



Chaucerian ambivalence in *Book of the Duchess* and *House of Fame*

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Chaucer's canon demonstrates a high degree of interaction with, or perhaps interrogation of, the moral and intellectual ideals at the forefront of Boethian psychology. The proceeding analysis specifically evaluates how Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* (c.1368-72) and *The House of Fame* (1378-80) index deep insecurities about the viability of an aesthetic medium like poetry to convey some of these values, namely truth, consolation and edification.¹ Chaucer's interaction with, and divergence from, traditional forms seems to establish an agenda: an engagement with conventionally indelible authoritative sources, like *Consolation*, that exposes the limitations of their principles by placing them beside a wide panoply of competing desires, beliefs, and other duties. Unlike much of the work he so closely assimilates, Chaucer's vernacular – viewed as subordinate to the prestigious and permanent act of writing – utilises philosophical disconsolations as a narrative preoccupation. In some cases, Chaucer's characteristic narrative uncertainty may be to avoid appearing overly platitudinous or didactic to his patrons. However, beyond this, Chaucer may also be proposing his limitations as a poet who engages with dialectics but cannot or 'solve' aporetic structures of thought. This, then, initiates questioning of gradations of authority and the production of legitimate knowledge. In his destabilising and "ironic treatment" of "intellectual systems" within *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, Chaucer seems to underline the stultifying familiarity and linguistic stasis caused by an unchallenged trust in authority. With what appears to seem an almost poststructural lens, Chaucer displays a scepticism that was highly unconventionally in the 14th-century literary culture.²

The Book of the Duchess (hereafter, referred to as *BD*) is undoubtedly indebted to Middle French literature, a language with considerable status as the speech of diplomacy, courtly romance and *gentillesse*.³ However, in what seems a very intentional quality, the extent and intricacy of Chaucer's embedment of this miscellany of borrowings actually frequently impedes identification of their meaning and value. Viewed in this way, Chaucer's utilisation of the silhouette of high literature, but divergence from the application of it within the details seems at the forefront of his examination of authority. This quality is also discernible in Chaucer's disorientating cacophony of influences in the *House of Fame*, (henceforth *HF*), wherein the highly citational style seems to result in a retraction of gravity from the usually dignified classical genre. Though Dante and Boethius supply the teleological structure and theme to *HF*, Chaucer's adaptations produce an unquestionably different effect. This results in a "skewed, ironic form of the poetic enlightenment brought on by the intrusion of the otherworldly",

¹ All subsequent quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Boston, Mass., 1988).

² Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). p.122.

³ Russell A. Potter, "Chaucer and the Authority of Language: The Politics and Poetics of the Vernacular in Late Medieval England." *Assays* 6, (1991), 73-91, p.77

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according to Smith.⁴ Whilst Lady Philosophy instructs Boethius to ‘avoid vices, cultivate the virtues’ and make ‘humble prayers’ to an understanding of ‘heaven’ (*Consolation*, 114), Geffery’s exploration of the chaotic, “labyrinth” cosmic sphere, and the fragile ‘glas’ (HF 120) and ‘gygges’ (HF 1942) buildings within it, veers far from this.⁵ Instead of being treading the “pattern imposed by Fate”, in what is predestined to be appropriate for each human being” (*Consolation*, 90), Chaucer journeys on the complex trail of the Eagle’s whims, recapitulating Philosophy’s itinerary with a high degree of “deliberate obscurity” and questioning.⁶ It may be considered that this sense of uncertainty, or perhaps scepticism of authorial stability, is represented in the very materiality of the glass and wicker buildings.

