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A READING OF CHAUCER'S THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

by

James LeRoy Sayre

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The Book of the Duchess, one of Chaucer's earliest poems, has traditionally been read as an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who died in September, 1369, and as an attempt by Chaucer to console John of Gaunt, Blanche's husband. Representative of the conventional interpretation of the poem are the works of Clemen, Kittredge, Muscatine and Robertson.¹ Basic to the usual interpretation of the poem are these assumptions: that Chaucer considered Blanche's memory well worth the poetic effort; that Gaunt was in need of consolation following his wife's death; and that Chaucer had reason to want to console Gaunt. The question of Blanche's worthiness has never been disputed, perhaps because Chaucer's description of her in The Book of the Duchess remains as the major evidence of her character. But the assumptions of Gaunt's need for consolation or Chaucer's intention to console him are open to questioning. It is usually believed that Gaunt was Chaucer's patron and that there was a friendly relationship between the

¹See Wolfgang Clemen, Chaucer's Early Poetry (New York, 1963); George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1915); Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1957); and D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives (Princeton, 1963). Clemen reads the poem as offering consolation to Gaunt by reviving the memory of his treasured wife. Kittredge's interpretation centers upon the tremendous feeling of loss at Blanche's death. Muscatine concentrates on the style of the poem and the fact that it is an elegy written in the courtly love tradition. Robertson's reading is a notable exception. He does not see any consolation in the poem, but rather interprets a somewhat didactic purpose to it. The Black Knight is shown that he is wrong to mourn his lady's death from a personal point of view.

two men. Indeed, the theme of consolation, that is, the notion of the poem offering consolation to Gaunt, depends upon the idea that Chaucer was sympathetic toward Gaunt following Blanche's death.

There are many aspects of the accepted relationship between Gaunt and Chaucer that are open to inquiry. If there are reasonable doubts concerning Chaucer's attitude toward his supposed patron, there may consequently be doubts about the validity of interpreting the poem as being sympathetic toward Gaunt. This paper will examine Chaucer's relationship with Gaunt and propose possible variations from what has been accepted. There is evidence within the poem that suggests that rather than consoling Gaunt, Chaucer was commenting critically upon him. A new interpretation of the poem will be offered, supported by the proposed differences from the accepted relationship between Chaucer and Gaunt.²

Before the poem itself is examined, the relationship between Chaucer and Gaunt must be looked at. Sydney Armitage-Smith, Gaunt's biographer, describes the results of the first meeting between Chaucer and Gaunt: "Upon Chaucer's fortunes this meeting had a lasting effect, for the friendship of John of Gaunt secured to him the favour of the Court, so long as his patron lived, and after his death the protection of the

²The text used is The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. Fred N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957). All citations from Chaucer are from this edition.

new dynasty."³ Armitage-Smith states the position that has been traditionally accepted: Gaunt was Chaucer's benign patron. Whether or not "patron" accurately describes the relationship is unimportant, for there were connections between Gaunt and Chaucer. George Williams, in A New View of Chaucer, offers a concise description of these connections: "Every circumstance of record suggests that Chaucer's public career was closely linked with the fortunes of John of Gaunt. Perhaps it is not literally correct to call Gaunt a 'patron' of Chaucer--if we define the word patron in a limited sense. But Gaunt was a loyal friend who saw to it that Chaucer prospered steadily as long as Gaunt was alive."⁴ What Williams and Armitage-Smith have established is that there existed some relationship between Chaucer and Gaunt that proved beneficial, both in money and position, to Chaucer. Both critics suggest that Gaunt's motive for aiding the poet was friendship, but there may have been other reasons. Regardless of how Gaunt felt about Chaucer, whether he was Chaucer's patron or simply someone who furthered the career of an able and deserving man, feelings of friendship for Gaunt on Chaucer's part cannot be automatically assumed. The gifts, annuities and any aid in obtaining positions that Chaucer received from Gaunt do not

³Sydney Armitage-Smith, John of Gaunt (New York, 1964), p. 11.

⁴George Williams, A New View of Chaucer (Durham, North Carolina, 1965), p. 41.

necessarily prove that Chaucer thought highly of or even liked Gaunt.

Marchette Chute, in a somewhat popular version of Chaucer's life, denies that Gaunt was Chaucer's patron: "It used to be the custom to speak of John of Gaunt as Chaucer's patron, but this he was not. In the strict sense of the word Chaucer never had a patron. He was a hard-working public official and fully earned the perquisites he received. But John of Gaunt was not even his employer."⁵ Chute points out that Chaucer's connection with Gaunt was through the poet's wife, Philippa, who was part of Gaunt's household and a sister of Katharine Swynford, Gaunt's mistress and later his wife. But Chaucer himself must have had some direct contact with Gaunt and with Blanche too, because his elegy for the dead wife of Gaunt suggests that Chaucer had first hand knowledge of his subject.

