

The Book of the Duchess

The Book of the Duchess is an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who died of the plague on September 12, 1369. At that time her husband the Duke, John of Gaunt, was campaigning on the continent, whence he did not return until November 3. He established an annual memorial service to be held each year at St. Paul's, London, arranged for a tomb for Blanche and for himself to be erected there, and endowed two chantry priests to sing masses daily. As we learn from Froissart, Blanche was an extremely attractive young woman, and at the time of her death she was among the highest ranking ladies at the English court. Chaucer's poem was probably (although not certainly) used in connection with one of the annual services, perhaps in 1374, when the Duke was able to attend for the first time. In any event, the poem should be thought of as a part of a ceremony of considerable dignity and national importance held for members of the royal and Lancastrian households and great men of London. Briefly, as the poem opens, the speaker, echoing the words of Froissart, describes himself as being overcome by "sorrowful ymaginacioun" and unable to sleep. After reading the Ovidian tale of Seys and Alcyone (somewhat altered to suit the purposes of the poem), he is enabled to fall asleep. In a dream he awakens

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at dawn to hear birds singing a "solempne servise." His chamber is decorated with scenes from the story of Troy, which appears the windows, and the "text and glose" of the *Roman de la Rose* which appears on the walls. Riding out, he witnesses the beginning of a hunt, led by "th'emperour Octovyen." After being led by a whelp through an earthly paradise, he finds a beardless Black Knight under an oak. The Knight sings a tuneless lament for his deceased beloved that the dreamer apparently overhears. But the dreamer, feigning ignorance, questions him at length. He discovers that the Knight has lost his "bliss" in a chess game wit Fortune. In youth he gave himself up to love and idleness, saw his lady, and was overcome by her beauties and virtues. They are described at length in what has sometimes been called the "elegy proper." When he approached her first, awkward and ashamed, she would have nothing to do with him. "Another yere," when she realized his good intentions, he was granted mercy and thereafter lived under her "governance." On further questioning, he admits that his lady is dead. The "hert-huntyng" is over, the king rides to a "long castel" on a rich hill wherein bell strikes twelve, and the dreamer awakens. The poem contains many echoes of fashionable French poetry, and is enlivened by touches of humor.

Modern discussions of the poem usually follow, in general outline, the account of G. L. Kittredge (1915), wherein the Knight identified as the bereaved John of Gaunt, is described as being "finished gentleman," whereas the dreamer is naive, full of "child-like wonder," and "stupefied by long suffering." Kittredge regarded love as "the only life that became the gently nurtured" so that "submission to the god [of Love] was their natural duty" (p. 63). He felt that the dream itself was "near to the actual phenomena of dream life." Following this general outline, H. R. Patch (1939) called the dreamer a "poor dolt" (p. 29) and described the poem in colorful terms, saying that it is "full of the high frivolity of Courtly Love." Kittredge's views were repeated by H. S. Bennett (1947), but he also expressed some dissatisfaction with the poem. It is, he said, structurally faulty, containing much

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that is "derivative and crude," and lacking in "profound emotion or any piercing thought" (p. 36). Adverse criticism also appeared in the discussion of J.S.P. Tatlock (1950), where the poem is said to be repetitious and dilatory, and the dreamer, who is here not Chaucer, indifferent to "human reality" (p. 30). The dreamer continued to suffer in the discussion of Kemp Malone (1951), where his lack of awareness is said to be an inconsistency on Chaucer's part. Malone also asserted that Chaucer was forced to turn the marriage of John of Gaunt (the Black Knight) into "an extra-marital love affair for the sake of the conventions of courtly love" (p. 40). The dream, he said, is "realistic."

