

The “olde bokes” become “newe”: Poetic Artistry in Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*

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It has been well recognized that Chaucer plays with his audience a game of intertextuality, raising expectations, stimulating cultural awareness and overwhelming his readers with displays of erudition. He translates and popularizes the actual tendency which has been seen between the chivalric culture of the courts and the clerical culture of the schools in fourteenth-century Europe. Notwithstanding, Chaucer often does more than that because he drops hints or explicitly refers to books which are not his sources. We might assert here that Chaucer’s dream poems begin with a book and end with a book, considering that Chaucer’s own previous works are discussed in a context dominated by a meditation on the value of the “olde bokes”. In *The Book of the Duchess*,¹ Chaucer’s dreaming begins with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and ends with Chaucer’s own books. Therefore, a book produces another book. In a sense, Ovid becomes Chaucer. It may be the meaning of this function that we have to pursue when we read *The Book of the Duchess* which is one of the dream poems. Generally speaking, we could employ the word “transformation” if we were to desolve the problems brought by Chaucer’s poems.

In *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer seems to offer to John of Gaunt a “consolation” for the death of his wife Blanche of Lancaster. And it is to confirm this private occasion that the poet uses the name of the Black

Knight's Lady, White.² The transformation of private occasion into public concern is meant by Chaucer through a series of operations centred on the fictionalization of certain motifs. At the beginning, the poetic "I" tells us that he suffers from insomnia. But he does not know the reason if it is not a sickness he has suffered for the last eight days. Here the persona relates that he depends on a book ("a romaunce") to drive the night away.

And in this bok were written fables
 That clerkes had in olde tyme,
 And other poets, put in rime
 To rede, and for to be in minde,

 This bok ne spak but of such thinges,
 Of queens lives.....

 Amonge al this I fond a tale
 That me thoughte a woder thing. (*BD*, 52-61)

He happens to find a "tale" which is the Ovidian story of Seyx and Alcyone. This story is like this: Seyx loses his life at sea and his wife, Alcyone, asks Juno to put her to sleep and to show her husband's fate to her in the dream. Morpheus, summoned by Juno's messenger, takes the mortal form of Seyx and appears to Alcyone, who dies within three days. The sleepless "I", amazed and rather skeptical, decides to offer a featherbed to Morpheus and Juno. Hardly has he formulated his vow when he falls asleep over his book and begins to dream.³

The function of the Ovidian story of Seyx and Alcyone is helpful to connect the themes of sleep and insomnia — by the way, this is the

protagonist's problem——with the story of Gaunt and Blanche fictionalized in the second part of the poem. There is a kind of mirror-version of the Black Knight and White and there lies the story of a deep love between wife and husband. Moreover, *The Book of the Duchess* is a tale in sleep and dreams occupy a central position. Like Alcyone, the protagonist in this tale sleeps and dreams; and so his dream will be the projection of this book and of the story of Gaunt and Blanche.

As soon as he falls asleep, the dreamer finds himself, on a May morning, lying in bed naked, with birds singing all around him. The sun is shining and the air is “blew, bright, clere”. The protagonist mounts on horse, rushes out and hears that emperor Octavian is going on a hunt.

“Say, felowe, who shal hunte here?”

Quod I, and he answered ageyn,

“Syr, th’emperour Octovyen,”

Quod he, “and ys here faste by.”

“A Goddes half, in good tyme!” quod I, (BD, 366-370)

He follows the company and ends up near a tree with a small dog. Trying to catch the animal, he goes down a “floury grene wente”, a grassy path in the full bloom of spring. At its end stands a man dressed in black, a knight, reciting a “compleynte” for his dead lady. This intermezzo seems to have nothing to do with the first and third parts of the story. As a matter of fact, this intermezzo consists of two themes common to both. One is the theme of romance full of “fables” which the protagonist sometimes enjoys, and the other is the theme of the *Roman de la Rose* and the story of Troy (incidentally, this will be taken up by both Knight and dreamer). But we must not neglect this intermezzo.

When we are to appreciate this story's poetic artistry, we should consider the theme of nature. In the introduction where the protagonist describes his insomnia, he makes clear that this "sickness" goes against nature.

And well ye woot, agaynes kynde
 Hyt were to lyven in thys wyse;
 For nature wolde nat suffyse
 To noon erthly creature
 Nat longe tyme to endure
 Withoute slep and be in sorwe. (BD, 16-21)

At night, the protagonist picks up the book which was written to be read and remembered "while men loved the lawe of kinde"(56). This book, the *Metamorphoses*, sets the reader on the path of natural law; and at the same time this book also provides the Knight indirectly with an example of how to recover that harmony with nature which he has lost owing to his lady's death. Originally, death is the "lawe of kinde" as the story of Seyx and Alcyone suggests. In fact, nature reigns in the *locus amoenus*⁴, where the "poverttee" and the "sorwes" of winter are forgotten.