Chaucer may well have been associated with the House of Lancaster through Blanche rather than through Gaunt. In 1360, Chaucer was a courier with Prince Lionel, Gaunt's brother. The following years, as Williams says, are vague: "Where he was, or what he was doing, between 1360 and 1367 is a mystery."⁶ Lionel and his wife, Elizabeth, went to Ireland in 1361, and there is no record of Chaucer accompanying them. Williams then suggests what may have happened to Chaucer: "If, then,

⁵Marchette Chute, Geoffrey Chaucer of England (New York, 1946), p. 60.

⁶Williams, p. 42.

when Lionel and Elizabeth were sent to Ireland, and young Geoffrey (his parents being still alive in London, and Ireland being generally regarded as a wild bogland) did not care to go along--nothing would have been more natural than for the Countess Elizabeth to recommend the bright and accomplished Geoffrey to her young cousin and only sister-in-law, Blanche, Countess of Richmond."⁷ If Williams' theory is correct, Chaucer was probably employed under Blanche rather than her husband. If so, his allegiance and respect would be due first to her rather than Gaunt if a conflict arose.

That Blanche was a woman who could command love, respect and devotion from her followers is almost undeniable. Marjorie Anderson points this out, speaking of Blanche's papal petitions: "These numerous petitions are evidence of the religious inclination of Blanche and of her interest in helping others, particularly those of her own household. They give one the impression of a kindly woman, thoughtful of the welfare of her dependents."⁸ Chaucer would certainly have had ample reason to poetically celebrate such a woman and lament her death, particularly if he had been in her household for any length of time, as he may well have been from 1361 to 1367.

Partial reason for reading the theme of consolation in The Book of the Duchess is the belief that Gaunt was devoted

⁷Ibid., p. 43.

⁸Marjorie Anderson, "Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster," MP, XLV (Feb., 1948), 155.

to his first wife. As Armitage-Smith relates: "To John of Gaunt the death of Blanche of Lancaster was a momentous loss. In his life also the death of his consort draws the dividing line."⁹ Armitage-Smith and others believe that Gaunt was faithful to Blanche until her death. One point made in this respect is Gaunt's petition to the pope in connection with his marriage to Katharine Swynford, his mistress, after the death of his second wife, Constance, in 1394. Marjorie Anderson offers the traditional interpretation: "In his petition to the pope for ratification and confirmation of his marriage to Katherine Swynford and for the legitimization of their children, John declared that he and Katherine had been married shortly after the death of Constance and admitted that he had had extra-marital relations with Katherine while Constance was still alive. He does not make any such statement with regard to Blanche."¹⁰

Gaunt's association with Katharine had spanned twenty years before they were married. His illegitimate children by Katharine, the Beauforts, were well-known, and the entire affair was familiar to the English court. In his petition, Gaunt was certainly not making any revelations. If he had been unfaithful to Blanche, such transgressions had certainly been successfully concealed in the ensuing twenty-five years since

⁹Armitage-Smith, p. 76.

¹⁰Anderson, p. 159.

Blanche's death, and Gaunt would have had ample reason to want to avoid publicly airing any more dirty linen in a papal petition. That the petition to the pope mentions nothing about any extra-marital activities during his first marriage does not rule out the possibility that Gaunt may have been as unfaithful to Blanche as he later was to Constance. On the contrary, Gaunt's behavior during his second marriage might well reflect upon his behavior during his marriage to Blanche.

Gaunt's long affair with Katharine Swynford has often been excused on the grounds that his second marriage, to Constance of Spain, "was strictly political. In marrying Constance, Gaunt merely seized the opportunity to obtain a title (of sorts) to the throne of Spain; and in marrying him, Constance merely seized the opportunity to get a powerful protector at a time when her very life was in danger."¹¹ Whatever prestige Gaunt gained by marrying Constance--for despite his claim he never gained the Spanish throne--is certainly rivaled by what his marriage to Blanche brought him. Marjorie Anderson describes the effects of that marriage: "The wealth and power which it brought to John of Gaunt were destined to have lasting effects upon the history of England; within three years, because of it, John found himself owner of one of the greatest titles and domains in the country."¹²

¹¹Williams, p. 54.

¹²Anderson, pp. 153-154.

Gaunt's first marriage, in terms of money and possessions, was decidedly a prosperous one for him. Whether Gaunt was happy in his marriage to Blanche or not, it was certainly a financially and politically wise choice. Gaunt seems to have been just as practical in his first marriage as he was in his second. If Gaunt's infidelity to Constance can be explained by the political overtones to their marriage, then any infidelity in his first marriage could be explained with similar reasons.

During the ten years of their marriage, 1359-69, Gaunt and Blanche were often apart: "There is no record of her accompanying him on any of his campaigns as was the case with Queen Philippa and King Edward. John was fighting in France in 1359-60 shortly after his marriage; in Spain in 1366-67; and again in France in 1369 at the time of Blanche's death. Aside from his military activity, he was in the parliaments of 1360, 1365, and 1366 and was sent on a diplomatic mission to Flanders in 1364. Blanche probably had little to do with this part of her husband's life either."¹³ Neither the obvious material gain Gaunt received through his first marriage nor the long periods of separation while the union lasted contribute to the accepted notion of Gaunt's love and devotion to Blanche. When these points are looked at in comparison with Gaunt's second marriage, serious questions are raised

¹³Ibid., p. 156.

concerning his motives for marrying Blanche and his attitude towards her as a wife.

