

## Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and the Limits of Narrative

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Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* has puzzled scholars because of its many gaps and silences: the Ovid story is incomplete, the Boethian dialogue between dreamer and Black Knight is inconclusive, and the ending is abrupt and unreflective. Critics search for the nature of consolation in the work, but are thwarted because the woman whom it memorializes and the audience to whom it is read are never directly addressed, and neither are the themes of eternal life and the consolations of faith elucidated. Rather, Chaucer chooses to stay silent on these themes, preferring to use language to illustrate the natural and tactile world and the confused thoughts and speech, the experience, of ordinary men faced with life's complications. So too does he manipulate the wisdom of other writers, the auctoritees, in order to both lead the audience to certain concepts and to exemplify the shortcomings of such writings. The reason for this, I believe, stems from a tendency in the Middle Ages for language to be treated with a guarded enthusiasm. That is, despite the power of the written word in theology, philosophy, science and literature, such authorities, who have achieved the heights of human reason, are still secondary to a higher way of knowing, one that supercedes what can be uttered with the tongue or conceived by mere reason. In this way, Chaucer's gaps and silences seem to reveal a degree of skepticism toward language: that somehow his tools are both liberating and limiting. The narrative challenges to experience and authority in *The Book of the Duchess* leave many areas for the readers to fill in for themselves; they are directed toward the meaning of the poem even though its themes lie outside its allegorical structure.

A reading such as my own that pays special attention to what is omitted from the text, and the ways the supremacy of language might be subverted by the author,

is no doubt influenced by my post-modern literary education. I read with my own confident disillusionment in the reliability of our experience and the written word, and as such, perhaps I am actually closer to Chaucer, and the literary and theological debates of his age, than readers from earlier centuries and the concerns that they brought to the text. Indeed, since the 1960s, the Medieval discourse over realism and nominalism have received increasing attention, especially in the area of language and interpretation. This too corresponds with the larger shift in scholarship and literary theory, influenced by linguistics and culture, in which we read signs as system of correspondences with little outside referent to truth or reality. It has been suggested that the emergence of nominalism in the Middle ages mirrors this shift as the Medieval world view moved from symbolism (and the Platonic realism) to a sign system, or “desymbolization” (Utz, 206). I make this point to both suggest a sympathy in world-view, but at the same time to apologize for the pitfalls of such a way of reading, for we are treading on dangerous ground when we seek to establish such links across the gulf of 600 years. Even Richard J. Utz, a prime proponent of literary nominalism, acknowledges the way in which critics’ desire to find a correlation in the Middle Ages with current post-modern linguistics might make their case too strongly. He gives the example of Stephen Knight whose “notion of Chaucer as a ‘modern’ writer is somewhat anachronistic and shows that the literary nominalism paradigm, like other paradigms, has also produced its share of venturesome applications” (210). Another example of “venturesome applications:”

The lure for twentieth-century critical readers of late-medieval English texts to detect within the maze of alterity something attuned to their own perceptions of art, language, and the world was most recently demonstrated when J. Stephen Russell was taken to task for attributing to both Occam and Chaucer a “linguistic relativism” and

for styling them as post-Suassurian linguists (ibid.).

Clearly, Utz offers these cases as extreme, but I would say that this serves to remind us that we must ever be wary of solipsism in Medieval studies.

So, the fact remains to be established whether or not Chaucer was actively a nominalist, or anything else, after all, he was a poet not a theologian or a philosopher. Certainly we can find just as much evidence to link him to the writers he admired and their views on language such as Dante and Petrarch. We can be certain, based upon evidence in his texts, that this debate did touch him in significant ways and my reading certainly places Chaucer’s relationship to language somewhere between the realists and the nominalists. That is, although I find his work to point to such essentials as virtue, religious consolation, and resurrection of the eternal soul through allegory, yet I do suggest that Chaucer’s manipulation of the authoritative works of Ovid and Boethius, the misguided experience of the Black Knight, and the narrator’s obstinate unreflectiveness, all add up to a deep sense of the inadequacy of language to address the topic of the death of Duchess Blanche from plague some eight years before the composition of the poem. Whatever Chaucer’s true sympathies were, my reading is certainly a product of my time and situation, but it might serve, after 600 years, to my advantage, rather than distancing me from the spirit of the age in which Chaucer composed this poem.

