

Songs about Hope: *Esperance & Amors* in fourteenth-century song

La verité qui est coverte,
Vos en sera lors toute aperte
Quant espondre m'orroiz le songe,
Car il n'i a mot de mensonge.

Roman de la Rose, 2071-74

The truth which is hidden
shall be completely revealed to you
when you have heard me explain the dream,
for in it is not one word of a lie.

When the narrator of a fiction assures the reader that his work contains not one fiction (not one!), *caveat lector*: as any student of postmodern fiction knows, a cascade of lies is sure to follow. Medieval writers and readers were well aware of the wondrous ways in which fictions lead and mislead, deceive and reveal, and proffer lies disguised as truth and truths cloaked in allegory, boldly asserting their own unquestionable credibility while simultaneously and ironically undercutting it. The above passage, from the enormous and bewilderingly complex thirteenth-century narrative poem entitled the *Roman de la Rose*, invites us to probe beneath the surface and consider hidden meanings: nothing may be as it seems. And if we expect everything to be revealed in the end in a tidy explication, alas! neither the author of these lines, Guillaume de Lorris, nor the poets who continued his (apparently) unfinished work, which breaks off in mid-phrase after some 4000 lines, ever provide the promised explanation of the Lover's dream.

To the ironies and multiple meanings of poetry, music may add its own. Thus, the text of *Je languis d'amere mort* reads as pure anguish—but is it? “If you don't love me, I'm gonna die,” sings the lover; ah, no doubt... The music, lushly dissonant and sensuous (here with an added fourth voice, by one Petrus de Vigilijs, which piles on more delightful dissonances) suggests that to languish in amorous pain may be, paradoxically, a pleasure.

Guillaume de Lorris wrote the first part of the *Roman de la Rose* around the year 1230. In it a young man describes a dream he had about five years before, at the age of twenty. It is, of course, a morning in the month of May, “Ou tens amereus pleins de joie, / Ou tens que toute riens s'escaye”—“In tyme of love and jolyte, / That al thyng gynneth waxen gay,” in Geoffrey Chaucer's Middle English translation. Our narrator finds himself in a lovely park, surrounded by flowering trees and serenaded by birds. He gains entrance to gardens surrounding the castle of Deduit (Pleasure, Mirth, Delight), where the God of Love wounds him with not one, but ten arrows. He falls hopelessly, desperately in love with a rosebud. The Rose is attended by numerous characters who personify her beauty (Sweet Regard), her welcoming traits (Fair Seeming, Sincerity, Youth, and especially *Bel Acueil*, Fair

Welcome), and those more concerned with preserving her honor (Shame, Fear, Scandal, and the hot-tempered and violent *Danger*, whose name might be translated as Resistance, Self-Possession, or Dominion). Refused his greatest desire, to possess the Rose, the Lover despairs. How is he to endure the pains of love, which the God of Love describes to him in gruesome detail? Love counsels him at length about how a Lover ought to behave and all the attributes he must display, and then tells him that he will be saved by Hope.

Cil que l'en met en chartre obscure,
En vermine et en ordure,
Qui n'a que pain d'orge et d'avoine,
Ne se muer mie por la poine.
Esperance confort li livre
Et se cuide veoir delivre
Encore par quelque cheance.
Trestoute autel beance
A cil qu'amors tient em prison :
Il espoire la garisson.
Ceste esperance le conforte
Et cuers et talanz li aporte
De son cuer a martire offrir.
Esperance li fet soffrir
Les maus dont nus ne set le conte,
Por la joie qui .c. tanz monte.
Esperance par soffrir vaint
Et fait que li amanz vivaint ;
Benoite soit Esperance
Qui les amanz ainssint avance.
Mout est esperance cortoise :
El ne lera ja une toise
Nul vaillant home jusqu'au chief,
Ne por peril ne por meschief,
Nes au larron que l'en vult pendre,
Fet ele ades merci atendre.
Icestes te garantira
Ne ja de toi ne partira,
Qu'ele ne te sequeure au besoing...

Roman de la Rose, 2609-37

He who is thrown into a dark dungeon,
filthy and infested with vermin,
and given nothing to eat but barley and oat bread,
nonetheless does not die from this:
Hope gives him comfort,
and he believes that he will yet be delivered
by some chance.
He who is imprisoned by Love
shares the very same aspiration:
he hopes for rescue.
This hope comforts him
and brings him the courage and desire
to offer his heart up to martyrdom.
Hope makes him bear
such ills as none can count
for the sake of joys a hundred times greater.
Hope conquers through suffering
and makes lovers live.
Blessed be Hope,
who so advances the cause of lovers!
Most courteous is Hope:
She'll not lag even a yard
behind a valiant man, until the very end,
despite peril or mischief.
Even the thief about to be hanged
is made by her to expect mercy.
She will protect you
and will never leave you
without succoring you in your need...