Gaunt's liaison with Katharine Swynford is dated as beginning 1371-72 by Armitage-Smith, and the birth of John Beaufort, Gaunt's oldest illegitimate son by Katharine, is dated approximately 1372. Armitage-Smith denies any infidelity on Gaunt's part during his marriage to Blanche, yet as Armitage-Smith himself points out, "Katharine had long been a familiar figure at the English Court. The daughter of a Hainaulter who came over in the suite of Queen Philippa, Sir Paon Roelt, Guyenne King of Arms, she had been attached in her youth to the household of Blanche of Lancaster, a position which she continued to hold after her marriage in 1368 to Sir Hugh Swynford."¹⁴ Gaunt carried on a long affair with Katharine, and if she was part of his household, it could have begun before 1371 or even before 1369. Indeed, the Percy MS.78, which Armitage-Smith discounts for lack of "contemporary evidence,"¹⁵ places the birth of the Beauforts, Gaunt's illegitimate children by Katharine, in Blanche's lifetime.

Thus there are doubts about the accepted version of Gaunt's relationship with Blanche. There are also questions to be raised about Gaunt's relationship to Chaucer, particularly in respect to Chaucer's wife, Philippa.

¹⁴Armitage-Smith, p. 390.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 462-465.

It is generally accepted now that Philippa Chaucer was a daughter of Sir Payne de Roet,¹⁶ the Sir Paon Roelt Armitage-Smith speaks of, and therefore a sister to Katharine Swynford. A question arises concerning the social differences between Chaucer and his wife. Williams describes Chaucer in the mid-1360s, when he presumably married: "Geoffrey was not a wealthy man. Nor was he of high birth; nor did he hold a prominent position in the king's household (being only a 'valettus,' the lowest non-menial rank, at least a year after he was married)."¹⁷ Philippa, on the other hand, came from a prominent family, involved in court life and associated closely with the queen. Chaucer often remarks in his poetry that he knew little of love, and some writers feel the marriage to Philippa was not one of love or happiness. How then did an apparently unhappy or unloving marriage come about between a woman of noble birth and a man of much lower social rank? Williams offers this explanation: "Gaunt (who had a contemporary reputation as being notably amorous as a young man) got Philippa with child, and persuaded (or hired, or forced) Chaucer to marry her."¹⁸ This child would have been Elizabeth Chaucer, born in the spring of 1367.

One fact that furthers the suspicion that Elizabeth may

¹⁶See Margaret Galway, "Philippa Pan., Philippa Chaucer," MLN, LV (Oct., 1960), 481-487.

¹⁷Williams, p. 45.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 46.

have been Gaunt's child is the contribution he made when Elizabeth, then fourteen, entered the convent of Barking:

"Gaunt presented the convent with £51 8s. 2d. (\$10,290) as a gift and for 'various expenses' incurred. This considerable sum of money may have been contributed because Elizabeth was the niece of Gaunt's current mistress Katharine Swynford, or it may have been contributed because Elizabeth was the daughter of Gaunt's friend Geoffrey. But the sum was so large that one cannot help suspecting that Gaunt had a more intimate interest in Elizabeth."¹⁹ If Elizabeth Chaucer was Gaunt's daughter, it is not hard to understand why Gaunt would favor Chaucer with money and the weight of his influence. Such an explanation would clear up the difficulty surrounding the marriage of Chaucer and Philippa and the difference between their respective social positions. This solution would also explain why Philippa, separate from Chaucer, was given many gifts and honors. For example: "on New Year's Day, 1380, 1381, and 1382, the accounts of the Duchy of Lancaster record presents from John of Gaunt to Philippa Chaucer of silver-gilt cups with covers."²⁰ Philippa was also received into a select society without her husband: "In 1386 she was at Lincoln with her patron, John of Gaunt, and a distinguished company; and there she was admitted into the Cathedral fraternity, together

¹⁹Ibid., p. 47.

²⁰G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England (London, 1927), p. 96.

with Henry of Derby, the future Henry IV."²¹ Money from Gaunt came separately to Chaucer and Philippa throughout their lives, and it appears quite true, as Williams says, that her contemporaries considered Philippa "more than the wife of Geoffrey Chaucer."²² If this speculated extra-marital relationship existed between Gaunt and Philippa, with Chaucer being forced or paid to marry her, the connections between Gaunt and Chaucer would be explained, and yet Chaucer would certainly have had little reason to be Gaunt's friend.

