

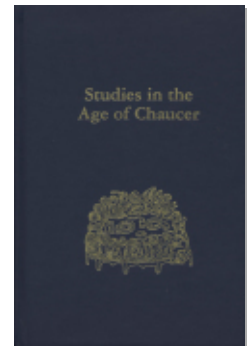


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Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 171-204 (Article)



Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0033>

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Venus and Christ in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*: The Fairfax 16 Frontispiece

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OXFORD, BODLEIAN LIBRARY MS Fairfax 16 contains one of the most accomplished illuminations to be associated with any of Chaucer's works. The full-page illustration preceding the *Complaint of Mars* (fol. 14v; fig. 1) rivals in skill even the much-discussed *Troilus* frontispiece (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 61, fol. 1v), but Chaucer criticism has generally ignored the Fairfax picture.¹ This is so in part, of course, because the *Complaint of Mars* has held less intrinsic interest than *Troilus and Criseyde*, even though the two poems are so similar in theme that the *Complaint* has been called a "miniature *Troilus*."² It is also—perhaps more—because the Fairfax image has been deemed unreadable in terms of the poem it accompanies. It has seemed all too clear, as Julia Boffey explains it, that the image derives from artistic precedents completely unconnected with Chaucer's work, and that it exists only because "a convenient iconographic tradition associated with the story

¹For discussion of the *Troilus* frontispiece, see, for example, Derek Pearsall, "The Troilus Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience," *YES* 7 (1977): 68–74; Elizabeth Salter, "The 'Troilus Frontispiece,'" in *Troilus and Criseyde: A Facsimile of Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61, ca. 1399–1413* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1978), pp. 15–23; and Laura Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in "The Canterbury Tales"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 163–74. The other Chaucerian illustrations that have occasioned much commentary are of course the Ellesmere pilgrim-portraits. See *The Canterbury Tales: The New Ellesmere Chaucer Facsimile*, ed. Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens (Tokyo: Yushodo; San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library Press, 1995), and its companion volume, *The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward (Tokyo: Yushodo; San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library Press, 1995), especially Richard K. Emmerson, "Text and Image in the Ellesmere Portraits of the Tale-Tellers," pp. 143–70.

²John Norton-Smith, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 28. The comparison is commonly made: see, for example, Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 62.



Fig. 1. Mars. Oxford, Bodleian MS Fairfax 16, fol. 14v. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

of Mars and Venus was already available.”³ In a similar dismissal, Theresa Tinkle observes that the frontispiece “carries to Chaucer’s poem little meaning but takes its meaning from that poem.”⁴ What we might wish to think an idiosyncratic visual reaction to Chaucer’s rather unusual text appears from this perspective to be a thoroughly conventional medieval picture of Mars, Venus, and Jupiter.

But precisely for this reason, the Fairfax illumination poses in an acute form the question that is unfortunately central to the study of decoration in Chaucerian manuscripts: What can be learned from even the most perfunctory conjunction of image and text? Illustration of vernacular literature is so rare and so limited in late medieval England that many readers have echoed John Fleming’s lament: “If we wish to visualize Chaucer with Gothic eyes we must turn to the painted pages of Boccaccio and Jean de Meun.”⁵ The overlooked Fairfax miniature demonstrates, on the contrary, that the native artistic tradition can on occasion offer significant visual context to readers of Middle English poetry. Moreover, although the picture is undoubtedly conventional, the interplay of its conventions brings meaning to its textual environment that—even if it was not planned for—enriches our experience of Chaucer’s *Complaint*. Using techniques of deliberate borrowing between devotional and courtly art—techniques that Barbara Newman has recently termed “crossover”—the *Complaint of Mars* and the Fairfax frontispiece explore in parallel the relation of Christian ideas to classical ones.⁶ The Fairfax artist adopts images central to the sacred tradition as symbols of

³ *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages*, Manuscript Studies 1 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985), p. 37. Norton-Smith also puts it baldly: “The iconographic ‘traditions’ had nothing to do with Chaucer’s original literary aims” (*Geoffrey Chaucer*, 26 n. 12); see also his later opinion that “care has been taken to match text and picture,” in *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16* (London: Scholar Press, 1979), p. xii.

⁴ *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 92.

⁵ “Chaucer and the Visual Arts of His Time,” in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Donald M. Rose, ed. (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1981), pp. 121–36 (127). For other perspectives on Chaucer and the arts, see also H. A. Kelly, “Chaucer’s Arts and Our Arts,” in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, pp. 107–20; V. A. Kolve, “Chaucer and the Visual Arts,” in *Geoffrey Chaucer: Writers and Their Background*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Bell, 1974), pp. 290–320; and Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984).

⁶ Newman defines crossover as “the intentional borrowing and adaptation of courtly themes in devotional art and vice versa.” “Love’s Arrows: Christ as Cupid in Late Medieval Art and Devotion,” in *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, 2006), pp. 263–86 (263).

the power of courtly passion, and Chaucer's poem fashions secular love-lament into Christian theodicy. The "crossover" iconography of the picture is more than merely convenient in this setting, for the relation between text and image here reveals the ways in which classical narrative, in each medium, can be shaped by traditions of Christian complaint.

Bodleian MS Fairfax 16 is one of the so-called Oxford group of manuscript anthologies of fifteenth-century verse, which contain a variety of shorter Chaucerian poems, as well as courtly material by such authors as Sir John Clanvowe, Thomas Hoccleve, and John Lydgate.⁷ The collection was most likely commissioned in the mid-fifteenth century by John Stanley (1400?–1469) from a commercial scriptorium or bookseller, perhaps in London. It has been designated "quasi-fascicular," for even though its sections were copied by the same scribe, they are separated by blank leaves and foliated by different hands; it seems to have been constructed from booklets chosen by the patron.⁸ Booklet I, which begins with the *Complaint of Mars*, contains courtly poetry by Chaucer, Clanvowe, Lydgate, and Hoccleve, as well as two light, gaming verses, "The Rolles of Kyng Ragman," and "The Chaunces of the Dyce." Booklet II begins with an integrated grouping of some of Chaucer's minor lyrics, then concludes with a more miscellaneous selection of minor works by Hoccleve and Lydgate. Booklets III and IV contain whole poems: Lydgate's *Reason and Sensuality* and the anonymous *How a Lover Praiseth his Lady*, respectively. Booklet V includes two collections of love lyrics, the first entitled the *Venus Mass* or *A Lover's Mass*, and the second, untitled, perhaps attributable to Charles d'Orléans. Although the manuscript as a whole is miscellaneous, some patterns can be observed within its booklets, which evince a certain fixity of structure, and even between booklets that often traveled together.⁹

⁷For discussion of these manuscripts, including Fairfax 16, see Julia Boffey and John J. Thompson, "Anthologies and Miscellanies: Production and Choice of Texts," in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 279–315, esp. 280–84.

⁸The designation comes from Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics*, p. 7. The facsimile gives a detailed discussion of the manuscript's construction; see Norton-Smith, *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*, pp. vii–x.

⁹For a nuanced discussion of structural patterns in the Oxford group and related manuscripts, see A. S. G. Edwards, "Bodleian Library MS Arch. Selden B.24: A 'Transitional' Collection," in *The Whole Book: Cultural Perspectives on the Medieval Miscellany*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols and Siegfried Wenzel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 53–67, esp. 56–58.

The frontispiece is an addition to Fairfax 16 as a whole, rather than a part of Booklet I, for it is painted on a singleton, and was probably contracted at the time the manuscript was commissioned. The image consists of three framed compartments, encompassing the figure of Mars on the left, Venus on the right, and Jupiter suspended above them both. Flower-and-spray border motifs surround the composition, with the Stanley of Hooton arms worked into the lower border.¹⁰ J. J. G. Alexander decades ago identified the Fairfax artist as William Abell, "the most important native illuminator to have been working in the mid-fifteenth century."¹¹ More likely, the frontispiece is the work of an artist known as the Abingdon Missal Master, an associate of Abell, who collaborated with him on at least one manuscript.¹² Even if the artist cannot be named, the peculiarly English, rather than International, style of the hand suggests that Chaucer's poetry can be associated with visual materials nearer to home than continental manuscripts of the *Filostrato* or the *Roman de la Rose*.

