

The Book of Duchess: Burgeoning of Chaucer as a New Storyteller

Lee, Dongchoon

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I. Introduction

As asserted in the lines of the *Parliament of Fowls*--“For out of olde felde, as men seyth,/cometh al this newe corn fro yer to yere” (22-3), Chaucer implies that, through retelling, “oldstories” can be brought into something new and original in terms of tone, style, voice, characterization, and so on. Chaucer positively combined the basic plot of old stories with new skills of tale-telling and creates surprising effects that we would not normally expect from them. The effects can be characterized with the Bakhtinian global concepts: *indeterminacy*, *dialogic*, and *semantic openendedness*. Chaucer’s story-telling techniques, employed in the basic plot of a popular tale, demand the audience’s intellect and imagination in ferreting out meaning or what might be seen as genuine authorial intention.

Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is not only the embodiment of his various

tale-telling strategies, but also the place for displaying the diversity of genre and “entente” among his various storytellers. In such a Chaucerian literary world of variety, we can find a common trait in his stylistic mode of tale-telling. As Raymond Preston points out, Chaucer as a professional raconteur keeps “in reserve, at a given point in his story, the completeness of the narrative and of possible attitudes toward it” (104). Chaucer’s telling of a tale from multiple points of view together with his giving up the role of authorial guide results from his combination of the traditional materials with his technical devices of storytelling. As stated in Pandarus’ proverbial wisdom in *Troilus and Criseydes*—“By his contrarie is everythyng declared” (637), for Chaucer, meaning or truth is not exposed to a reader on a surface level, but the reader himself should grope through the veil of the outer story for its kernel. Chaucer’s eschewing of an authorial role as an absolute guide to meaning and his encouraging of a reader’s cooperation in filling in the narrative halfway narrated or in making a judgment in the unsettling moments are frequently observed in his tales, including *The Book of Duchess* that will be discussed in this paper.

To put this another way, most of the Chaucerian fictions involve the tensions between the voices or the ideas without a resolution or a synthesis and create the dialogic discourse. In Bakhtin’s analysis, the voice of the author who speaks through characters, as Chaucer does, is “refracted as it passes through these planes [the speech diversity of the characters]” and “does not give itself up to any one of them” (311). That voice serves to cohabit the voices each other within the narrative without one obliterating or subsuming the other and, through the narrative devices of variety, to subject the character’s voices to irony. Only the reader should be alert to the complexity of the voices residing in the Chaucerian narrative and responsible for sorting them out. In short, the Chaucerian

storytelling devices, causing the effect of indeterminacy and semantic openendedness, are closely related to the reader's intellectual response.¹⁾

In my study of the *Book of Duchess* that serves as the testing ground for Chaucer's later writings, especially, the *Canterbury Tales*, in the light of tale and tale-telling, I want to show how Chaucer manipulates the artistic skills in the basic plot of popular narrative and what differences his manipulation brings about to his audience.

II. The Tradition of English Popular Narratives

Before the narrator accounts his dream about his encounter with the Black Knight in the *Book of Duchess*, he describes his surroundings inside (his chamber) and outside (May's morning environment). More significantly, the narrator's chamber is decorated with the windows glazed with images from classical poems, and with walls painted with the "text and glose" of the *Roman de la Rose* (321-34). The chamber decorations properly suggest Chaucer's poetic environment and heritage that had influenced his storytelling. Indeed, in the *Book of Duchess*, Chaucer is in debt to the Roman classical writer, Ovid, and the French writers such as Machaut, Froissart, and Jean de Meun in terms of their narrative crafts as well as of their sources. In the poem, Chaucer incorporates the narrative skills that he borrowed from his literary predecessors into the structural pattern of the English vernacular narrative.

Though the mode of the narrative apparently looks disjunct, discontinuous, and inorganic, from the point of view of a structural analysis

1) For further study of the reader's essential role in the Chaucerian narratives, see Leonard Michael Koff, *Chaucer and the Art of Story-telling* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988).

on the basis of Propp's morphological paradigm, the basic pattern of the *Book of Duchess* corresponds to the functional events point by point. In order to examine both the similar and distinct features that the structure of the poem has, I want to apply the Proppian tool to the poem. My analysis is as follows:

The frame narrative--the narrator's dream.