Chaucer, plausibly a man of some religious scruples, encodes, in *The Book of the Duchess*, the notion that faith is the real crux of consolation and happiness and that language can only bring people nearer to comprehending that faith, but it can never represent it adequately. Chaucer’s poem emphasizes the deficiencies of text and speech and privileges non-verbal imagery, such as light, song, nature and virtue, in order to suggest to the audience, by conjuring up associations rather than employing explication, that they hold within themselves

a knowledge of Blanche's true virtue, and, by extension, the understanding that she lives after death and so can be remembered with joy. Grief and pain are, like language itself, a means of achieving a higher state of understanding but are not to be dwelt upon. This is the poem's true consolation: a rescue from despair.

Readings which latch onto the Boethian motif in the poem, such as those of the older Kittredge, Robertson and Huppé, and extended by the more recent works of Grudin, Rambuss, and Thundy, are persuasive, yet they must be qualified by two important ideas: first, that Chaucer's allusions and allegorical structure might in fact be subverting or challenging, rather than following or supporting, the philosophy of the "auctors" from whom he borrows inspiration. Second, the indeterminacy of the poem on the topic of consolation cannot be neatly put aside. Chaucer's narrator's avoidance of interpretation and the reluctance to name the ultimate source of consolation, except by euphemism, is significant and indicates Chaucer's reflexive sense of the limits of verbal communication. Although Huppé and Robertson acknowledge the way the poem invites the reader/auditor to fill in the silences when they write: "The implications which arise from the poem are more powerful than any direct statement of them could be," (Huppé, Robertson 100), they do not grapple with the potential hermeneutics of such a way of writing. In short, they fail to examine the way in which Chaucer himself might be making a novel statement about the act of reading, telling, and writing and their power to offer, not total consolation, but only a potential means by which to achieve it.

Interestingly, the criticism of the last twenty years, despite the influences of such "pro-subversion" schools as Deconstruction and New Historicism, and the nominalist debate, have remained supportive of the consolatory impulse of the text, and they too find the nature of that consolation sufficiently manifested in the language of the work itself. These readings do not contradict my own conclusions about the insufficiency of

the Boethian dialogue between the Black Knight and the dreamer/narrator, I do believe that Chaucer implies consolation, but none of them focuses upon the issue of narrative itself. Some of the works recognize the narrative gaps and silences in the poem, but none of them considers the possibility that this is a conscious device employed by Chaucer in order to avoid a sort of artistic hubris. Of course, part of their problem is that they search too hard for consolation and fail to take a step back and try to see what other philosophical forces are working upon Chaucer’s sense of his own task. Although he is offering this poem at a memorial service for the Duchess Blanche, he still is, as they probably are, aware that the poet, a dealer in words, is limited by the very tools of his trade. It is perhaps a gentler version of Plato’s Republic: the poet is tolerated, but his powers, as everybody knows, do not sufficiently attain the “forms” of the Middle Ages, which would be knowledge of the divine through faith, nor does he supersede the Medieval “philosopher king,” Christ himself. Nominalist readings clearly embrace the subversion of narrative, but again, I would resist their readings if they posit that *The Book of the Duchess* does not, at its core, indicate a correspondence to some essential truths.