The intended relation between the frontispiece and the textual contents of the manuscript is not easy to discern. The singleton was most likely added at the time the collection was constructed, but not necessarily with the *Complaint of Mars*, or even any particular text, in mind. As Boffey explains, "This seems to be a case in which a small amount of rich decoration was added to an already completed manuscript, and inserted in the most practically convenient position (the beginning) in an attempt to enhance the status of the collection as a whole."¹³ The prominent inclusion of the Stanley of Hooton arms supports this argument, since the heraldry links the image more explicitly to the manuscript's patron and his chivalric interests than to any particular poem.¹⁴ If it is

¹⁰ See Norton-Smith, *Bodleian MS Fairfax 16*, for a discussion of the heraldry.

¹¹ The phrase quoted comes from Alexander's recent entry for Abell in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The identification was originally made in "William Abell, 'Lymnour,' and Fifteenth-Century English Illumination," in *Kunsthistorische Forschungen Otto Pächt zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Artur Rosenauer and Gerold Weber (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1972), pp. 166–72.

¹² For a revision of Alexander's list of manuscripts attributed to Abell, see Kathleen L. Scott, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490* (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), pp. 264–65. For manuscripts attributed to the Abingdon Missal Master, see Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, pp. 265, 280–81. The collaborative work is Cambridge, St. John's MS H.5 (Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, no. 94).

¹³ *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics*, p. 42.

¹⁴ See, for example, Norton-Smith, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 26 n.12 (though he here thinks the owner is William Stanley). Sir John Stanley served the court of Henry VI as Sargeant

possible that the image was merely an expedient decoration unrelated to the literary contents of Fairfax 16, it is also possible that it should be connected to more than one poem in the manuscript. The *Complaint of Venus* follows the *Complaint of Mars* in this and most other manuscripts, and the rubric that heads them here reads jointly: “Complaynt of Mars and Venus.”¹⁵ Commentators who understand the two poems to be one have seen in the Fairfax image some support for their theories.¹⁶ Even beyond the *Complaint of Venus*, there is more in the contents of Fairfax 16 to which the frontispiece might respond. Courtliness, complaint, and even the figure of Venus herself feature in such works as the anonymous *Venus Mass*, Lydgate’s *Temple of Glass*, and Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*. In spite of the *ad hoc* combination of its fascicles, thematic unities in the manuscript’s collection might be represented in its prefatory picture.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the physical conjunction of the image with the manuscript’s first text argues for a special relation between them. The independent decision taken to add the picture to a manuscript after its construction might be seen to reinforce rather than diminish its importance; the frontispiece need not have been there, and yet someone found it important to include. And regardless of the intentions of the artist or the compiler or the patron, it seems likely that fifteenth-century readers encountered Chaucer’s poem in the first instance with its pictorial preamble. Moreover, the structure of the image argues for the separation—or at least the separability—of the first two texts in the manuscript, for it depends upon the narrative of adultery told only in the *Complaint of Mars*.¹⁸ The emblematic figure of the goddess herself

of the Armoury in the Tower of London (1431–60) and Usher of the Chamber (1440–55). He was also member of parliament and justice of the peace for Surrey.

¹⁵Bodleian MS Fairfax 16, fol. 15r. See also the contemporary table of contents on folio 2, which lists “[T]he complaynt of Mars and Venus,” “[T]he complaynt of Mars by him self,” and “[T]he complaynt of Venus by hir self.”

¹⁶For an argument that the poems form two parts of a whole, see Rodney Merrill, “Chaucer’s *Broche of Thebes*: The Unity of ‘The Complaint of Mars’ and ‘The Complaint of Venus,’” *Literary Monographs* 5 (1973): 3–61. Merrill sees in the Fairfax image some support for his theory (12–14), and Julia Boffey also associates the frontispiece with both poems, for they are “amalgamated” in Fairfax 16 (*Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics*, p. 35).

¹⁷A recent reading of the manuscript as a whole around ideas of masculine community is offered by Teresa Tinkle, “The Imagined Chaucerian Community of Bodleian MS Fairfax 16,” in *Chaucer and the Challenges of Medievalism: Studies in Honor of H. A. Kelly* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 157–74.

¹⁸Boffey concedes that the picture “functions effectively” only because of the more narrative parts of *Mars* (*Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics*, p. 36).

might reflect other mentions of her in the texts of Fairfax 16, but nowhere except in the manuscript's first poem is she connected with Mars and Jupiter.¹⁹ The *Complaint of Venus* gives no hint of any figure apart from the speaker and the beloved, whereas the frontispiece is organized around the interaction among the three figures. And although Mars's lament is reflected in his declamatory posture, nowhere is the idea of Venus as complainant represented.²⁰

In the *Complaint of Mars*, Chaucer grafts the eponymous lament onto the well-known story of Mars's adultery with Venus. The text comprises three sections: first, a proem in which a bird-narrator celebrates love and calls on lovers to choose their mates. Then follows the "story": the speaker's exemplary narration of Mars's love for Venus, their discovery, and their forcible separation. The movements of heavenly bodies—here the temporary conjunction of a slow planet and a faster-moving one—are made to symbolize the changing passions and jealousies of the Olympian gods. The opening establishes that Mars has won Venus's love, "As wel by hevenysh revolucioun / As by desert," that is, as much by simply traveling around in his orbit as by performing noble courtly feats.²¹ After this elaborate astrological allegory, the poem concludes with Mars's complaint proper, in which he proclaims himself in courtly terms to be his lady's "truest servaunt and her knyght" (187), laments her departure, and poses philosophical questions about the fleeting na-

¹⁹For Chaucer's unusual combination of complaint with narrative in *Mars*, see W. A. Davenport, *Chaucer: Complaint and Narrative* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), esp. pp. 33–40. See also Carolyn Van Dyke, "'To Whom Shul We Compleyn?': The Poetics of Agency in Chaucer's Complaints," *Style* 31 (1997): 370–91.

²⁰Pace Norton-Smith, *Bodleian MS Fairfax 16*, p. xii. Norton-Smith argues that the image represents the complaints of both Mars and Venus, based on his identification of a book carried under Venus's arm as a visual manifestation of her complaint. I am not convinced that we should read a book there, and at any rate I find the complaint of Mars more definitely represented in his oratorical gesture.

²¹Lines 30–31; *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All subsequent quotations of Chaucer's works are from this edition. For discussions of the astrological details lying behind the poem, see J. C. Eade, "'We Ben to Lewed or to Slowe': Chaucer's Astronomy and Audience Participation," *SAC* 4 (1982): 53–85, esp. 69–76; Edgar S. Laird, "Astrology and Irony in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *ChauR* 6 (1972): 229–31; Laird, "Chaucer's Complaint of Mars, Line 145: 'Venus valaunse,'" *PQ* 51 (1972): 486–89; J. M. Manly, "On the Date and Interpretation of Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 5 (1896): 107–26; J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 304–25; Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 115–20; and Johnstone Parr and Nancy Ann Holtz, "The Astronomy-Astrology in Chaucer's *The Complaint of Mars*," *ChauR* 15 (1981): 255–66.

ture of earthly love. In addition to its formal amalgam of narrative and complaint, the *Complaint of Mars* is driven by a complex interplay of thematic conventions: astrological, mythological, courtly, Boethian—even the possibility of a reference to contemporary amorous scandals.²² Criticism of the text has generally argued for the priority of one or another of its registers of meaning, and interpretations have been quite disparate, calling the poem variously moralizing, comic, occasional, or sagely philosophical.²³ But the poem's wit resides in its ability to imagine events equally in many different terms, and in the reader's knowledge that all of these contexts are always visible.²⁴ It seems clear that, as for the planetary Mars and Venus themselves, the conjunction is the point.