- I. 1-61: Introduction--the narrator's insomnia and his reading
[Propp's functions of "implied" *absentation* and *lack*].

The inset tale--the tale of Ceyx and Alcione.

- II. 62-217: Tale of Ceyx and Alcione.
122-211: the frame narrative--Alcione's dream.
132-91: sub-episode about Morpheus.
192-217: Alcione's vision of Ceyx, and the conclusion of dream and tale [Propp's functions of *absentation*, *lack*, and *liquidation*].
- III. 218-90: Narrator's explicit transition back to his "first matere."
218-69: the narrator's response to the tale of Ceyx and Alcione.
270-90: the narrator's falling asleep [Propp's function of *liquidation*].
- IV. 291-443: Narrator's dream [Propp's *initial situation*].
291-343: description of the narrator's surroundings.
344-443: the hunt.

The sub-narrative--the tale of the Black Knight.

- V. 444–557: Description of the Black Knight.
444–513: the narrator–dreamer observing and overhearing the Black Knight [Propp’s function of “implied” *absentation*].
514–57: the first dialogue between the Knight and the narrator–dreamer.
- VI. 558–709: Knight’s explanation of sorrow [Propp’s function of “implied” *lack*].
558–616: series of rhetorical figures of love–pain.
617–686: chess game with Fortune.
687–709: personal lamentation.
- VII. 710–57: The second dialogue between the narrator–dreamer and the Knight.
- VIII. 758–1111: Knight’s second explanation [Propp’s functions of “implied” *absentation* and *lack*]
758–804: dedication of himself to love.
805–1111: Knight’s first sight of lady and his eulogy of her.
- IX. 1112–43: The third dialogue between the narrator–dreamer and the Knight.
- X. 1144–1294: Knight’s third explanation [Propp’s functions of “implied” *absentation* and *lack*].
1144–1220: Knight’s beginning of love for lady in secret.
1221–94: Knight’s supplications to lady and her acceptance.
- XI. 1295–1323: The fourth dialogue between the narrator–dreamer and the Knight, and the Knight’s departure [Propp’s functions of “explicit” *absentation*, *lack*, and “implied” *liquidation*].

The Ending: XII. 1324–34: The narrator–dreamer waking up
with the book in his hand.

As the above analysis shows, the *Book of Duchess* is organized in three analogical tales: the tale of the narrator, the tale of Ceyx and Alcione, and the tale of the Black Knight. Each tale commonly consists of a series of functional events—death [*absentation*]²⁾—sorrow [*lack*]²⁾—consolation [*liquidation*], though some functions are not explicitly revealed. In other words, the protagonist in each tale repeats comparable experiences of love, loss, grief, and consolation. Although each tale is somewhat different from each other in terms of tone and significance, these tales are connected and “analogized” by repetitions of imagery and diction (Ebel 200). In this sense, the poem is based on analogy and parallel, as in the Middle English popular narratives such as *King Horn* and Constance narratives.

Although we are unable to diagnose the narrator’s eight-year malady which causes his insomnia (1–43), nonetheless, the details on his symptoms suggest that he is the suffering lover and indeed unhappy in love. Especially, the fact that “there is phisicien but oon” (39) who can heal him implies the absence of his counterpart and his state of mind.²⁾ In the second tale, in order to match his state of mind with Alcione’s, the narrator compresses all of the materials in Ovid preliminary to and inclusive of Ceyx’s departure and death and only focuses on Alcione’s state of mental confusion after he has set sail. As does the narrator, Alcione knows “no reed but oon” (105) for her difficulty, and she prays for sleep

2) Bernard Huppé and D. W. Robertson and, independently, J. Burke Severs have symbolically interpreted the “phisicien but oon” as God. See Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer’s Allegories* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963), 32–4; J. Burke Severs, “Chaucer’s Self-Portrait in the *Book of the Duchess*,” *Philological Quarterly* 43 (1964): 32–3. See Russell A. Peck, “Theme and Number in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*,” *Silent Poetry: Essays in Numerological Analysis*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Routledge, 1970), 73–115.

and a dream which will cure her predicament. The verbal echo together with the similarity in their two states of mind links the first narrative with the second one. Furthermore, as the narrator's lack of sleep is liquidated by his reading of the myth and his offering of a mock prayer to Juno and Morpheus, Chaucer's learned court audience's knowledge on Ovid's version would have enabled them to presume that Alcione's grief for the bereavement of her husband is liquidated by their final union as sea birds.

