

INTRODUCTION

The Book of the Duchess

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The *Book of the Duchess* is the first English *dit amoureux*. To anyone familiar with the narrative poetry of Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart, and before that the *Roman de la Rose* by Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris, the poem reads like an anglophone fusion of their work: a display of fourteenth-century French poetic strategies constructed around the thirteenth-century *Rose*. Chaucer was an avid reader of French poetry throughout his poetic career. Reading the *Book of the Duchess*, a supremely Anglo-French poem, reveals this with extraordinary clarity.

Anglo-French is a complex term because the relationship between English and French, the English and the French, was, and still is, full of complexity. There is humour, aggression, respect, admiration, rivalry, and familial comprehension and incomprehension in equal measure. The *Book of the Duchess* was written in the heart of the Hundred Years War when such factors were in the air with more than usual tension. Part of its fascination as a work is the way Chaucer negotiates that relationship with contemporary French poets. Poetry had a close connection to life: Machaut's *Fonteinne amoureuse* mourns the departure of the duc de Berri for England as a hostage; both he and Chaucer were conscripted as soldiers on opposite sides. Froissart, legendary chronicler of the war, spent his early poetic career somewhere in between, an Hainuyer in England, in the household of Edward III's Queen, Philippa of Hainaut.

As if war were not complex enough as a backdrop, the *Duchess* engages with another huge crisis of the time: plague. All parties in this international conflict were struggling with the frightening realities of a pandemic that hit Europe in devastating waves throughout the later part of the fourteenth century. Chaucer's poem commemorates the young wife of John of Gaunt, Blanche of Lancaster, who died of the plague. Blanche was also mourned in a poem by Froissart, and Machaut wrote in detail about the plague in his *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*. This was an extraordinary moment where poets on both sides of the channel were trying to articulate responses to these two great forms of social upheaval. In a further twist, this was a decade when each side dominated the other, but in divergent ways. English polity was seeking to capitalize on a succession of crushing military victories; culturally, in sharp contrast, its local low status vernacular was completely outshone by the linguistic and literary standing of French, not just in

INTRODUCTION

the hexagon but well beyond into *outramer*. Plague and war frame at every level Chaucer's attempt to voice an English poem on a French literary stage.

Yet, or perhaps because of its moment, the *Duchess* is also riddling and obscure. It seems to be an elegy. But this is not declared openly in the poem, and readers must puzzle out the identities of its main characters and even its purpose through anagrams, symbolism, and a veil of emotional indirection. Its 'plot' such as it is, is circular rather than linear. Towards the centre, the speaker follows a grassy path into a hidden clearing, where an encounter with 'a man in blak' (445) expresses that central emotional tension between grief and joy, longing and frustration, eloquent utterance and tongue-tied silence so familiar from earlier French love narrative and song. But the nature of the encounter is mysterious and invites many questions, as do the poem's structure and form. As we will see, this Anglo-French poem, in its very mysteries, speaks with moving contemporary power.

Both English and French

The *Duchess* is the result of someone with an almost obsessive attention to six works in particular: the *Rose* itself; Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*, *La Fonteinne amoureuse*, and his two *Jugement* narratives; and Froissart's *Le Paradys d'amour*. Many lines and plot elements receive an exact English counterpart while other parts of the *Duchess* engage with the imaginative work of translation through many brilliant and innovative strategies, emotional, sensual, political and cultural. The poem challenges a reader familiar with French love narratives to learn to understand a complex form of translation, on both a minute and a large scale.

Such an immersive translation has the effect of making the poem speak as both English and French. Calibration of the precise weighting of the English and French elements depends on the reader: from a French perspective, much is familiar: the octosyllabic couplets, the set-piece scenes in which a poet encounters his patron in a dream and engages in debate, the inset songs, luscious courtly landscapes, the colours, scents, and sounds of spring. However, the language – English – would probably be alienating to a medieval contemporary, being the local insular vernacular of a near neighbor engaged in mass pillaging of northern French towns and villages and asserting sovereignty over the French crown. Remarks by Machaut himself and Chaucer's exact contemporary Eustache Deschamps make this clear. Machaut writes sympathetically of the duc de

INTRODUCTION

Berri how hard it would be to be locked up in England where there would be no one to talk to unless one learned English in one's prison cell (a desperate measure, he implies).¹ More favourably, the diction would have been recognized as often heavily French as well as Latinate, and the poem itself evidence of the English poet's deep involvement in his peers' poetic aspirations and unquestioned cultural success.