In bringing Mars and Venus together in such a wide variety of ways, Chaucer draws on a medieval mythographic tradition that is extensive, not to say unwieldy. Mythographic materials available to a late medieval author range from the sixth-century Fulgentius's *Mitologiae* to the fourteenth-century John Ridewall's *Fulgentius metaforalis*, and include the Third Vatican Mythographer's (Alberic of London's?) *De diis gentium et*

²² One strand of the poem's criticism has tried to identify a contemporary illicit love affair to which it might refer. The matter turns upon the meaning of John Shirley's enigmatic rubrics in MS Trinity R.3.20, which might imply that the lovers in question are John Holland and Isabel of York or Elizabeth of Lancaster (both daughters of John of Gaunt). For further discussion of this issue, see G. H. Cowling, "Chaucer's *Complaints of Mars and of Venus*," *RES* 2 (1926): 405–10; Norton-Smith, *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*, pp. 23–25; and Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, pp. 103–08. For the identification of the lovers as John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford, see George Williams, "What Is the Meaning of Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*?" *JEGP* 57 (1958): 167–76.

²³ For examples of occasional readings, see note 22. For moralizing readings, see Mark E. Amsler, "Mad Lovers and Other Hooked Fish: Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *Allegorica* 4 (1979): 301–14; James M. Dean, "Mars the Exegete in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *CL* 41.2 (1989): 128–40; Neil C. Hultin, "Anti-Courtly Elements in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *Annuaire Medievale* 9 (1968): 58–75; and Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, pp. 130–41. For an account of the poem's comic realism, see Merrill, "Broche of Thebes," and for its "poetics of universal compassion," see Van Dyke, "To Whom Shul We Compleyn?" and "The Lyric Planet: Chaucer's Construction of Subjectivity in the *Complaint of Mars*," *ChauR* 31 (1996): 164–72.

²⁴ The first appreciative study of the poem noted its "contradictions or enrichments of conventions"; see Gardiner Stillwell, "Convention and Individuality in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *PQ* 35 (1956): 69–89 (69). More recently, Lee Patterson has observed that the poem "delineates a world in which the either/or of singularity is subverted by a dualistic both/and, in which oppositions are revealed to be counterparts." "Writing Amorous Wrongs: Chaucer and the Order of Complaint," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), pp. 55–71 (66).

illorum allegoriis and the anonymous *De deorum imaginibus libellus* derived from it, as well as the works of contemporary poets such as Petrarch's *Africa*, Boccaccio's *De genealogiis deorum*, or Christine de Pisan's *Epistre d'Othea*.²⁵ These mythographic handbooks present the gods of the classical pantheon in a bewildering number of guises. Indeed, Theresa Tinkle has suggested in a book-length study of *Medieval Venuses and Cupids* that exuberant multiplicity of interpretation is the hallmark of mythographic writing. As Tinkle explains: "Venus may be historically a prostitute; naturally, a planet; allegorically, feminine vanity; morally, libido or licit and illicit loves; philosophically, celestial or earthly love. Mythographers typically develop more than one of these models, and Venus may signify all of these meanings within a single text."²⁶ Even though it remains impossible to trace with absolute certainty the particular handbooks upon which Chaucer drew, it is clear that he knew broadly of these mythographic traditions of imagining and understanding the Olympians, and that he used them creatively in the working of his poetic art.²⁷ Allusions to mythographic conventions surface in a number of

²⁵ For a useful introduction to medieval mythography generally, see Judson B. Allen, "Commentary as Criticism: The Text, Influence, and Literary Theory of the 'Fulgentius Metaphored' of John Ridewall," in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Amstelodamensis: Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies, Amsterdam 19–24 August 1973*, ed. P. Tuynman, G. C. Kuiper, and E. Kessler, Humanistica Bibliothek 1, Abhandlungen 26 (Munich: William Fink Verlag, 1979), pp. 25–47. See also Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960); Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography*, 2 vols. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994–2000); Jane Chance, ed., *The Mythographic Art: Classical Fable and the Rise of the Vernacular in Early France and England* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1990), esp. Chance, "The Medieval 'Apology for Poetry': Fabulous Narrative and Stories of the Gods," pp. 3–44.

²⁶ Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, p. 49. Other specialized studies of the medieval Venus include George D. Economou, "The Two Venuses and Courtly Love," in *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature*, ed. Joan M. Ferrante and George D. Economou (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 17–50; John B. Friedman, "L'Iconographie de Venus et de son miroir à la fin du moyen age," in *L'Erotisme au Moyen Age*, ed. Bruno Roy (Montreal: Editions de l'Aurore, 1977), pp. 53–82; Robert Hollander, *Boccaccio's Two Venuses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); John Mulryan, "Venus, Cupid, and the Italian Mythographers," *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 23 (1974): 31–41; D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), esp. pp. 370–74; and Earl G. Schreiber, "Venus in the Medieval Mythographic Tradition," *JEGP* 74 (1975): 519–35. Tinkle provides a useful challenge to the binary assumptions that characterize much of this scholarship; see *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, esp. pp. 8–77.

²⁷ For speculations about Chaucer's mythographic reading, which derive mainly from his representation of Venus, see Ernest H. Wilkins, "Descriptions of Pagan Divinities from Petrarch to Chaucer," *Speculum* 32 (1957): 511–22 (arguing for the *Libellus*); John M. Steadman, "Venus's Citole in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Berchorius," *Speculum* 34 (1959): 620–24 (arguing for Bersuire); and Betty Nye Quinn, "Venus, Chaucer, and

Chaucerian works, but the *Complaint of Mars*, with its complex mythological-astrological allegory, represents the poet's most extended engagement with these materials.

Medieval mythography is, by and large, an ekphrastic genre; the Olympians are usually described (and sometimes moralized) in terms of their iconic attributes, their visual appearance. Even when no physical picture accompanies the text, the idea of artistic representation stands behind the verbal version of each figure: the crucial verb in Fulgentius and his fourteenth-century successors, for example, is usually *pingitur* ("Venus is painted nude, floating in the sea").²⁸ The textual tradition thus manifests itself as the imagined record of an artistic tradition; the verbal and the visual are mutually dependent in the construction of the mythographic figure. Appropriately, then, the actual images drawn from mythographic handbooks are as various in their form and their meaning as the texts they illustrate. Mythographic images of Venus *anadyomene*, as we will see, often comprise picturesque Ovidian elements, such as doves, roses, Cupid, and Vulcan. But other images of the goddess just as often imply moral interpretations, as in composite figures of Venus-Luxuria gazing in a mirror, or astrological forces, as in personifications of the planet with those born under her sign. An early fifteenth-century Italian manuscript combines the personified planet Venus and her astrological "children" with revealing dress and a mirror, motifs of Luxury (fig. 2).²⁹

It is undoubtedly by contrast with this complexity of signification that the Fairfax picture appears unnuanced. But the frontispiece, like

Peter Bersuire," *Speculum* 38 (1963): 479–80 (adding to the evidence for Bersuire). On Hyginus and Boccaccio as sources for the *Complaint of Mars*, see D. S. Brewer, "Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *N&Q* 199 (1954): 462–63. The most detailed study of Chaucer's Venus remains Meg Twycross, *The Medieval Anadyomene: A Study in Chaucer's Mythography* (Oxford: Blackwell for the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1972). For general studies of Chaucer's relation to the classics, see Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer: The Fabulation of Sexual Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); John P. McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1979); and A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982).