One closer illustration of this mere structural tracing, and internal deflection, is the narrator’s “lively, conversational and emphatic” manner in the opening of *BD* which abandons the high register of the French courtly narratives that it traces. In essence, lines 1-15 of *BD* closely resemble that of Froissart’s *Paradys d’amours* (1-13).⁷ However, the passage diverges vastly in terms of application, facilitated by its verisimilitude. Chaucer’s use of the vernacular here, which digresses from the more “sober, well language, flat” rhetoric of Froissart, is markedly less coherent in both meaning and sound than that of its French counterpart which precisely establishes its position within the love-vision genre.⁸ Composed in 1361, ‘the terminal ‘r’s and ‘s’s of lines 5-10 of *Paradys* would not have been voiced, leaving there to be three neat rhyming couplets amongst an extremely cohesive verse. As well as the tight sonic patterning, Froissart’s verse feels circularly unified: the opening ‘en grant’ and closing line ‘en tant’ correspond. This, according to Bahr, creates a sense of “aural and semantic closure”.⁹ Though Chaucer does closely trace the opening of *Paradys* in terms of theme, its “jaunty” and informal application does not result in this feeling of closure – semantically or otherwise.¹⁰ Indeed depicting the deeply ‘melancholye’ (23) narrator whose despondent state mirrors that described in Froissart’s *Paradys* (7) (and Machaut’s *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, *Oeuvres* 1:109-12), the *BD* narrator creates a distinct persona in a way that the continental texts fail to. In wordy phraseology full of alternatives (*BD* ‘joy or sorrowe’, 10) and doublets (*BD* ‘day ne nyght’ 2), the narrator expresses his weariness-induced-apathy due to having ‘nat slepe wel’ (3). Aided by the presence of cesura (*BD* lines 1,2,6,7,10) Chaucer’s verse seems to colloquially mirror the narrator’s uncertainty about what his predicament – or anything – is actually about. This “verbal chaos” could be interpreted as Chaucer probing at the hollowness of adorned verse and thereby removing some of the weight of authoritative academic traditions, but also perhaps comically connotes the agnostic unknowability of authority irrespective of literary style.¹¹ Consequently, Chaucer’s semantically elevated litanies of events in HF, for example ‘of werres,

⁴ Christopher Smith, ‘Under the Reign of Doubt: Chaucer’s House of Fame and Narrative Authority’, *CONCEPT*, 27, ed. By Edward Pettit, 2004. <<https://expositions.journals.villanova.edu/index.php/concept/article/view/141/112>> [accessed 29 April 2022]

⁵ Penelope B. Reed, *The Idea of Labyrinth: From Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 307

⁶ B.G. Koonce, ‘Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the House of Fame’ (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.3

⁷ Arthur W. Bahr, ‘The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer’s the “Book of the Duchess”’, *The Chaucer Review*, 35.1 (2000), pp. 43–59, p. 44 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096116?Seq=2>> [accessed 28 April 2022]

⁸ D. S. Brewer, “The Relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions,” *Chaucer and Chaucerian’s*, ed. D. S. Brewer (Alabama, 1967), p.3.

⁹ Arthur W. Bahr, ‘The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer’s the “Book of the Duchess”’, p. 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Christopher Smith, ‘Under the Reign of Doubt’, p.9.

of pes, of mariages | of reste, of labour....' (*HF* 1961-62) actually contribute to the curation of a confused and topsy-turvy landscape, that is unrefined, chaotic and uncertain. In what Smith terms a "sensory overload", it is not the vernacular presented to be the unruly tongue.¹² Through Chaucer's borrowings and inversions, instead, it is the languages with previously unchallenged certification of knowledge and authority, with codified grammatical and orthographical rules, that are affiliated with uncertainty.