The action of Guillaume's *Roman de la Rose* is suspended with the Rose imprisoned in the Tower of Jealousy along with Bel Accueil. Sometime later, an anonymous poet provided a brief conclusion of just over seventy lines, in which Pity, having escaped while Jealousy is asleep, arrives with Bel Accueil and other allies, along with the rosebud itself. The lovers spend one enchanted night together "A

grant solaz, a grant deduit” (in great comfort, in great delight) before the rosebud is secretly escorted back into the Tower—upon which the Lover, sworn to her service, awakes from his dream and takes his leave in two short lines:

Atant m'en part e pren congié
C'est li songes que j'ai songié.
Anonymous conclusion of the *Rose*, 76-77

At that I leave and bid farewell:
this is the dream that I dreamed.

Modern commentators have found this abrupt tying-up of threads extremely unsatisfying, an opinion shared by medieval readers. Around 1270-80, a cleric named Jean de Meun composed his own continuation to the *Rose*—some 17,500 lines of narration, monologue, philosophy, theology, speculation, parody, wisdom, a great encyclopedia of wit and irony. Often as not manuscripts transmitted Guillaume's *Rose*, the anonymous conclusion, and Jean's continuation one after the other.

The *Roman de la Rose* was phenomenally popular for centuries, first in manuscript copies (there are well over a hundred) and then in printed editions. Any poet of the fourteenth century would have known it intimately. Its influence on Guillaume de Machaut (born circa 1300) is everywhere apparent in his lyrics and narrative poems, including the *Remede de Fortune*, written around 1340 for Bonne of Luxembourg. The *Remede* is narrated by another young and rather inept lover, who finds himself commanded to read an amorous *lai* before the very lady who has inspired it, unbeknownst to her. When the lady asks the young man to name the author of the *lai*, he is cast into utter confusion. Unable to speak (“I know for a fact that I'd have died on the spot”), he retreats to yet another delightful park, where he sets down a *Complainte* against Fortune and her wheel. He goes on for thirty-six strophes. At this point, to his rescue comes “the most beautiful lady I'd ever seen, by my soul, excepting only my own lady.”

Car tant estoit parfaitement
Belle, gente, et bien acesmee,
Que se Dieus de ses mains fourmee
L'eüst; s'estoit elle d'asfaire
Bel, bon, gent, doulz, et debonnaire.
Mes il ne me fu mie avis,
Quant je l'esgardai vis a vis,
Que ce fust creature humaine
De li, ne qu'elle fust mondaine,
Dont j'avoie moult grant merveille.

For she was as perfectly
beautiful, noble, and well adorned
as if God had shaped her
with his own hands; in manner she was
fair, good, noble, sweet, and refined.
But I did not at all think,
when I regarded her face to face,
that she was a human creature
or of this world,
at which I marvelled greatly.

Remede de Fortune, 1506-15

She is, in fact, not a mortal lady, but Lady Hope—Esperance. Hope counsels him how to understand the predicament he is in. Far from being a curse, it is a blessing, for Love has awarded him the most noble, beautiful, wise, and accomplished lady on earth as the object of his desire, and if he can acquire the correct insight into his situation, he can not only become wise, edified by the perfections of his lady and ennobled by his suffering, he can even be happy. She sings him a song:

En amer a douce vie
Et jolie,
Qui bien la scet maintenir,
Car tant plaist la maladie,
Quant norrie
Est en amouereus desir,
Que l'amant fait esbaudir
Et querir
Comment elle monteplie.
C'est dous maus a soustenir,
Qu'esjoir
Fait cuer d'ami et d'amie.

To be in love is a sweet life
and a happy one
for him who knows how to live it,
for the malady is so pleasing
when it is fed
with amorous desire,
that it emboldens the lover
to discover
how it multiplies.
It is a sweet trouble to bear,
which brings joy to
the heart of a lover and his lady.

Remede de Fortune, 2857-68

But, he asks, what of Fortune? “How can I defend myself against Fortune, because her game is to break a heart?” Ah, replies Hope, you must always remember that Fortune’s nature is to be fickle and mutable: “If she were constant and behaved reasonably, so that she were just and true to everyone, she would not be Fortune.” Accept this truth, do not trust in her, enjoy the benefits she may bring, find the good in what appears to be bad, and you will be happy. Good luck, bad luck—can you really tell the difference? She sounds a lot like a Zen master.

One of the reasons we know more about Machaut than any other musician or poet of the fourteenth century is that he was uniquely diligent in overseeing the production of large manuscripts that contained his complete works. One of these, the so-called Manuscript C, which features numerous illustrations of the *Remede de Fortune*, may have travelled to England with Jean II, king of France, who was captured at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356 and spent four years as a hostage in London. It is possible that Geoffrey Chaucer encountered the manuscript at this time; it is clear from his works that he knew the *Remede* as well as other poems by Machaut.