²⁸Smalley notes this tendency in her discussion of the purely verbal "pictures" of the classicizing friar John Ridevall; see *English Friars and Antiquity*, pp. 112–13. Twycross quotes Fulgentius as the origin of the idiom: "Hanc etiam nudam pingunt. . . . Hanc etiam in mari natantem pingunt. . . . Concha etiam marina pingitur portari" (*Medieval Anadyomene*, p. 18).

²⁹"Prosdócimo de Beldomandi," Padua, 1435. Oxford, Bodleian MS Can. Misc. 554.



Fig. 2. Planetary Venus with Her Children. Oxford, Bodleian MS Canon. Misc. 554, fol. 172r. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

the *Complaint of Mars* itself, combines different layers of convention to create a picture that, if not explicitly witty, is nonetheless structured by complex and meaningful allusions. The portrait of Venus suggests the poem's double perspective in particularly striking terms, even though it is seemingly the most conventional of the three. She is Venus *anadyomene*, the goddess rising from the sea. At first glance, she seems a pure reflection of the most common traditions of Ovidian illustration, the visual embodiment of Chaucer's description in the *House of Fame*. In the dreamer's words:

in portreyture
I sawgh anoon-ryght hir figure
Naked fletyng in a see,
And also on hir hed, pardee,
Hir rose garlond whit and red,
And hir comb to kembe hir hed,
Hir dowves, and daun Cupido
Hir blynde sone, and Vulcano,
That in his face was ful broun.

(131–39)

The Fairfax frontispiece reflects all of these attributes associated with Venus *anadyomene* in medieval understanding: Vulcan at his forge, blind Cupid with his bow (his closed eyes here perhaps representing his blindness), a flower garland, a flock of doves. Damage to the manuscript page has obscured the object that this Venus holds, but it seems most likely to be a shell, metamorphosed by this time from the craft that carries the goddess (*concham portari*) into an attribute that she herself carries (*concham portare*).³⁰ A statue of a similar Venus figures prominently in the temple of *The Knight's Tale*.³¹ As Meg Twycross and others have shown, many of these descriptive particulars derive from the late medieval mythographic handbooks with which Chaucer was demonstrably fa-

³⁰Petrarch seems to have introduced this change, which may derive from an error in his copy of Fulgentius. See Twycross, *Medieval Anadyomene*, 21–22. For a more extreme (and more amusing) example of this kind of transformation, see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), pp. 86–87: Venus's *concam marinam* (seashell) turned into an *aucam marinam* (sea goose), with predictably nonsensical artistic results.

³¹*Knight's Tale*, I.1955–66. For a somewhat different vision of the goddess, cf. *Parliament of Fowls*, 260–73.

miliar, most likely Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidus moralizatus* or the anonymous *Libellus*.³²

The Fairfax picture also includes as Venus's attendants the Three Graces, who take their characteristic medieval rather than their classical form. In ancient art, the Three Graces are usually depicted with their arms linked, the figure in the middle facing backward and the others forward, as in the well-known fresco from Pompeii (fig. 3). But in the



Fig. 3. Three Graces. Pompeii, House of Titus Dentatus Panthera, ca. A.D. 65–79. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. (photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, N.Y.)

³²For a summary of scholarship on which handbooks Chaucer might have known, see Twycross, *Medieval Anadyomene*, pp. 1–15.

Middle Ages, when verbal descriptions alone served to transmit these visual images, the traditional disposition of the figures was obscured, and the only stipulation on their representation became that two look forward and one looks back.³³ This detail, like so many in the mythographic tradition, took on a moral rather than an aesthetic meaning: "A benefit conferred is twice repaid."³⁴ The tradition was further transformed when Bersuire in his popular *Ovidius moralizatus* changed even the verbal description, calling instead for one of the Graces to be looking forward and the other two to be looking back. It is such a description, doubtless, that produced the Fairfax Graces, who bear almost no resemblance at all to their classical forebears.

The difference between images transmitted verbally and those transmitted visually is telling for the history of the medieval *anadyomene*, for it helps to account for the astonishing variety of her representations in art.³⁵ Even if the verbal traditions and the iconography they transmit are relatively similar, the artistic realizations of these descriptions can be surprisingly different; although the Fairfax Venus conforms neatly to the most common descriptions of the goddess rising from the sea, it does not finally *look* much like other pictures of her.³⁶ In one manuscript of John Ridewall's *Fulgentius metaforalis*, for example, she is shown with doves, a flower garland, and a conch shell or mirror, but she is swimming in the sea rather than standing in it (fig. 4).³⁷ And even when she

³³For a brief history of the Graces, see Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions, Bollingen Series 38 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 208–9. See also Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky, "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art," *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4 (1933): 228–80 (257).

³⁴The phrase is Seznec's, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, p. 209.

³⁵Because the Fairfax image draws so closely on traditions of depicting the *anadyomene*, it is less relevant to images of Venus in narrative contexts such as the *Romance of the Rose*, Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus*, Christine de Pisan's *Epistre d'Othea*, and histories of the Trojan War that include the Judgment of Paris.

³⁶For a survey of English medieval Venuses, see Fritz Saxl and Hans Meier, *Catalogue of Astrological and Mythological Illuminated Manuscripts of the Latin Middle Ages, Manuscripts in English Libraries* (III), ed. Harry Bober, 2 vols. (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1953). Bodleian MS Fairfax 16 itself is mentioned on pp. 382–83, Abb. 18.

³⁷Rome, Vatican, Palat. lat. 1726 (reprinted in Seznec, fig. 31, p. 107). This change comes from confusion over "in mari natantem," which may mean either floating on or swimming in the sea. See Twycross, *Medieval Anadyomene*, 18 n. 31. See also Marion Lawrence, "The Birth of Venus in Roman Art," in *Essays in the History of Art Presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, ed. Douglas Fraser, Howard Hibbard, and Milton J. Levine (London: Phaidon, 1967), pp. 10–16; and Edgar Wind's Appendix 5, "Aphrodite's Shell," in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (London: Faber, 1958), pp. 263–64, figs. 35, 36.



Fig. 4. Venus Swimming. *Fulgentius megaforalis*, Rome, Vatican Palat. Lat. 1726, fol. 43a. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

is standing in the sea, surrounded by all the attributes we have come to expect, the disposition of the figures does not necessarily recall the Fairfax Venus. There is no discernible iconographical difference between our Venus and an illustration from a fifteenth-century English manuscript of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but it is a very different picture (fig. 5).³⁸

The Fairfax Venus is iconographically conventional, then, but parallels in form and sensibility must be sought elsewhere.³⁹ The image owes



Fig. 5. Venus *anadyomene*. Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B.214, fol. 198v. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

³⁸ Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B.214.

³⁹ For a connection between the physiognomy of this Venus and Hieronymus Bosch's Eve, see A. Boczkowska, "The Crab, the Sun, the Moon, and Venus: Studies in the Iconology of Hieronymus Bosch's Triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*," *Oud Holland* 91 (1977): 197–231 (215 and fig. 33).

a debt to medieval mythography, but it demonstrates, too, an important inheritance from a more surprising quarter: the Christian tradition of baptismal iconography that includes, for example, the image in *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* of Christ's Baptism in the Jordan (fol. 109v; fig. 6).⁴⁰ Like Christ, the Fairfax Venus stands in a river rather than a sea; the surrounding landscape shows not only the promontories providing space for Vulcan and the Graces, but also the opposite bank. A tight circle of roses and doves surrounds the goddess's head in a striking visual reminiscence of a halo, an impression of divinity reinforced by golden rays. This "halo" is all the more interesting here because neither Mars nor Jupiter has one, though there is no clear rationale for the artist's distinction among the pagan gods. The frontal position of the leading dove could even be derived from representations of the descending Holy Spirit.⁴¹ And even though Venus's raised hand is not absolutely unique—the Oxford manuscript, for example, includes this detail (see fig. 5)—her gesture here recalls Christ's benediction. Christ in his baptism is most often seen to be blessing in a gesture still more overt than the one depicted in the *Très Riches Heures*;⁴² but even if the Fairfax artist's exemplar was more explicitly benedictional, the adjustment required by his classicizing secularization need not have been large.