Kittredge's "naive" dreamer has not lacked defenders, however, and the integrity of the poem has been vigorously supported. James R. Kreuzer (1951) denied the dreamer's naiveté altogether, refusing to identify the dreamer and the speaker (pp. 544-5). The dreamer's lack of awareness, he explained, was "consciously contrived" to enable him to administer a cathartic remedy. In a long and carefully wrought article, B. H. Bronson (1952) elaborated the idea of the dreamer's "tact," at the same time describing the Knight and Blanche as ideal "courtly lovers." Here the Knight acts as a "surrogate" for the dreamer. His description of Blanche is both his own (i.e., the Duke's) and Chaucer's. However, D.S. Brewer (1953), calling attention to the public presentation of the poem and to its "conventionality," warned that it was not "a private outcry of grief nor a private consolation" (pp. 44-5). Brewer considered the humor of the poem to be largely unintentional and the portrait of Blanche to be archetypal. With some similar misgivings about Chaucer's own participation, Donald C. Baker (1955) made the description of the lady the work of a "peer" (John of Gaunt) rather than of the poet, since the expression of such noble grief was, he asserted, beyond the comprehension of the poet-dreamer. The poet's inadequacy as a personal eulogist was also emphasized by Stephen Manning (1956), but at the expense of the dreamer once more, who is said to be characterized by "nonpareil dullwittedness." In a later article (1958) Manning's dreamer still displays "customary stupidity," and the

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portrait of Blanche is said to show the influence of the troubadours and of the traditions of "courtly love."

Professor Malone's observations on extra-marital "courtly love" were answered elaborately by John Lawlor (1956), who maintained that such love, stemming from the traditions of the *Roman de la Rose*, could exist between married persons, especially in England, and that

Chaucer halted his account of the love affair at its highest point, which is not marriage but the acceptance of the lover (p. 631). This is, Lawlor assures us, the "highest earthly good," a good that the Knight has enjoyed but that the dreamer, whose love is unrequited, has not. In a briefer and more recent statement of his thesis (1966), the same author, using a hint from Bronson, makes the poet a "substitute figure for the real mourner." The dreamer is further exculpated by W. H. French (1957), for, it is said, the song he overheard might well be taken simply as a conventional lyric without specific personal application. In Charles Muscatine's treatment of the poem's style (1957), the dreamer is a lover, but the realism or "factualism" of the dream itself is seriously questioned. R.M. Lumiansky (1959) maintained, however, that the narrator in the poem suffered from bereavement, not love-longing, and that he, Alcyone, and the Knight are united in grief. An extended argument is presented to show that the poem consoles both the dreamer and the Knight. but the dreamer was severely criticized once more by Dorothy Bethurum (1959), who found him obtuse, a failure as a lover, and ignorant of currently fashionable classical lore. He was defended once more by Joseph E. Grennen (1964) for his deft "psychological maneuvering" that reflects conventional treatments of *cardiaca passio*. Finally, in a carefully reasoned article, J. Burke Severs (1964) maintained that the speaker's condition at the opening was not due to unrequited love, and that the dreamer never speaks as a lover. He, speaking for Chaucer, keeps the Black Knight talking until he can face his sorrow "in plain utterance."

These are the principal variations on the pattern of interpretation established by Professor Kittredge. The questions that have

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concerned scholars most are (1) whether the speaker at the opening suffers from unrequited love or from grief as a result of bereavement; (2) whether the dreamer is naive, or even awkward, or, on the other hand, courteous and considerate; and (3) whether the consolation is well applied, and if so how it is applied. Some of the works mentioned above, especially those of Bronson, Lawlor, Lumiansky, and Severs, contain elaborate treatments of the third question that cannot be summarized adequately in a few words. In addition to the works mentioned above, there have been at least two extensive critical appreciation's of the poem in recent years, one by Donald C. Baker (1958), using "archetypal imagery," and one by Georgia Ronan Crampon (1963). These read a little like pleasant afternoon lectures on abstract paintings, although the tendency to treat Chaucer's poem as a work of modern expressionism is by no means confined to these two essays.

There have been a number of efforts to explain specific details in the poem. John M. Steadman (1956) suggested that the "whelp" might be a symbol of marital fidelity, calling attention to dogs in Alciati's *Emblemata*, in Pierius' *Hieroglyphica*, and on late medieval funerary monuments. Beryl Rowland (1962) suggested that the "twelve ferries" may constitute a reference to the signs of the Zodiac, and that the chess game in the poem might be a variant of the standard game. She also suggested (1963) that the "round tour of yvoyre" used in the description of the lady might refer to an ivory chess piece. Turning to the "whelp," the same author (1965) found that Chaucer never commends dogs, and that the whelp may be a kind of nightmare feature of the dream hunt that acts to split the dreamer into two parts (Black Knight and interrogator). James I. Wimsatt (1967), in a careful and detailed article, has shown that the description of Blanche contains definite suggestions of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The general formulation established by Professor Kittredge was abandoned altogether by D. W. Robertson, Jr. (1962), who considered the "courtly love" that plays such a large part in the usual discussions to be, as it is there used, an irrelevant modern