For the equivalent sophisticatedly literary English reader, by contrast, familiar with French and French poetry, there might be a pleasure in the translation. They would enjoy the recreation of the French genre of the *dit* into English and observe Chaucer's decision at times to track word choice closely, even slavishly, and at others to re-orient his borrowings. This is most puzzlingly, yet intriguingly evident in the poem's opening 40 lines, where Chaucer turns the first 6 or 7 lines of Froissart's *Le Paradys d'amours* into the distracted frayages of an English 'je' who cannot sleep and whose mind is full of empty, depressive thoughts. In this opening monologue the speaker wanders between intellectual French and seemingly vacuous English, from 'ymaginacioun' to 'thyng'. The English rhymes and fillers echo Middle English romances, themselves largely translated from French but into formulaic English idioms such as 'as I gesse' (35)... 'leef nor looth' (8)... 'but that is don' (40). For both French and English medieval readers, in short, Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* would seem both familiar and strange, its English features dressed in French style, its French design expressed in an English accent. To understand this poem requires a sense of what it is like to write poetry from both sides of the channel.

Social and historical circumstances

None of Chaucer's poems can be dated with any precision. No documents outside his own poetry and a few references in contemporary poetry refer to him as a poet. The *Duchess* is exceptional in that we can identify the much-mourned Lady 'White' as Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who died in 1368 of the plague, aged only 22, leaving three young children (two died in infancy).² She was the first wife of King Edward III's fourth son, John of Gaunt. Through her inheritance from her father Henry of Lancaster, Gaunt became fabulously wealthy. Gaunt's

¹ *Le Confort d'ami*, 2843-50 (check in Hoepffner).

² Chaucer himself refers to the poem as 'the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse' in the Prologue of the Legend of Good Women (F, 418, G 406).

INTRODUCTION

affection for her seems possible from instructions that Blanche should be commemorated in an annual supper; and that he should be buried beside her in St Paul's Cathedral, despite the fact that he re-married twice, first, for reasons of polity in 1371 to Constanza of Castile and second, in 1396, to his longtime companion, Kathryn Swynford, Chaucer's sister-in-law.³ But other identifications in the *Duchess* are less straightforward, and this makes the exact date hard to gauge. Apart from Blanche (and even she is named only in translation), Chaucer's poem does not name anyone plainly. There is also no direct evidence that the poem was commissioned.⁴ Modern scholars have therefore not come to any consensus about whether the *Duchess* was composed *as* an elegy, and if so, for what kind of occasion. The most likely occasion, the anniversary supper, presents the problem that Gaunt was out of the country and could not attend it before 1371, by which time he had a second wife.⁵ Few disagree, though, that the poem, although it evades a formal status as elegy, performs a tribute to Blanche and in that respect acknowledges her abrupt and untimely death in a time of overwhelming collective fear and grief. Most hypotheses place the work between 1368 and 1374.

Delving a little more into the wider social circumstances of its composition reveals further ways in which the *Duchess* borrows and yet displaces French precedents. Blanche's death was part of a royal crisis of loss in England in the late 1360s: her father, Henry of Lancaster, and her only sister both died in the same outbreak; a few months after the Queen herself died. A formal elegy was written for Queen Philippa but by her protégé Froissart, not Chaucer, and in French, not English.⁶ Froissart also wrote formal commemorative words for Blanche and for Philippa in his dit *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*. The portrait of Blanche composed by Chaucer by contrast are uttered, not as his own words of public mourning but as a long speech of praise of 'White' by an unnamed 'man in blak'. It's interesting that what he imitates here is

³ It is not known when their liaison began; it may have been after Blanche's death since their first child was born in 1371. It continued until Gaunt's death in 1399 and produced 4 children, who were legitimised as a result of their marriage, made possible by Constanza's death in March 1394.

⁴ Chaucer received an unspecified gift from John of Gaunt in 1374, which some scholars have linked to the poem's composition.

⁵ Gaunt married Constanza of Castile in September 1371.

⁶ Lay de la mort de la royne d'Angleterre.