Doubts have been raised concerning the traditionally accepted relationship between Gaunt and Chaucer. It has been shown that there are many possible reasons to suspect the conventional view of a bond of friendship existing between the two men. That Chaucer thought highly of Blanche, perhaps even loved her for the virtuous woman she was, is not questioned. But that Chaucer may have had reasons to dislike Gaunt, either for his treatment of Blanche during their marriage or for his treatment of Chaucer himself, is a likely possibility in light of the doubts raised. The questions and doubts presented concerning Chaucer's relationship to Gaunt provide a reference point in examining the poem itself, but any interpretation of the poem must rest upon internal evidence.

D. W. Robertson, Jr., in an article summarizing the

²¹Ibid., p. 59.

²²Williams, p. 48.

present state of critical work concerning The Book of the Duchess, points out that "the questions that have 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."²³ These points and others will be taken up in analyzing the poem.

As the poem opens, the narrator is speaking of his own troubles:

I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
I have so many an ydel thoght,
Purely for defaute of slep,
That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.

(1-8)

Clearly disturbed by the symptoms he has, the narrator (it is safe to assume that the narrator is at least speaking for Chaucer) describes his problem:

²³D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Book of the Duchess," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York, 1968), pp. 335-336.

but trewly, as I gesse,
 I holde hit be a sicknesse
 That I have suffred this eight yeer,
 And yet my boote is never the ner;
 For there is phisicien but oon
 That may me hele; but that is don.

(35-40)

As Robertson pointed out, this eight-year sickness Chaucer refers to has been a source of much critical study. Often the interpretation is that Chaucer is love-sick and has been suffering from unrequited love for eight years. Yet, as J. Burke Severs says, "the remarkable thing about this full account of the poet's sleeplessness and resulting mental distress is that there is not a word about love in it."²⁴

Two suggestions come to mind concerning the eight years of distress and the endlessness Chaucer sees to it. One is Williams' notion that the eight years may refer to the period 1361-67 when Chaucer may have been in Gaunt's household.²⁵ Following this out, Chaucer's sickness may arise from his association with Gaunt and the resulting marriage to Philippa. Shackled with an unloving wife and a child that was not his, Chaucer might very well have felt sick about the whole affair, and there would have been no relief in the foreseeable future.

²⁴J. Burke Severs, "Chaucer's Self-Portrait in the Book of the Duchess," PQ, XLIII (Jan., 1964), 29.

²⁵Williams, p. 47.

On the other hand, if the speculations about Gaunt's infidelity to Blanche are correct, and Chaucer was as devoted to her as the poem suggests, the eight-year sickness might have been the time from 1361 until Blanche's death when Chaucer was witness to a marriage between a virtuous woman, worthy of love, and a man who ignored her and his marital vows. Such a situation would easily have disturbed a sensitive person, and just as the memory of Blanche was not quick to fade, so too, a taste of the miserable period would have lingered with the poet. In either case, whether it was for himself or Blanche that Chaucer was troubled, the only cure for his distress was a "phisicien but oon."

The argument for Chaucer suffering from unrequited love for eight years interprets this physician as the loved lady, but Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., offer a different interpretation: "On the one hand, the image of the lady as the only physician to her lover's discomfort is traditional. On the other hand, the image of Christ the Physician represents an even earlier and more pervasive tradition."²⁶ Christ could cure Chaucer's sickness, whether by correcting Chaucer's own unfortunate marriage or by correcting the injustices Blanche received from Gaunt during their marriage and putting Chaucer's mind to rest. It is significant that Chaucer opens his poem with references to personal distress, distress so serious that

²⁶ Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories (Princeton, 1963), p. 33.

there is only one possible remedy. This opening mood should be kept in mind while reading the rest of the poem.

Chaucer moves on to a tale within a tale, Ovid's story of Seys and Alcyone. Bertrand H. Bronson remarks on how this story has been viewed by some critics: "Chaucer has been censured for not finding a closer parallel to John of Gaunt's bereavement. The tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, as he tells it, stresses the wife's grief, not the love of a husband bereft."²⁷ Assuming that Gaunt was not a bereaved husband, the lack of parallel is no longer a problem. The Seys and Alcyone story describes not only a wife's grief, but a wife very much in love with her husband:

She longed so after the king
That, certes, it were a pitous thing
To telle her hertely sorowful lif
That she had, this noble wif,
For him she loved alderbest.

(83-87)

Parallel descriptions of Alcyone and Blanche give similar impressions. For Alcyone, Chaucer writes:

There was a king
That highte Seys, and had a wif,
The beste that mighte bere lyf,

²⁷Bertrand H. Bronson, "The Book of the Duchess Re-opened," in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1966), p. 278.

And this quene highte Alcyone.

(62-65)

The singularity of Alcyone is emphasized, for she is "the beste that mighte bere lyf." Blanche is introduced as being just as extraordinary:

Among these ladyes thus echon,
Soth to seyen y sawgh oon
That was lyk noon of the route.

(817-819)

The two women are similar in many respects. From what we know of Blanche, she was capable of being as devoted to Gaunt as Alcyone was to Seys. Also both women were deserted in a sense: Seys left Alcyone and never returned; and Gaunt was often apart from Blanche, and if my theories are true, he had deserted her bed often enough.