The visual connection in the Fairfax frontispiece between Venus *anadyomene* and Christ in his baptism is less strange than may at first appear. Barbara Newman has recently traced widespread iconographies of secular love that became just as popular in late medieval Christian contexts: the bow and arrows, firebrand, flaming heart, and pierced heart that are associated both with Cupid and with Christ.⁴³ Conversely, the familiar languages of the late medieval "religion of love" appropriate a sacred vocabulary to transform *cupiditas* into *caritas*.⁴⁴ Representations of Venus

⁴⁰ For a facsimile, see *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, intro. Jean Longon and Raymond Cazelles, preface Millard Meiss, trans. Victoria Benedict (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969).

⁴¹ Doves are of course a familiar Christian symbol as well as a Venerean one. For the white dove as the Christian soul, see W. S. Heckscher, "The *Anadyomene* in the Mediaeval Tradition (Pelagia-Cleopatra-Aphrodite), A Prelude to Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus.'" *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 7 (1956): 1–38 (21).

⁴² For a useful survey of an enormous topic, see "The Baptism of Christ," in Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, 2 vols. (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1971–72), pp. 127–43.

⁴³ Newman, "Love's Arrows."

⁴⁴ For a pertinent discussion of this familiar trope, see Alcuin Blamires, "The 'Religion of Love' in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Medieval Visual Art," in *Word and Visual Imagination: Studies in the Interaction of English Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed.

herself as the goddess of love can overlap with Christian iconography of the divine: she can be pictured with a crown, or with a nimbus, in a floating mandorla, or attended by kneeling worshipers. A divine Venus appears in a mandorla, for example, in the well-known Florentine *desco da parto*, probably a maternity gift from husband to wife, in which the goddess is adored by famous lovers kneeling below her.⁴⁵ She is deified in such an image, for in its structure it resembles the Assumption of the Virgin, in a way that dignifies the all-too-human adoration of Tristan, Paris, Lancelot, and the rest. This late medieval religion of love plays a role in the *Complaint of Mars*, for the god vows “perpetuall obeisaunce” to his lady, whom he calls “the verrey sours and welle / Of beaute, lust, fredom, and gentilnesse” (174–75). Other texts included in Fairfax 16 repeat the trope, confirming that the ennobling of secular love was one of its compiler’s controlling interests.⁴⁶

Comparing Venus with Christ might seem to evoke the medieval problem of the “two Venuses,” in which one version of the goddess represents an ennobled kind of human *caritas*, conjugal and procreative, and the other represents a debased form of sexual *cupiditas* to be condemned.⁴⁷ But the comparison between the Fairfax Venus and Christ in baptism brings up issues far richer than that simple binary would allow. For in addition to drawing on images of an idealized Christian femininity, the goddess of love can in some ways resemble Christ himself. In his study of the ways in which early Christian iconography grew from depictions of the pagan gods, Thomas Mathews has explored the feminization of Christ in early depictions of him.⁴⁸ Mathews demonstrates that such transhistorically intractable attributes of Christ as his long hair borrow from pagan iconographies to assert both his potent divinity and his fruitfulness. Some images of Christ even display a decided ambiguity of body type along lines that have to do with fertility: full breasts and

Karl Josef Höltgen, Peter M. Daly, and Wolfgang Lottes (Erlangen: Univ.-Bibliothek Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1988), pp. 11–31.

⁴⁵See Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), fig. 23; and Blamires, “‘Religion of Love,’” fig. 4. For Cupid in a mandorla, see Newman, “Love’s Arrows,” fig. 1.

⁴⁶See Tinkle, “The Imagined Chaucerian Community,” pp. 167–71.

⁴⁷For a review of the problem of the “two Venuses,” and for its inadequacy to the complexity of the medieval goddess, see Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, pp. 9–41. See Patterson, “Writing Amorous Wrongs,” 68–69 n. 18, for a review of the evidence that Chaucer’s Venus could be beneficial.

⁴⁸Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 115–41.



Fig. 6. Limbourg Brothers, Baptism of Christ. *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, fol. 109v. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. (photo: R. G. Ojeda, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, N.Y.)

hips at times distinguish Christ from his disciples. In a more theological vein, Christ's ambiguous gender seems to have enhanced the universal appeal of his image, in the context of both gnostic scriptures and also Paul's call to baptism in Galatians 3:28: "there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁴⁹ In fact, what Mathews calls "the most strikingly ambiguous image in Ravenna" is a baptismal mosaic in which the androgyny of the young Christ—genital specificity notwithstanding—is thrown into relief by the more clearly masculine (if less clearly male) figures of the Baptist and the personified River Jordan (fig. 7).⁵⁰

If Christ can be seen, at least in these early images, to look a bit like Venus, then Venus *anadyomene* also functions upon occasion a bit like Christ.⁵¹ Roman images of the *anadyomene* were notably different from the medieval ones—the classical goddess is generally shown wringing the water from her hair, swimming in the sea, floating in or even born from a shell, rather than carrying one. But these shell-borne Venuses were used in an environment that may prove instructive: they often appear in the context of burial—on sarcophagi, for example, such as this one now in the Louvre (fig. 8). The goddess on her shell represents a journey, a crossing, even new birth.⁵² Venus is born from the sea, after all—the image of the *anadyomene*, as much as the Baptism of Christ, is a theogony. The shell that John uses to baptize Christ in the *Très Riches Heures*, and that still occasionally graces baptismal fonts, is a relic of this ancient and widespread connection between water and rebirth. Baptismal fonts were originally conch-shaped, and the word *concha* was used to describe them from the fourth century to the fourteenth.⁵³ Even Botticelli, in his version of the goddess rising from the sea on a shell,

⁴⁹ "Non est Iudaeus neque Graecus, non est servus neque liber, non est masculus neque femina, omnes enim vos unum estis in Christo Iesu" (Douai-Rheims Bible).

⁵⁰ Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 134.

⁵¹ The cross-gendering worked both ways, for an eighth-century English sermon inveighs against a Venus mistakenly described as Mars's brother. See Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990 [1953]), p. 406; and Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 302–14.

⁵² See Lawrence, "The Birth of Venus in Roman Art," pp. 10–16; and A. A. Barb, "Diva Matrix: A Faked Gnostic Intaglio in the Possession of P. P. Rubens and the Iconology of a Symbol," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953): 193–238, esp. 204–07.

⁵³ Heckscher, "The *Anadyomene* in the Mediaeval Tradition," pp. 25–26.



Fig. 7. Baptism of Christ. Baptistry of the Arians, Ravenna. (photo: Scala / Art Resource, N.Y.)



Fig. 8. Venus *anadyomene*. Roman sarcophagus. Musée du Louvre, Paris. © Maurice and Pierre Chazelle / Musée du Louvre.

profited from this kind of association, and some have observed that he patterned his famous picture on images of Christ's baptism.⁵⁴

I have, at this point, strayed far from the Fairfax Venus itself—and even farther from Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*. To return to my original question: How can we understand the baptismal imagery echoed here to enrich our reading of the poem? I am not claiming that this artist (or his audience) would have defended any fundamental similarity between the pagan goddess and their Savior. Undoubtedly the similarity of presentation here derives in part from pragmatic considerations: this artist used what imagery came to hand for his pictorial mythography. But to acknowledge this borrowing is not to say that his practice is without interpretive interest. The hybrid genealogy of the image indicates that the artist at work in Fairfax 16 engaged actively with, rather than thoughtlessly adopting, various artistic exemplars. And the result of his *bricolage* is meaningful in ways he may not have foreseen: as both medieval and modern readers of Fairfax 16 are in a position to see, the picture and the poem explore divinity in several different registers.