The most useful of contemporary readings appear to be those which aim to view the text deconstructively and/or psychoanalytically. Typically, they read with respect to Medieval contexts, albeit with the infusion of more modern notions of the mind and language. The contemporary pieces I will engage in my argument are generally concerned with the function of discourse in the poem. Michaela Paasche Grudin’s chapter on dream visions highlights the uses of different types of discourse in the text, book, testimony, and dream, and the way they function reciprocally. My ideas about the active role of the audience, as well as the interplay of different acts of telling and listening, are inspired by this essay. Richard Rambuss considers the connection between the Medieval definition of “apocalypse” as “revelation” and the

psychological function of that revelation on the part of both dreamer/narrator and Black Knight, this, and his discussion of Medieval theosophy, have served very well as a springboard for my arguments. Each of these works, plus earlier authorities from Augustine to C. S. Lewis to Huppé and Robertson, have fashioned my interpretation of the limitations of language implied by the poem because they are all inherently skeptical about the effectiveness of language in consolation, albeit in a somewhat theoretically conservative vein. Of the literary nominalists, Kathryn Lynch and Hugo Keiper's writings on Chaucer's dream poetry have also been very illuminating.

Throughout the poem, Chaucer relies upon his audience's knowledge of certain texts (as will be explored below) and their ability to glimpse something beyond the mere words he is saying. This notion of the higher faculties of the auditor, as Rambuss suggests, is influenced by Boethius' Lady Philosophy and her discourse on "intelligence." The definition of "intelligence" is adapted by Chaucer directly out of Boethius: it is the faculty of humans that supercedes reason, imagination and emotion, it is the faculty that brings one nearest to comprehending the divine. So, although Chaucer seems to ultimately reject the Boethian dialectical method here, that is, the ability of a philosophical dialogue to assuage deep grief, he does owe some of his motivation to Lady Philosophy's ideas about intelligence. Rambuss looks to Chaucer's own translation of Boethius to show how Chaucer himself not only understood this term, but also to show how he literally imported his own conception of it into his translation of Boethius' Consolation:

...but intelligence, that looketh al aboven...useth  
nat nor of resoun ne of ymaginacioun ne of wit  
withoute-forth; but it beholdeth alle thingis, so  
I schal seie, by strook of thought formerly  
withoute discours or collacioun (677, Rambuss'  
italics).

Rambuss identifies the italicized “without discours or collacioun” as being Chaucer’s own addition: it is not in Boethius. I do not agree with Rambuss that this necessarily equals “subversion” (I rather think that that is abusing Chaucer with our 20th Century point of view), but nonetheless, it certainly indicates and supports what I have begun to hint at: that Chaucer has a keen sense of the boundary of his own art of poetry as well as of the written or spoken word in general. Rambuss continues: “It [the above passage] raises the question, even as Lady Philosophy speaks, whether *intelligentia* can be communicated through her words or through any text at all...[it] is not only non-material, but extra-linguistic as well (677).” So, the highest form of consolation must be beyond what even Boethius could explain. Truth or faith exists, but it is beyond the scope of ordinary comprehension. Herein lie some of the errors of past scholarship in supposing that Chaucer’s allusion to Boethius can be easily paralleled in terms of consolation. Just because Boethius’ narrator could be consoled by the language of philosophy doesn’t mean that Chaucer expects the same results from his writings. Indeed, the Narrator is unlike the lecturing Lady Philosophy, he merely listens whereas she corrects and explains. Furthermore, since the writings of Ovid and the other classical writers are being reconfigured in the Middle Ages to reflect the light of Christian revelation, so too might Chaucer be imbuing Boethius with a higher wisdom. It is important to stress that Boethius was much admired by Medieval thinkers, and popular through the Renaissance, but it was inconclusive if he was indeed a Christian. Chaucer, given the occasion of the poem’s reading and its heavily Christian context and imagery, posits a religious consolation, not a philosophical one. As C. S. Lewis writes in Boethius’ voice: “*I wrote philosophically, not religiously, because I had chosen the consolations of philosophy, not those of religion, as my subject*” (78, my italics). Thus, the heavy reliance upon language and rational argument is

appropriate for Boethius and his concerns with the nature of justice and fortune in this world, but Chaucer wants to guide the reader, and the Black Knight, beyond the cares of the temporal world into the contemplation of eternity and heaven, and hence, mere language is insufficient.