INTRODUCTION

Machaut's habit of naming himself and his poetic subjects through anagrams and riddles. The *Remede de Fortune*, for example, alludes in this way to Bonne of Luxembourg, daughter of Jean, duc de Behaigne and wife of Jean le Bon, who herself died of plague in 1349, along with her mother-in-law Jeanne of Burgundy.⁷ Casting her as his object of love Machaut describes her as 'ma dame, qui est clamee/De tous seur toutes belle et bonne./Chascun par droit ce non li donne.' (54-56, W&K, p.34).⁸ Chaucer likewise says of White:

And good faire White she het;
That was my lady name right.
She was bothe fair and bryght;
She hadde not her name wrong. (948-51)

He adds further riddles placed towards the end of the poem, alluding to John of Gaunt, Blanche's husband. Chaucer seems intrigued by the symbolic potential of naming this royal woman and her milieu not overtly or formally, but by means of two oblique literary strategies: translation and the powerful coding of white and black.

Genre and structure

As a poem of mourning, the *Duchess* is far more explicitly framed as a love narrative than as an elegy, where sorrow emerges from thwarted desire rather than death. Its features are shared by some ten fourteenth-century French *dits amoureux*, some of which may have been composed in response to it. In a nutshell, a *dit* begins with an autobiographical introduction modelled on the *Rose*, follows this with an exemplary story (usually several), and then moves into a dream or allegorical adventure about love set in a garden in springtime. Songs may be scattered into this outline performed by the poet-narrator, by the figures he encounters, by his patron. The ending is often loose or unresolved: the love problem is expressed and debated, advice and sympathy are offered, but desire translates into joy only provisionally, if at all.

⁷ all three of whom were important patrons of Machaut

⁸ As W&K point out (34), he says she was to him 'mestresse bonne' who taught him in a 'bonne escole', lines 268-69 and 3816-17.

INTRODUCTION

Chaucer creates a structure that is seemingly even more episodic and yet (as we later discern) tightly controlled. In a long desultory opening monologue, the poet declares that he suffers from acute and chronic insomnia. He picks up a book to read to help him doze off, and tells the plot with energetic enthusiasm: it is the story of Ceyx and Alcyone from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ceyx, a king, is drowned on a sea journey. His Queen, Alcyone, distraught with anxiety when he fails to return, dreams, with the help of Juno and of Morpheus - god of sleep - that her husband's dead body comes to tell her that he has died and that she will never see him again. Fainting with pain and sorrow she utters a single cry 'allas', and dies herself within 3 days. Deciding to pray to Morpheus himself, the poet-narrator falls asleep over the book and finds himself dreaming. He wakes, on a brilliant spring morning loud with birdsong, with the sunlight streaming onto his bed through windows painted with richly coloured images from the *Roman de la Rose*. Hearing a hunting horn, he jumps up, mounts a horse and goes in search of the hunt. He joins the party as it chases down a hart, but they lose the trail after a long time and are eventually forced to call off the attempt for the time being. Left alone again, he is discovered by a puppy and follows it as it scampers off through thick woods and grass. Here, in a clearing, by a huge oak, he notices a young man dressed in black, in great distress, and hears him reciting a song in which he blames death for not having taken him as well when he took his lady. The knight faints with grief. Coming up behind him, the poet (in his dream) offers a few polite remarks. Although the knight is unwilling to engage in these social niceties, the poet-dreamer presses him gently as to why he is so troubled and offers to help in any way he can. The knight explains at some length how Fortune has played a game of chess with him and checkmated him. The poet-dreamer tries to interrupt and say something comforting, the knight retorts, three times altogether, that he doesn't know what he is talking about, for the knight has lost far more than the poet-dreamer imagines. Undeterred, the dreamer persists in his gentle questioning: in response, the knight explains how he fell in love with a lady called White, describes her many beautiful and noble qualities, and then that she granted him her love.

Thus far, the Duchess seems a fairly classic, perhaps slightly disjointed and meandering version of a *dit amoureux*. It's the ending of the poem that suddenly disrupts this sense of dream-like vagueness with a rapid sequence of motifs of closure that have the effect of pulling the skeins of thread tight and snapping the spell. After one final interruption to ask where she is, the knight's long eulogy abruptly ceases in one short stichomythic line shared by both speakers:

'She ys ded!' Nay! Yis, be my trouthe!

INTRODUCTION

‘Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!’ (1310).

No more is said, the hunt strikes off home to a nearby castle, a bell is tolled, and the dreamer wakes, lying in his own bed with the book of Ceyx and Alcyone in his hand. He resolves to turn his dream into rhyme and declares it done. In these few final riddling couplets, Chaucer collapses the poem’s linearity into a circle. The dreaming of the dream about a death, prompted by a book that told of the dreaming of a dream about a death, ends with the book in the dreamer’s hand, who turns it into another book. A book of a dream of a death.

