

Book Three

POEM 9

"Oh God, Maker of heaven and earth! Who govern the world with eternal reason, at your command time passes from the beginning. You place all things in motion, though You are yourself without change. No external causes impelled You to make this work from chaotic matter. Rather it was the form of the highest good, existing within You without envy, which caused You to fashion all things according to the eternal exemplar. You who are most beautiful produce the beautiful world from your divine mind and, forming it in your image, You order the perfect parts in a perfect whole.

"You bind the elements in harmony so that cold and heat, dry and wet are joined, and the purer fire does not fly up through the air, nor the earth sink beneath the weight of water." * * *

Book Four

PROSE 1

[Philosophy teaches Boethius that perfect goodness and true happiness are found in a divine Creator; who is the ultimate goal of all things. Even so, Boethius wonders how there can be evil in the world and how wickedness can go unpunished. Philosophy replies that this is not the case; she declares that the good will always be powerful, and vice will be met with weakness and futility. She likens the steps of her argument to an ascent through the heavens.]

* * * [Since under my guidance you have understood the essence of true happiness, and have found out where it resides, I shall now run through the steps in my explanation which I think necessary and show you the path which will take you home. And I shall give wings to your mind which can carry you aloft, so that, without further anxiety, you may return safely to your own country under my direction, along my path, and by my means.]

POEM 1

"My wings are swift able to soar beyond the heavens. The quick mind which wears them scorns the hateful earth and climbs above the globe of the immense sky, leaving the clouds below. It soars beyond the point of fire caused by the swift motion of the upper air until it reaches the house of stars. There it joins Phoebus in his path, or rides with cold, old Saturn, companion of that flashing sphere, running along the starry circle where sparkling night is made. When it has seen enough, it flies beyond the farthest sphere to mount the top of the swift heaven and share the holy light."

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ALAIN DE LILLE

From the *Complaint of Nature*[†]

[Alain de Lille (flourished late twelfth century C.E.) was a French theologian and academic who taught in the schools of Paris, later moving to Montpelier and eventually withdrawing to Cîteaux, where he joined the Cistercian Order. His finest works include the *Anticladunus*, an allegory on the creation of the perfect human soul, and *The Complaint of Nature* (*De planctu naturae*), which places Neoplatonist ideas in a Christian context. The *Complaint of Nature* resembles Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, with the allegorical *Philosophy* recast as *Nature*.

Chaucer refers to the *Complaint of Nature*, or "Pleynt of Kinde," in line 316 of the *Parliament of Fowls*. As the narrator specifically tells us there, he borrows his portrait of the goddess directly from "Aleyn," who depicted *Nature* with all of creation represented on her beautiful gown—save for humanity, whose section of the garment is badly torn. An excerpt from the description of her gown, arrayed with numerous species of birds, is presented below.]

* * *

A garment, woven from silky wool and covered with many colors, was as the virgin's robe of state. Its appearance perpetually changed with many a different color and manifold hue. At first it startled the sight with the white radiance of the lily. Next, as if its simplicity had been thrown aside and it were striving for something better, it glowed with rosy life. Then, reaching the height of perfection, it gladdened the sight with the greenness of the emerald. Moreover, spun exceedingly fine, so as to escape the scrutiny of the eye, it was so delicate of substance that you would think it and the air of the same nature. On it, as a picture fancied to the sight, was being held a parliament of the living creation. There the eagle, first assuming youth, then age, and finally returning to the first, changed from Nestor to Adonis. There the hawk, chief of the realm of the air, demanded tribute from its subjects with violent tyranny. The kite assumed the character of hunter, and in its stealthy preying seemed like the ghost of the hawk. The falcon stirred up civil war against the heron, though this was not divided with equal balance, for that should not be thought of by the name of war where you strike, but I only am struck. The ostrich, disregarding a worldly life for a lonely, dwelt like a hermit in solitudes of desert places. The swan, herald of its own death, foretold with its honey-sweet lyre of music the stopping of its life. There on the peacock *Nature* had rained so great a treasure-store of beauty that you would think she afterwards would have gone begging. The phoenix died in its real self, but, by some miracle of nature, revived in another, and in its death aroused itself from the dead. The bird of concord paid tribute to *Nature* by decimating its brood. There lived sparrows, shrunk to low, pygmean atoms; while the crane opposite went to the excess of gigantic size. The pheasant, after it had endured the

[†] From *The Complaint of Nature*, translated by Douglas M. Moffat (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1906), 11, 12, 17, 22.

