



Chaucer: The Beginner

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Abstract

The father of Modern English Poetry, Geoffrey Chaucer's first major poem, "Book of the Duchess", represents a devoted reader's best attempt at creating a meaningful and authoritative text of their own. After extensive reading Chaucer's first attempt to write a text draws significant inspiration from past text such as Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Medieval French dream vision 'Romance of the Rose'. 'The Book of The Duchess, being Chaucer's first major work as an author, provides us with Chaucer's initial, most uninhabited attempts to draw on his various inspirations in order to fabricate his own voice and his own authority. 'The Book of the Duchess' contains multiple scenarios involving reading, interpreting and writing and examining these instances will provide us a good idea of Chaucer's own creative process as a beginning writer – Chaucer utilizes and manipulates a great many voices in 'Book of the Duchess', many of which obviously do not belong to Chaucer but rather to authors of the past. It is these multiple already authoritative voice, in addition to a single nameless voice narrating the story, that ultimately constitute Chaucer's own, original voice.

Keywords: uninhabited attempts, fabricate, interpreting, instances, authoritative voices

Introduction

The Book of the Duchess' is unique in that it is Chaucer's first major work being composed after his translation of 'Romance of the Rose' and after Chaucer had done extensive reading. For this reason, it makes sense that the story focuses so intensely not only on grief and consolation, which are arguably the main themes of both Ovid's tale and the narrator's dream, but also on the processes of reading and writing. The reason for the poem's overarching themes of grief and consolation likely arises from the occasion of the death of John of Gaunt's (06th March, 1340 – 03rd Feb., 1399) Wife, Blanche of Lancaster (25th March, 1345 – 12th Sept., 1368). John of Gaunt was Chaucer's patron and would have been one of the probable audiences for BD. Luckily for us, a significant portion of BD is also devoted to detailing the narrator's creative process – his thinking, reading and writing. Instead of the entirety of BD being devoted to Ovid's tale and to the narrator's dream, Chaucer presents us also with moments where we can experience the narrator (who is also the text's author") as he really is. "Book of the Duchess" opens with a sleep – deprived narrator complaining that he is unable to sleep and as a result has a mind full of negative and idle thoughts. He declares that no creature should have to live in this way, but he seems to not be actively trying to find healing, and we are never told the cause of his condition. Then, realizing that sleep will not come to him anytime soon, he decided to read a tale by Ovid. The tale involves a queen grieving over the fate of her husband who has been gone at sea for a long time, causing the queen to wonder whether he has died at sea or not. The anxious queen prays to the Goddess Juno to send her a dream that reveals the fate of her husband. The narrator continues to recount the rest of the tale, but it is this plea for a dream that the narrator finds the most interest in. After the story's conclusion, in which the queen ends up receiving her wish and discovering that her husband is dead, the narrator, having learned that there is a Goddess of sleep,

copies the queen's request. Instead of asking for a dream, however, the narrator asks only for sleep. After making this request, he immediately falls asleep, with his head resting on the book he has just read. The narrator then "wake-up" (in a bed, in his dream) in a ceiling-less room windows depicting the history of Troy and Walls containing the text and gloss of Romance of Rose. The narrator hears a hunting call, and then mounts a horse, which has seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and rides out of the room in order to find the group of hunters. He catches up to them and learns they are hunting with Emperor Augustus. The narrator follows the hunters to forest, before seeing a long dog and following it until he comes into a clearing where a knight dressed in black sits, complaining loudly of his sorrow. The narrator and knight have a conversation in which the knight uses highly figurative language to explain the cause and intensity his sorrow, which stems from the death of his wife, but the narrator fail to correctly understand anything the Knight says. After a long discourse, the Knight, frustrated by the narrator's ignorance, states literally that his wife is dead. The Knight then rides off towards a Castle, and the narrator wakes up. The narrator, being so moved by the dream he has just dreamt, find himself motivated to record his dream in the form of a poem. It is this recounting of the narrator's story – his ailment and remedy, and consequent dream.

At the start of 'The Book of The Duchess', we find the narrator sleep – deprived and devoid of productive thoughts saying -

"I have so many an ydel thought
 Purely for defaute of sleep."

One can easily imagine this is how a beginning author, or someone intending to be an author, would feel once faced with the task of putting one's own words down in writing. This is not a situation unique to authors, either. Whether

having to write an essay for school, paint a picture, create a computer program, or do some other creative task, everyone will face the dreaded “blank Canvas” at some point.

Chaucer, lacking experience as an author, does not yet have these ‘expert’ habits. It is for this reason that I believe the narrator’s idle thoughts can be seen as representing, likely in a dramaticized way, Chaucer’s thoughts on the creative process. This idea, that beginners are for more unrestricted in their handling of tasks than experts, is best stated I think by ‘Shunryu Suzuki’, a famous Buddhist monk and teacher –

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 “The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, read to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything.”

When Chaucer attempts something new, it is not only important to understand that he will not have any ‘expert habit’, but that the result of not having these habits will likely result in a kind of uneasiness from not knowing how exactly to get started. Chaucer’s narrator, himself a beginning author, expresses exactly these sentiments immediately after complaining about his idle thoughts and lack of sleep –

“Defaute of slep and hevynesse
 Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknese
 That I have lost al lustyhede,
 Suche fantasies ben in myn hede
 So I not what is best to doo.”

When we read the aforementioned lines of BD with the intent of seeing in the text Chaucer’s creative process, something Chaucer would expect and tolerate due to its unavoidability. We can interpret the last two lines as describing a sense of anxiety or dread which a beginner author is very likely to experience once tasked with writing their first work, not knowing how or where to begin, due to having never begun before. The narrator is unable to sleep and lacks spirit, and is either unable to have any worthwhile ideas or is so full of ideas he cannot possibly decide which to focus on. Either way, the narrator is clearly concerned with ideas, and his ability to have worthwhile ideas – and so obviously has the intent to write. He just is unsure how to actually begin the act of writing –
 “I not what is best to doo.”

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