

The Historical Setting of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*

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It has recently been argued by John N. Palmer, "The Historical Context of the Book of the Duchess," Chaucer Review, 8 (1974), 253-256, that Blanche of Lancaster died in 1368 rather than in 1369. However, if this revision turns out to be correct the essential argument of the article here printed remains unchanged. Palmer's remarks about the terminus ad quem for the publication of the poem seem to me unconvincing, since Chaucer would have described conditions at the time of Blanche's death. A very promising account of the form of the poem by Marc M. Pelen, "Machaut's Court of Love Narratives and Chaucer's Book of the Duchess, Chaucer Review, 11 (1976), 128-147, reinforces the general thematic ideas here suggested. For another argument dating the publication of the poem in 1374 see the appendix to John M. Hill, "The Book of the Duchess, Melancholy, and that Eight-Year Sickness," Chaucer Review, 9 (1974), 35-50.

Criticism of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the first major work of a young man who was to become England's most famous poet, has sometimes neglected not only the immediate historical setting of the poem and the most probable circumstances of its first publication, but also the *mores* of its audience. At the beginning of the year 1369 the most notable poet attached to the English court was Jean Froissart, who wrote under the patronage of Queen Philippa. Both Edward III and his Queen spoke French (rather than English) as their natural language, and the Queen in particular was quite evidently an admirer of literary fashions as they had developed in the French language. In this year, which marked a turning point in the fortunes of English chivalry,¹ King Edward's court was still the most brilliant in Europe. The glory of English victories earlier in the century and the prestige of the Order of the Garter were still intact. Chaucer himself went off campaigning in France.

Queen Philippa died of the plague on August 14, the Vigil of the Assumption. Chaucer, who had returned to England, was, on September 1, granted funds for mourning for himself and his wife. On September 12, Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, also died of the plague. Her husband, John of Gaunt, was campaigning in Picardy, whence he did not return until November 3. England thus lost two of its noblest ladies within a few weeks. The effect of these losses in a society bound together by close personal relationships must have been profound. Froissart spoke of the Queen as "the most courteous, noble, and liberal queen that ever reigned in her time," and of Blanche he wrote,

Aussi sa fille de Lancastre --
Haro! mettés moi une emplastre
Sus le coer, car, quant m'en souvient,
Certes souspirer me couvient,
Tant sui plains de melancolie.
Elle morut jone et jolie,
Environ de vingt et deux ans;
Gaie, lie, friche, esbatans,
Douce, simple, d'umble samblance;
La bonne dame ot à nom Blanche.³
(241-250)

The Duke of Lancaster instituted a memorial service to be held for Blanche each year on September 12 at St. Paul's Cathedral,⁴ a ceremonial which he continued to support for the remainder of his life. He arranged for an elaborate alabaster tomb to be erected by Henry Yevele, who was to become England's most distinguished mason.⁵ An altar was erected near the tomb, and two chantry priests were engaged to sing masses there throughout the year.⁶ In accordance with the explicit provision of his will, John was buried by the side of Blanche.

Concerning John of Gaunt's reaction, Armitage-Smith observes, "of the sincerity of the Duke's grief there need be no question," adding that his gratitude to the memory of Blanche "never failed."⁷ More recent writers, pointing, with appropriate disdain, to the Duke's relations with Katherine Swynford, who was the guardian of his children, and to his marriage to Constance of Castile, have been more cynical. But the alliance with Katherine indicates nothing except the fact that the two were thrown together by circumstance at a time when the Duke was still relatively young and vigorous in an age that was neither sentimental nor especially squeamish about sex. The marriage to Constance, which was made for political reasons, has no bearing on John's feelings for either Blanche or Katherine. For our purposes the Duke's feelings, for which we have little evidence, are not, in any event, important. What is important is the Duke's public posture. And there is nothing in that posture to cast doubt on Armitage-Smith's conclusion. The tomb, the altar, the chantry-priests, and the annual memorial service were all reminders of the inspiration Blanche had been, not only to John personally, but to all those who had known and loved her. Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, a work prepared by a young squire who was to receive very substantial favors from John of Gaunt in the future, should be considered as a kind of literary counterpart of Henry Yevele's alabaster tomb, a memorial to a great lady celebrating neither Chaucer's nor anyone else's intimate feelings and "psychological" reveries, but the kind of tribute a great lady, still "jone et jolie," suddenly destroyed by a terrible malady, deserves from all men of good will.