Again, the Fairfax artist's use of the Three Graces provides an important clue to interpretation of his picture, and to its relation to Chaucer's poem. Although the association of Venus with the Graces is common in the Ovidian mythographic tradition, it is not impossible to read at least one of these figures as supplicating, as well as attending, the goddess. The two who look away from the viewer look significantly toward their reigning deity, and one of these also lifts her hands in prayer. Although

⁵⁴For the "rather unexpected" connection between Botticelli's Venus and the Baptism of Christ, see *ibid.*, p. 6. Heckscher also connects the imagery of rebirth in Botticelli's painting to the vita of the fifth-century saint Pelagia of Antioch.

this visual detail does not illustrate, in a technical sense, any aspect of Chaucer's poem (in which the Three Graces play no role at all), it does accord with the reverential tone taken by Mars in that poem toward the power of his courtly mistress, who "hath take him in subjeccioun, / and as a maistresse taught him his lessoun" (32–33). The Graces, then, function surprisingly like the crowd on the banks of the Jordan in the *Trés Riches Heures*; they acclaim and worship the divine figure at the center. The evocation of imagery of Christ's baptism visually strengthens the impression of Venus as a courtly goddess.

The artist's exploration of divinity becomes clearer in the portraits of Mars and Jupiter, where the combination of Christian forms with classical subject matter may be less visually compelling, but is still more thematically suggestive. If the Fairfax Venus is conventional in surprising ways, the Fairfax Mars is surprisingly unconventional, and might be more closely related to the specifics of the text (see fig. 1).⁵⁵ The god's standard mythographical attributes are well represented by this image from the fifteenth-century Oxford manuscript from which we have already seen the portrait of Venus (fig. 9), and by the similar description in Chaucer's *Knigh't's Tale*:

The statue of Mars upon a carte stood
 Armed, and looked grym as he were wood.

 A wolf ther stood biforn hym at his feet
 With eyen rede, and of a man he eet.
 (2041–42; 2046–47)

By contrast, the Fairfax Mars does not claim the customary iconography of cart and whip. A wolf attends him, but a surprisingly unthreatening one, more heraldic than fearsome. Even more remarkable than the docility of the wolf is Mars's own peaceable expression. The *Complaint* describes him equally as a soldier "furious and wod" (123) and as a "woful" and disappointed lover (104), and in accordance with his amorous role the god here looks worried rather than traditionally irascible. A final oddity that may derive from the poem is Mars's peculiar *deshabille*: he is

⁵⁵For studies of Mars in Chaucer, see Melvin Storm, "Chaucer's Poetic Treatment of the Figure of Mars" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1973); "Troilus, Mars, and Late Medieval Chivalry," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 12 (1982) 45–65; and especially "The Mythological Tradition in Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*," *PQ* 57 (1978): 323–35.



Fig. 9. Mars. Oxford, Bodleian MS Rawlinson B.214, fol. 198v. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

armed, but incompletely, and his bare arm and leg are unattested elsewhere in mythographic and iconographic traditions. The most likely—though still inconclusive—explanation for this is that his bare limbs imply the Ovidian narrative by representing the situation of discovery: he is half-dressed because he is fleeing Venus’s bed.⁵⁶ Indeed, Chaucer’s poem makes a point of his need to arm himself: when Phebus arrives to put a halt to the lovers’ dalliance, Venus moves on, making her escape, but Mars must pause to throw on his “helm of huge wyghte” (99) and other martial gear. Mars’s heavy armor—that is, his slower planetary movement—impedes his flight and prevents him from joining his lady: “Ful hevy was he to walken over lond” (103).

The more meaningful links between picture and poem are to be found elsewhere—in echoes of Christian images similar to those we have already seen in the Fairfax Venus. In a telling detail, Mars is attended by what seem to be his astrological “children”: three knights kneel behind him in an attenuated version of *Planetenkinder*, as, for example, in the Venus-Luxuria image we saw earlier. This tradition of the *Planeten-*

⁵⁶This interpretation of the picture has provided the occasion for much of the moralizing commentary on the poem. Christine de Pisan, however, in her *Epistre d’Otbee*, explains that the moral of the episode is that a good knight (that is, Mars) should not be forgetful of time. She also explains that the myth can be read astrologically—a combination of registers that suggests perhaps she had Chaucer’s poem in mind. For the wide variety in interpretations of the story of Mars and Venus in mythographic writings, see Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, pp. 46–48.

kinder was familiar to Chaucer—the Wife of Bath names herself as both a child of Venus and of Mars⁵⁷—and it has important implications for the Fairfax illustration. For although it is a traditional idea, these are not the usual wrathful children of Mars. They are soldiers, but they follow Chaucer's god in complaint, as he calls them to do, rather than in warfare. Most important, the complaint of these knights is represented in the image as a kind of prayer. More obviously even than the Graces, these figures resemble Christian supplicants, marked by their kneeling posture and the red crosses on their chests. These details transform Mars's knights from courtly complainants into devout petitioners—not disappointed lovers, but faithful followers of their god. At the end of his complaint, Mars beseeches the “hardy knyghtes of renoun” of his “devisioun”—astrological children ruled by his planetary influence—to join him in his lamentation. He also beseeches his “ladyes” to have pity on people in pain for the sake of their “emperise,” Venus, who cannot attain her goal: “Now shulde your holy teres falle and reyne.”⁵⁸ The combination of devotional and courtly language here in the detail of the “holy” tears shows the proximity between these supplicants and Christian petitioners at prayer.

The prayer of Mars's knights is important to the interpretation of poem and picture, for it mirrors the relation figured in both text and image between Mars himself and Jupiter. The most arresting feature of these two portraits, in fact, is not any iconographical attribute, but the gods' actions: in defiance of the clear frames surrounding each Olympian figure, Mars reaches up toward Jupiter, who responds with an answering gesture. This image has little to do with the conventional static representation of classical deities in mythographic catalogues, few of which depict any relation, even of a hierarchical kind, between Jupiter and the other gods.⁵⁹ The Oxford manuscript, for example, exhibits this characteristic fracturing of space, the complete dissociation of one figure from another (see fig. 5). Even in a more formal setting it is rare that a rela-

⁵⁷“For certes, I am al Venerien / In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien” (III.609–10).

⁵⁸*Pace* Tinkle's claim that the manuscript's booklet 1 is concerned with creating “an imagined masculine community,” Mars here addresses both knights and ladies. See Tinkle, “Imagined Chaucerian Community,” p. 160.

⁵⁹The interaction of the figures also argues against the link to *imagines deorum* derived from geomantic iconography proposed by Norton-Smith. *Bodleian MS Fairfax 16*, p. xiii.

tionship is figured between Jupiter and his pantheon.⁶⁰ Although the Jupiter of Mantegna's sixteenth-century Tarocchi, for instance, relates to a figure below him, that figure cannot be interpreted as a classical deity (fig. 10).⁶¹ This Jupiter is hurling thunderbolts at humans, not counseling troubled Olympians.

Mars relates to Jupiter more as human than as Olympian in the Fairfax miniature, becoming a petitioning child of the planetary god, though not of course in a strict astrological sense. An image of Jupiter and his children from Christine de Pisan's *Epistre d'Othea* points up both similarities and crucial differences between the *Planetenkinder* tradition and the Fairfax picture (fig. 11). The disposition of the figures is the same—godly Jupiter above reaching down to supplicants with outstretched hands below—but in this case the pagan deity is said to be pouring a “sweet liquid” on his children. The allegory appended to the text likens the liquid to God's grace, and the picture, in fact, recalls images of the Descent of the Holy Spirit.⁶² But the deity of the *Complaint of Mars* offers no sweet liquid of comfort—Mars is left at the end of the poem with no ready answers to his poignant questions. He asks:

To what fyn made the God, that sit so hye,
Benethen him love other companye
And streyneth folk to love, malgre her hed?
And then her joy, for oght I can espye,
Ne lasteth not the twynkelyng of an ye,
And somme han never joy til they be ded.
What meneth this? What is this mystihed?
Wherto contreyneþ he his folk so faste
Thing to desyre, but hit shulde laste?