Alcyone's grief over Seys has often been called inordinate, yet the striking thing about it is its genuine feeling and totality. Chaucer does not hesitate to remark on Alcyone's emotions:

Such sorowe this lady to her tok
That trewly I, which made this book,
Had such pittee and such rowthe
To rede hir sorwe, that, by my trowthe,
I ferde the worse al the morwe
Aftir, to thenken on hir sorwe.

(95-100)

The sorrow of Alcyone is real and so intense that it causes her death. Blanche and Alcyone are parallel figures in the poem, and while Blanche plays no active role in the dream, Chaucer may be suggesting through Alcyone's grief over Seys that Blanche too had reason to mourn a dead husband, a husband perhaps dead to her in the sense of love and devotion throughout much of their married life.

Alcyone implores the goddess Juno for aid in her sorrow. Juno has Morpheus raise Seys' body up and send it to Alcyone. The sleep god has done what Juno asked, "Bid hym crepe into the body,/ And doo hit goon to Alcione" (144-145), and therefore it is Morpheus, not Seys, who appears to Alcyone, and she ignores the words of her husband's corpse. Chaucer later comments on the validity of pagan gods:

For I had never herd speke, or tho,
 Of noo goddes that koude make
 Men to slepe, ne for to wake;
 For I ne knew never god but oon.

(234-237)

Morpheus, in Seys' body, is not what he appears to be. He is a false god, in a Christian sense, and Alcyone may be wise in not heeding him. Morpheus begins a true-false parallelism in the poem. Apparently he is Seys, Alcyone's loved husband, returned from the grave to inform and reassure her, but in reality he is Morpheus of the underworld and is not to be

trusted. Morpheus' final comment, "To lytel while oure blysse lasteth!" (211), is ironical since this is not Seys speaking, and it will in turn cast an ironical light on the remainder of the poem, particularly upon the words of his counterpart in the dream sequence, the Black Knight. For if Alcyone and Blanche are paralleled in the poem, then Seys-Morpheus parallels the Black Knight.

As Chaucer turns from the story of Seys and Alcyone, he comments upon the pagan gods in the tale and upon his own still troubled condition:

I wolde yive thilke Morpheus,
Or hys goddesse, dame Juno,
Or som wight elles, I ne roghte who,
To make me slepe and have som reste.

(242-245)

In desperation for relief from his plight, Chaucer appeals to anyone for aid. The dream that immediately follows raises the idea that Chaucer means it to originate from Morpheus. Therefore, even though it has a positive side, being "so ynly swete a sweven," it must be regarded according to its source.

This introduction to the dream follows the true-false parallels established by Seys' ghost. The dream is outwardly attractive, but its meaning is obscure, open to speculation, and of such a strange quality at times as to suggest the direness and darkness of the Seys-Alcyone tale.

The dream itself is much discussed in scholarly writings, and Charles Muscatine's description is representative:

"Chaucer, on the other hand, uses the device of the dream, conventionally and functionally, to exclude those reminders of common life, of business, war, and politics, that would cling to a realistic representation of his subject and thus smudge the purity of feeling proper to the occasion. It opens to him the ideal landscape that is his setting, the exemplarily polite conversation, the high-courtly narrative, the brilliant and elaborate portraiture, and the lyrical utterances that form the body of the poem."²⁸ Muscatine's view that Chaucer uses the dream-vision conventionally is not disputed, but the poet may have used it for unconventional purposes, just as he used the courtly love tradition unconventionally in writing an elegy.

Wolfgang Clemen suggests how Chaucer may have used the dream: "The essential point is that Chaucer saw new poetic and artistic possibilities in the use of the dream. He links it with reality and with the preceding action, he deliberately uses the illusion inherent in the dream and he portrays his own second self within this dream world."²⁹ Clemen's notion of both reality and illusion within the dream is comparable to my idea of true-false parallels existing throughout the poem.

²⁸Muscatine, p. 102.

²⁹Clemen, p. 27.

The reader must examine closely the idealized setting and elaborate descriptions for hints as to whether reality or illusion, truth or falseness, is being presented.

I pause here to offer an explanation of the dream that is apart from my reading of the poem as a whole and yet in line with my interpretation of Chaucer's attitude toward Gaunt. As mentioned earlier, John of Gaunt was one of England's most powerful lords in 1369 when The Book of the Duchess was probably written. Any overt statements against Gaunt in such a poem could easily have cost the poet dearly. Bronson mentions that "the Man in Black and his lady, it would be admitted, are idealizations appropriate to their context in the poem: they are images in a dream."³⁰ Other critics make the same point. If then the Black Knight and his lady represent ideals, their relationship would also be an ideal, perhaps one Chaucer felt a woman such as Blanche deserved. If Gaunt never gave his wife anything even resembling such an ideal situation or if Chaucer had reason to dislike Gaunt, he could possibly have created the dream as a poetic device to vividly display the differences between the real Gaunt and the ideal Black Knight. At the same time, the superficial level of the poem would be apparently complimentary and pleasing to Gaunt. The suspicions raised by the Black Knight's behavior in the poem create the possibility that Chaucer is distorting the ideal the Knight

³⁰Bronson, p. 274.

represents, and thereby suggesting a conflict between reality and the ideal. Thus, the dream can be read as Chaucer's wish for what might have been while implying by the contrast what really was. This revelation through contrast could not be too blatant or obvious because of the possible danger of criticizing a man of Gaunt's political power and stature. Within the ideal setting of the dream, the dreamer is not troubled as the narrator was.

