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MEMORIA: MOURNING AND MELANCHOLY IN CHAUCER'S *THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS*

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ABSTRACT

Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* develops ideas about bereavement through the depiction of the dynamics of psychological states, *topoi* concerning loss and memory, and literary conceits related to the *consolatio* genre. These fixtures, developed and supported through reference to several layers of bereavement or "loss" narratives, combine to produce a document that negotiates melancholy and memory, ultimately raising questions regarding the relationship between narrative and death. At the heart of Chaucer's critique is the depiction of a protagonist whose need to relive the process and condition of loss has become a thing in and of itself, inspired by, but now divorced from, the cause of sorrow.

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On the 12th of September in 1368, Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster and wife to John of Gaunt, Chaucer's key literary patron, died and was later buried in Saint Paul's Cathedral. Continual masses would be said for the salvation of her soul, and Gaunt would also institute yearly commemorations in her honor. As Donald Howard (1987) notes in narrative biography of Chaucer:

> this grief of Gaunt's can touch us still, for it was to be the subject of Chaucer's poem *The Book of the Duchess*. Chaucer began working on the elegy at once; one scholar argues that it was completed by November, others that it was not presented to the duke for several years, possibly was read at one of the annual commemorations of the Duchess' death as much as eight years later. But its intensity of feeling argues that it was conceived and begun while her death was still a painful memory. (123)

While we may accept the importance of reverent spaces and monuments, the ritualized behaviors and expectations of social congress which allow the living to negotiate bereavement, loss, and self-reflexive thoughts of personal mortality, it is important to consider what grief does to an individual, what role it serves as a process and repetitive action, and whether or not it is formed solely as an aid to future memory—a need to memorialize—or is in part an action in and of itself, used to fill present internal and external spaces with sorrow. As a student of human character, Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* functions as a detailed, theoretical analysis of the dynamics and "need" for grief, and the subsequent dialogue between Chaucer's narrator, the

Man in Black, functions as a precursor and analogue to the repetitive grief compulsion suggested in Freud's *Remembering, Repeating,and Working-Through*(1914). Along with "On Transience" (1915), both essays represent Freud's formulation of the grief addiction which Chaucer clearly delineates in his *Book of the Duchess*.

Much of the previous scholarship on the historical context of *The Book of the Duchess* is in agreement that Chaucer's text "shows definite signs of intent to console John of Gaunt for the death of Duchess Blanche of Lancaster in 1368" (Strohm10).[i] As a *consolatio*, *The Book of the Duchess* manifests its thesis on all three levels of its text. The prologue features a befuddled narrator who assures us "*That wil not be mot need be left*" (42),[ii] while its literary episode features the reanimated corpse of Ceyx begging his wife "*Let be your sorwfullyf,/For in your sorwe there lyth no red*" (202-03), and additionally, the poem's dream sequence depicts the narrator asking the bereaved Man in Black "*telleth me of your sorwessmerte;/Paraunterhyt may ese youreherte*" (555-56). Clearly aimed at issues of loss and healing, therefore, the poem advocates the cathartic "talking cure" inherent within the *consolatio* genre and the text's elegiac mode, while simultaneously stressing the need to make an end of mourning. As such, the text is an appropriate response to the mourning that followed the loss of Blanche in 1368, and fits neatly into the standard historical context normally provided for Chaucer's work. Obviously, placing Chaucer's poem within this particular period in the poet's career does much to inspire the evaluation of the poem's cultural and biographical significance, as well as to shed light on the poet's developing artistry and attitude towards the appropriation of sources.[iii]

However, the application of critical practices associated with cultural poetics and psychoanalytic theory suggest that Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is more complex than the sum of its historical parts, and a more inclusive approach frees the text from the limitations of its historical immediacy, permitting appreciation of the work to transcend a simply mimetic relationship to genre and historical contingencies, thereby revealing its simultaneously subjective and culturally determined attitudes towards the linked processes of loss, mourning, and the generation of narrative remembrance. As PieroBoitani(2003) has noted, "the images and the narrative sequence of the book raise far wider, "public" issues such as those of love, fortune, and death (64). In light of this, it is productive to view the occasion for memorializing Blanche and consoling Gaunt as only a starting point for a much larger meditation on the relationship between grief and related issues. In particular, it is intriguing to note the stress in the text placed on narrative memory in relation to time, memory as the evocation of grief, and the process of recalling loss as akin to the physical experience of a death-like stasis. The grief described in *The Book of the Duchess* is not remedied but is rather negotiated through the vague suggestion of reunion in the after-life. However, without the possibility of such hope, to remember is to re-experience one's loss; to have thoughts of the future is to experience dread at the thought of the replication of one's present state of sorrow*ad infinitum.*

The narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* functions in the eternal present of his text, "*I have gret wonder, be this lyght,/How that I lyve*" (1-2), suffering with grief characterized by the present tense of "*have*" and "*that I lyve*." This grief has a causal relationship to the past, "*I have suffred this eight year*" (37), and diversion from suffering is sought in tales from the "*oldetyme*" (53). While the narrator's immediate goal is to facilitate the passing of the present time, "*and drive the night away*" (49), his view of the future is bleak. He has nothing to look forward to, and his "*sorwfulymagynacioun*" (14), more than an insignificant *visio* inspired by lack of sleep,[iv] leads the narrator to project his feelings of doom into the future: "*drede I have for to dye*" (24). This pattern is repeated in Alcione's fear that the "longeterme" (79) her husband has been absent signifies that he may "*be ded*" (91). The man in Black, who like the narrator is also a storyteller, is typified through reference to protracted suffering, "*Hit was gret wonder that Nature/Myght suffer any creature/To have such sorwe and not be ded*" (467-69). But while the narrator uses his tale to pass time, the elegy and complaint of the Man in Black serve to constantly reiterate the cause of his suffering by recreating the portrait of the absent Blanche.

The Man in Black describes his own suffering as analogous to the torments of "*Cesiphus*" (589) and "*Tantale*" (709), implying the repetitious nature of the pain and loss he experiences; a continual teasing by the

unobtainable nature of the object of desire. But unlike the traditional elegiac reflex, which like "Greek epic…intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero" (Foucault 979), *The Book of the Duchess's* consolatory strategy skirts the border between the possibility of consolation and that *mournful and never-ending remembrance*[v] that characterizes the melancholia of the literature of lamentation. What ultimately makes the Man in Black's lament universal is the degree to which his melancholia is a response to the transitory nature of all worldly bliss.

Though clearly influenced by the *consolations* and elegiac literature of the medieval and classical period, the Man in Black's melancholia parallels the conditions observed by Freud, many centuries later, is his essay "On Transience." The piece narrates in part the analyst's walk with a young poet and considers the painful inevitability of decay as expressed in the poet's response to the vibrant landscape around him. Juxtaposed with Freud's own optimism, the two men represent polarized responses to the fleeting nature of life:

> The poet admired the beauty of the scene around us but felt no joy in it. He was disturbed by the thought that all this beauty was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendor that men have created or may create. All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him to be shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom…But I did dispute the pessimistic poet's view that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss of its worth. On the contrary, an increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment. (79-80)[vi]

There is an exclusive tendency in such an *either/or* approach to transience which causes us to question the potential for satisfaction in the consolatory method represented in the juxtaposed outlooks described in Freud's essay. Either the aesthetic hedonism of immediacy or the romantic fatalism of impermanence are the choices of interpretation available to the individual who attempts to rectify life's fleeting majesty with the reflex towards fairness and constancy. As such, these choices are indicative of wholly different psychological states and categories of need. As to intervention on the part of a narrator or witness to the mourning reflex, it is curious that Freud's narrator—something distinct from Freud the author—does not "dispute" the condition; his response appears to be sympathetic silence and retroactive analysis. For Chaucer's narrator, the "therapeutic response" takes the form of overt befuddlement, confusion, a posture of willful ignorance, and for the narrative itself, a sudden ending as the "hart" hunting comes to a close.

Indeed, in Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, the issue is made more complex by the presence of narrative memory, and the protagonist's need to rehearse the process of loss over and over again, both of which place the literary actions of the text in opposition to its historically accepted consolatory purpose. The Man in Black's testimony, in light of Freud's characterization of transience, is a testament to that which is now gone; the Man in Black's words are an evocation of absence. The immediate symptom experienced is a type of living death, to be "*Always deynge and be not ded*" (588). To live in the desire of that which is absent is to dwell between "time," as it were, in a netherworld of the present-past; the "doom" that shrouds the existence of the young poet in Freud's anecdote.

