

The Complaint of Mars

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century verse narrative in Middle English

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This poem has been translated and retold from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press.

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The Complaint of Mars

Geoffrey Chaucer

a late-fourteenth century poem in Middle English

Gladeth, ye fowles, of the morow gray · Lo! Venus risen among yon rowes rede! · And floures fresshe, honoureth ye this day · for when the sonne uprist, then wol ye sprede – ‘Rejoice, you birds, in the grey morning. Lo! See how Venus rises amongst the crimson rays of the sun.

‘You fresh flowers, honour this day, for when the sun rises your petals will open!

‘But you lovers who lie in fear of being caught, you’d better flee in case you’re seen, or those with wicked tongues will catch a glimpse of you. Lo! Here is the sun, the candle by which jealousy will seek to find you out. So with tears and regret, take your leave, and with Saint John to console you, moderate your sharp sorrow, for the time will soon arrive when your happiness will return. A joyful night is worth a painful morning!’

Saint Valentine, I heard a bird sing this on your day, before the sun arose. And this fowl continued: ‘Wake up! Those of you who haven’t yet done so, choose a mate! And those of you who have already chosen, reaffirm your perpetual service and pledge your fealty and your willingness to accept with patience whatever fortune should bring.

‘And to celebrate this high feast, I, in my bird’s way, will sing the substance of a complaint that woeful Mars made when he was forced to leave the new Venus one morning, which is the time of day when Phoebus, with his golden, fiery beams, seeks out every fearful lover.

The story

Once, the lord of the third heavenly sphere, as much by the inevitable turning of the heavens as by any deserving virtue of his own, won Venus’s love, and she took him as her own; but gave him a stern lecture first, commanding him that he must never, whilst in her service, be so bold as to despise any lover that she might take besides himself. She forbade him all jealous feelings, along with cruelty, pride and any thoughts of getting his own way through violence. She made him so humble and so docile that when it pleased her to look at him, he was as willing to do her bidding as a lamb. In this way

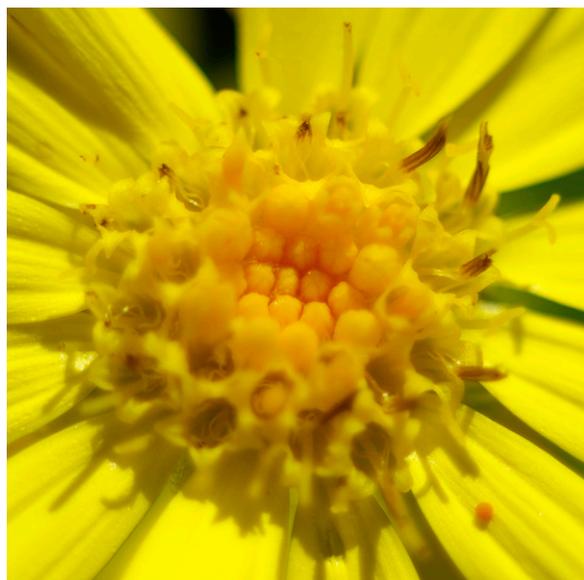
The Complaint of Mars is one of Geoffrey Chaucer’s short narrative poems. To judge from the overarching story, it is likely to have been composed for a Saint Valentine’s Day gathering, and it may even be possible to guess the year: 1385, since the drama includes references to astronomical and planetary events that point to April of that year. Notes left by a manuscript copyist may hint at the poem’s allusion to a court intrigue, involving Isabella, a daughter of John of Gaunt, but this has been challenged. A number of surviving manuscripts contain the work. Walter Skeat based his printed edition on a copy of the poem in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16, which has a rather striking, if enigmatic, illustration as a frontispiece.

she bridled him, with nothing more than her words, and her mood.

Who reigns now, in bliss, but Venus! She has this worthy knight under her control.

Who sings now but Mars, who serves the fair Venus, the very foundation of all pleasure? He's bound himself to perpetual obedience, and she's pledged herself to love him forever – unless he reneges upon his promise to her, that is.

In this way they've tied the knot. They gaze together over the heavens as though they reign there; until it happened one day that by mutual assent a moment was arranged at



which Mars should enter the next house, as fast as he could glide. He would move along his trajectory until she had overtaken him, and he urged her to hurry, for his sake.

'My sweetheart,' he said. 'You well know how vulnerable I will be there. Until we are together again, my life is uncertain and in jeopardy. But when I see the beauty of your face, no threat of death can do me any harm, for your desire is all I need.'

Venus has such great compassion for her knight, who dwells now in solitude waiting for her – for it happened at that time that he was alone in that house – that she was nearly overcome with anguish and sped towards him almost as fast in one day as he was moving in two.