confinement of its natal island, flew into our world, destined to become the delight of princes. The cock, like a popular astrologer, told with its voice's clock the divisions of the hours. But the wild cock derided its domestic idleness, and roamed abroad, wandering through the woody regions. The horned owl, prophet of misery, sang psalms of future deep sorrowing. The night owl was so gross with the dregs of ugliness that you would think that Nature had dozed at its making. The crow predicted things to come in the excitement of vain chatter. The drowsily colored magpie kept up a sleepless attention to argument. The jackdaw treasured trifles of its commendable thieving, showing the signs of inborn avarice. The dove, drunk with the sweet Dionean evil, labored at the sport of Cyprus. The raven, hating the shame of rivalry, did not confess for its brood its own offspring, until the sign of dark color was disclosed, whereupon, as if disputing with itself it acknowledged the fact. The partridge shunned now the attacks of the powers of the air, now the traps of hunters, now the warning barks of dogs. The duck and the goose wintered, according to the same law of living, in their native land of streams. The turtle-dove, widowed of its mate, scorned to return to love, and refused the consolation of marrying again. The parrot on the anvil of its throat fashioned the coin of human speech. There the trick of a false voice beguiled the quail, ignorant of the deceit of the serpent's figure. The woodpecker, architect of its own small house, with its beak's pick made a little retreat in an oak. The hedge-sparrow, putting aside the role of step-mother, with the maternal breast of devotion adopted as its child the alien offspring of the cuckoo; but the offspring, though the subject of so great a boon, yet knew itself not as own son, but as stepchild. The swallow returned from its wandering, and made with mud under a beam its nest and home. The nightingale, renewing the complaint of its ravishment, and making music of harmonious sweetness, gave excuse for the fall of its chastity. The lark, like a high-souled musician, offered the lyre of its throat, not with the artfulness of study but with the mastery of nature, as one most skilled in the lore of melody; and refining its tones into finer, separated these little notes into inseparable chains. The bat, bird of double sex, held the rank of cipher among small birds. These living things, although as it were in allegory moving there, seemed to exist actually.

Fine linen, with its white shaded into green, which the maiden, as she herself shortly afterward said, had woven without a seam, and which was not of common material, but rejoiced in a skilled workmanship, served for her mantle. Its many intricate folds showed the color of water, and on it a graphic picture told of the nature of the watery creation, as divided into numerous species. * * *

A damask tunic, also, pictured with embroidered work, concealed the maiden's body. This was starred with many colors, and massed into a thicker material approaching the appearance of the terrestrial element. In its principal part man laid aside the idleness of sensuality, and by the direct guidance of reason penetrated the secrets of the heavens. Here the tunic had undergone a rending of its parts, and showed abuses and injuries. But elsewhere its parts were united in unbroken elegance, and suffered no discord nor division. On these the magic of a picture gave life to the animals of the earth. * * *

GUILLAUME DE LORRIS AND JEAN DE MEUN

From the Romance of the Rose[†]

[The *Romance of the Rose* was one of the most influential poems of the later Middle Ages. An allegory of courtly love, it was widely read in both France and in England. The two sections of the poem, the second much longer than the first, were probably written about forty to fifty years apart. The author of the first section, Guillaume de Lorris (flourished ca. 1230 c.e.), began composing his 4058 lines around 1225–1230. Later Jean de Meun (ca. 1225–40–1305 c.e.), in his 17,721-line continuation, explains in a witty speech given by the God of Love that Guillaume died before he was able to complete the poem. The God of Love then predicts that "Jean Chopinél . . . born at Meung-sur-Loire" will finish the work "without avarice or envy . . . if time and place can be found" (10565–10586). While both Guillaume and Jean were born near Orleans, Jean later moved to Paris, where he was associated with the city's university.

Guillaume de Lorris's section of the poem draws upon, and in large part helps to define, traditional courtly love. Jean de Meun continues this theme, though he portrays the ideals of courtly love with considerable irony, providing a humorous, sometimes sharply critical, scholastic survey of love in all its manifestations. The two authors' different approaches to the topic of love, plus the subtle ways in which Jean de Meun draws upon Guillaume's writing, still inspire debate about the poem's overall unity.

The *Romance of the Rose* is one of Chaucer's principal literary influences. He wrote a translation of at least part of it himself. In one way or another, the thirteenth-century poem informed all of Chaucer's dream visions, but especially the *Book of the Duchess*, where "text and glose" (333) of the *Rose* decorate the windows of the dreamer's bedchamber, and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, where the God of Love specifically condemns the narrator for translating the work. The excerpt below begins in Guillaume de Lorris's part of the text, with the beginning of the poem, and extends, with some omissions, to line 1732; it then picks up again with a discussion of Fortune that appears early in Jean de Meun's section.]

Many men say that there is nothing in dreams but fables and lies, but one may have dreams which are not deceitful, whose import becomes quite clear afterward. We may take as witness an author named Macrobius, who did not take dreams as trifles, for he wrote of the vision which came to King Scipio. Whoever thinks or says that to believe in a dream's coming true is folly and stupidity may, if he wishes, think me a fool; but, for my part, I am convinced that a dream signifies the good and evil that come to men, for most men at night dream many things in a hidden way which may afterward be seen openly.

[†] From *The Romance of the Rose*. Copyright © 1971 Princeton University Press. 1999 renewed PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. The translator's notes have been omitted.