Like the main figures in the first and the second tale, the protagonist of the third tale recapitulates the experiences of loss, sorrow, and consolation. Similar to the narrator and Alcione, the Black Knight, deprived of his "suffisance" (703), is plunged into a mood of "sorful ymagynacioun." He has lost all joy and interest in life, and he sits overwhelmed by grief. The Knight's lack of joy that results from the loss of his White is finally liquidated, though not explicitly revealed, but implied at the end of the Dreamer's dream (Delasanta 249). Besides the implicit revelation of Propp's function of *liquidation* in the second and third episodes, we can notice that three parallel episodes have also some acceptance of the fact of finality, and even the hint of a move away from loss (41–42; 202–3, 210; 1311–13), though the poem does not offer to the audience traditional philosophical and Christian consolation directly. As the function of *liquidation* in the tale of Ceyx and Alcione is not explicitly revealed, but suggested in the narrator's omissions of the Ovidian source, the possibility of consolation in the tale of the Black Knight is indirectly implied not only in the series of parallel episodes, but also the narrative technique of "juxtaposition of opposites" that I will explain later. To put this another way, rather than intruding his authorial voice of Christianity into his narrative, Chaucer indirectly conveys to his audience his concern of offering consolation to the bereaved Black Knight not only through the suggestive ways,³⁾ but also through an incantatory pattern of the narrative.

Accordingly, a reader's role in this poem is much more important than in a Middle English popular tale. A reader in the *Book of Duchess* should exert his own knowledge and wisdom to ferret out the poet's intent that lurks in the poem. In this regard, Chaucer's earliest tale can be said to be a testing ground for his mature work, the *Canterbury Tales*.

III. Chaucerian Narrative Stylistics: the Structural Qualities

As we have seen in some Middle English tales like the *Constance* and *King Horn*, whose structure is based on analogical principles of varied repetition and parallelism, the basic pattern embedded in the overall complex and inorganic structure of the *Book of Duchess* does not deviate from the typical pattern of a popular narrative, and its analogous pattern repeats in order to affirm the sense of consolation. Except for these features similar to those of a Middle English vernacular narrative, however, Chaucer's story marks more distinct features in terms of structure. Chaucer employs the method of abrupt, unadorned juxtapositions and, as the above analysis shows, adds non-functional digressive materials to the

3) See Helen Phillips' article entitled "Structure and Consolation in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981): 111-15; she argues that the possibility of consolation in the poem is suggested in the passage on Fortune (618-74) and the cryptic "emperiour Octavyen" (368). She further says that, by giving a well-known argument on the fickleness of Fortune to his audience, but by stopping short of conclusion on it, Chaucer allows his readers to find the sense of consolation that is suggested in the Knight's omissions of the conclusion on his complaints. See also Huppé and Robertson, 91-2; Huppé and Robertson have read the iconography of the last scene in pointing out that it signifies the New Jerusalem. In addition, for a thorough discussion of the number metaphor in the *Book of the Duchess* in relation to the poet's intention to offer the sense of consolation to a reader, see Peck, 89-104.

basic skeleton of the tale. As a consequence, compared with the vernacular English tale, the criteria of narrative continuity, dramatic consistency, and organic unity diminish in relevance. As Robert Jordan points out, in the distinct, discontinuous narrative mode, especially, the dreamer's transitional links between two episodes "override his dramatic function and characterization" (108). In short, in comparison with the examples of a popular narrative, the *Book of Duchess* is extraordinarily indirect in its style of conveying its meaning to a reader, because of its poetic structure characteristic of postponement and dilation. Such structural qualities that mark the *Book of Duchess* as most truly Chaucer's anticipate the direction of his creations as whole, particularly, the direction of writing his tales like the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, and so on.

