me al hooly° *gave / unreservedly*
The noble yifte° of hir mercy, *gift*
Saving° hir worship by° al weyes; *Preserving / honor in*
Dredles,° I mene noon other weyes.° *Fear not / nothing otherwise*
And therwith° she yaf° me a ringe; *with that / gave*
I trowe° it was the firste° thinge. *believe / earliest, also foremost*
But if myn herte was y-waxe° *(then) became, grew*
Glad, that is no need to axe!° *ask*
As° helpe me God, I was as blyve° *So / quickly*
Reysed as fro° deeth to lyve,° *from / life*
Of alle happes° the alderbeste,° *fortunes / the very best*
The gladdest and the moste at reste.° *contented*
For trewly, that swete wight,° *creature, person*
Whan I had° wrong and she the right, *was in the*

8. Cassandra was the Trojan princess whose prophecy of Troy's destruction was doomed to be ignored. Her lament over the fall of Troy is included in medieval versions of the story by Guido delle Colonne and Benoît de Sainte Maure. Ilioun (for Latin "Ilium") was the citadel in Troy; see also the *Legend of Good Women* 936, and the *House of Fame* 158.
9. And it would have been a pity if I were to die since I truly meant no harm.

She wolde alwey so goodely° *pleasingly, courteously*
Foryeve° me so debonairely.° *forgive / graciously*
In al my youthe, in al chaunce,° *cases, events*
She tooke me in hir governaunce.° *under her guidance, care*
Therwith° she was alwey so trewe, *Also*
Our joye was ever yliche newe;° *unfailingly fresh*
Our hertes weren so even a paire° *evenly matched*
That never nas that oon° contraire *was (the wish) of one*
To that other, for no wo.° *whatever the sad (circumstance)*
For soothe,° yliche° they suffred tho° *truly / alike / then*
O° blisse and eek o sorwe° bothe; *One / also one sorrow*
Yliche° they were bothe gladde and wrothe.° *Equally / angry, vexed*
Al was us oon,° withoute were.° *We were united / quarrel*
And thus we lived ful many a yere
So wel, I can nat telle how."° *fully convey it*
"Sir," quod° I, "where is she now?" *said*
"Now?" quod he, and stinte anoon.° *stopped at once*
Therwith° he wex° as deed as stoon, *With that / grew*
And seyde, "Allas that I was bore!° *born*
That was the los° that herbifore° *loss / earlier*
I tolde thee that I had lorne.° *suffered*
Bethinke° how I seyde herbiforne, *Remember, consider*
'Thou wost ful litel° what thou menest; *know very little*
I have lost more than thou wenest.'° *think, comprehend*
God wot,° allas, right that was she!" *knows*
"Allas, sir, how? What may that be?"° *What do you mean?*
"She is deed." "Nay!" "Yis, by my trouthe."° *faith, honor*
"Is that your los? By God, it is routhe."° *a cause for pity*
And with that worde, right anoon° *all at once*
They gan to strake forth. Al was doon,
For that tyme, the herte hunting.[1]
With that, me thoughte that this king
Gan quikly hoomward for to ryde
Unto a place was ther besyde,
Which was from us but a lyte:
A longe castel with walles whyte,
By Seynt Johan, on a riche hille,
As me mette; but thus it fille.[2]
Right thus me mette,° as I yow telle, *dreamed*
That in the castel was a belle,
As it had smyte° houres twelve,° *(And) as it struck / midnight?*
Therwith° I awooke myselve,° *With that / awakened*

1. They began to blow the notes on the horn that sounded the end of the hunt. For the moment, the hart hunt was done.
2. With that, it seemed to me that this king quickly rode homeward, to a place quite near, only a small distance away: a tall castle with white walls, situated—by Saint John—on a splendid hill, as I dreamed; but thus it happened. (In these lines Chaucer gives us the most pointed clues to the poem's occasion. "Seynt Johan" on a "riche hille" [French "riche mont"] is most likely a reference to John of Gaunt, also the Earl of Richmond; the "longe castel" with "walles whyte" to his wife Blanche of Lancaster, who died in 1368 of plague [John was also the Duke of Lancaster; see my introduction]. The specific identity of the "king" is open to debate, for it could simply allude back to Octavian [368], or it could suggest John of Gaunt or his father, Edward III. Some critics also see in Saint John an allusion to the Book of Revelations 21–22, where the Evangelist's vision of the New Jerusalem, another city on a hill, is described.)

And fonde me° lying in my bed; *found myself*
And the booke that I had red
Of Alcyone and Seys the kinge
And of the goddes of slepinge,
I fond it in myn honde ful even.° *just like that*
Thought I, "This is so queynt a sweven° *strange, curious a dream*
That I wol, by processe° of tyme, *in the course*
Fonde° to putte this sweven in ryme° *Strive / rhyme*
As I can° best, and that anoon."° *am able, know how / at once*
This was my sweven; now it is doon.