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Author: Julia O'Connell

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Emotional Boundaries in Chaucer's Book of the Duchess

JULIA O'CONNELL

Geoffrey Chaucer (early 1340s – 1400) is widely regarded as the greatest English poet of the Middle Ages. Chaucer worked for most of his life as a civil servant in the turbulent political world of the English royal court, whilst also composing some of the most famous and influential works of English literature, such as the *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The House of Fame*. One of his earliest works, the *Book of the Duchess*, was written between 1368 and 1372 and represents Chaucer's first experimentation with the dream vision form, the amalgamation of comic and courtly themes, and with the poetic capacity of the English language. It is also a text in which Chaucer skilfully draws upon previous literary models and adapts his French sources to create a work of emotional perspicacity. The poem has a complex narrative structure connecting three main elements: a narrator experiencing a melancholic insomnia, an interpretation of Ovid's tale of Ceys and Alcyone, and a poignant dream-narrative in which a Man in Black grieves for the lost Lady Whyte. Through a number of coded references in the poem, the Man in Black and his lady are identified as John of Gaunt and his wife Blanche of Lancaster, who died of the plague in 1368. The poem therefore interweaves the narrator's 'seemingly mundane private frustrations' against the 'public spectacle' of grief suffered by a real member of the royal household, and one of the nobility's most powerful members.¹ Through an analysis of the poem's linguistic and formal features, this paper will demonstrate that the narrator and the Man in Black represent different emotional communities, each with their own standards of emotional expression and belief in the value of similar types of emotion. It will argue that these figures establish boundaries that inhibit effective and affective communication between their respective

¹ J. C. Fumo, *Making Chaucer's Book of the Duchess: Textuality and Reception* (Cardiff, 2015), p. 2.

emotional communities, thereby reflecting the connections between authority and feeling in fourteenth-century England.

The term emotional communities was first introduced by historian Barbara Rosenwein and describes 'groups in which people adhere to the same norms of emotional expression and value – or devalue – the same or related emotions'.² Rosenwein suggests

More than one emotional community may exist – indeed normally does exist – contemporaneously, and these communities may change over time. Some come to the fore to dominate our sources, then recede in importance. Others are almost entirely hidden from us, though we may imagine they exist and even may see their effects on more visible groups.³

Through the depiction of the bookish narrator, who belongs to the community of learned laymen, and the Man in Black, who is part of the community of courtly males, Chaucer's poem reflects the multiplicity of emotional communities that exist within society. Whilst social class impacts upon effective communication between the two characters, they represent distinct emotional communities because they value, perform and understand different types of emotion. Throughout the text, the narrator and Man in Black frequently misinterpret and misunderstand the emotions associated with a different emotional community. The *Book of the Duchess* therefore illustrates the boundaries that limit emotional communication between different communities. The *Book of the Duchess* begins with the voice of the narrator who appears to be in the throes of an intense, almost debilitating emotional crisis. The opening lines describe symptoms which exacerbate his suffering, including restless thoughts and an inability to sleep:

I have gret wonder, be this light,

How that I lyve, for day ne nyght

² B. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, 2007), p. 2.

³ Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*, p. 2.

I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;

I have so many an ydel thought

Purely for defaute of slep (1-5).⁴

In his sleeplessness, the narrator seems to be trapped within the contemplation of his immediate troubles; he has no interest in the outside world and asserts that he has 'feling in nothyng' (11) such is his focus on his sorrow and melancholy. Yet the narrator is unable to provide a clear cause of his sorrow, explaining 'Myselven can not telle why' (34) he is unable to sleep, he only understands his symptoms to be part of 'a sicknesse | That I have suffred this eight yeer' (36-7). The narrator also appears to be unable to self-regulate his feelings or provide a remedy for his sickness. Instead, he relies upon another to act as his cure: 'there is phisicien but oon | That may me hele' (39-40). Chaucer's description creates a vivid and convincing portrait of the suffering lover, especially as insomnia, the eight-year sickness and the implication that there is only one lady who can dispel suffering, are all conventional signs of lovesickness.

However, the opening lines of the *Book of the Duchess* are actually drawn from the start of Jean Froissart's *Le Paradis d'amour*,

Je sui de moi en grant merveille

Comment je vifs quant tant je veille,

Et on ne poroit en veillant

Trouver de moi plus traveillant,

Car bien saciés que par veillier

Me viennent souvent travillier

⁴ All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, L. Benson et al. (eds.) (Oxford, 2008).