Perhaps it is futile to speculate about the unfulfilled potentialities of history. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suppose that if the Queen had not died, depriving Froissart of his position at the English court, we might very well have had a formal elegy for Blanche in French. Blanche's father, Henry of Lancaster, had been the author of a

devotional treatise, the *Livre de Seyntz Medicines*, written in French. The fact that Chaucer wrote the elegy is an indication of the "Anglicising" of the English nobility during the second half of the century. It is also a tribute to the growing prestige of Geoffrey Chaucer. If Speght was right, and the "A. B. C." was actually written for Blanche during her lifetime, that poem may be regarded as further evidence indicating Blanche's preference for literature in English. It would serve at the same time as a foretaste of the serious attitudes to be expected from the young squire. But when Chaucer did begin his poem, he introduced it with an echo of a poem by Froissart, an echo which is at once a clue to the thematic content of the poem and a tribute to the French poet who was in a very real sense Chaucer's predecessor.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that *The Book of the Duchess* is essentially a funerary poem, a poem designed to be delivered orally before an orthodox audience of noblemen, great men of London, ladies, and clerks, whose literary tastes were traditionally French. It is also true that medieval poems other than those written for private devotion or for evangelical instruction were "occasional" poems, composed for an audience assembled for some specific social occasion.⁸ The gathering might be anything from a dinner to a festival of the Pui. We should think of Chaucer's poem as being "public," written neither to express the very private feelings of the author nor to inspire the very private reactions of anyone sitting alone in the silence of a study. The most probable occasion for its presentation would have been one of the memorial celebrations held each year on September 12, perhaps at supper at the Savoy, perhaps in the nave of St. Paul's, which was thought of as "belonging to the people" and used for a variety of lay activities. As we read *The Book of the Duchess*, then, we should try to imagine ourselves hearing it read as we sit (or stand) in an audience of fourteenth-century ladies and gentlemen assembled especially for the purpose of paying tribute to the memory of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who had been one of the ladies of highest rank in the English court.

The men and women who sit around us as we listen to the poem are chivalric in outlook and orthodox in sentiment, attitudes that were by no means thought of as being inconsistent. The Duke of Lancaster was, throughout his life, a generous benefactor of ecclesiastics and of religious institutions. His later patronage of Wyclif had nothing to do with any lack of orthodoxy on his part,⁹ and the status of Katherine Swynford as his mistress after 1372 neither made him a "pagan" nor caused him to be thought of by his peers as a "great sinner." The fulminations of politically hostile chroniclers should not be taken too seriously, no matter how much they may appeal to the ingrown Calvinism of certain modern historians. With reference to Chaucer himself, it is significant that some of his closest associates at court were Lollard knights, men who were Lollards not out of any lack of orthodoxy, but by virtue of the fact that the spiritual corruption of their church and society was a matter of grave concern to them.¹⁰ Whatever we may think of either the Duke or the poet, however, *The Book of the Duchess* was a public poem, and since it was a public poem and not an expression of personal feeling, we may expect it to exhibit certain proprieties. There can be little doubt that Blanche of Lancaster was a lady who attracted much genuine affection in courtly circles. Her rank was great enough to

inspire a certain devotion to begin with, and her youth and charm must have attracted many persons of importance in addition to Jean Froissart.

Considering the occasion of Chaucer's poem and its probable audience, there are then certain things we might expect of it in advance: a generally chivalric attitude; a tactful restraint with reference to the lady, her family, and her associates; a statement, either direct or indirect, of the conventional ideas associated with funerary consolation; and, finally, a fairly close adherence to the techniques and general attitudes of the popular French poetry of the time. At this point my literary friends will object: "It is unfair to go outside of the poem. One should begin with the text, without any presuppositions whatsoever." Let me reply that it is impossible to read anything "without any presuppositions," and that what has happened is that most critics of the poem have brought to it a great many post-romantic presuppositions concerning both the subject of the poem and its technique, which are entirely inappropriate to its cultural setting. In any event, let us consider the above points in reverse order.