The interest in the truth value of visionary poetry, and therefore the legitimacy of a dream vision poet's work, is also highly present in Book II of *HF*, in which the poem's position as a "parody of didacticism" is most observable.¹³ Geffery's ascension above earth, to the contemplation of *summam bonum*, is on the wings of an eagle, who is acting in the role of Lady Philosophy. This guide, however, has a "strangely rash" manner that contrasts the "solicitous and attentive" nature of Dante's guide who offers an intricately mapped vision of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise in *Divine Comedy*.¹⁴ This parody and diminution of register, in many ways, seems to be Chaucer's means of removing some dignity and authority from the Epic genre. Closely resembling Philosophy's proclamation in *Consolation*: 'I have swift and speedy wings | With which to mount the lofty skies' (140), Geffery is depicted as literally flying on her wings, 'fetheres' (*HF* 974).¹⁵ This Boethian motif of the flight of the soul, however, fails to provide the intellectual transcendence to which it aspires, and instead, the arbitrary judgements of Fame, and chaotic landscape of the House of Rumour only result in Geffery's perplexity and doubt: 'Y wexen in a were'.¹⁶ Littered with digressions from the works Chaucer so closely echoes, Geffery's ascent is not smooth, but awkward, almost as though he is uncooperative with his passage. Unlike the ascension of the figures from mythical and biblical tradition he mentions ('Ennok, Elye, Romulus, Ganymede', *HF* 588-89), Geffery does not rise with ease. Echoing Paul's visionary experience in II Corinthians 'whether the body, I know not, or out of the body, I know not: God knoweth', his uncertainty is put plainly: 'wher in body or in gost | I not, ywys, but God, thou wost' (*HF* 981-82).¹⁷ Geffery's whereabouts, and indeed overall understanding, requires further clarification by some form of 'auctorite' (*HF* 2158). However, commentaries from literary sources, and 'man of gret auctorite' both prove to be ineffective at providing this.

Chaucer's employment of this archetype, a guided figure seeking understanding, is reconfigured with intent to draw attention to Geffery's recalcitrance and thereby perhaps his own. His narrator's description as 'noyous for to carye' (*HF* 574) comically notes his cumbersome physique, which is not 'lyte' to carry (*HF* 660). However, this 'weight' is likely more figurative, denoting his limited mind.¹⁸ Furthering this, Geffery only reaches 'half so high' (*HF* 914) to a place 'amyddys' (*HF* 845) heaven and earth.¹⁸ In contrast to his visionary predecessors, he never actually rises above the sublunary world.¹⁹ Lines 972, which resembles *Consolation's* description of the soul's ability to reach its 'proper mansyon' (*HF* 754) by ascension to its proper home (4.m11. 1-7n) entirely epitomises this: Chaucer glaringly marks off the limits of his journey

¹² Christopher Smith, 'Under the Reign of Doubt', p.10.

¹³ Christopher Smith, 'Under the Reign of Doubt', p.3.

¹⁴ James, Simpson, "Chaucer as a European Writer." in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, edited by Seth Lerer, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006), p.7.

¹⁵ Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, p.142.

¹⁶ MED: 'Were' <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/>> [accessed 28 April 2022].

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:3.

¹⁸ MED: 'Amyddys'.

¹⁹ Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.984.

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cutting Boethius of mid-sentence. By creating distance between his work and that of Boethius who also ascends his state of mind to attain understanding (and indeed deflecting the works which ultimately derive from this prosimetric 5th-century text), Chaucer is suggesting his relative boundaries as a poet when compared to his literary parallels (Boethius, Martainus Capella, Allain of Lille, and Dante). Here, Chaucer exhibits a form of poetic introspection that leans on the virtues of *cautio et discretio*, discussed in Horace's *De arte poetica* and Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia* respectively. In modifying the guide convention— an eagle who unceremoniously uplifts the narrator against his will towards an aberrant version of a celestial destination— Chaucer disconnects the action from the world of narrative certainty and the authority it connotes.

Chaucer's engagement with visionary poetry, which seems to question the elasticity of literary tradition, is also evident in the derangement of the Ovidian source-narrative of Ceyx and Alcyone in *BD*. Uncertain whether Ceyx is 'quyk or ded' (*BD* 121), Alcyone appeals to Juno for her 'lord to see | Sone, or whit wher so he be' (*BD* 111-12). Crucially, similar to his omission of Ovidian metamorphic events such as in 'Legend of Philomela' in *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer does not retell the consolatory metamorphoses of the couple into Halycon birds (*BD* 215), withholding the expected solace that the tale usually provides. Whilst the narrator does pity Alcyone's tragic love, he is not disturbed by it. Instead, he is more intrigued by the prospect of sleep as a result of appealing to a pagan goddess since his previous invocations had not been met. By utilising this primitivistic myth, Chaucer once again remains provisional about whether visionary experiences or dreams themselves might be divine or quotidian occurrences. Further, Chaucer may not only be attempting to minimize potential space for romanticizing grief (as to fulfil the agenda of his occasional piece) but also be making a casual acquaintance with conventionally significant narratives with the implication they hold unstable authority. Serving less of a didactic function within his narratives, these classical references are drawn in only to be dismissed as apparently insignificant. However, since the Cave of Sleep episode in *Metamorphoses* is most deeply fascinated with imitation, a sense of "imitative self-consciousness" is established.²⁰ Words like 'imitamine', 'imagine', 'simulacra' and 'fingant' allude to dreams, but also to literary fiction, or *imitatio*. In breaking away from classical and French tradition, Chaucer withholds the conventional authority bestowed within them and profoundly ruptures literary tradition that assured "intellectual and political control".²¹ Just as turning to Juno is not presented to fulfil its expectant consolatory function to Alcyone, nor has turning to the Gods for sleep been fruitful, the significance of literature is demoted and positioned as unstable in its ability to provide insight.