Pensées et melancolies

Qui me son tens au coer liies. (*Paradis d'Amour*, 1-8)

[I marvel at how I stay alive, for I lie awake so many nights, and one could not find any man more tormented in his sleepless plight; for, you see, as I lie awake there often come to worry me heavy thoughts and melancholies that are shackles on my heart.]⁵

The characteristics of the narrative voice in the *Book of the Duchess* are not only inspired by, but are directly drawn from the French tradition. Froissart's central ideas, such as the sleepless, melancholic dreamer who is preoccupied by sad thoughts and concerned that he will not survive his sustained period of insomnia, are clearly emulated in the opening section of Chaucer's text. Furthermore, the emphatic 'I' used by the narrator at the very start of the *Book of the Duchess* is a direct translation of Froissart's opening 'Je'. Ardis Butterfield has argued that Froissart's use of the first person mode at the beginning of the poem is 'radical and experimental'⁶ as it gives the narrator a far more active and direct function in the text, an innovative feature which is then echoed in Chaucer's work.

The *Book of the Duchess* appropriates the ideas and style of French texts for a specific reason, bringing the subject of emotional experience into direct contact with the literary tradition of *fin amor* (courtly love). Chaucer deliberately draws attention to his French sources and to the instances of translation in the *Book of the Duchess* to demonstrate that the narrator's thoughts and emotions are influenced to such a degree by French courtly literature that it has shaped his emotional expression and understanding. Feelings of loss, sleeplessness and despair are traditional symbols of lovesickness, but crucially, these

⁵ Jean Froissart, *Le Paradis d'Amour*, K. M. Figg, & R. B. Palmer (eds. & trans.), *Jean Froissart: An Anthology of Lyric and Narrative Poetry* (London, 2001).

⁶ A. Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford, 2009), p. 281.

emotions have been *learnt* from the courtly French texts with which the narrator seems so familiar.

A useful framework for understanding how the narrator has learnt the emotions he describes is Sarah McNamer's view that literary texts act as scripts for the performance of feeling. McNamer suggests the most fruitful way to understand emotions in literary texts is through performance as,

Performance is the means through which the feelings embedded in literary texts became, potentially, performative, thus entering and altering history ... What I suggest is a more imaginative, large-scale experiment with the literal; with conceiving of [...] texts as literal scripts that vigorously enlist *literariness* as a means of generating feelings and putting them into play in history.⁷

McNamer demonstrates that many medieval genres sought to provoke an emotional response in their readers and that texts played a significant role in teaching readers how to feel.⁸ In the context of *The Book of the Duchess*, considering medieval texts as 'scripts for the performance of feeling' facilitates an understanding of the narrator's emotional engagement with French texts.⁹ Lovesickness and loss are descriptively performed in Froissart's text and have then become performative for Chaucer's narrator. French texts act as emotion scripts for the narrator's understanding, interpretation and expression of feeling. Chaucer is therefore exploring the ways in which literary texts can affect and shape emotional states.

The reading of literary texts is an essential part of the narrator's emotional community. He is part of a new community of the 'literate layman who was not a clerk, the courtier who was not a knight; [...] not poor but not rich; a salaried man, not landed gentry'.¹⁰

⁷ S. McNamer, 'Feeling', in P. Strohm (ed.), *Middle English* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 245-46.

⁸ S. McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, (Philadelphia, 2010), p. 2

⁹ S. McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, p. 2.

¹⁰ D. Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (New York, 1982), p. 71.

For the literate layman, access to manuscripts and literary texts was essential to their position within the court and to their sense of authority. Classical and French texts were the sources from which these new men learnt about how to operate in the courtly world, and where this emotional community learnt their emotional regimes and vocabulary.

Therefore, when the narrator seeks a solution for his melancholy and insomnia he asks his servant to ‘recche me a booke, / A romaunce, and he it me tooke / To rede and dryve the night away’ (47-49). At this point in the poem the narrator offers his own unique reading of a parallel narrative of grief in Ovid’s tale of Ceys and Alcyone, after which he immediately proceeds to fall asleep ‘upon my booke’ (274). He wakes within the dream, finding himself in a chamber

Ful wel depeynted, and with glas

Were al the wyndowes wel yglased

Ful clere, and nat an hole ycrased,

That to beholde hyt was gret joye.

For hooly al the story of Troye

Was in the glasinge ywrought thus

[...]