The poem asks the audience to look outside itself: beyond its loss and grief or the turnings of fortune into another realm and to a “phisicien” other than mere philosophy. In this way, the Black Knight is every mourner who must eventually pass from grief, by remembering the virtues of Blanche, into a consolation based upon faith. But this consolation lies always outside of the text. That is perhaps why Chaucer chooses the dream-allegory form: both are, by definition, a step removed from waking reality and perception and, thus, supersede the normal constraints of language and reason which prevent intuition of the divine nature of things. Keiper writes: “Chaucer’s dream poems confront us with teasingly iridescent, scintillating images of a reality that is basically seen as refracted and always at a remove from the authenticity or unmediated experience” (226). Ambiguity in the dream’s identification and interpretation supports the thesis that Chaucer is deliberately playing with different types of “discours and collacioun” in order to show their limitations. The meaning of the dream can only be understood in the process of dreaming it, or in the very process of his audience’s hearing it recounted, just as the metaphorical relationships of allegory cannot always be verbally explained. Chaucer not only emphasizes that discourse, of any kind, requires interaction and reciprocity, dreamer to Black Knight, story to reader, poem to audience, truth to allegory, but designs the narration so that the hearer/reader can only find meaning in terms of what is implicit in the language (Grudin, 27-35). Indeed, most of what is left to the intuitive comprehension of the reader is not even stated, much less glossed, in the language of the text. The dreamer, like the audience, can only recount what he has



seen in the dream and what he did before and after it in plain language, commenting on the novelty and beauty of what he has dreamed and recalling emotional responses to reading the story of Seys and Alcyone, hearing the Knight’s story, that is, sense and emotion, but only as a means to a larger end, something outside the act of narration. The dreamer wakes and feels compelled to recall what he has dreamed, but he resists interpreting it.

When one looks at the tradition of English dream poetry, one finds that from the *Dream of the Rood*, to *Piers Plowman*, and beyond, dream visions are explicitly tied to religious allegory, signaling an awakening for the dreamer who moves from error to illumination and deepened faith. This is perhaps the only narrative form Chaucer isn’t subverting: in other words, although the dreamer is curiously silent, the moral message of the dream experience is still resonant for the audience who move from the error in despair, as does the dreamer, to the illumination of faith in an eternal soul. Chaucer derives much of this from the Old Testament and such sources as Macrobius’ *Dream of Scipio*.

The dreamer, the Black Knight, and the audience are then all drawn through this simple narration so that they can pass from an indulgent, self-centered mourning, close to the sin of despair, like that of the narrator and Knight initially, into a more considered reflection of Blanche herself and the eternal qualities that she was widely understood to possess. In this way, the Boethian parallel works, as we follow the Black Knight from confused grumbling against fate (reminiscent of other Ovidian writings), to a full revelation of “White’s” personal worthiness and the sanctity of their love, and, finally, his departure to the proverbial white castle upon the hill. Huppé and Robertson’s exegesis is tremendously useful in piecing together the Knight’s progress from youthful frustration in love to his mature recognition of Blanche’s virtues. The Knight’s reliance on imperfect auctoritee is transformed by the experience of sharing the story of his

grief, revealing to him, albeit implicitly, an intelligence about the redemptive qualities of true love. Perhaps the Knight comes to doubt the worth of his own experience as he tells the dreamer about it, that is, he realizes as he speaks that he is describing a woman who assuredly has been granted eternal life for her virtues. And, even if he and the dreamer remain obtuse, the audience who hears the poem is surely not. The Knight's experience of sorrow parallels the audience's expression of sorrow, and both outpourings lead to the recognition of Blanche's virtues -- if she were not good, who would mourn for her? -- and ultimately the celebration of her life after death in heavenly grace. Huppé and Robertson write:

The loss of Blanche must be seen not as a loss of a gift of Fortune but as an inspiration. It is important, moreover, not that the dreamer specifically be led to see this, but that the audience of the poem be led to understand it. The subject of the poem is not the poet, but the Duchess whom it eulogizes (53).