Within this scene, Chaucer is playfully withholding evidence as to which form of dream the narrator may be experiencing with remarkable ingenuity. In the revised Ovidian account, Chaucer provides the possibility that the narrator is experiencing *somnia coelestia*, since he is witnessing Juno's disclosure of truth to Alcyone about death.²² However, the ensuing Black Knight narrative may have been stimulated by the preoccupation of his mind following his reading of the Ovidian narrative, and thereby be considered a *somnium animale*. However, due to the deep 'melancholye' the narrator is in, as Chauntercleer comes to understand in *The*

²⁰ Colin Burrow, "Full of the Maker's Guile": Ovid on Imitating and on the Imitation of Ovid', in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*, ed. Philip Hardie, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society Supplement 23 (1999), p. 271-87.

²¹ R. H Robbins, 'Dissent in Middle English Literature: The Spirit of (Thirteen) Seventy-Six.' *Medievalia et Humanistica* 9 (1979), p.40.

²² A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.56.

Nun's Tale, it may simply be that an excess of distress has caused the narrator a disturbance and resulted in him dreaming of black things (i.e., The Knight in Black) and thereby be *somnia naturalia*. In this way, Chaucer hints that *BD* may be aligning itself to a form of divine discourse but hesitates to confirm it. Interestingly, this unwillingness to eschew the representation of divine speech is present until *The Parson's Tale*. This uncertainty of the status of how this dream should be classified seems intentional. On one hand, it means the tale fulfils its function as a consolatory elegy that conveys death can only be accepted but does not do this to an extent that places Chaucer in a superior role in relation to his patron. On the other hand, in a poetic meditation of his status as a meta-archiver of the works of his literary ancestors, it raises Chaucer's ambivalence of the truth value held in dreams. In the same manner, in the proem of Book I in *HF*, Chaucer offers an intentionally confusing taxonomy of dreams as classified by Cicero.²³ The extended *dubitatio*, addressing details such as the possible significance of 'distance | Of tymes' (*HF* 18-19) between dreams is "one long, eager and breathless sentence".²⁴ Though it utilises the learned and rare language of Boethian philosophy, Macobius's commentary, and esteemed terminology of the French Dream Visions (predominantly *Romance of the Rose*), it vastly contrasts due to its air of uncertainty. The absence of confident style renders academic tradition powerless. Rather than asserting that "dreams are worthy of belief" as is the case with french lyrics, the prophetic value of the ensuing narrative is immediately cast into doubt.²⁵ The word 'avisions' (*HF* 7) epitomises the possibility that dreams may indeed be merely prophetic, delusory or meaningless.²⁶ In this way, the opening explanatory dialogue of *HF*, ironically, has no explanatory effect at all. This indecipherability immediately emphasises the inadequacy of accepted knowledge and verbal (or textual) classification.