This overweening sense of doom is repeated once the Man in Black has completed his initial lament, when Chaucer's narrator provides a ghastly depiction of this state of living death:

> *Whan he had mad thus his complaynte,*
> *Hyssorwfulhertganfastefaynte*
> *And his spirites waxen dede…*
> *And that made al*
> *Hyshewe change and wexegrene*
> *And pale, for thernoo blood yssene.*
>
> (487-89 and 496-99)

The result of the cycle of mourning is this corpse-like state: an absence of blood, an alteration of pallor. The process of memory preserves the record of perfection manifested in the portrait of Blanche's beauty and kindness, but it leads only to the debilitation of the recorder of that memory. Appropriately, the narrator's portrait of the Man in Black mirrors the animated corpse of Ceyx, "*That lyethful pale and nothing rody*" (143), thereby manifesting the theme, once again, on several different levels of the narrative simultaneously.

A more elusive example may be found in the narrator's description of his dream chamber, "*For hooly al the story of Troye/Was in the glasyngeywroght thus*" (326-27). These decorated windows depict episodes from the Trojan conflict as told by Benoit de SainteMaure or Guido dellaColonne, "rather than the story of the siege and fall of the city as told by Homer and Virgil" (Wilcockson 969).[vii] But the motif of the illustrated Troy story echoes Book I of Virgil's *Aeneid* as well, where Aeneas gazes at a mural depicting the fall of his city and becomes depressed: *"Quisiam locus inquit, Achate,/quae regio in terrisnostri non plena laboris?"*(I. 459-60) ["What spot on earth,"/He said, "what region of the earth, Achates,/Is not full of the story of our sorrow?"(I. 624-25].[viii]In this episode, one is struck by the way in which self-conscious artifice, ornament, and text function to play upon memory. Virgil's use of the images of the Fall of Troy on illustrated panels in the temple is provocative, as before Aeneas' eyes his own grief is translated into images that stimulate memory and are themselves evocative of grief. Aeneas "feels" grief as his gaze moves through the representations of his own, and others, experiences. As a perceptive reader and sensitive writer, Chaucer's appropriation of this episode was motivated by what the scene says about the nature of mourning, loss, memory, and the ability which art has to move the individual. For Chaucer, the character of Aeneas, like his own Man in Black, experiences the grief of exile through the act of remembering. In his state of loss, the Man in Black has moved into solitary grief and, like the protagonist in Gower's *ConfessioAmantis* or the dreamer in The *Gawain*-Poet's *Pearl*, dwells in a remembered sense of grief and rehearsals of loss. His distance from bliss and other humans becomes his defining feature: "*No man may my sorwe glade,/That maketh my hewe to falle and fade,/And hath mynunderstondyngelorn/That me ys wo that I was born!*" (563-66). Thisretroactive death wish, manifested in the desire to have never been born, is the ultimate statement of the melancholic man in exile.

It is apropos that a text so concerned with time should have such a sudden ending. The abrupt parting of the two with the acknowledgement of the woman's death frustrates the desire for closure—things simply stop; time has run out. The narrator alludes to the text in hand, stating that he will write down his dream "*be processe of tyme*" (1331), "*and that anoon*" (1333); both the dream and the poem are now "*doon*" (1334), echoing the impossibility of closure for his own predicament: "*but that is don*" (40) earlier in the text. Alcione's grief ends with her own death, and the suggestive "*hert-huntyng*" (1313) with the Man in Black also ends, "*al was doon*" (1312). We may detect a note of healing in the Man in Black's retreat to the White Castle, perhaps suggesting, as Pearl and Dante do, that reunion in paradise is possible for the pious. But for the unfortunate narrator, who has momentarily tasted the balm of sleep, without which he would be dead (223), the eternal present outside narrative time is a waking dream of irreconcilable numbness.

