

## Remede de Fortune / *A Remedy for Fortune*

### Guillaume de Machaut

Guillaume de Machaut first enters the historical record in a few ecclesiastical documents from 1330-33 in which he is described variously as a clerk, almoner, notary, and secretary to the king of Bohemia, Jean of Luxembourg. Machaut probably worked as Jean's secretary, travelling all over Europe, until the king's heroic if foolhardy death at the battle of Crécy on August 26, 1346. (He insisted on being led into battle, although he was by then completely blind.) After Crécy, Machaut seems to have served a number of other eminent nobles, a confusing number of whom are named either Jean or Charles: his patrons included the king of Bohemia's daughter, Bonne of Luxembourg; her husband Jean, duke of Normandy, who became King Jean II of France; their son Charles, the future King Charles V; Charles's brothers, Jean, duke of Berry, and Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy; Pierre de Lusignan, king of Cyprus; King Charles of Navarre, and others. Machaut lived through the Black Death, which peaked in France in the years 1348-50, killing 30-60% of the European population, including about half of Paris's 100,000 inhabitants. By 1360 or so Machaut seems to have taken up residence in Reims, where he had held a benefice at the Cathedral since 1338. (A benefice was an ecclesiastical appointment offering a salary without requirement of service in return: a literal sinecure, *sine cura* or free of pastoral duties.) He died sometime before November 9, 1377, when his position at the Cathedral of Reims passed to another.

While Machaut's life is sparsely documented, his works are richly transmitted in a unique series of six "complete works" manuscripts produced between c. 1350 and 1390, mostly under the author's supervision, several abundantly illuminated. The manuscripts contain more than fifteen long narrative poems or *dits*; a collection of lyric poetry known as the *Loange des dames* or *Praise of Ladies*, consisting of some 280 poems not set to music; and a music section which eventually comprised 19 *lais*, 23 *motets*, a setting of the Mass, a *hocket*, 42 *ballades*, 22 *rondeaux*, and 33 *virelais*. The order in which all this was to appear was carefully specified by the composer, as a manuscript compiled at the very end of his life tells us: "Vesci l'ordenance que G. de Machau vuet qu'il ait en son livre": "This is the order which G. de Machaut wishes to have in his book."

## Bonne of Luxembourg & the *Remede de Fortune*

Of all his patrons, the one who seems to have attracted Machaut's warmest personal devotion was Bonne of Luxembourg. Born May 20, 1315, she died at age 34 on September 11, 1349, perhaps of the Black Death, the mother of ten. Machaut may have undertaken the compilation of his first complete works manuscript for Bonne, in the late 1340s (the so-called MS C), but she died before it was finished and it was completed either for her widower Jean or for their son Charles. The lavishly illustrated book concludes with the motet *Trop plus est bele que Biauté*, perhaps intended as a memorial benediction for Bonne, "Far more beautiful than Beauty itself..., better than Goodness, and full of everything, in truth, that a good and beautiful lady should have." The *Remede de Fortune*, too, appears to be dedicated to Bonne: the text identifies her more or less explicitly as the perfect lady of the tale, to whom everyone rightly gives the name *bonne*.

...tousdis enclinoie  
Mon cuer et toute ma pensee  
Vers ma dame qui est clamee  
De tous sur toutes belle et bonne:  
Chascun par droit ce nom li donne.

...my heart and all my thoughts  
were ever inclined towards  
my lady, who is proclaimed  
by all beautiful and good above all:  
everyone rightly gives her this name.

*Remede de Fortune*, 52-6

The *Remede* is a *dit* or narrative poem of over 4000 octosyllabic lines, telling the story of a young and inexperienced lover and his attempt to learn how to be happy, to live and love well, despite the reversals dished out by Fortune and her wheel. Interspersed into the highly didactic story are seven lyric poems, set to music, which present a catalogue of exemplary forms arranged from old to new, from the traditional, virtuoso *lai*, a comically extended *complainte*, and *chanson royal*—forms inherited from the previous century—to the newer forms of the so-called *seconde rhétorique*, the *ballade* and related *baladelle*, the *virelai*, and the *rondeau* (here labelled *rondelet*). The explicit goal of the *Remede* is to instruct its readers, by means of example and plain teaching, in how to live ethically in a world which is not designed to assure human happiness. Lady Hope teaches the lover to trust in hope, cultivate indifference to the vagaries of Fortune—whether you are in her favor for the moment or not—and do not desire, but accept the good things Love has given you without wishing vainly for things which are impossible. These ideas are summarized in the ballade with which we open our concert, *Esperance qui m'asseure*, and their essential kernel is perfectly expressed in the tenor of the

motet *Trop plus est bele*, with which we conclude: “I am not certain of having a lover, but I am a loyal friend.”