(218–26)

Mars finds God's role in human love especially mysterious, and especially blameworthy, wondering why “so juste a kyng / Doth such hardnesse to his creature” (231–32). He even accuses God of real cruelty,

⁶⁰ An example of a more formal but still-static arrangement is in an *Ovide moralisé* (Bibliothèque de Lyon, cod. 742), reprinted in Seznec, fig. 33.

⁶¹ For the complete set, see *I Tarocchi detti del Mantegna*, preface Claudia Cieri Via (Pavia: Torchio de' Ricci, 1992).

⁶² For discussion of the *Epistre d'Othea* and this illustration, see Millard Meiss, *French Painting in the Time of Jean, Duc de Berry: The Limbours and Their Contemporaries*, 2 vols. (New York: Braziller, 1974), 1:23–41 (23).



Fig. 10. Jupiter, from Mantegna's *Tarocchi*. National Gallery of Art, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund. Courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 11. Planetary Jupiter and His Children. Christine de Pisan, *Epitre d'Othea*, BN fr. 606, fol. 5v. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

comparing him to a "fisser," who baits his "angle-hok" with romantic pleasures that leave lovers wounded, even if they eventually escape by breaking the line (237–38). This characterization of God as a cruel fisherman might mark Mars as a pagan, for although images of a deadly hook baited with sexual pleasure for example, are common, it can be answered in a Christian context by the salvific image of Christ's humanity as the bait that catches the devil on the hook of his divinity.⁶³ Mars even goes so far as to blame God for making Venus's irresistible beauty, comparing him to the jeweler responsible for creating the beautiful but deadly Brooch of Thebes (who, in a neat irony, turns out to have been the goddess's cuckolded husband, Vulcan).⁶⁴ Venus herself is not responsible for any tragedies of love, but rather the one who made her beauty—"In the worcher is the vyce," Mars claims, and, he adds belatedly, in the "coveitour" who succumbs to his attraction (261–62). The stars cannot explain these difficult conundrums: in spite of his responsive gesture, the Fairfax Jupiter offers no clear astrological guidance for his petitioner, whose role in the poem more closely resembles the rather more complicated and uncertain position of human worshiper than that of pagan deity.

The unusual communication in the Fairfax frontispiece between Mars and Jupiter, across a pictorial frame that Venus respects (if Cupid does not),⁶⁵ suggests that we might also profitably think of their gestures in the context of Christian supplication on the one hand and divine intercession on the other. The iconography of prayer (as in Peter the Chanter's twelfth-century treatise on the subject) often involves the lifting of the hands over the head, as Mars does.⁶⁶ And certainly at times in medieval use of classical myth Jupiter was made analogous to the Chris-

⁶³The idea of Christ as bait and fishhook comes up in Gregory of Nyssa's commentary on Job 41. For the contrasting metaphors of the hook baited with sexual pleasure and the Christian clergy as "fishers of men," see Amsler, "Mad Lovers and Other Hooked Fish"; and Hultin, "Anti-Courtly Elements," 70–73.

⁶⁴For a reading of the Brooch of Thebes in the context of the *Complaint*, see Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 76, 219.

⁶⁵Chauncey Wood sees Mars and Venus as communicating gesturally, reading Mars's gesture closely against line 146 of the poem, in which he "salueth" his lady. Wood is eager to see the picture as a condemnation of lechery, but it seems clear from the direction of Mars's eyes that he instead means to communicate with the god above. Wood also reads Jupiter's gesture as "rebuke," but nothing in the picture necessitates such a reading. *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, p. 136.

⁶⁶See Richard C. Trexler, *The Christian at Prayer: An Illustrated Prayer Manual Attributed to Peter the Chanter* (d. 1197), *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 44 (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1987).

tian God; the Jupiter of the Tarocchi sits in a mandorla, looking strikingly like Christ in Majesty on a Gothic tympanum (see fig. 10), and there are suggestions of such an equivalence even in *The Knight's Tale* (I.2987–3074). The Fairfax Jupiter also brings to mind such analogies: he looks down as if from heaven upon the supplicant, and he appears in a radiant sunburst similar to the one that surrounds Mary in, for example, the Augustan *ara coeli* vision. Indeed, a similar architecture structures another of this artist's productions, which might have served as a formal model for the tripartite division of the Fairfax illustration: the tau-shaped cross in the Abingdon Missal crucifixion divides Mary from John, and Christ from God the Father, in just the same way as in the Fairfax frontispiece (fig. 12).⁶⁷ Here, too, God leans to the left to acknowledge the suffering figure, in this case Mary, below him.⁶⁸ He radiates divinity (just as Mary and John display their sanctity) through golden beams that descend upon the central figure of Christ on the cross. These divine rays recall versions of God as the *sol iustitiae*, such as this one from the fourteenth-century *Rothschild Canticles* (fig. 13).⁶⁹

The connection of the Fairfax Jupiter to the sun is especially important, for it may help explain his presence in the frontispiece. I have suggested that the relationship of Mars and Jupiter is represented in both picture and poem, but in fact in the *Complaint of Mars* Jupiter is never named. In the astrological terms of Chaucer's poem, Mars appears to act most directly in relation to Phebus, the sun. The poem's bird-narrator bemoans the arrival of day, upbraiding the sun as the "candel of jelosye" (7) in an *aubade* that ironically anticipates the fate of the adulterous gods, who are eventually exposed by the "firy torches" of Phebus (27).⁷⁰ The Fairfax artist's titulus has therefore often been taken as a misidentification; and, indeed, the inclusion of Jupiter is at once probably the most mysterious feature of the frontispiece, and the most seemingly distant from Chaucer's poem. But the figure's association with the sun could easily imply a Christian paradigm, as well as a classical one; and Jupi-

⁶⁷Norton-Smith notes the formal similarities; *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*, p. xiii.

⁶⁸Some understand God the Father here as leaning down to receive the dove of the Holy Spirit; see, for example, Richard Marks and Nigel Morgan, *The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting, 1200–1500* (New York: Braziller, 1981), p. 119.

⁶⁹See Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Rothschild Canticles: Art and Mysticism in Flanders and the Rhineland circa 1300* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Hamburger discusses the *sol iustitiae* primarily on pp. 64–66. The metaphor comes originally from Malachi 4.2.

⁷⁰For a discussion of the *aubade* in the *Complaint of Mars*, see Paul Battles, "Chaucer and the Traditions of Dawn-Song," *Chaucer* 31 (1997): 317–38, esp. 323–36.