The peculiarity of the Chaucer's dreamer's response to the Knight's lamentation, and the lacuna that this creates is perhaps most relevant to Chaucer's examination of the capacity for literature to provide edification or consolation. The narrator's failure to recognise the Knight's direct lamentation, which closely resembles Boethius' sorrowful 'querimoniam lacimabelem' (*Consolation* I, prose. I), indicates Chaucer's acute awareness of the limitations of bearing emotion and achieving placatory consolation. It seems Chaucer is subjecting prescriptive, yet potentially dangerous idealism to a searching critique, with acknowledgement that the attachment an individual has to goods and desires is more than merely instrumental. By abstaining from consigning the argument that desire only has one true object – a notion that perhaps relies on a fragile and overly prescriptive psychology – Chaucer deviates from notions of *Consolation*. Perhaps Chaucer is suggesting that such dialectical matters are external to philosophy, and, as suggested by Wetherbee, as a mark that there are passionate human commitments that philosophy cannot adequately take into account.²⁷ This then, suggests Chaucer's engagement with Nicholas of Trevet's rationale which has unrealistic suitability: a pursuit of full *virtus et sapiential* requires an individual to despise all earthly attachments.²⁸ Since this narrative was likely written an occasional poem for John of Gaunt who was 'pitiously

²³ William H. Stahl., *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. (Columbia University Press, 1990).

²⁴ G.L Kitterage, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1970), p.75.

²⁵ Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.74.

²⁶ MED, 'Avisions'.

²⁷ Winthrop, Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century : The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.74–82.

²⁸ Nicholas Trevet, 'Expositio fratris nicolae treveti anglici ordinis praedicatorum super Boetio de consolatione', edited by E. T. Silk, (2012), p. 524 <http://campuspress.yale.edu/trevet/>, [accessed 1/05/2022].

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complaynyng the deathe of the sayd dutchess blanche', as noted by John Stowe in the margins of the Fairfax manuscript, the poems' dedicative function may elucidate why Chaucer takes this stance.²⁹ Not only does it verify the duke's pain, but it restrains from directly moralising the death of Blanche by promising immediate alleviation of grief by merely ascending one's emotions or thinking oneself out of grief, or by promising reunion.³⁰ Chaucer seems to settle that, as opposed to Boethian ideals, it is too obtuse to assert one should simply cast aside inconsistent intangibles that colour the human experience.

In the case of the first of *BD*'s lyrics, the elements are extracted and assimilated from several French love narratives, including that by Froissart and Oton de Graunson, wherein a complaint is narrated or overheard, and an opportunity of consolation is successfully granted by a character such as Esperance or Venus. The way in which Chaucer creates a bricolage of these sources, rather than only tracing one, lends itself to Chaucer's comparative avoidance of placatory consolation that is so patent in the *dits*. It seems consolation is a matter which Chaucer aims to blur: the narrator withholds his prying, leaving his aspiration to settle ('amende', *BD* 556) the Black Knight's condition obscured. What becomes apparent is that Chaucer's partial extractions from French works are entirely deliberate and meaningful. It seems no accident that he intentionally handles the subject of death in a contrasting manner to his French contemporaries who do not shroud the subject in obscurity, nor that he employs the French-derived lyric expression but does not replicate its form. In aligning *BD* with French literature contextually, but veering away from it in application, he abstains from reaction to the complaint and does not immediately aim to console or offer any wholly comforting form of consolation. This departure from his sources modifies the subject of the *complainte d'amour* towards something that almost seems to near stoicism. This emphasises the concept of a journey of the mind, which is a theme highly explicit in *House of Fame*.

Within both *BD* and *HF*, Chaucer establishes a scepticism towards absolute truths, absolute values and the truth value of dream literature. Through a catalogue of deflected borrowings, Chaucer destabilises the inspired status of philosophical and literary power by denying an overarching source of stable authority. This sense of uncertainty, first explored here, is then diffused into his wider canon and initiates a turn in subjectivity seen in subsequent literature as a whole. By illuminating the doubtful aspects of literature and subjectivity by trading on the overtures of classical and continental texts, Chaucer may be attesting that such concepts escape the narrative authority of absolutes.

²⁹ John Edmonds. 2006. *Chaucer's Other Works in Modern English Prose : The Book of the Duchess : The House of Fame : Anelide and Arcite : The Parliament of Fowls : Boece : Troilus and Criseyde : The Legend of Good Women : The Shorter Poems : The Romaunt of the Rose* (Morrisville, Ndc: Lulu Enterprises), p. 7.

³⁰ Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.966.

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