To begin with, scholars have long since pointed out that Chaucer does indeed rely heavily on French sources for the materials of his poem. They have gleaned a number of parallel passages which are quite convincing, as well as some which are not so convincing.¹¹ What they have not done is to make useful comments on the significance of the borrowings. That is, the passages used have a contextual significance in the works from which they are derived, a significance of which Chaucer was certainly aware and of which many members of his audience were probably aware. As a consequence of this failure literary critics have frequently disregarded the parallel passages as constituting so much dusty and irrelevant information. And, indeed, in their present form, they are just that. The situation is made worse by the fact that there are hardly more neglected European poets anywhere than the poets of fourteenth-century France. When one looks for interpretations of their works, which are frequently allegorical in technique, one finds instead of interpretation a series of statements to the effect that the poems are "conventional." To say that a poem by Machaut or Froissart is merely an agglomeration of "conventions" is simply to say, with a certain professorial profundity, that one does not know what the poem is about. There are thus many details in *The Book of the Duchess* which must remain relatively obscure until serious studies of the French sources have been made.

It is possible to make a general statement about the French poetry Chaucer drew upon that has some bearing on the thematic content of *The Book of the Duchess*. That poetry shows a heavy reliance on themes from *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, a work that enjoyed increasing popularity during the course of the century and that Chaucer later undertook to translate into English. The *Consolation* has not fared well in modern times, having been victimized by literal-minded comments, by irrelevant analyses on the part of philosophers trained in nineteenth-century German metaphysics, and by a general failure to take its themes seriously or to assume that anyone ever did take them seriously. In the fourteenth century, however, the *Consolation* was a book regarded with genuine love by many, especially by those who had witnessed the devastations of the plague and suffered personal losses in those devastations; its themes appear not only in literary

works but also in the visual arts of the time, penetrating even to country parishes. The book was thought of as being thoroughly orthodox, a fact that one modern authority fully appreciated, observing that "there is nothing in this work for which a good case might not have been made by any contemporary Christian theologian, who knew his Augustine."¹²

Since the commentaries of Guillaume de Conches and Nicholas Trivet on the *Consolation* have never been printed, perhaps the best short introduction to the work as it was understood in later Middle Ages is that provided by Jean de Meun for the translation he presented to Philip the Fair of France.¹³ After identifying himself, explaining the reasons for his translation and the techniques he employed in it, Jean goes on to outline the thesis of the work. He points out first of all, with a rather elaborate argument, that all things tend toward the good. In this respect, however, man differs from other things, since his course is not predetermined (i.e., he has free choice). The true good of man lies in the intelligible, but sensible goods impress him first (i.e., those goods perceived by the senses rather than by the understanding) and he is misled into deserting his proper good in favor of those things which are sensible. He must therefore be taught to distinguish reasonably between the two kinds of good and to know what kind of good he should enjoy. Most men go astray in this respect, enjoying things of the wrong kind. And this causes their lives to be full of bitterness. For sensible things, which are transitory and mutable, cannot be enjoyed without sorrow. The *Consolation*, Jean says, is most useful in teaching the distinction between true and false good, in showing what things are to be enjoyed, and in demonstrating how other things are to be used.¹⁴ Among all the books ever written, Jean assures his royal patron, this is the best one for teaching us to despise false and deceptive goods (later called "*biens sensibles forains et fortunieux*," or alien goods of Fortune) and to seek instead true and immutable goods that will lead us to happiness. Boethius, we are told, was wrongfully imprisoned, but he endured his misfortune well and wisely as a strong man of good heart. In his book, he is presented as a man divided into two parts: first, as a man cast down by "*passions sensibles*," and second, as a man divinely raised up to intelligible goods. That is, the figure "Boethius" in the book is the man cast down, while the other reasonable part of him is represented by Philosophy.¹⁵ The actual Boethius, we assume, always endured his trouble patiently.