### Our *Remede*

Our concert version of the *Remede*, created by Debra Nagy and myself, includes all of the lyrics and music from the poem, although we have excerpted the Lai and Complainte. (Performed complete, they would last approximately fifteen and forty-five minutes, respectively.) We have replaced most of the narration with songs and motets, mostly by Machaut, that explore the same themes. What remains, describing the essence of the action, has been translated into English prose to be spoken. The supertitles provide slightly condensed translations of the sung lyrics; the complete French texts and translations may be found on Blue Heron’s website, [www.blueheron.org](http://www.blueheron.org).

For the projections, Shawn Keener has drawn on illustrations from the Machaut manuscripts, especially those found in MS C, which were created by a small team of highly skilled and esteemed artists.

—Scott Metcalfe

### The Story

The *Remede de Fortune* is an interesting (and funny) story for a few reasons. While it traffics in common themes from the medieval world of Courtly Love (including the central allegorical figures of Hope and Fortune and unrequited pining for the beloved), there’s also some fascinating gender-role reversal. For instance, it’s the women here who are wise, deft, and strong: Hope is all-knowing and comforting, Fortune is powerful and virtually untouchable, and the Lady is a slightly manipulative power-broker who’s well aware of her position and her ability to extract favors and to grant or withhold happiness. The Lover, on the other hand, is practically a hysterical caricature: a whimpering, self-indulgent sot who is reduced to quivering and puddles of tears at the slightest glance from his Lady.

## Synopsis

Our story begins with the Lover (our narrator) attempting to enumerate all he has learned through trial and experience. He is easily distracted and veers off course, however, and doesn't appear to list all the "twelve things" he has promised to reveal. Instead, he begins to tell us about how he first came to fall in love. He was young, innocent, and foolish. His Lady, meanwhile, was perfection—his model in all things. Naturally, he kept his feelings deeply hidden but learned to express both his despair and exaltation through poetry and song.

One day, his Lady asks him to recite a *lai* (a long and complex lyric poem) for her enjoyment. When she asks him who wrote it, he is scared stiff. Should he tell her the truth and risk rejection and humiliation? Conversely, how could he possibly lie to the woman he loves? He does neither: bewildered and flabbergasted, fearing that he will drop dead on the spot if the Lady expresses the slightest disfavor towards him (!), he runs off without saying a word.

Overwhelmed by cowardice and intimidated by the strength of his own feelings, he wanders until he comes upon a secluded spot in a pleasure garden called the Park of Hesdin. First he cries himself sick—lashing out at himself, Love, and Fortune—in a 36-stanza *Complainte* that would easily take 45 minutes to perform. (We have excerpted it for this performance.) Having convinced himself that he is near death, he opens one eye to find a beautiful woman sitting next to him. She is there to comfort him, instruct him about Love, and counsel him to adjust his attitude about Fortune. She barely seems real; at length she introduces herself as *Esperance*—Hope. Pledging her companionship through doubts and difficult times, she gives the Lover her ring. His health restored, emboldened by Hope, the Lover goes off in search of his Lady—though he quickly loses faith, causing Hope to reappear.

Approaching his Lady's castle, the Lover comes upon a group dancing in a garden and spots his Lady among them. The dancers each take a turn singing and the Lover stumbles forward to join them. The Lady notices the Lover and insists that he take his turn to sing for the dance. The dancing winds up and the company departs.

Back at the castle, the Lady pointedly asks the Lover where he has been and confronts him about running off. He confesses all to her and she grants him the gift of her love. They go together to hear Mass after which a trumpet sounds, announcing dinner. The entire company then enjoys a great feast followed by music and dancing. Before the Lover takes his leave, he and his Lady exchange rings as a token of their alliance. The Lover departs, singing a rondelet (*Dame, mon cuer en vous remaint*) as he goes.

After spending the afternoon in a field enjoying jousting and other diversions, the Lover can't wait to get back to his Lady. But when he finds her, she appears to ignore him. Stricken with grief and doubt, he asks whether she has decided to abandon him; she reassures him that she is merely acting to conceal their love, for true love ought not to be revealed to a slanderous, perverse, and inconstant society such as the world has presently become. Although assailed by fear and torments of all kinds, he determines to believe and trust her. The poem ends with a prayer of homage to Love, in which Machaut signs his name in an anagram.

—Debra Nagy