The great joy that there was between them when they met was such that it cannot be put into words. There is no more to say, except that they went to bed at once, so I shall leave them there in joy and bliss. This worthy Mars, who is the fountainhead of all knight-hood, holds the flower of all fairness in his arms.

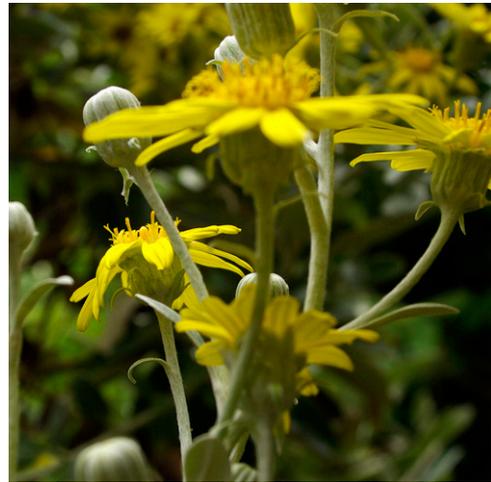
Mars remained in this house, in a chamber of this palace, a certain length of time, until he felt the fearful approach of Phoebus, the sun, who was approaching the palace gates rapidly and with great assurance, carrying in his hand a torch whose beams of light began knocking gently upon Venus's chamber door. The room where this fresh queen lay was decorated with great white bulls, and Venus knew, by the presence of this streaming light, that Phoebus had come to burn Mars and herself with his heat. Beside herself with fear and weeping bitterly, she embraced Mars and cried: 'Alas! I die! The torch has arrived that will light up everything!'

Up started Mars; he had no inclination to remain sleeping with his lady crying in such distress beside him. Since it was not in his nature to weep, it was not tears but fiery sparks that burst from his two anguished eyes. He made a grab for the hauberk that lay beside him. He had no intention of fleeing, nor of hiding, but threw on his magnificent helmet, belted his sword in place and grasped the mighty spear that he was accustomed

to wielding, shaking it so much that it almost broke. He could not stay with Venus, so heavy was he to walk over the land, but advised her to flee, before Phoebus saw her.

Oh woeful Mars! Alas, what can you say? You are now all alone in the palace where you have been disturbed, in peril of your life. And yet your suffering is doubled, for she who holds your heart in hers is now only half as bright as she was. Unless you can get a move on, very quickly, you may well weep and wail!

Venus now flees into Mercury's house, having made herself nearly invisible through her fear of the sun. But alas, there is no comfort to be had, for she can neither see nor find anyone there, and she is very weak now. So in order to hide and save herself, she flees into a cave and vanishes from sight.



The cave was dark, and so full of smoke that it was like hell itself. It was only two paces within the outer gate of Mercury's castle. I shall let her remain there in darkness, for the length of a natural day, and I shall speak of Mars, who is mad with anger and so beside himself that he would gladly have seen his heart's blood. Since he was unable to keep Venus company he didn't care a straw if he lived or died. He became so feeble, what with the heat and because of his extreme sorrow, that he could scarcely endure it and almost perished. He moved only one degree in two days. But nevertheless, for all his weighty armour, he tried to follow Venus, whose departure distressed him more than any burning he'd received from the fire of the sun.

After Mars had walked slowly for a while, complaining so bitterly that it was pitiful to hear, he said: 'Oh lady bright! Venus, alas that my orbit spans so wide a compass! Alas, when shall I meet you again, my love? On this twelfth day of April I endure this misfortune because of Phoebus the sun.' Oh god, help poor Venus who is now alone.

But as god willed, it happened that while Venus was giving expression to her dismay, Mercury, riding his course through the heavens, could see his castle from the place where he was situated and cried out to Venus in greeting. He tried to lift her spirits and welcomed her into his palace as a dear friend.

Meanwhile, Mars continued onwards, complaining incessantly about his loss of Venus, and I can remember all the substance of his complaint and therefore, on this lusty morning, I shall sing it to the best of my ability, and then I will take my leave. May god give everyone joy of his partner.

The complaint

The overriding requirement of a complaint is that there should be a good reason to complain. If done skilfully, it should elicit pity, or else it may be thought foolish and unfounded, and alas, this is certainly not the case with me! So I shall set out the cause and foundation of all my pain as carefully as my troubled wits will allow, not for any hope of redress but just to set the record straight.