What relevance has all this to a funerary poem! An inkling of the answer to this question may be found in the pages of Dante, who tells us in the *Convivio* (2.13) that he was inconsolable after the death of Beatrice until he had read the *Consolation* of Boethius and the *De amicitia* of Cicero. In the *De amicitia* he would have found that true friendship, or true love of one human being for another, is based on virtue; and in the *Consolation*, that such friendship, or love, is not subject to Fortune. That is, the virtues of another human being are intelligible rather than sensible goods which, in a Christian context, are derived from God and do not perish. Moreover, the memory of the virtues of one who has died can act as an inspiration, just as the memory of a loved one as a physical being that has perished can bring a sense of acute loss.

If we turn our attention to *The Book of the Duchess*, it is apparent at once that one character in it, the Black Knight, regards the loss of Blanche as the loss of a gift of Fortune. He is introduced, much like the persona "Boethius" in the *Consolation*, in a

condition of despair arising from the loss of Blanche as a sensible object, and this loss is attributed specifically to the operations of Fortune. In Boethian terms, this kind of sorrow, although it occurs spontaneously in all of us, is actually a kind of foolishness. Chaucer is careful to make his Knight a beardless adolescent who gave himself up to "love" in "idleness" before he ever saw Blanche.¹⁶ He is obviously in need of the kind of instruction that, as Jean de Meun assures us, may be found best expressed in the *Consolation*. It must be emphasized that themes from this work were common in French poetry -- perhaps the most obvious example being Machaut's *Remède de Fortune*, which Chaucer drew upon heavily -- that they appeared in the visual arts, and even found a prominent place in highly "secular" works like Geoffrey de Charny's treatise on chivalry. That is, Chaucer's audience would have been in a position to realize fully the implications of losing a chess game to Fortune. Of the two principal "characters" in Chaucer's poem, one, the Knight, despairingly recounts his experience with reference to Blanche -- his first sight of her, his conception of her person and character, his first unsuccessful approach, his acquisition of the lady's grace, and finally, the fact of her death. The other "character," the dreamer, acts as a confessor, pressing the Knight to reveal the whole course of his experience and offering a certain amount of wise advice, like that, for example, on the folly of suicide. The parallel between this general situation and that in the *Consolation* is obvious and would hardly have escaped Chaucer's audience. The plight of the Black Knight expressed in terms of Fortune would have suggested a more "proper" attitude, even if such an attitude were not otherwise indicated in the poem. As we shall see presently, however, the "proper" attitude is very definitely suggested.

As we have suggested earlier, a funerary poem, to avoid boorishness, might be expected to show considerable restraint in its implications concerning actual persons. The young poet would have been particularly careful not to offend John of Gaunt, no matter what his "private" feelings may have been, if indeed he had any as distinct from his "public" feelings about the Duke. If the poem, as a public memorial, had been offensive to the Duke, we should in all likelihood have no evidence of its existence today. However, in June, 1374, the Duke, as he put it, "by our special grace and for the good, and so on, that our good friend Geoffrey Chaucer has done for us" granted to Chaucer and to his wife "for the good service... performed for our very honored dame and mother the Queen, whom God pardon, and for our very dear friend and companion the Queen [of Castile], a pension of ten pounds a year for life."¹⁷ The sum is exactly half that granted Chaucer many years later by Richard II as a recognition for his services in the very distinguished office of Clerk of the King's works. It is not unlikely that the phrase "for the good, and so on" referred in part to *The Book of the Duchess* itself. The Duke was in England for the first time on September 12 in this year to attend the memorial service for Blanche in person. It is significant that he referred to this grant specifically on January 20 of the following year.¹⁸ Under the circumstances, the traditional view that the beardless adolescent who appears in the poem as the Black Knight overcome by the loss of Blanche as a gift of Fortune was intended to represent John of Gaunt is absurd. Whatever we may think of the Duke, there is little doubt that he felt grief for the loss of Blanche, but there is also little doubt that any public representation of the Duke's grief contrived by a good friend would have shown him, like Jean de Meun's Boethius, suffering "tout sagement sa douleur comme homme fort et de grant cuer." The Black Knight shows a consistent

blindness to the intelligible, even when it is suggested by his own words. There is no probability whatsoever that he was meant to represent literally anyone in Chaucer's audience, least of all John of Gaunt. He may well have represented, however, a certain aspect of almost everyone in the audience.