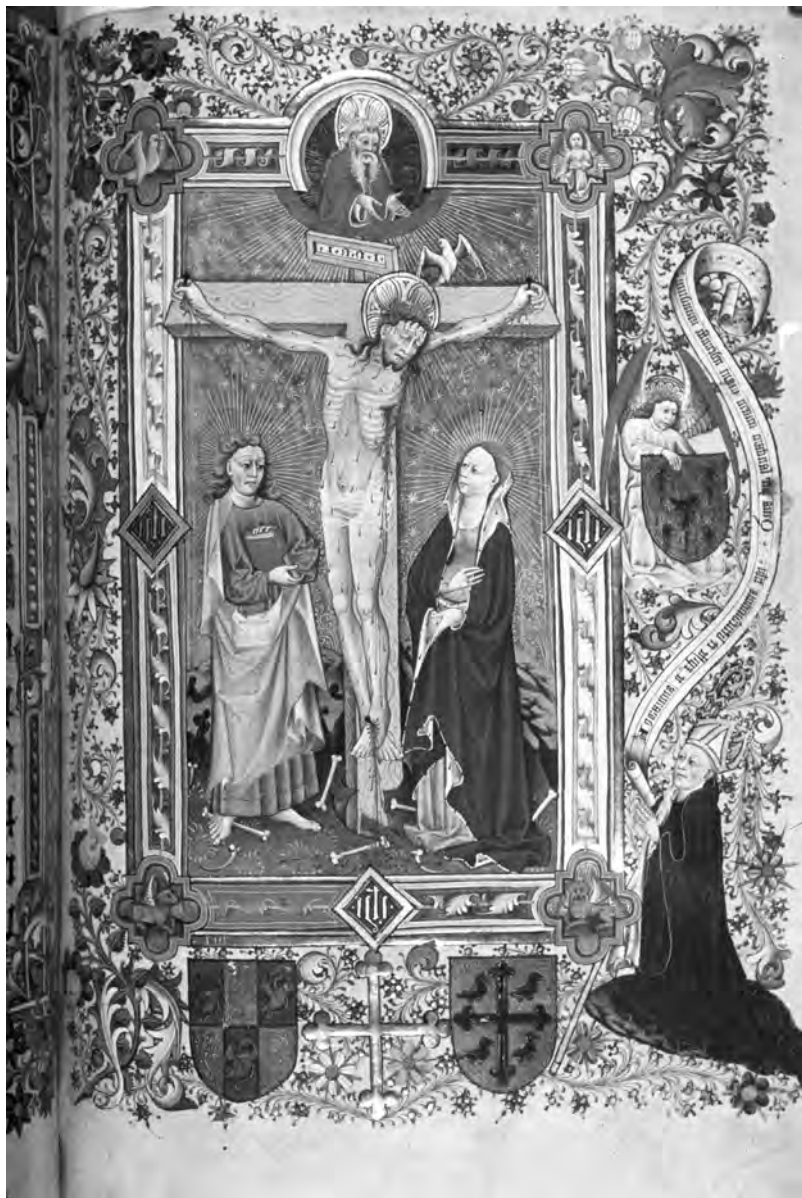


Fig. 12. Crucifixion, Abingdon Missal. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 227, fol. 113v. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.



Fig. 13. God as *Sol Justitiae*, *Rothschild Canticles*. New Haven, Beinecke Library MS 404, fol. 36r. Beinecke Library, Yale University.

ter—more than Phebus—represents Christian monotheism.⁷¹ For even though the artist takes his primary inspiration from the poem's first section—the story of the astrological and human encounter among Venus, Mars, and Phebus—he also takes up the complaint proper: Mars's anguished cry protesting the injustices of “him that lordeth ech intelligence” (166), a nonspecific but monotheistic God, that “sit so hye” (218). Although Mars never directly answers his own question—“To

⁷¹ Medieval tradition recognized that some pagans considered the entire Pantheon to be contained in the figure of Jove. See Augustine, *City of God*, bk. 4, chap. 11; and Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Doctrinale*, xix.18. Cited by Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 50 n. 79.

whom shal I than pleyne of my distresse?" (191)—and he never addresses God directly, his existential torment is directed toward the one he sees as ultimately responsible. It is to this daring verbal picture that the Fairfax artist has responded with an idiosyncratic combination of pictorial conventions. To suggest iconographically that Jupiter is the "sun of justice," when Mars is so stridently casting doubt on God's goodness, is to pose forcefully the problem of Chaucer's *Complaint of Mars*.

In their exploration of divinity both sacred and secular, the poem and the picture draw on the conventions of a late medieval "religion of love," in which the lady is deified and the suitor humbled to the point of supplication. But this is more than the familiar adoption of religious language to describe a secular goddess. The crossover here does not simply imbue a human beloved with celestial qualities, but brings earthly love together with heavenly love to ask real, painful, and poignant questions about the relationships between the two. The interactions among the ancient gods in both picture and poem are finally more daring in their Christian parallels than the common courtly vocabulary would suggest, moving beyond adoration to complaint, beyond worship to radical existential doubt. The comparison works not to ennoble pagan worship or secular love, but to enable the expression of a Christian skepticism that otherwise could find few outlets.⁷² This frontispiece is not merely an argument for a celestial vision of earthly love. Rather, it is an argument that the idealization of the lady that can lead to her identification with Christ is related to the anguish of the lover that can lead him to question God; the idealization of the lady and the anguish of the lover are two sides of the same problem. Venus's resemblance to Christ suggests that a beloved lady might be deified, but Mars's prayer—the most telling visual detail, and the one that corresponds more closely to the poem—suggests that God can be questioned. His supplication is not to the lady as to a goddess, but to God himself.

Although it is not a narrative image per se, the frontispiece depends upon the narrative that Chaucer tells at the opening of the *Complaint of Mars*. The characters pictured are the familiar gods of the classical pantheon, adorned with the iconographical symbols attributed to them by medieval commentary tradition. But the picture speaks most forcefully to the conclusion of Chaucer's poem, to Mars's complaint. Like the *Complaint of Mars* itself, the manuscript's prefatory picture represents both

⁷²For one perspective on medieval atheism in connection to this sort of crossover, see V. A. Kolve, "God-Denying Fools and the Medieval 'Religion of Love,'" *SAC* 19 (1997): 3–59.

the story of the gods' interactions and their subjective responses to it. As Lee Patterson has described it, the poem asks "whether amorous wrongs can be righted by being written—whether, that is, the self can be repaired or justice can be done through poetry."⁷³ The Fairfax picture, as well as the poem, leaves that question open, and leaves the human petitioner without any concrete assurance that his complaint will be effective. If, as Newman has shown, Cupid is linked to Christ based on a likeness through suffering, Venus is linked to him through renewal and rebirth. Through imagery of baptism connected to Venus, the picture is about regeneration, but through imagery of prayer connected to Mars, it is also about anguish. By visual rather than textual means, the frontispiece combines narrative with complaint, Ovidian images with astrological ones, and amorous intrigues with serious theological problems.

The combination of classical, astrological, and Christian conventions is the central point of connection between picture and poem. Even from the second line of the text, Venus the Olympian goddess is also imagined as the morning star "rysen among yon rowes rede." A few lines later, the narrator in his "briddes wise" alludes to Saint John as Guarantor in an aside that, if not heavy with meaning, nonetheless marks the poem immediately with a Christian idiom (9). It is of course not unusual to find classical figures represented in Christian forms in medieval art and literature: from Amphiorax as a "bisshop" in *Troilus and Criseyde* to Mercury as an "ecclesiastical dignitary" in Western copies of Arabian astronomical manuscripts.⁷⁴ But to my knowledge no one has analyzed the similarities between Venus *anadyomene* and Christ in baptism, or the ways in which Christian prayer is figured among pagan deities. The presentation of theological questions in the context of pagan antiquity both mitigates and complicates their force—a characteristically Chaucerian move seen most richly of course in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale*. The Fairfax artist seems aware also of the philosophical richness of representing the classical past in imagery readily readable in Christian terms; he juxtaposes antique and Christian elements in such a way as to acknowledge, but gently, the serious implications of Mars's criticism. By manipulating these images just as Chaucer does, this artist engaged in a project more complicated than the simple adoption of iconographic convention, and here it appears that more is to be gained from investigating interpretive connections between the illustration and its text.

⁷³ Patterson, "Writing Amorous Wrongs," p. 57.

⁷⁴ For Amphiorax, see *Troilus and Criseyde* II.104–5; for Mercury, see Sez nec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, pp. 156–60 (158).