The circularity of song

In the final part of this introduction, I want to suggest that Chaucer uses song to express the dark emotions of grief and fear that frame his poem of mourning. Again he draws inspiration from the longstanding predilection of French writers from the thirteenth-century onwards for casting song and narrative in mutual relief. Modern readers have been so puzzled by the man in black’s little song. Why is it said not sung? What form is it? why is it so short and unassuming? Most of all, why, since the knight says so plainly ‘my lady...is fro me ded and ys agoon’ does the poet-dreamer spend the next few hundred lines asking the knight insistently why he is grieving? He heard him clearly and even memorized the song, giving us the words in full. The most brilliantly convincing answers point to the constant play on literal and figurative meanings in the poem as a whole, the black and white symbols of the chess game, and the deep pun on hart and heart. In brief, the poet-dreamer keeps asking the knight to be more and more literal, unless finally he blurts out the truth he has already uttered (in the song). The expressive power of this outburst is brought about by the poet-dreamer, whose questions create an extended time and space for the knight to repeat the utterance of his loss.

I want to extend these readings by pointing to other forms of recapitulation in the narrative. Going back to the ending, as we read the final line we realise that time has played a trick: there has been no time for the dreamer to write the book, he has only just finished dreaming. And yet a moment’s further thought shows us that the dream *was* the book, just as the book *was* the dream. Such circular patterning permeates the dream’s, the book’s structure. Each motif of closure recalls an earlier iteration of that motif: the hunt had already lost its way well before, the hart had already escaped. The man in black had already said she was dead, in the song that the poet-dreamer had

already heard. The eulogy had already been interrupted, three times, with an exactly repeated refrain. The abrupt disappearance of the grieving man in black once he utters those words of death had already happened in the death of Alcyone, whose ‘allas’ prefigured her death.

Alcyone’s “allas” makes us aware of another circular rhythm in the *Duchess*: the unbroken alternation of eloquence and raw, anguished silence. This pattern links the poet-narrator at the opening of the poem to Alcyone, to the man in black, and back to the poet-narrator. At the centre is the song that announces White’s death, buried in plain sight, and treated subsequently as if it had not been uttered. In all these reiterative patterns Chaucer is reinforcing and re-ordering French motifs. As we read, and re-read, we find that other centres emerge: the loss of the hart, the luminous colours of the sunlit *Rose*. Or to put it another way, other points of origin emerge: the Ovidian story, the agitated silence that precedes sleep, death, and the expression of grief; the moment when consciousness is either lost or poetically retrieved.

French in English

French readers of Chaucer have many reasons to enjoy and admire the *Duchess*, especially in translation. But it is good to be aware that it is already in translation as a poem written in English. Chaucer’s English seems uncertain whether to be insecure or assertive. One reason for this ambivalence might be that Chaucer’s own role in the English court was less clear than Froissart’s. Froissart has more claim to be regarded as an English court poet than Chaucer, since his role as a poet in Philippa’s household is clearly attested unlike Chaucer’s, described instead as an esquire.⁹ Froissart’s love narratives, like Chaucer’s, were immersed in the language and imagination of Machaut’s *dits*, and his *Paradys d’amours*, in particular, with *La Fonteinne amoureuse* and the *Remede de Fortune*. Yet where *La Fonteinne amoureuse* depicts a moment of political exchange, Froissart’s *Paradys*, written on the other side of the channel, celebrates Froissart’s new role as a poet in England engaged in cultural exchange. In drawing so fully from both poets’ work, Chaucer places himself between them, writing an English poem, in English, that pays deep homage to poetry in French, and in so doing speaks to a complexly intertwined identity.

⁹ It was he, rather than Chaucer, for instance, who wrote an epithalamion, *Le Temple d'Honneur*, for Humphrey X of Bohun and Jeanne d'Arundel.

INTRODUCTION

The painful topic of death from plague adds further tension to an already complex task. Chaucer leaned on Machaut to provide a framework for that fear of contagious death that is so powerfully present in the prologue to the *Jugement dou roy de Navarre*. Yet it was Froissart whose opening lines of his first new English poem were the model for Chaucer's own entry into international writing. Ironically, perhaps, Chaucer did not choose to write formally, or even with plain linearity. Instead he took the winding, circuitous route into the hidden, secret place of grief, where one loses direction but gains sympathy, becomes unable to speak and so stays close to the script of song and mourning.

FURTHER READING

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