What needs to be stressed is that the poem, quite self-consciously, resists explicitly making this point. At no moment is the idea of heaven, resurrection, eternal love, or the divine nature of Blanche's immortal virtues directly mentioned. They are only suggested by the continual shortcomings of text and speech, whether it be experience or auctoritee: consolation occurs when the audience, like the dreamer and the Black Knight, can glimpse, by an intuitive understanding of the poem, what is indicated through its imagery and allusions. (Keiper, 222-223)

The playful delineation of discourse in the dream form and the Knight's story-telling can be categorized among those gaps of "experience." Other discourses conjured and transcended by the poem are the "auctoritees:" namely, what is written down in poetry and philosophy. So far, we have looked at Boethius and the boundaries of philosophical authority, the paradoxically extra-linguistic revelations of the audience, and the

Knight and the dreamer/narrator’s unreflective experience. As Lewis and Huppé-Robertson have written, the Medieval task of poets and theologians was to infuse the works of the ancients with the revelations of Christianity. The most striking image of this (and I would add one of the most beautifully written passages in Chaucer’s poetry) occurs when the dreamer “awakens” into his dream (lines 291-343). As he awakens, he sees stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the Trojan wars and the Romance of the Rose “illuminated through Christian understanding” (Huppé, Robertson 47), and that understanding is symbolically the very light which shines into the room. At the same time, the dreamer hears music of birds’ singing rising to his ears from outside.

And sooth to seyen, my chambre was  
Ful wel depyented, and with glas  
Were all the wyndowes wel yglased  
Ful clere, and nat an hoole ycrased,  
For hooly al the story of Troye  
Was in the glasynge ywroght thus,  
Of Ector and of kyng Priamus,  
Of Achilles and of kyng Lamedon,  
And eke of Medea and of Jason,  
Of Paris, Eleyne, and of Lavyne.  
And alle the walles with colours fyne  
Were peynted, bothe text and glose,  
Of al the Romaunce of the Rose.  
My wyndowes were shette echon,  
And through the glas the sonne shon  
Upon my bed with bryghte bemes,  
With many glade gilde stremes (lines 321-338)

That Chaucer chooses to embody enlightenment in sunlight and music reinforces the point that the dreamworld is a liminal space where meaning is rarefied by other ways of knowing: it lies beyond the narratives suggested by the antique stories, or any “stories” at all. Music occurs again to illustrate the Knight’s over-reliance upon the material world of sense and word, emphasized

by the lay he recites “without noute, withoute song” (line 472). The Knight’s song is important in relation to Chaucer’s use of lyric in the poem. Sections of *The Book of the Duchess* contain borrowed paraphrases of Froissart and Machaud, and, certainly, Ovid was molded by many Medieval writers into a lyric poet of sorts. Here, for the Knight, the lyric form with its narcissism, pathos, and emphasis upon secular love, is exposed as somehow sterile, almost absurdly rendered by the self-indulgent Black Knight. His own story of love and loss has yet to be infused with melody, with the revelatory light like that in the narrator’s dream-room. Similarly, the narrator’s opening remarks are heavily reliant upon Chaucer’s borrowings, indicating how these works tend to indulge feelings of sorrow and despair, as the narrator does in the beginning of the poem, rather than lead the reader to something beyond himself, and hence, to healing.

It is curious that the dreamer awakens to the classics and the light immediately after reading the Seys and Alcyone story. The Seys and Alcyone story is the most central and lengthy of the classical sources evoked, and the manner in which Chaucer alters it and places it is extremely important in terms of his greater position on narrative and language. The most obvious alteration is the elimination of the transformation of the despairing (and in Chaucer’s version, dead), Alcyone and the drowned Seys into a couple of birds. Rambuss says: “By denying them [Seys and Alcyone] their miraculous reunion after death, *The Book of the Duchess* is also denying its readers the solace available in this rare Ovidian exemplum of mutual love’s power to overcome even the grave” (670). I disagree with Rambuss’ assertion that this alteration makes the whole message of the poem non-consolatory, rather, I see its elimination as both an indication of the narrator’s internal state and a sign to the audience who, presumably, know this story and the reunion of the lovers after death. He is correct, however, to point out that this is again an example of “*the inability of verbal means, and of the imaginative faculty, what*

*Augustine terms the visio imaginativa, to effect any sort of lasting consolation*” (671, italics mine). The ending of the story is merely left for us to fill in, and the imagery of the light streaming through the windows does, in retrospect, cast the Seys and Alcyone ending in its own light and is consoling because the story now signifies a great essential truth: that the couple united in marriage will be resurrected into eternal life.