In the same way, Nature is thought to dominate the ideal portrait of the lady, "chef ensample" of Nature's work.

For certes, Nature had swich lest
 To make that fair, that trewly she
 Was hir chef patron of beaute
 And chef ensample of al hir werk, (BD, 908-911)

Therefore, it is natural that courtly terms (for example, “worship”, “service”) are employed in the story of the Knight’s love for Blanche. But the forces of grief, Fortune and death against Nature and Love are also seen. In the splendid meadow where the “sorrow” of the winter is forgotten, the dreamer suddenly hears a complaint where sorrow and death dominate, and comments with a phrase that reminds us of the word “insomnia”.

Hit was gret wonder that Nature
 Myght suffer any creature
 To have such sorwe..... (BD, 467-469)

And so Blanche’s beauty and perfect union of marriage are destroyed by death, the ‘natural law’ which had killed Seyx. At the end of the series of questions and answers that characterizes their exchange, the Knight cries to the dreamer, “She ys ded!” Just then the hunt is suddenly done. With the result that, the Knight is forced to walk off homewards to “a long castel with walles white”. The bell strikes twelve, and the protagonist wakes up in his bed, with the book of Seyx and Alcyone in his hand.

When we read *The Book of the Duchess*, we notice that it has an historical occasion. And so it is commonplace for us to speak of the Black Knight as John of Gaunt and the Lady White as Blanche. Figures in a dream are figures in the imagination of the dreamer. In *The Book of the Duchess*, however, Chaucer finds a means to make the expression of grief much more immediate, by rethinking the interface between poet and reader, and between narrator and speaking subject, in quite original ways. In some way, the poem might mediate between the writer and the potential recipient of his work.

It is no doubt that Chaucer within the poem is represented by his first-person narrator, the man who awakes and writes the poem. For he starts off as sleepless, melancholy, sunk in sorrow (“For sorwful ymagynacioun / Ys alway hooly in my mynde” 14-15). He is in sorrow and melancholy to the point where he cannot endure it. When he falls asleep, he dreams, being melancholy. Here he dreams of the Black Knight, who is a kind of personification of sorrow.

Y am sorwe, and sorwe is y (BD, 597)

Consequently, the figure is a projection of his own grief. The narrator, therefore, is divided into two within the dream: into the first-person “I” who registers all the sights in the dream, and into the Black Knight who figures the dreamer’s own grief. Thus, the dream is well explained in the terms set out within the poem. The melancholy narrator of the opening has been reading of a wife who has lost her husband. He dreams of the Black Knight who is the lover or the husband who has lost his lady.⁵

Just as Chaucer-narrator is split into two within the dream, so is John of Gaunt. At one level he is the great man whose public life continues. At the other, he is the grieving man in the black of mourning. Through the device of the dream, Chaucer can make himself quite literally the spokeman for John of Gaunt. He can put into words that conflict of love and death, joy and mourning.

Notes:

1. *The Book of the Duchess* is influenced by these authorities. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Seyx and Alcyone) ; Bible, *Genesis* (Joseph's dream, 280-282) ; Macrobius, *Commentarii Somnium Scipionis* (284-286) ; story of Troy (Benoit's *Roman de Troie*, 326-331) ; *Roman de la Rose* (334) ; "remedyes of Ovyde" (*Remedia Amoris*, 568) ; Bible, Esther (987) ; Dares Phrygius (1079) ; Livy (1084) ; Peter Riga's "Aurora" (*Biblia Versificata*, 1169) ; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (1326-1327).
2. See Robinson's Introduction, pp. 266-267, and Notes pp. 773-778.
3. On the medieval understanding of various kinds of dream, see W. C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (Barnes and Noble, 1960), Chapter 8. On the spiritual significance of dreams in medieval literature, T. S. Eliot's *Selected Essays*, p. 248. He uses the words "high and low dream". Presumably he is influenced by Dante.
4. On the meaning of *locus amoenus*, see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by W. R. Trask (Harper and Row, 1953)
5. For a direct affirmation of Chaucer's sense of the importance of truth in human life, cf. the statement of Arveragus in *The Franklin's Tale*: "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe". By the way, Derek Traversi attaches importance to the sense of this phrase (*Chaucer : The Earlier Poetry*, Univ. of Delaware Press, 1987, p. 148)

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