Returning to the reading of The Book of the Duchess that I feel best accounts for all parts of the poem, an initial assumption is that the dreamer, as with the narrator earlier, is a personification of Chaucer, or reflective of Chaucer's attitudes and opinions. Moving ahead for a moment, the Knight's lady is poetically identified with Blanche, for she is "goode faire White." Therefore the simplest, most straightforward identification of the Black Knight would be with Gaunt.

Chaucer very carefully makes the reader realize that what follows is a dream: "Loo, thus hyt was, thys was my sweven." Just as Morpheus appeared to be. Seys, the dream appears at first to be very true. The singing of birds awakes Chaucer, and the sound gives him the impression of a paradise of sorts:

Was never herd so swete a steven,--

But hyt had be a thyng of heven,--

So mery a soun, so swete entewnes.

(307-309)

The new surroundings seem very pleasant indeed, but the dream

is an illusion, and, like most illusions, cannot hold up when confronted with reality. The reader must look past what is apparent for what is true.

After listening to the birds, the dreamer's attention is called to a hunt going on nearby. Joining the hunt for a while, he is later separated and a young puppy comes up to him:

ther cam by mee

A whelp, that fauned me as I stood,

That hadde yfolowed, and koude no good.

Hyt com and crepte to me as lowe

Ryght as hyt hadde me yknowe.

(388-392)

John M. Steadman sees this whelp as a symbol of fidelity, particularly marital fidelity, saying, "as a symbol of fidelity, the whelp in The Book of the Duchess could have relevance to any one of three figures (or possibly to all three): Chaucer, John of Gaunt, or Blanche herself. It might represent (1) the poet's own loyalty to the deceased duchess and to John of Gaunt in his grief, (2) the latter's loyalty to his dead wife, or (3) Blanche's fides uxoria as evinced in the course of her married life."³¹ Parts of Steadman's interpretation would fit into my thesis as they relate to Chaucer's feelings for Blanche and Blanche's behavior toward her husband. The whelp as a symbol of marital fidelity becomes an ironical image

³¹John M. Steadman, "Chaucer's 'Whelp': A Symbol of Marital Fidelity?" N&Q, CCI (Sept., 1956), 375.

questioning Gaunt's grief or fidelity toward Blanche, for the doubts raised about Gaunt's devotion and faithfulness to Blanche create the possibility that Gaunt neither lamented his first wife's death nor honored his marriage vows while she was alive. Thus if the whelp represents marital fidelity, it may be a very cynical identification in respect to John of Gaunt.

Chaucer, in the dream, reaches for the whelp:

I wolde have kaught hyt, and anoon
 Hyt fledde, and was fro me goon;
 And I hym folwed.

(395-397)

Running away from the dreamer, the pup leads to the Black Knight. The whelp thus establishes a connection between the dreamer and the Knight, or, for my reading, between Chaucer and Gaunt. The puppy seems to know both of them, for it "fauned" the dreamer "as hyt hadde me yknowe," and it goes to the Black Knight. Assuming as true my theories on Chaucer's marriage, marital fidelity and happiness were as illusive as this whelp for Chaucer, and just as the whelp leads to the Black Knight, Chaucer's marital woes originated with Gaunt (the whelp might possibly represent Elizabeth Chaucer).

The main part of the dream is the conversation between the dreamer and the Black Knight. But before that conversation begins, the dreamer comes upon the Knight sitting alone and gives us this description:

A wonder wel-farynge knyght--
 By the maner me thoghte so--
 Of good mochel, and ryght yong therto,
 Of the age of foure and twenty yer,
 Upon hys berd but lytel her,
 And he was clothed al in blak.

(452-457)

Chaucer describes what the Knight appears to be, for the poet could have been much more precise and emphatic. The phrase "by the maner me thoghte so" is a hint that appearances may be deceiving. The Knight may not be the fine young ideal he seems. The Black Knight, like the dream's setting, is part of the true-false parallelism, and what he is will be developed later.

Unaware of the dreamer's presence, the Knight is complaining of his sorrow, which the dreamer overhears. The exact nature of the Knight's grief is revealed:

I have of sorwe so gret won
 That joye gete I never non,
 Now that I see my lady bryght,
 Which I have loved with al my myght,
 Is fro me ded and ys agoon.

(475-479)

Clearly, the Knight's sorrow is over his loved lady, who is now dead. The Knight continues bewailing his fate, ignorant

of the dreamer even though the latter stands directly in front of the Knight and speaks to him. When the Knight becomes aware of the dreamer he says:

I prey the, be not wroth.

I herde the not, to seyn the soth,

Ne I sawgh the not, syr, trewely.