Just as the stories of antiquity are illumined by the light of divinity, so is the redemptive, celebratory ending of Ovid’s tale subtly revealed in the dream vision as the Black Knight comes closer to his own “intelligence.” The dreamer’s corruption of the text serves as a signal of sorts to the audience, many of whom would have been familiar with the tales of Ovid. That is, Chaucer deliberately over-emphasizes the pathos and tragedy of the story, not only to reflect the dreamer’s (and later the Knight’s) mental anguish, but to cause mistrust in the act of glossing or retelling stories. Just as we are meant to read beyond the philosophical wisdom of Boethius and beyond the seeming obtuseness of the “experience” of the Knight and the narrator, so too are we lead to read beyond the “auctoritee” of the poets themselves. And so, the Ovid text is carefully paralleled in the dream allegory, and although the resurrection is never made explicit because of Chaucer’s cautionary stance toward auctoritee, the process of relating the dream encodes the consolation of the tale.

The parallels between the tales are interesting to note. When the dreamer first sees the Knight he seems, “Ful piteous pale and nothing red” (line 470). This corresponds to the appearance of Seys dead in the waters: “Ful pale and nothing roddy” (line 143). One of Chaucer’s omissions from the Ovidian tale as the narrator relates it is Seys’ poignant exclamations of love even as he drowns in the waves (Ovid 276-277). The force of Seys’ love is reintroduced in the form of the Black Knight who is, as we know, suffering over the loss of his much beloved Duchess. Interestingly, the dreamer

symbolically aligns himself with Alcyone, for we find them both in bed “al naked”: she, before the vision of her husband (line 125), he, as he awakens into the dream world (line 293).

Interestingly, like the music and the sunlight, the major symbol of rebirth and immortality is also without verbal language: birds become the representation of eternal love, as well as life after death. As Huppé and Robertson point out, the Knight’s comparison of the Duchess to the phoenix implies rebirth:

To the Christian the resurrection of the Phoenix was a symbol of hope in the Resurrection. In the same way the death of Blanche should be a source of hope rather than despair to the Knight. The comparison should remind him that his lady has not died, but lives (77).

Birds signify the Duchess’ resurrection, and, of course, make the connection with the bird imagery in the Seys and Alcyone story: they are reborn as birds who live together by the sea. Chaucer has inscribed the “actual” text of the story into the dream so that the listeners might be focused upon the idea of Blanche’s eternal goodness and the possibility that those persons who truly love her and whom she truly loved can never be separated from her. By placing the images of birds inside the dream rather than in the frame story, Chaucer also emphasizes the Medieval idea of rereading the “auctors” of the past through the light of Christian revelation. Indeed, one can envision the whole dream saturated with the same sunlight that streams in through the dreamer’s window. This light must be perceived by the audience by their intelligence and in their ability to reconstruct the narratives in their own minds, because the message of eternity and resurrection are never explicitly articulated in the poem. Again, I want to point out that this departs from readings which might suggest that the whole Seys and Alcyone story deconstructs here. Rather, I find that Chaucer’s “skepticism” is limited to the ultimate communicative power of language, but not necessarily to

the power of what is implied by allegory and by conjuring up this tale in the minds of the listeners. The privileging of images of nature and light at the very least must be seen as an attempt to indicate the power of extra-linguistic symbols or signs, however implicitly the message is conveyed, these are the means to comprehending it.