These elusive patterns associate stasis and forgetting with bliss, not just as manifested in the narrator's advice at line 42 of *Book of the Duchess*, or the statements made by the reanimated-Ceyx to Alcione, but manifested in the landscape as well: "*Hyt had forgete the povertee/That winter, through hyscoldemorwes,/Had mad hyt suffer, and his sorwes;/All was forgeten*" (410-13). If to remember is to feel pain, then to forget must be to experience heaven. This leads us to recall with particular interest the references made in Chaucer's narrative to that great story of loss, so important to medieval narrative, the fall of Troy. In Virgil's great national epic, his tale of the exile and wandering of the survivors of the sacking of the great city, contains an otherworldly narrative which prefigures Chaucer's own *Book of the Duchess*. As Virgil's Aeneas visits the underworld, the episode includes a sequence where the hero witnesses the souls of the departed receiving the ultimate cure for grief—a dissolution of their memory, their very sense of self—as they are dipped into the river of forgetfulness as part of their final cleansing. Virgil depicts this scene in Book VI of his *Aeneid*:

"*hasomnis,ubi mille rotamvolvere per annos,*
Lethaeumadfluviumdeusevocatagminemagno,
scilicet immemoressuperautconvexarevisant
rursus, et incipiant in corpora vellereverti."
(VI. 748-51)

["These other souls,
When they have turned time's wheel a thousand years,
The god calls in a crowd to Lethe stream,
That there unmemoried they may see again
The heavens and wish re-entry into bodies."]
(VI. 1004-08)

The release embodied in both Virgil's "un-memoried" souls and Chaucer's "*All was forgeten*" is clear to be seen. However, such peace is beyond the lot of those unhappy protagonists who have as their part the repetitive generation of narrative sorrow, and it is clear that, at least up to the concluding moment of his poem, Chaucer's Man in Black does not relinquish his grip on his memory of loss.

In Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the dynamics of psychological states, *topoi* concerning loss and memory, and literary conceits related to the *consolation* genre, all combine to produce a document that negotiates melancholy and memory, ultimately raising questions regarding the relationship between narrative and death, and the potential need to "re-hearse" the experience of loss to fill an emotive absence. Certainly, such a complex and provocative subject could not simply terminate with the completion of Chaucer's first dream-vision. Indeed, these matters would demand that Chaucer revisit them. In light of this, it is possible that what Chaucer initiates with his *Book of the Duchess* is an early stage of an intellectual project concerning the relationship between *memoria*, suffering, and grace; a project whose later permutations shape themes present in the poet's *Merchant's Tale*, *Knight's Tale*, and especially his masterful *Troilus*.

NOTES

[i] See also the interesting debate on the historical significance of *The Book of the Duchess* played out in Condren, Edward I. "The Historical Context of *The Book of The Duchess*: A New Hypothesis." (*Chaucer Review*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1971), 195-212), Palmer, John H. "The Historical Context of *The Book of The Duchess*: A Revision." (*Chaucer Review*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1974), 253-261), and Condren, Edward I. "Of Deaths and Duchesses and Scholars Coughing in Ink."(*Chaucer Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1975), 87-96).

[ii] All citations from Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*.Benson, Larry D. et al. Eds. Third edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 329-346. Parenthetical references designate line numbers in that edition.

[iii] See Philips, Helen. "Structure and Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*." (*Chaucer Review*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1981), 107-118) and Lawlor, John. "The Pattern of Consolation in *The Book of the Duchess*." *Chaucer Criticism: Troilus and Criseyde and the Minor Poems*. Schoeck, Richard J. and Jerome Taylor Eds. (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1961), 232-260.

[iv] Cf. Colin Wilcockson's note in *Riverside Chaucer* (966).

[v] Poe, Edgar Allen. *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846).

[vi] All citations from "On Transience" drawn from *Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud*.vol. v, James Strachey ed. and trans. London: Hogarth Press, 1953 (79-82).

[vii] Colin Wilcockson's notes in *Riverside Chaucer*.

[viii] Citations of Virgil's *Aeneid*in Latin drawn from the J. B. Greenough, *Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics of Vergil* (Boston: Ginn& Co., 1900). The English translation is drawn from the Robert Fitzgerald translation, *The Aeneid* (New York: Vintage, 1980). Parenthetical references designate book and line numbers in these respective editions.

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