

Merciles Beautè

a song for baritone and cello

by

Michael Scherperel

with words by

Geoffrey Chaucer

Chaucer's *Merciles Beautè* and Middle English pronunciation

Middle English was in a state of great flux during Chaucer's time. There were large regional variants in orthography, pronunciation, and even grammar and syntax. The suggestions for pronunciation made here are just that: suggestions. The composer makes no claim to being a scholar in Medieval languages—but he has consulted at least one such for some validation.

Vowels are generally those which most singers consider “Italian” vowels. There was a phenomenon in English known as the Great Vowel Shift which was beginning even in Chaucer's day and was pretty much complete by Shakespeare's. In Middle English, “a” is “ah”, “e” is “ay”, and “i” is “ee” (none of these are diphthongs, however). By the time of Elizabeth the First, “a” had become “ay”, “e” had become “ee”, and “i” had become the diphthong “aye”. This makes Middle English much more difficult to hear than it is to read. Words such as “I” and “me” look like what they are but would be heard as “ee” and “may”.

The inflectional “e” at the end of words is nearly always pronounced, so we have “loh-vuh” rather than “luv” for the word spelled “l-o-v-e”. Liaison between adjacent vowels is common—and in music, just as problematical as in French (Modern or Middle). The composer elected to let the scansion dictate for the most part. (These poems are iambic pentameter with 10- or 11-syllable lines.)

There are no silent consonants: “know” is “kuh-noh”. The digraph “gh” is pronounced like German “ch”: “though” is “thouX”.

Diphthongs are falling, *i.e.* the first vowel is the prominent one: “availeth” is “ah-VIuh-leth”; “trouthe” is “TROu-thuh”.

The composer has attempted to put the text in IPA under the original Middle English text in the music. The composer claims, as with Middle English, no great expertise in IPA (*disclaimer*).

There follows here the lexical and orthographical form of the text that the composer employed for the creation of these songs. This poem is commonly called a triple rondel, though the sections are not in any of the strict French

rondel forms. In some anthologies, the three sections are separated by subtitles. This approach led the composer to write three separate songs but with the intent always that the entire set would be sung as a single piece.

Merciles beauté

Your yēn two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beauté of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit through-out my herte kene.

And but your word wol helen hastily
My hertes wounde, whyl that hit is grene,
*Your yēn two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beauté of hem not sustene.*

Upon my trouthe I sey yow feithfully,
That ye ben of my lyf and deeth the quene;
For with my deeth the trouthe shal be sene.
*Your yēn two wol slee me sodenly,
I may the beauté of hem not sustene,
So woundeth hit through-out my herte kene.*

So hath your beauté fro your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne;
For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne.

Giltless my deeth thus han ye me purchaced;
I sey yow sooth, me nedeth not to feyne;
*So hath your beauté from your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne.*

Allas! That nature hath in yow compassed
So greet beauté, that no man may atteyne
To mercy, though he sterve for the peyne.
*So hath your beauté from your herte chaced
Pitee, that me ne availeth not to pleyne;
For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne.*

Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.

He may answer, and seye this or that;
I do no fors, I speke right as I mene.
*Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene.*

Love hath my name y-strike out of his sclat,
And he is strike out of my bokes clene
For ever-mo; ther is non other mene.
*Sin I fro Love escaped am so fat,
I never thenk to ben in his prison lene;
Sin I am free, I counte him not a bene.*

Many modern “translations” are available. Due to possible copyright issues, the composer refrains from providing any here and encourages the singer (and cellist) to consult one (or more) of the innumerable online resources.

A few words which may prove problematical are “translated” here:

Yën – eyes
Pleyne – complain
Daunger – pride (pronounced, incidentally, “down-jer”)
Giltless – doubtless
Sooth – indeed
Sclat – slate
Fors – other (“I do no fors” – “I care not”)

Merciles Beautè

for Thomas Cavendish

Geoffrey Chaucer

Michael Scherperel

first rondel

(♩ approx. 80)

Baritone

Cello

freely (♩ approx. 80)

f

accel.

3

4 freely *f*

B

Your y - ën two wol slee me so-den-ly

Vlc.

fp

3 3

p

7

B

so-den-ly; I

Vlc.

7

rit.

mp

11

B

may the beau - - - té of hem not sus - te - ne, So

Vlc.

14

B

wound-eth hit through - out my her - te ke - ne. And

Vlc.

17

B

but your word wol he-len has-ti-ly My hert - es woun-de whyl that hit is

Vlc.

20

B

gre - ne, freely
sotto voce *p* Your y - ěn two wol slee me

Vlc.

20

fp colla voce

23 *B* *mf* *rit.* *a tempo*

so-den-ly, I may the beau-té of hem not sus-te-ne. U-

23 *Vlc.* *mf* *rit.* *a tempo*

26 *B*

pon my trouthe I sey you feith-ful-ly, That ye ben of my lyf and deeth the

26 *Vlc.*

29 *B*

que-ne; For with my deeth the trou-the shal be se-ne.