Much of the confusion concerning the poem has arisen from our inclination to see the grief of the Black Knight in a "psychological" context rather than in the moral and philosophical context familiar to the society of which Chaucer was a part. Efforts to demonstrate this distinction have met with rejoinders like "We are back again in an idealized Middle Ages peopled only with righteous Christians."¹⁹ The fact that people thought of human conduct in "moral" terms during the Middle Ages does not mean that their behavior was "moral," especially from our point of view. We tend to think of human beings in "psychological" terms, but this fact does not imply that people in our own society are generally sane and well-adjusted. On the contrary, our literature shows a strong preoccupation with themes of isolation, *anomie*, and alienation. We seek as best we can to regard persons suffering from social maladjustment and psychological weakness with sympathy and understanding. Although this sympathy may sometimes imply criticism of society, it does not ordinarily imply any criticism of the "terms" of the psychology used to depict the suffering of the individual. For example, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* reflects certain principles of Freudian psychology, but this fact does not imply any criticism of Freud.

Medieval men were also urged, as they are in the *Consolation*, to take pity on sinners, since a malady of the spirit is more serious than a malady of the flesh.²⁰ But this pity does not imply either that sinners are not sinners or that there is anything wrong with the conceptual system upon which the pity itself is based. If we look at the Black Knight (rather vaguely and without paying any attention to the connotations of the terms used to describe him) from a "psychological" point of view, his grief seems quite understandable and not reprehensible at all. If we look at him in the context of the moral philosophy of the fourteenth century, he appears, not as a "psychological entity," an individual like ourselves alienated in an absurd world, but as an exemplification of an understandable but errant attitude toward the lady that is not very complimentary to the lady. Had she, after all, no intelligible virtues? Was she mere flesh? Most frequently, the Black Knight has been seen romantically, with an attitude that has its roots in the cult of melancholy that grew up in the eighteenth century and that has been reinforced by various outgrowths like *ennui*, existential absurdity, ambiguity, and so on. Our "psychology" as it appears in literary criticism is, as a matter of fact, little more than an amorphous reflection of these attitudes. It is a product of a society in which the tightly-knit communities of the past have broken down so that the individual is left with a somewhat diminished and fragmented identity as a member of large and loosely organized groups in which the ties of organization do not form channels of personal satisfaction. Chaucer lived in no such society. He and his contemporaries would not have understood what we mean by "psychology," and, what is more important, would have felt no need for it. In any event, *The Book of the Duchess* is a public funerary poem that may be expected to reflect the most elevated public philosophy available for its conceptual frame-work.

The "anguish of a troubled heart" is something that we are inclined to regard with a certain reverence. The phrase brings to mind lingering fancies decked with wisps of autumnal melancholy we have heard echoing in the finest sonatas of Mozart, in the grand symphonies of Beethoven, in the graceful strains of Chopin's nocturnes, in the nostalgic memories inspired by Brahms, or even if our tastes are more advanced, in those brief moments of tenderness in Webern, where the anguish is intensified by poignant feelings of alienation and despair. We know that Chaucer had not heard these things and was not familiar, indeed, in spite of his elegy, with the theory that the most beautiful and appropriate subject for poetry is the death of a beautiful woman. But, we assure ourselves, he was human, and so must have felt as we feel, but without the richness of association that we are able to bring to his poetry.²¹ We are in a position to find much in it, quite legitimately, of which he had only a rudimentary apprehension. This line of argument has a certain appeal, but it is, nevertheless, sheer nonsense.

In 1853 Delacroix wrote in his journal,

Exquisite music at the house of charming Princess Marcelline. I especially remember Mozart's Fantasia [K. 475], a serious work, verging on the terrible, and with a title too light for its character; also a sonata by Beethoven which I already knew -- but admirable. I really liked it exceedingly, especially the mournful imaginative passages. Beethoven is always melancholy. Mozart is modern too; I mean by this that like other men of his time he is not afraid of touching on the sad side of things.²²