(519-521)

If the Knight had not heard the dreamer, how did he know the dreamer had spoken? His unawareness of the dreamer is open to some question, and if he was aware of the dreamer's presence, his show of grief could easily have been for the dreamer's benefit. Chaucer himself speaks peculiarly of the Knight:

Loo! how goodly spak thys knyght,

As hit had be another wyght.

(529-530)

The goodliness of the Knight's words is in line with what he appears to be, but the "as hit had be another wyght" is very curious, as if implying the Knight was not what he seemed. The slight hints Chaucer gives us create a question about what the Knight appears to be and what he really is. The Knight is another example of the true-false parallels in the poem.

The dreamer attempts to draw the Knight into a conversation, telling him that

yif that yee

Wolde ought discure me youre woo,

I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
Amende hyt, yif I kan or may.

(548-551)

The dreamer's request to know the cause of the Knight's sorrow has caused much critical speculation as to whether the dreamer is naive or very clever.³² Having overheard the Knight's complaint on his lady's death, why does the dreamer question the Black Knight? If the dreamer suspects the sincerity of the Knight, as he may indeed, his request to hear the Knight tell his sorrow and its causes may very well be an attempt by the dreamer to draw the Knight out: to let him play the part he seems to want and then to reveal him for what he is, a hypocrite.

The Knight then begins his long tale of woe, and he emphasizes his own personal sorrow. He attempts to make his sorrow seem absolute, beyond compare and hopeless:

Ne hele me may no phisicien.

(571)

And later,

Y wreche, that deth hath mad al naked
Of al the blysse that ever was maked,
Yworthe worste of alle wyghtes,

³²See Donald C. Baker, "The Dreamer Again in The Book of the Duchess," PMLA, LXX (Mar., 1955), 279-282; James R. Kreuzer, "The Dreamer in the Book of the Duchess," PMLA, LXVI (June, 1951), 543-547; and Stephen Manning, "That Dreamer Once More," PMLA, LXXI (June, 1956), 540-541.

That hate my dayes and my nyghtes!

(577-580)

For one hundred and fifty lines (559-709), the Knight expands on his sorrow, with no mention of what caused it. This rambling, self-centered complaint on sorrow and fortune, coupled with the doubts already raised, leads to a possible reading of the Knight's speech as either a rather tedious monologue of self-pity or a play for the sympathy of his listener. In either case, the Black Knight would no longer appear quite so "goodly," and his motives would now be suspect.

Georgia Ronan Crampton points out that in the Knight's lament "he inveighs against Fortune in a long string of oxymorons; she subverts his universe so that good is bad, light is darkness, and "sykernessee" has become "drede."³³ These oxymorons in the Knight's speech also suggest the true-false quality in the Knight himself:

My good ys harm, and evermoo
 In wrathe ys turned my pleyng
 And my delyt into sorwyng.
 Myn hele ys turned into seknesse,
 In drede ys al my sykernessee;
 To derke ys turned al my lyght,
 My wyt ys foly, my day ys nyght,

³³ Georgia Ronan Crampton, "Transitions and Meaning in The Book of the Duchess," JEGP, LXII (July, 1963), 494-495.

My love ys hate, my slep wakyng.

(604-611)

The Knight's own words emphasize the question of what is real and what is not, what is true and what is false. Just as the various images in the description are reversed, so the Knight may be an image of goodliness that is reversed in reality.

The dreamer continues questioning the Black Knight to reveal the full source and nature of his sorrow, and the Knight relates that he had, in his youth, dedicated himself

To Love, hooly with good entente,
And throgh plesaunce become his thral
With good wille, body, hert, and al.

(766-768)

This could easily be read as Chaucer's statement of Gaunt's amorous nature, accepting what is known and what is speculated about Gaunt. After his long, self-indulgent lament, the Knight finally describes his lady:

I sawgh hyr daunce so comlily,
Carole and synge so swetely,
Laughe and pleye so womanly,
And loke so debonairly,
So goodly speke and so frendly,
That, certes, y trowe that evermor
Nas seyn so blysfyl a tresor.

(848-854)

The description continues, but the Knight seems to dwell on the lady's physical charm, that is, her superficial beauty. As D. W. Robertson, Jr., says "at the beginning of his little confession the Black Knight reveals an inclination to take Blanche merely as a gift of Fortune."³⁴ If the Knight is lamenting only the material loss of his lady, then his sorrow is selfish, and if the Knight is not what he seems to be, then his grief is false.

As the Knight's description continues, we are told the lady's name:

And goode faire White she het;
That was my lady name ryght.
She was bothe fair and bryght;
She hadde not hir name wrong.

(948-951)

Aside from the identification with Blanche, the name White sets up a basic contrast between her and the Black Knight. Stephen Manning makes a point concerning the lady's name: "the name White sums up also her moral beauty, for Chaucer has called her good fair White. White is both good and fair; she is both Goodness and Beauty."³⁵

The Knight does not completely ignore his lady's virtue:

³⁴Robertson, A Preface to Chaucer, p. 464.