In addition to these structural qualities of the *Book of Duchess*, Chaucer's "novel combinations of heterogeneous elements" in the early poetry that Wolfgang Clemen points out is one of the peculiar features that Chaucer further developed in his later creations (38). My point is that, together with Chaucer's devious, roundabout approach to the theme of the tale by employing the delicate framework, the combination of "heterogeneous elements" or "opposites" is the storytelling method that serves as the rationale for Chaucer's later writings. As John Fyler has observed, both Ovid's and Chaucer's works are "full of juxtaposition and opposites" (20). Indeed, in the *Book of Duchess*, one of the striking aspects of Chaucerian narrative stylistics is to delight in the continuity of disparate elements, whether of differences not only in the sources of content [classical, Latin, French, and English], but also in the stylistic elements [the juxtaposition of high formal with low colloquial], and even in generic types [the combination of medieval love vision with classical elegy]. Besides, one type of juxtapositional incongruity Chaucer creates in the *Book of Duchess* which is also observed in his mature works is the

tension between comic and tragic as well as between bright and dark.⁴⁾ My aim is to study the examples of contrasting these two moods in the tale and to reveal how the narrative principle of juxtaposition works with the poet's thematic purpose of offering consolation to his audiences, especially, to his bereaved noble Duke, John of Gaunt.

The first example to show the juxtaposition of opposite moods is the narrative of the journey to Morpheus' cave (153–91), which is a part of the larger intercalated narrative of Ceyx and Alcione (62–220). As opposed to his source, Ovid's state tale of Ceyx and Alcione in Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*, as Julia Ebel says, Chaucer's retelling of the Ovidian version is infused with "real novelty and considerable humor." She further says that "the sinister and conventional gloom of the valley of the dead is peopled not with stock Homeric or Virgilian heroes but with a random assortment of nodding human beings" (201):

Somme henge her chyn upon hir brest,
And slept upryght, hir hed yhed,
And somme lay naked in her bed
And slepe whiles the dayes laste. (174–77)

The god of sleep, Morpheus, in Chaucer's version is turned into a comic figure, "That slep and dide noon other werk" (169),⁵⁾ and the details about

4) For the detailed discussion of the consolatory effect that results from the juxtaposition of the dark [the black] and the bright [the white], see Denis Walker, "Narrative Inconclusiveness and Consolatory Dialectic in *The Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983): 1–17. He concludes that "It is a tactful, discreet way of going about a poem, and flattering to the intelligence of the reader, whether he is John of Gaunt or not. ... The text leaves the dialectic unresolved, the syllogism of consolation incomplete. It is by such means that Chaucer expresses his characteristic, non-reductionist respect for man's essential ambivalence, in his knowledge that what the mind assents to the heart may reject" (16).

5) See Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: U of

Morpheus strengthen the humorous effect against the gloomy and serious atmosphere of the tale proper.

Furthermore, the comic narrator has a functional role of cutting through the elegiac fabric which enshrouds the tale. As the story of Ceyx and Alcione is completed, the narrator turns his attention to his situation of insomnia and offers a mock prayer to Morpheus for sleep. Comically, the narrator promises to offer to Morpheus not the costly rewards or paeans of praise, but a featherbed in exchange for his rest. Throughout the tale, the narrator, as if ignorant of a serious nature of the tale that he tells, enacts the bumbling and comic moments. In the scene that the narrator-dreamer responds to the Black Knight's lament, the ironic humor arises from the narrator's misapprehensions of the Black Knight's "rhetorical elaboration and formal lyricism" (103). As the Knight expresses the loss of his wife as the "loss of a fers" (654 and 669) through an elaborate metaphor of a chess game with Fortune, the narrator's literal-mindedness does not grasp the true meaning in the Knight's figurative remarks and takes them straightforwardly:

But ther is no man alyve her
Wolde for a fers make this woo! (740-41)

This scene marks the narrator's incredibility as a tale-teller, and it also gives us the comic effect. Especially, it is ironical that the narrator as consoler disengages himself from the serious purposes of elegy and even indeed arouses the responses irrelevant to the mourner's situation. As in his literary predecessors' works, however, Chaucer's creation of comic

California P, 1957): He says "the mind behind the narrative tears so bluntly through the finery of the traditional rendering that we need hardly know the tradition to feel the shock of the passage in its context. It is a moment of intense, comic practicality in the midst of conventionalism" (105).

effects not only through his narrator but also through his additions of comic moments into his source is quite intentional; by bringing the effect of bathos to the intrinsic quality of his elegy, Chaucer, though transitory, aims at alleviating the burden of his noble Duke's grief from his mind. That is, rather than by the narrator's earnest and authorial voice, the consolatory tone of the narrative is indirectly carried by the masterful blending of the humorous and the elegiac.