Although Delacroix was not an historian of music, his observation that "modern" music is distinguished by melancholy and sadness touches on a profound truth: the glorification of "the anguish of a troubled heart" as an aesthetically appealing theme to be revered in itself is relatively modern. Chaucer uses the phrase once, in his Parson's Tale, where it is a definition of the sin of "accidie": "Thanne is Accidie the angwissh of troubled herte; and Seint Augustyn seith, 'It is anyo of goodnesse and loye of harm.' Certes, this is a dampnable synne."²³ The branches of this sin include sloth, despair, lassitude, and tristicia, "the synne of worldly sorwe." Its remedies are fortitude, magnanimity, sureness or perseverance, magnificence, and constancy, virtues which are distinctly chivalric.²⁴ Perhaps some will reply that Chaucer's humble and devout Parson, who taught "Cristes loore and his apostles twelve" after he had "folwed it hymselfe" was an old Puritan, to whose strictures Chaucer, who was, after all, a great poet and hence "advanced," could have given small credence.²⁵ But this is to misunderstand both the Parson and his creator. With reference to the "Puritanism," we should recall that the Parson, although he was a learned man and a clerk, was also "to synful men nat despitous." This does not mean that he relaxed his principles. What it does mean is that the Parson employed "fairnesse" and "good ensampie." He was, that is, no Pharisee who said one thing and did another. No

one in the Middle Ages except for a few pious hypocrites who were condemned with equal severity by Jean de Meun, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, thought that "sinners" were "those others." Every man since the Fall was by nature a child of wrath, to paraphrase St. Paul; and no one expected any individual to refrain from sin altogether. Everyone was required to confess his "deadly" sins at least once a year. If society had been made up of the righteous, the ecclesiastical hierarchy might just as well have closed its doors and gone out of business. With reference to the "accidie" of the Black Knight specifically, it is obvious that it deprives him of virtues like magnanimity and magnificence and that we should consider his conduct to be unreasonable. His virtues have been turned to vices (ll. 598ff.), he seriously contemplates suicide (ll. 689-690), and he desires to do nothing worthwhile. This attitude is hardly, in fourteenth-century terms, a fitting tribute to a great lady in a chivalric society. In other societies it might have a certain appeal. Thus, if we accept for a moment Rousseau's account of the affair (whose verisimilitude is all that is important here),²⁶ when M. Grimm deliberately adopted a posture very similar to that of the Black Knight because he had been rejected by Mlle. Fel, he won for himself an enormous reputation as a prodigy of love and devotion and was warmly received by the best society of Paris. But Chaucer did not live in eighteenth-century Paris. The age of sentiment had not yet arrived. If we glance back at Froissart's remarks quoted earlier, we shall notice that the old poet shows no inclination to cultivate the melancholy he feels when he remembers Blanche, and that his sighs follow an exclamation that is vigorous and positive.

The Black Knight, like M. Grimm, is a lover; and this fact also should lead us to read Chaucer's poem with a certain caution. Some critics of the poem have written about it as though they were themselves spiritual descendants of Emma Bovary and expected everyone else, including Chaucer, to share the same general outlook. Perhaps nothing has been more characteristic of the past two hundred years than the violence and rapidity with which attitudes toward sexual relations and love between the sexes have changed.²⁷ There is no need to go into the history of these matters in detail here; it is obvious that the place of sexual relations and love in a society where feelings of loneliness, boredom, namelessness, and alienation are common, and environments created by an industrial society seem inhumane, should be very different from their place in a predominantly rural society where everyone had a more or less natural position in a small community. It is true that war and pestilence created dislocation in the fourteenth century. But the dislocated, in general, tended to become outlaws, not authors, especially in England. The Middle Ages had experienced none of the glorification of sentiment (the beginnings of which are apparent in Rousseau), the strong urge toward the brotherhood of all mankind (which led Baudelaire to think that prostitutes are holy, and has produced many golden-hearted whores since), the squeamishness of the Victorians, nor the crisis marked by the revolt of D. H. Lawrence and the observations of Freud, all of which, together with some more recent "revolutions," lie in our immediate background. Although in the Middle Ages contemplatives and, perhaps, apprentices, took vows of chastity, and priests were not encouraged to have concubines, and medieval manors supported many unmarried serfs, it is unlikely that many persons, especially among those of gentle birth, suffered long from sexual frustration. What we call "the facts of life" were not concealed from

children,²⁸ they were not mysteries for adolescent fumbling; and no one felt any compulsion to be either "sincere" or sentimental about his miscellaneous sexual activities.