And al the walles with colours fine

Were peynted, both text and glose,

Of al the Romaunce of the Rose. (322-334)

The narrator wakes to find himself in a dream chamber in which light streams through stained glass images of the story of Troy and the walls are decorated with paintings of the French dream vision, the *Roman de la Rose*. The narrator’s dream is therefore refracted through the lens of classical and French literature. The act of reading has sent the dreamer-

narrator to sleep, but, as the images within the chamber demonstrate, reading has also permeated the narrator's dream as 'therwith even | Me mette so inly swete a sweven' (273-4). The narrator moves from the reading of an Ovidian tale, to a chamber filled with literary images and finally outside into an Edenic landscape drawn directly from the romance tradition. The dream chamber demonstrates that literature has been internalised by the narrator to shape his understanding of the world. The inclusion of this literary space, set between the narrator's waking and dreaming state, is key to the narrative's literariness and suggests the narrator views emotions through the lens of literature, specifically through the lens of French texts.

The narrator then moves from the transitional space of the dream-chamber to a forest in which he eventually encounters the Man in Black. The Man in Black is described as having 'y-turned his bak' (446), 'he heng his hede adounne' (461) and instead of the ruddiness of good health, his skin is 'Ful pitous, pale' (471). The Man in Black then proceeds to speak a complainte 'withoute song' (472):

I have of sorwe so grete woon
That joye gete I never noon,
Now that I see my lady bright,
Which I have loved with al my might,
Is fro me deed and is agoon.
Allas, Deeth, what aileth thee
That thou noldest have taken me
Whan thou took my lady swete
That was so fair, so fresh, so free,
So good that men may wel y-see

Of al goodness she had no mete! (475-86)

The Man in Black explicitly states that his lady is 'deed and is agoon' (480) and that death has 'took my lady swete' (483), yet the narrator fails to understand this spoken complaint to be a statement of death, loss and grief. The narrator equates the Man in Black's declarations with the conventions of lovesickness stemming from unrequited love or an absent lover. This misreading of the Man in Black's emotions demonstrates that though the narrator reads and recognises literary language describing emotional distress, he appears to be unable to understand emotional vocabulary when it is detached from the written page and the literary context of *fin amor*.

However, as soon as the Man in Black has finished his complaint, the narrator is shown to be a far more observant reader of emotion. In great detail, the narrator describes the ways in which emotional pain is written directly onto the Man in Black's body. Chaucer's use of medieval medical language 'reveals the painful embodied emotion that spurs the Knight's voiced lament' and suggests the body acts as a signifier of authentic, internal feeling.¹¹ The Man in Black's spirits or humors withdraw and his blood is driven by his sorrowful thoughts to move to the heart, the main organ of emotion. His grief then causes the skin to change colour, robbing it of a healthy rosiness and turning it green and pale as his limbs are drained of blood. It is the description of embodied emotions (488–499), rather than the preceding complaint (475–86) which allows the narrator to comprehend the extent to which the Man in Black is suffering and of the potentially harmful internal bodily and mental practices which are being aggravated by his sorrow.¹²

Yet, rather than connecting the Man in Black's embodied emotions with the earlier declaration of his lady's death, the narrator instead interprets these emotions as a signifier of the Man in Black's authority, power and courtliness, describing him as a 'wonder wel-faringe

¹¹ R. McNamara, 'Wearing Your Heart on Your Face: Reading Lovesickness and the Suicidal Impulse in Chaucer', *Literature and Medicine* 33 (2015), p. 262.

¹² R. McNamara, 'Wearing Your Heart on Your Face', p. 263.

knight' (452). This is because the authority of the emotional community of courtly males was practiced through emotional performance. The performance of emotions such as anger, love and sorrow operated 'to inform and express the relationships between cooperating hierarchies of authority and to signal and affirm the rights, responsibilities, and authority of men to regulate communities that ranged from the household to the spiritual, the urban, and the national.'¹³ Therefore, whilst the narrator understands that the Man in Black's embodied emotions signal sorrow, he is unable to equate them to the death of Lady Whyte because the imbalance in the authority between the two emotional communities acts as a boundary impeding the narrator's successful reading of the Man in Black's noble emotions.

To conclude, the narrator has learnt the feelings of lovesickness he professes to feel at the beginning of the poem from reading the literary texts of *fin'amor*. In his observation of the Man in Black, the narrator transcribes the feelings and tropes of lovesickness onto the Man in Black's emotional experience. The narrator's perspective has been so shaped by the emotional vocabulary of *fin'amor* that he creates an emotional boundary that inhibits his understanding of the Man in Black's deeply felt grief. The two characters are not only separated by social standing, but by their understanding and expression of emotion. The narrator attempts to console the Man in Black over the rest of the poem, whilst the rather brisk concluding line 'This was my sweven; now it is doon' (1334) leaves the reader to consider how much the narrator has learnt from his dream. It is a concluding line that cements the emotional boundary separating the narrator from the experience of the Man in Black.

¹³ S. Broomhall (ed.), *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York, 2015), p. 13.

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