The comic effects arising from the narrator's simplicity and slow-wittedness indicate that, as now generally conceded by the critics, the first person narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* is not a literal portrait of Chaucer, but a fictional mask for him. This simpleton narrator is like the "Geffrey" who quakes in the grasp of the eagle, the "dullard" who tells the doggerel story about Sir Thopas.⁶⁾ Even this fictional mask is extensively employed by an ignorant, unpoetic, and uncomplicated storyteller throughout the later works of Chaucer. To put this another way, a division between the implied author (the poet) and his narrator-dreamer (the storyteller) usually exists in Chaucer's tales, and the meaning of Chaucer's tale generally resides in a reader's active and critical negotiations with the storyteller's voice and the implied author's hidden voice. I want to further study the gap between the implied author, Chaucer, and the narrator of the *Book of Duchess* and its effect on a readership.

6) On the other hand, Huppé and Robertson, and Russell Peck argue that the dreamer pretends to be a simpleton, despite his understanding of the Black Knight's true state, in order to lead the Black Knight to self-confession (self-recovery from the loss of his lady) through the dialogue. Especially, Peck says that the dreamer, disguising himself as a dim-witted person, is like Boethius' Philosophy who listens and asks the basic questions. See Huppé and Robertson, 63-5; Peck, 81.

IV. Narrative Voices and Readership

In the *Book of Duchess*, Chaucer through his fictional narrator challenges the traditional authorities of the French love-poets such as Jean Froissart and Guillaume de Machaut. Chaucer, freed from the French love-poets' authoritative demands in relation to narrator, a poetic matter, and audience, describes his narrator as a person who suffers the uncourtly insomnia and speaks the essential "lewednesse" of the English. In this regard, Chaucer's narrator is quite different from the French love-poets' narrators who are the genuine courtly lovers both in their refined act and sensibility. In addition to the differences in terms of a narrator, as in opposed to the French poems--Froissart's *Paradys d'amour* and Machaut's *Fonteinne amoureuse*--we can find the incongruity between the narrator and his poetic matter, the courtly love poem. As in his *Canterbury Tales*, for example, in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and so on, it is through the gap between the storyteller and his poetic materials used for his storytelling that Chaucer alienates himself from his narrator. To put this in Barbara Nolan's words, "instead of a poet confidently wedding matter and high meaning on the basis of learning, wisdom, or high sensibility, Chaucer in the *Book of the Duchess* projects a teller absorbed in the accidents of his daily life [and in his low colloquialism]" (218).

Not only in his dealing with his French sources, but also in his treatment of a classical source, Ovid's tale of Ceyx and Alcione, Chaucer keeps himself distanced from his narrator. As I have briefly mentioned in the discussion of the narrative principle of juxtaposition, the narrator alters and distorts the tone of the story in order to carry his poetic goal. Furthermore, what drives a reader to doubt the narrator's words and attitude is his personal attitude toward the Ovidian story. The narrator admits that he is not the "clerkes....and other poets" (53-4), and reveals

his own attitude toward the tale:

For me thoughte it better play
Then playe either at ches or tables. (50-1)

As far as he is concerned, reading “fables” is not a search for wisdom or moral, as did the clerkly poets (53-5), but an amusement to “drive the night away” (49). Barbara Nolan says that the narrator’s reading attitude toward the Ovidian tale “violates the canonical grammar-school attitude toward literary texts that urged piously that ‘the fruit of reading is the rectification of the moral life.’”⁷⁾ But it is not surprising at all that the narrator whose attention is absorbed in his own personal difficulty of insomnia fails to derive moral wisdom from the tale. It is, I think, Chaucer’s intention to arouse a comic effect and further to keep the distance from his narrator.