The character Esperance also turns up in an anonymous rondeau which was written and set to music some time in the second half of the century; the rondeau is transmitted in English sources as well as continental ones and may have been composed in England. The poem refers directly to the baladelle *En amer a douce vie* which Machaut's Hope sings to the Lover in the *Remede*: "Esperance, qui en mon cuer embat, / Sentir me fait d'amer la douce vie." The rondeau *Esperance* is referenced in turn in a set of three works which open with the same words, "En attendant." Galiot quotes the rondeau's text (or Machaut's) in his *En attendant d'amer la douce vie*, Senleches cites both music and text in *En attendant, Esperance conforte*, and Philipoctus de Caserta alludes to music in both the anonymous *Esperance* and Senleches's ballade in his own ballade, *En attendant souffrir m'estuet*. A fourth work, the anonymous *Je voy mon cuer en un bachel nager*, also quotes the text and music of *Esperance*, and in the same way as Senleches: the word "Esperance" is set to the opening melody of the original *Esperance*. In the infinitely subtle and complex ballade by Senleches, the listener must wait until the final word of the stanza to hear his hopes rewarded.

What occasioned this web of citation and allusion remains uncertain. All three "En attendant" songs appear in two important sources of French secular music of the late fourteenth century, the famous Chantilly codex and the manuscript Modena, Biblioteca Estense, {alpha}.M.5.24. But both of these seem to have been copied by Italian scribes around the second decade of the fifteenth century, which does not offer much of a clue to the origins of a group of French songs composed, very likely, in the 1380s. It is probably not coincidental that Jean II's nephew, Louis de Bourbon, took "Esperance" as his motto after he himself was released from English captivity in the mid-1360s and that the French royal family adopted it by the 1380s, nor that "Souffrir m'estuet" ("I must suffer") was the motto of Bernabò Visconti of Milan. Various connections between the Bourbon-Valois nobility of France and the Visconti, in particular an alliance formed against Naples in an attempt to reinstate the Avignonese Pope Clement VII, may have prompted Philipoctus to link the two mottos in the ballade *En attendant souffrir m'estuet* and inspired the creation of the "En attendant" songs; we might envision some sort of half collaborative, half competitive effort commissioned by noble patrons.

But however diverting it may be to speculate about why these pieces were composed, the pieces themselves are of more enduring appeal. All three "En attendant" songs are made in the rhythmically complex style that was enabled by refinements in musical notation developed in the latter part of the fourteenth century. The best music in this style, later dubbed the *Ars subtilior* (the more subtle art),

is jazzy, at once hard to grasp and intoxicating; its complicated rhythms are precisely specified but the effect is loose, improvisatory, and spellbinding.

Besides songs, today's entertainment offers a handful of instrumental works. At least one of these is undoubtedly a song whose text, beyond its first word, has gone missing—*Creature*, possibly a rondeau. The canon *Andray soulet* (“I will go alone”) may also have been intended to be sung, despite the ornate and apparently “instrumental” character of its melody. *De ce que fol pense* is an ornamented setting, from the Faenza codex, of a famous song by P. des Molins. The Faenza manuscript contains a large number of such works, which have been thought to be intended for keyboard but which Timothy McGee has proposed are as likely meant for lute duet or for lute and harp (the former playing the virtuosic diminutions to the cantus, the latter playing tenor and probably adding a contratenor, either improvised or fashioned after the contratenor of the original song). We also perform an estampie, one of the very few instrumental dances surviving from the Middle Ages. This estampie is one of eight in a French manuscript dating from the second half of the thirteenth century—rather earlier than the rest of the music on the program, but no later French examples survive. (The eight estampies found in a late fourteenth-century Italian source are quite different in form, structure, meter, and melodic style.) An estampie is danced in the *Remede de Fortune* after a feast in the Lady's manor. Machaut spins out a long list of the instruments played by the minstrels; it includes all those you will here today, and many more besides.

Car, je vi la tout en un cerne
Violle, rubelle, guiterne,
Leü, morache, micanon,
Cytolle, et le psalterion,
Harpe, tabour, trompes, nacaires,
Orgues, cornes, plus de dis paires,
Cornemuses, flajos, chevretes,
Douceinnes, simbales, clocettes,
Tymbre, le flëuste brehaingne,
Et le grant cornet d'Alemaingne,
Flajos de Scens, fistule, pipe,
Muse d'Aussay, trompe petite,
Buissines, eles, monocorde
Ou il n'a c'une seule corde,
Et muse de blef tout ensemble.
Et certainement, il me samble
Qu'onques mais telle melodie
Ne fu veüe ne oÿe,
Car chascuns d'eaus, selonc l'acort
De son instrument, sans decort,