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fantasy. In this account, the Black Knight is said to be no literal reflection of John of Gaunt, but the erring will of the speaker that sees the loss of the lady as the loss of a gift of Fortune, while the dreamer represents the reason. The dream thus contains a dialogue between what may be considered as two parts of the same person (pp. 463-5) who represents the mourners for Blanche. B. F. Huppé and Robertson (1963) sought to interpret the entire poem in the light of medieval literary theory, offering interpretations of many of its details on the basis of traditional iconography. Here the Knight is not the Duke but a kind of alter-ego of the dreamer, expressive of grief over the loss of Blanche as a merely physical object of desire. The details in the description of Blanche are said to reflect conventional imagery, chiefly Scriptural in origin, and to point to her spiritual virtues. Some features of this explanation were elaborated in an essay by Robertson (1965) in an attempt to place the poem in its historical setting. Chaucer's poem is here said to be consistent with the conventional themes of funerary consolation as they are implicit in *The Consolation of Philosophy* and explicit in the Mass for the Burial of the Dead. Its surface humor is attributed to the chivalric character of the audience and to the underlying idea that Chaucer had no desire to cultivate grief on an occasion of hope and inspiration. The speaker typifies the initial sorrow of all of the mourners for Blanche. The Knight and the dreamer are not "characters" but exemplifications of attitudes, so that the Knight may be dismissed as soon as the theme of the poem becomes clear. That is, "if the virtues of the Duchess were an inspiration to reasonable and noble conduct in life, her memory should continue to inspire such conduct," not the helpless sorrow of the speaker at the opening, nor the bitter grief of Alcyone, who has no hope, nor the sloth of the Man in Black, who has lost his "bliss" to Fortune and does not understand the implications of the lady's virtue, even after he has described them in his own words.

It is obvious that further contributions to our knowledge of the poem must rest on an intensive study of primary materials. We have hardly begun to understand the French sources. As the

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late Rosemond Tuve demonstrated in her study of *Allegorical Imagery* (1966), we may need to revise considerably our general estimate of even such well-known works as the *Roman de la Rose*, which is mentioned explicitly in Chaucer's poem. Again, we know very little about the meaning of the dream vision as a poetic form; it is, in any event, certainly not conducive to dream "realism" of the kind envisaged by Kittredge and Malone. Again, we are largely ignorant of the conventions of Gothic iconography as they were manifested in fourteenth-century England. Finally, there are many traits of style, attitude, and demeanor in the England of Edward III that remain

obscure. Simple readjustments of the ideas set forth in the secondary sources above without careful attention to primary materials may fatten our bibliographies, but they will not contribute substantially to our knowledge of Chaucer's work, nor to any real appreciation for it.

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Â· 306 ratings Â· 14 reviews. *The Book of the Duchess*. Get A Copy. Kindle Store.Â This really isn't the case with "Duchess"- to me, it just seems like Chaucer read a book, fell asleep and had a dream about it, then he thought, "this is so queynt a sweven,/That I wol, by

processe of tyme,/Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme/As I can best; and that anon." ...more. flag Like Â· see review. The Book of the Duchess is a poem of the dream-vision genre, presumably composed as an elegy for the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster (the wife of Geoffrey Chaucer's patron, the royal Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt) in 1368 or 1369. The poem was composed sometime in the few years after this event, and it is generally considered to be flattering to both the Duke and the Duchess.Â The House of Fame, a longer poem written about ten years after The Book of the Duchess, runs 2158 lines and was left unfinished. The three extant books begin with the retelling of The Aeneid by the Roman poet Virgil, as found written on a brass tablet in a temple of glass in the vision of a dreamer. An eagle takes up the dreamer to a point between heaven and earth, which is the House of Fame. a dream vision narrative poem written by Geoffrey Chaucer. The Book of the Duchess is the earliest of Chaucerâ€™s major poems, preceded only by his short poem An ABC and possibly his translation of The Romaunt of the Rose. Most sources ascribe the date of composition between 1369 and 1372, though more recent studies suggest that the poem may have been completed as early as late 1368. 3814The Book of the DuchessGeoffrey Chaucer1360s. THE PROEM[edit]. 1.

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