³⁵Stephen Manning, "Chaucer's Good Fair White: Woman and Symbol," CL, X (Spring, 1958), 100.

Therwith she loved so wel ryght,
 She wrong do wolde to no wyght.
 No wyght myghte do hir noo shame,
 She loved so wel hir owne name.

(1015-18)

The description of the lady's virtue comes after her physical description, and less time is devoted to it. It is as if her virtues were second thoughts to the Knight, or of less importance than her beauty. Manning later states that the Black Knight symbolizes grief, yet, Manning remarks, "White contrasts immediately with black, the color in which the knight is attired."³⁶ The simplest interpretation of the symbolism, if white is moral beauty, is for black to be immoral or ugly or both. For my reading, the Knight's black garb symbolizes his sinfulness, that is, his falseness as a husband. As many critics have pointed out, the Black Knight and White do not seem to be married. Perhaps in Chaucer's mind Gaunt did not appear married to Blanche. For the obvious political aspects of Gaunt's marriage to Blanche and the frequent periods of separation coupled with the possibility of Gaunt's infidelity all suggest that the marriage may have been a poor one indeed. Toward the end of his story, the Knight tells of receiving a ring from his lady, "and therwith she yaf me a ryng." This is not an exchange of rings. The ring may be a symbol of marital

³⁶Ibid., p. 101.

behavior, and Chaucer may mean that Blanche was a faithful and virtuous wife, but Gaunt never returned this precious gift. Thus the Black Knight received a ring, but gave none in return. Manning also suggests that White often symbolizes purity (the Knight himself points out his lady's virtue in this respect), and by contrast, the Black Knight could represent the opposite, impurity.

The Knight describes his attempts to win his lady, and he vows his love and devotion in absolute terms (similar to those used in his elaborate tale of sorrow):

With hool herte I gan hir beseche
 That she wolde be my lady swete;
 And swor, and hertely gan hir hete,
 Ever to be stedfast and trewe,
 And love hir alwey fresshly newe,
 And never other lady have.

(1224-29)

In light of the contrasts established between the Black Knight and Blanche and the suspicions already raised concerning the Knight's sincerity, this profession of love is also subject to doubt. Significant is the Knight's remark: "and never other lady have." Assuming Gaunt was as active outside his marriage as I have suggested, this remark is grimly ironical.

Suggestive of how the Knight could be interpreted is the fact that the lady turned down his overtures. As Muscatine,

speaking of the general principles of courtly love, points out: "the Lady is traditionally desirable and difficult, and her favors are not lightly given. Love itself is a humbling and refining passion, open only to the worthy."³⁷ Although the Knight has certainly described Blanche as desirable, his earlier, elaborate lament centered upon himself and not his lady, and thereby raises the question of the Knight's worthiness. Up to this point in his tale, the Knight has not seemed humble at all.

According to the Knight, the lady finally accepted him when

she wel understod
That I ne wilned thyng but god,
And worship, and to kepe hir name
Over alle thyng, and to drede hir shame.

(1261-64)

At this point, with the contrast between the Knight and Blanche and the true-false structure that runs through the poem in mind, the Knight's words are hard to believe. His whole story about the lady accepting him may be false and simply an attempt to gain sympathy. The ending to the dream suggests such a reading, for as the Knight pronounces woefully the supposed capping to his sorrow, that his lady is dead, something the dreamer already knows, the dreamer's response is very brief,

³⁷Muscatine, p. 13.

almost curt: "Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!"

After the Knight's long discourse, this is the dreamer's only reply, and its brevity and simplicity contrast sharply with the Knight's protracted tale. I suggest the dreamer's reply is a sarcastic one, revealing that all along the dreamer was aware of the Knight's basic falseness, and simply drew the Knight out to expose him. In regard to Blanche and Gaunt, this closing statement by the dreamer is the poet's way of commenting upon Gaunt, his behavior to Blanche and his faithlessness in his marriage.

The questions concerning the historical relationships between Gaunt and Blanche, Gaunt and Chaucer, and Chaucer and his wife can never be answered with certainty. My hope is that I have successfully raised doubt enough about what has been traditionally accepted to warrant a new look at The Book of the Duchess. As I have tried to show in my reading of the poem, from the opening suggestion by Chaucer of an eight-year sickness, there is a continuing thread of suspicion and illusion throughout, eventually centering in the Black Knight. What consolation there is in this reading of the poem falls to Chaucer for being able to poetically express what may well have been a long contained frustration over Gaunt for the possible reasons I have suggested. The poem contains the basic evidence of a conflict between reality and illusion, and the contrasts set up run throughout the poem down to the basic

contrast between White and the Black Knight. What I believe Chaucer attempted to do in The Book of the Duchess is implied by Robert O. Payne: "Life, as compacted into the created character of 'narrator' or 'dreamer,' may provide a 'realistic criticism of the dream.' So may the dream provide an idealistic criticism of life."³⁸

³⁸Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics (New Haven, Conn., 1963), p. 120.

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