For I saw there, all in a circle,
fiddle, rebec, gittern,
lute, Moorish guitar, small psaltery,
cittern, and the psaltery,
harp, tabor, trumpets, nakers,
organs, horns—more than ten pairs—
bagpipes, flutes, musettes,
douçaines, cymbals, bells,
timbrels, the Bohemian flute,
and the large German cornet,
flutes of willow, fife, pipe,
Alsatian reed pipe, small trumpet,
herald's trumpet, another psaltery, monochord
(which has only one string),
and a straw pipe, all together.
And certainly it seemed to me
that such melody had never before
been witnessed or heard,
for each of them, according to the harmony
of his instrument, without discord—

Viole, guiterne, cytolle,
Harpe, trompe, corne, flajole,
Pipe, souffle, muse, naquaire,
Taboure, et quanque on puet faire
De dois, de penne, et de l'archet
Ouÿ je et vi en ce parchet.
Quant fait eurent une estampie,
Les dames et leur compaignie
S'en alerent, ci .ii. ci .iii.,
En elles tenant par les dois...

Remede de Fortune, 3955-92

fiddle, gittern, cittern,
harp, trumpet, horn, flute,
pipe, bladder pipe, bagpipe, naker,
tabor, and whatever could be played
with finger, pick, or bow—
I heard and saw in that little park.
After they had performed an estampie,
the ladies and their company
went off in twos and threes,
holding each other by the hand...

Whether such an array of instruments would ever have played “all together” outside of fiction is open to considerable doubt. On the opposite end of spectrum of dance performance from this fantastical ensemble is the monophonic virelai or *chanson baladée*. Machaut left us twenty-five of them, including one in the *Remede*. A song for dancing was normally sung by one voice alone, in the *Remede* as in the *Roman de la Rose*.

Cele gent dont je vous parole
Estoient pris a la querole
Et une dame lor chantoit
Qui Leesce apelee estoit;
Bien sot canter et plesaument,
Ne nule plus avenaument
Ne plus bel ses refrais n'assist.
A chanter merveilles li sist,
Qu'ele avoit la voiz clere et saine.

Roman de la Rose, 726-34

These people of whom I am speaking
were dancing the carol,
and a lady was singing for them
whose name was Joy;
she knew well how to sing, and pleasantly,
and none had a more becoming
or more beautiful way of placing her refrains.
Singing suited her marvellously,
for she had a clear and rich voice.

Mais n'alay pas le trait d'un arc
Que pres de la tour vi un parc
Ou priaus ot et fontanelles,
Dames, chevaliers, pucelles,
Et d'autres gens grant compaignie
Moult joieuse et moult envoisie,
Qui dansoient jolïement;
N'il n'avoient nul instrument,
Ne menestrelz, fors chançonnettes
Deduisans, courtoyses, et nettes.

Remede de Fortune, 3358-68

But I'd not gone the distance of a bowshot
when near to the tower I saw a park
where there were meadows and little fountains,
ladies, knights, maidens,
and a great company of other people,
very joyful and very festive,
who were dancing gaily.
There were no instruments
nor minstrels, only songs,
delightful, courtly, and bright.

This program features one of Machaut's *chansons baladées*, *Je vivroie liement*, which you will hear first sung by a soloist, then taken up for polyphonic elaboration by three instruments.

Our instruments, blown or played with finger, pick, or bow, are of late medieval design and differ in various ways from later models. Recorder and douçaine have a cylindrical bore, rather than conical; the straight bore tames the double-reed douçaine and renders it soft (in English it might be called a “still shawm”) and sweet, so sweet that Machaut compares Hope's voice to it—she speaks in a “belle vois, clere et saine, / Plus douce que nulle douçaine” (“a beautiful voice, clear and rich, sweeter than any douçaine”; *Remede de Fortune*, 1605-6). The douçaine's pleasing reediness reflects the buzziness of the medieval harp, which is equipped with brays, small wedges set atop the pins in the sound board: when the string is plucked, it vibrates against the narrow end of the wedge, creating a buzzy or snappy sound which is both louder and more sustained than that of a harp without brays. The medieval lute was played with a pick or plectrum and thus is a single-line instrument, not the harmonic or contrapuntal lute of the sixteenth century. The fiddle played today has five strings of plain gut tuned in fifths and fourths; its bow, made of European pearwood and strung with horsehair, is highly curved and very much resembles the hunting bow for which it is named.

Many thanks to Debra Nagy for devising an instrumental setting of *Je vivroie liement* and a fourth voice for *Rose sans per*.

—Scott Metcalfe

Einsi parti, je pris congïé.
Dites moy, fu ce bien songïé?

Machaut, *La fonteinne amoureuse*, 2847-48

Now that he's gone, I take my leave.
Tell me, was that well dreamed?