29 *Vlc.*

32 *B* *p* *freely sotto voce*

Your y - - - en two wol slee me

32 *Vlc.* *fp* *colla voce*

34 *a tempo*

B

so-den-ly, I may the beau-té of hem not sus-te - ne, So

Vlc.

34 *riten.*

37 *rit.*

B

wound-eth hit through - out my her - te ke - ne.

Vlc.

37 *a tempo* *rit.* *a tempo* *mp*

40

B

Vlc.

40 *pp* *mp* *rit.* *attacca con sordino*

seconde rondel

$\text{♩} = 60$

Baritone

Cello

(sul A) $\text{♩} = 60$
p *(sul D)*
con sordino

4 *p*

B

Vlc.

So hath your beau - tè fro your her - te chac-ed Pi - tee, _____ that me ne'a-

7 *mp*

B

Vlc.

vai - leth not to pley - ne, pley - ne; For Daun - - -

mp

10

B

- ger halt _____ your _____ mer - cy _____ in his chey - ne.

Vlc.

13

B

mf

Gilt - less my deeth _____ thus _____ han ye _____ me pur-

Vlc.

mf

16

B

p

chac - ed, I sey yow sooth, _____ me ne - deth not to

Vlc.

p

19

B

riten. *sotto voce* *a tempo*

feyn - e; _____ So hath your beaut-è from your hert-e cha - ced Pi - tee,

Vlc.

riten. *a tempo* *pp*

22 *riten.*

B that me ne'a-vail-eth not to pley - ne, pley - ne.

Vlc. *pizz. riten.* *a tempo (sul D) arco* *f*

25 *f*

B Al - las! That na - - - - - ture hath in yow com -

Vlc. *(arco)* *(pizz)*

27

B pas - sed So greet beau - té, that no man may at - tey - ne to

Vlc. *arco*

30 *mp*

B mer - cy, though he ster - ve for the

Vlc. *p*

34 *sotto voce*

B

pey - ne. So hath your beau - tè from your her-te cha - ced Pi - tee

Vlc.

34 *pp*

37

B

that me ne'a-vail - eth not to pley - ne, pley - ne; For

Vlc.

37 *mp* pizz. *arco* *mp*

40

B

Daun-ger halt your mer - cy in _____ his chey - ne.

Vlc.

40 *pizz.*

*attacca
senza sordino*

thridde rondel

Baritone

$\text{♩} = 120$

Cello

$\text{♩} = 120$

arco

pizz.

arco

pizz.

f

senza sordino

B

3

Sin I fro Love es - cap - ed am so

Vlc.

3

arco

pizz.

arco

pizz.

B

6

fat, I nev - er thank to — ben in his pris - on

Vlc.

6

arco

pizz.

B

9

le - - - ne;

mf

clap!

Sin I fro Love es -

Vlc.

9

arco

pizz.

11

B

cap-ed am so fat, _____ I nev-er thenk to ben in his pris - on

Vlc.

13

B

falsetto
mp

le - ne; Sin I am free,

Vlc.

cql legno
mp

15

B

full voice
f

I count - e him not a be - ne.

Vlc.

arco
f

pizz.
riten.

18

B

mf

He _____ may

Vlc.

a tempo
arco
mf

pizz. *arco* *pizz.*

20

B

an - swere and se - ye this or that, and se - ye this or that;

Vlc.

arco pizz.

p

23

B

f

I do no fors, I spe - ke right — as I

Vlc.

23 arco pizz.

f

26

B

me - - - ne. *clap!* Sin I fro Love es -

Vlc.

26 arco pizz.

28

B

cap-ed am so fat, — I nev - er thenk to ben in his pris - on

Vlc.

28

30

B

le - ne. *mp* Lo - ve hath my na - me y - strike

Vlc.

col legno *rit.* *arco* *mp* *a-tempo*

33

B

out of his sclat, *mf* And he — is — strik - e, and

Vlc.

col legno *mp* *arco*

36

B

he — is — stri - - - ke out of my bok - es out of my

Vlc.

pizz. *arco*

39

B

bok - es cle - ne *mp* *riten.* For ev - er - mo;

Vlc.

pizz. *col legno* *pizz.* *col legno* *arco* *riten.* *p*

42 *a tempo*

B

Vlc. *f* *a tempo* pizz. arco pizz.

44 *f*

B

Sin I fro Love es - cap - ed am so

Vlc. arco pizz. arco pizz.

47

B

fat, I nev - er thenk to — ben in his pris - on

Vlc. arco pizz.

50

B

le - - - ne *clap!* Sin I fro Love es -

Vlc. arco pizz.

52

B

cap-ed am so fat, _____ I nev-er thenk to ben in his pris - on

Vlc.

54

B

falsetto

le - ne; Sin I am free,

Vlc.

54

col legno

56

B

full voice

I count - e him I count - e him

Vlc.

56

arco *col legno*

f

59

B

not a be - ne.

Vlc.

59

arco *pizz.*