The narrator’s parodic voice against the traditional authorities of the French love-poets and his burlesque of the Ovidian tale culminate in his dialogue with the Black Knight. In the scene that the narrator in his dream as consoler encounters the Knight and responds to the Knight’s complaints, we can notice the narrative style of multiplicity of voice, that is, “polyphony” that Chaucer has fondness for in his later writings. As, by juxtaposing his uncourtly narrator in terms of his circumstantial situation,

7) Nolan, 215. She further argues that “...the Narrator of the *Duchess* can imply themes that were to occupy Chaucer the poet throughout his career—questions of the frailty and transiency of language and the relativity of literary texts, of the difficulties of projecting truth or absolute meaning through the filter of verbal structures, and of consequent dangers of falsification or self-deception in the teller’s assumption of a single authoritative posture” (216). See also Michael D. Cherniss, “The Narrator Asleep and Awake in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 8 (1972): 118-20. Cherniss also points out the gap between the general reading attitude toward the “fables” in Chaucer’s times and the narrator’s “foolishly narrow, parochial attitude toward the story of Ceyx and Alcione” (120).

his act, his usage of language, and so on, against the refined and sophisticated narrator of the French poets, Chaucer refuses to take the French authorities as an absolute and final value, likewise, the confrontation between the narrator and the Knight indirectly reflects Chaucer's trust in his own experience rather than in his mere dependence on the authorities handed down to him. As in his early poems such as the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer appears to be reluctant to take a fixed judgment or value on a certain character and issue at face value that is revealed explicitly or implicitly in his authoritative sources. He usually refuses to embrace expected authoritative stances in relation to meaning and value on a certain point and poses doubt on them. Eventually, the responsibility of making a final judgment on the issue is laid on a reader.

Likewise, Chaucer in the scene of the narrator's encountering the Black Knight juxtaposes two different types of character and two different styles of language, and he does not accept the French courtly conventions at face value and tries to see them from a more realistic and practical perspective.⁸⁾ I want to look at the scene of the dialogue between the two figures more closely. From the first moment of their encounter, the narrator-dreamer misunderstands the Knight's condition that is implied in his appearance--"a man in blak,/That sat and had yturned his bak" (445-46)--and that is explicit in his brief lyric:

"I have of sorwe so gret won
That joye gete I never non,

8) Martin Stevens explains the confrontation between the narrator and the Black Knight as follows: "In the final analysis, the suffering of the Knight is caused by the inefficacy of codified sentiments.... Chaucer was to write for a lifetime about the inadequacy of any mere convention for the expression of personal sentiments" (32). See his article entitled "Narrative Focus in *The Book of the Duchess: A Critical Reevaluation*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 7 (1966): 16-32.

Now that I see my lady bryght,
 Which I have loved with al my myght,
 Is fro me ded and ys agoon.
 “Allas, deth, what ayleth the,
 That thou noldest have taken me,
 Whan thou toke my lady swete,
 That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,
 So good that men may wel se
 Of al goodnesse she had no mete!” (475–86)

In the passages quoted above, despite the heavy burden of the Knight's personal sorrow, his description of his late wife reflects the qualities of courtly grace and magnanimity. Together with his gentle manner as a genuine courtly lover, his use of courtly language is highlighted against the narrator's colloquial language and comic manner. In spite of the Knight's repetitive allusions to the loss of his wife, the dreamer's perplexity more deepens because of the clash between the Knight's metaphorical, courtly language and the narrator's everyday language.

As I have mentioned earlier, the narrator straightforwardly takes the Knight's metaphorical allusion to the loss of his wife through the chess game with Fortune and misunderstands the Knight's lamentation as the loss of a mere chess piece. As a response, the Knight immediately indicates the narrator's error in judgment: “Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;/I have lost more than thow wenest” (743–44). And the narrator requests the Knight to tell the point of his figurative and allegorical words plainly:

“Good sir, telle me al hooly
 In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore
 That ye have thus youre blysse lore.” (746–48).