When I was first created – alas, the day! – and brought here to fulfil a purpose by he who governs over every intelligent being, I pledged all of my attention and my faithful service – and how dearly I have paid for it! – to she who is of such excellence that, whoever approaches her when she is angry and unwilling to pay him any attention, will not succeed for very long in the joy of love. I'm not making this up. My lady is the very fountainhead of beauty, the bubbling source of desire, of freedom and gentility, generous and well provisioned – and how highly regarded this is! – with all those friendly entertainments and gatherings, with love and gentle humility, good humour, playful amusement and the sound of musical instruments playing sweet melodies. She is so blessed and smiled upon that throughout the whole world her goodness is seen and acknowledged.



What wonder then, when I have gifted my service to such a being, that I may be wedded to joy or else to sorrow, since both lie in her power? I give my heart to her forever. Truly, to my dying day, I shall not stop from being her most faithful servant and her knight. I mean this sincerely and everyone must recognise this, for today I shall die in her service. Unless divine grace dictates otherwise, I shall never see her again.

To whom can I complain of my distress? Who can help me? Who can find a remedy? Shall I complain to my generous lady? Certainly not! She has enough on her plate already. She's so sick with fear and anxiety that in a short while it will likely make an end of her. If she can find safety, it will be through no help from me. Alas, that lovers must always endure such trials and tribulations for their love! For although lovers may be as faithful and trustworthy as any newly forged steel, in many cases they will find only sorrow. Sometimes their ladies have no pity for them; sometimes, if jealousy is involved, they will willingly risk their lives; sometimes envious folk will slander them and do them a great deal of harm. Alas! Who can they please? No true lover will ever say that he is without worry, unless he is a liar.

But what use is such a long sermon about the vicissitudes of love? I shall return to my theme, and speak of my own pain. The dagger's point that is pressing into my heart is this: that my rightful lady, my salvation, is in danger and doesn't know who to turn to. Oh sweetheart! Oh sovereign lady! For your fading away I have every reason to feel

faint and die myself, although no other injury nor fear afflicts me, except for my fear for you.

To what end did that god who sits so high spread love beneath him and encourage folk to love, in spite of themselves? Their joy, for all that I can see, lasts no more than the twinkling of an eye; and some find no joy at all until they are dead! What's the meaning of this mystery? What's the point of it? Why does he coerce his people so forcefully to strive over something that's so short-lived and transitory? He causes lovers to love something, and makes it seem permanent and enduring, although he has put into it such perils and dangers that there's nothing but anxiety in his gift. It's a wonder that so just a king should be the cause of such anguish to the creature that he has created, when always, whether love fades or remains strong, he who experiences it will feel sorrow and pain more frequently than the changing of the moon. It seems that this high god has enmity towards lovers and that, like a fisherman – as you can see every day – he baits his hook with something delightful that sends all his prey wild with desire until they are caught; and then they have both their wish and their misfortune, both their desire and their end. And even if the line breaks, there is suffering, for the hook has wounded the lover so badly that he is condemned to suffer forevermore.

The brooch of Thebes was like this. It was so full of rubies and precious stones that anyone who saw it would go out of their mind with desire. Its beauty would so capture his heart that a man thought he would die unless he was able to possess it. And when he owned it, he would endure such grievous woe, for as long as the brooch was his, that it would almost send him mad with fear. And when he had lost it, then his woe was doubled, since he had let slip from his grasp such a valuable treasure.

And yet the brooch was not the cause of all this distress. He who made it had given it this property, that those who possess it should suffer so greatly. Therefore the fault was with the craftsman, and with the greedy person who allowed himself to become besotted with it. And so it goes with all lovers, and with me. For although my lady has such tremendous beauty that I was beside myself with anguish before I won her favour, she was not the cause of my suffering, it was he who made her and put such a great beauty into her face. He was the one who caused me to long for her so greatly and therefore to bring about my own death. It is his fault that I die, and mine that I ever aspired to climb so high.

But to you, hardy knights of renown, since you are of my kind – and although I am not worthy of such a name, learned men call me your patron – therefore you ought to have some compassion for my death and not take it light-heartedly, for the proudest of you may be brought down just as easily. Therefore I ask you, through your nobility, to lament my suffering.

And you, my ladies, who by nature are faithful and level-headed, you ought to be able to feel pity for people who are in pain. There is good reason now for you to put on your black clothes, since the predicament of your empress, the honourable Venus, is dire. Her

situation is desolate, and you have good reason to lament. Now should your holy tears rain down. Alas! Venus is helpless and nearly dead through fear!

All you lovers, grieve, all of you, for she who with humility and sincerity has always been ready to help you in your need. Mourn she who has always held you dear, mourn beauty, mourn generosity and friendliness, mourn she who has always eased your struggle, mourn this prime example of all honour, she who has never done anything that was not noble. Show her some love.