The Black Knight’s memory of his bliss on earth with the Duchess is another instance where the immortality of love is evoked. Although the image of the mated birds in Ovid is not directly alluded to here, when one reads the two passages side by side, one can hardly fail to see their similarities. The Knight says:

Therewyth she was alway so trewe  
Our joye was ever ylyche newe;  
Oure hertes wern so evene a payre  
That never nas that oon contrayre  
To that other for no woo  
Al was us oon, withoute were.  
And thus we lived ful many a yere  
So wel I kan nat tell how (lines 1288-1299).

He describes a perfect coupling of hearts that he ultimately cannot even express fully in words. The ending of Ovid’s tale where Alcyone and Seys are transformed evokes the same feeling of the power of love:

No one could say  
Whether Ceyx felt those kisses and responded,  
Or whether it was the lift of the waves alone  
That made him rise his face. But he felt them,  
And through the pity of the gods, the husband  
Became a bird, and joined his wife. Together  
They suffered, and together loved; no parting  
Followed them in their new-found form as birds  
(line 282) .

In our poem, the main difference is that the love experienced during life on earth as human beings is the only thing that can be linguistically expressed. Ovid’s union clearly describes a mystical rebirth, but Chaucer chooses not to explicitly represent this through language.

Ovid writes from the authorial, editorial third person, but Chaucer's parallel not only remains earthbound but is told from the point of view of an unreliable first person account. The Knight "kan nat tell how," and the poet must communicate "as I kan best," but no human being can actually verbalize or communicate in writing what happens to the lovers in the afterlife, hence Ovid is truncated and reworked: used, like Boethius, but not granted full authority.

Chaucer then was resisting the urge to become himself an "auctoritee" or to bring even his own experience to bear upon the poem. The editorial voice is silent in most of the frame story, he describes his initial mental state, but reiterates that he is recounting the dream without any real reason why. The first section of the frame makes a reference to Blanche dead "this eight year" (line 37), and here he makes mention of the "phisicien" who might heal him, "but that is don" (line 40). God, as Huppé and Robertson point out, is frequently called a phisicien of souls, but it is unclear whether or not Chaucer refers to God or to the implied lost love whom we imagine is causing his insomnia. Whatever the case, our narrator avoids details and merely shows us the scene and the dream, leaving "glose" and consolation beyond the narrative.

Chaucer's poem has changed for readers who have begun to challenge the tendency of older critics such as C. S. Lewis and the like who have maintained that there is such a thing as the "Medieval Mind," and that it is characterized by a rigid, hierarchical symbolic structure which has specific essential referents and strict social roles, usually informed by religion. That Chaucer would choose to diminish his role as author or interpreter might signal humility in the face of divine truths if it were not for the fact that he seems to challenge both auctoritee and experience while still keeping silent on the very truths he is subtly leading the hearer towards, privileging the natural world, but not glossing its revelations. Perhaps, in the end, it is both a sort of humble approach



to the task of the memorial poet and a glimmer of Chaucer’s life long preoccupation with the nature of the written word and the idiosyncratic nature of experience. The new attention critics are paying to the late Medieval debate over language and representation has certainly opened up our conception of just what exactly makes up the Medieval Mind and has given our theoretical ideas about semiotics and essentialism a particular relevance in Chaucer criticism. It is, of course, important that we resist titling Chaucer a nominalist or anything else, but the possibility that he was actively using his poetry to grapple with such questions as we are wrestling with has opened up a whole new avenue in Chaucer criticism. We have found, as it were, a Chaucer in the margins of the paradigmatic world view of his age, a poet who has survived because the liminal has always existed and now as we embrace it as the final frontier in cultural and literary studies, we find that it is perhaps the genesis of literary expression itself. To quote Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*: “I know not whether to marvel more, either that he [Chaucer] in that misty time could see so clearly, or that we in this clear age walk so stumblingly after him.”

## Notes

Indeed, nominalists do write about Chaucer’s poetry, but seem to avoid this poem. Perhaps for the reasons that I suggest, it is incompatible with strict nominalism.

I must thank Gregory B. Stone for pointing out the relevance of the issue of lyric to my argument. He is the author of *The Death of the Troubadour* which contains a chapter on *The Book of the Duchess* and deals with lyric and narrative.

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