Upon the narrator's request, the Knight abandons his figurative and

indirect style of language and relies more on his narrative account of love service to the lady, "White." In spite of the Knight's descriptions of his courtship, marriage, and the death of his wife in a more plain style, the narrator still falters and does not understand the Knight's words. Finally, it is only at line 1319 ["She ys ded!"] that the narrator understands the point of the Knight's words and comments: "Be God, hyt ys routhe" (1310). As in the first moment of their encounter, here the Knight as a paragon of courtly manner also employs the conventional courtly attitudes and stylized formulas. That is, the Knight's narrative conventions and manner based on the authorities of the French poets are counterbalanced by the narrator's colloquial and low style of language and his crude manner on the ground of the English tradition. Barbara Nolan argues that Chaucer's refusal of simply imitating his French models in the important matter of the narrative authority is partly due to the result of historical circumstance:

Writing for a court that prized French sophistication and the highly developed theory of the love poets, he was faced with the prosaic limitations of English. In addition, in his first public appearance, he had undertaken to address the noble Duke of Lancaster while he was not himself an aristocrat. The need for deference in both these areas may well have suggested to the young Chaucer a questioning rather than an assertive stance. (215)

Whatever the reason, Chaucer's earliest experiment in narrative voice, challenging the traditional authorities that were handed down to him and keeping the suspicious mind upon them, establishes the direction that points to Chaucer's complex and sophisticated writings, especially, the *Canterbury Tales*.

V. Conclusion

In brief, we can't be sure that Chaucer, in addition to his intention to console his patron, John of Gaunt, originally wrote the poem with the intent of criticizing the authorities of the French love-poets. It appears that, as witnessed in the *Book of the Duchess*, the essential "lewednesse" of the narrator's English, his noncourtly insomnia, and his call for common sense are the evidences of Chaucer's questioning of literary conventions based on authority and applying criteria for judgment drawn from experience. This conflict between experience and authority is basically a struggle to assert his own principles and values against overwhelming conventional expectations, both moral and aesthetic. Though, as revealed in the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer has not made himself completely free from the influence of high French poetry in both theme and style, nonetheless, we can see his intellectual struggle to review such conventional expectations grounded on the French authorities from his own experience. Such questioning and challenging mind that Chaucer shows in his first poetic narrative serves as a rationale for his later storytellings; especially, the *Book of Duchess*, as Barbara Nolan points out, implies the themes "that were to occupy Chaucer the poet throughout his career—questions of the frailty and transiency of language and the relativity of literary texts, of the difficulties of projecting truth or absolute meaning through the filter of verbal structures, and of consequent dangers of falsification or self-deception in the teller's assumption of a single authoritative posture" (216).

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Abstract

***The Book of Duchess*: Burgeoning of Chaucer as a New Storyteller**

Lee, Dongchoon (Daegu University)

Chaucer's story-telling techniques, employed in the basic plot of a popular tale, demand the audience's intellect and imagination in ferreting out meaning or what might be seen as genuine authorial intention. Chaucer's eschewing of an authorial role as an absolute guide to meaning and his encouraging of a reader's cooperation in filling in the narrative halfway narrated or in making a judgment in the unsettling moments are frequently observed in *The Book of Duchess*. *The Book of Duchess* serves as the testing ground for Chaucer's later writings, especially, the *Canterbury Tales*, in the light of tale and tale-telling.

The Book of Duchess is extraordinarily indirect in its style of conveying its meaning to a reader, because of its poetic structure characteristic of postponement and dilation. Such structural qualities that mark the *Book of Duchess* as most truly Chaucer's anticipate the direction of his creations as whole. Together with Chaucer's devious, roundabout approach to the theme of the tale by employing the delicate framework, the combination of "heterogeneous elements" or "opposites" is the storytelling method that serves as the rationale for his poem. In *The Book of Duchess*, these strategies, causing the effect of indeterminacy and semantic openendedness, are closely related to the audience's critical and active response.

Key Words: *The Book of Duchess*, narrative strategies, reader's response, authorship, poetic structure

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이름: 이동춘

소속: 대구대학교

주소: (712-714)경북 경산시 진량읍 대구대로 201 대구대학교 인문대학 영어영문학과

이메일: dcleee@taegu.ac.kr