It is true, as churchmen disturbed by Albigensian errors insist throughout the later Middle Ages, that fornication was considered to be a "deadly sin." But so were getting drunk, eating too much or too delicately, envying your neighbor's goods, dressing yourself up proudly beyond your station, and, indeed, a great many other kinds of fairly common behavior "deadly sins" also. These were things that everyone was expected to fall into occasionally and which everyone was supposed to reveal to his confessor. No one was encouraged to do any of these things, but no one was especially surprised when anyone did. A vicious inclination to pursue sins of any given type, sexual or otherwise, was heartily discouraged, but the medieval ecclesiastical hierarchy did not pursue the subject in such a way as to encourage what we might call "Ruskin's Problem." Nor was there much need for "Rousseau's Solution." Sinning did not make anyone a "pagan," and no one thought that pagans enjoyed life more than Christians. Adultery was, naturally enough, another "deadly sin." In this matter the feudal Middle Ages maintained a "double standard" for social reasons. Feudal holdings were hereditary, and feudal tenants wished their holdings to descend to their own children, not to the children of intruders. But the ladies, although a few may have been misled by "the book of Launcelot de Lake," did not have their "psychological needs" stimulated by the kind of romantic picture books that fascinated little Emma Bovary, did not immerse themselves vicariously in novels, and did not, finally, live in a dull, postrevolutionary middle-class society. In the fourteenth century, in short, sex was neither a mystery nor a mystique. Although it was quite profitable for summoners, archdeacons, and rural deans, it did not constitute a profound personal problem, especially among noblemen, who in general found "venison" plentiful. To use an example pertinent to our present discussion, the first child of John of Gaunt of whom we have any record was born when John was about eighteen, and the lady in question, one Marie de Saint Hilaire, was probably by no means his first love.²⁹

If fornication was simply one among many "deadly sins," and adultery occasioned little surprise among the male nobility,³⁰ there was something else that was severely condemned by the ecclesiastical authorities and ridiculed by laymen because it led to impenitence spiritually and to a foolish neglect of social obligations. And that was a single-minded and impenitent fixation on a single member of the opposite sex as a means of enjoyment to be venerated above all other things. As this sort of passion is usually described, it has pleasure, not marriage, as its end; and it deprives the victim of the solaces of all other women except the one fixed upon. This kind of "idolatrous" love is not, in substance, of medieval origin. It is described by Lucretius.³¹ In the Middle Ages it is illustrated in Abelard's *Historia calamitatum*, in the Tristan romances of Béroul and Thomas, in Chrétien's romances of Cligés and Lancelot, in the *Roman de la Rose*, in Chaucer's *Troilus*, in *Celestina*, and, in the Renaissance, in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Medical authorities described it as "heroic" love, an appellation in which the word heroic is pejorative. It is the same sort of thing that in Rousseau's account M. Grimm pretended to feel for his opera singer. We are naturally inclined in reading medieval texts of the kind just mentioned to react in much the same way that fashionable Paris reacted to Grimm's predicament, and to add to our sentiment a further veneer of

Biedermeier sentimentality glossed with a dash of existential loneliness. From a medieval point of view, the great difficulty with a Passion of this kind is that it leads almost inevitably to frustration, or even death, and it deprives its victim of the mercy of the New Law.

It would be foolish to accuse John of Gaunt of any such impenitent passion. But the Black Knight in *The Book of the Duchess* seems to have been thrown by his grief into a condition very much resembling it. Without Blanche, he can do nothing constructive, and life itself seems worthless. When his interrogator suggests to him that he has, in view of his description of Blanche, had "such a chance as shryfte wythoute repentaunce," he can reply only that it would be treasonable for him to repent of his love. He has no notion of what his description of the lady has implied: the virtues of Blanche belong to the realm of the intelligible and are not subject to Fortune. The quest of the idolatrous lover is not a quest for virtue, but for his own "bliss." And it is this, the Knight assures us, that he has lost. Without it, death seems the only solution. His "shrift," in other words, has not led him to see the essential selfishness of his passion.

Turning now from the Black Knight to the description of Blanche, we find that scholars and critics have insisted, in spite of the fact that Chaucer's materials are clearly derivative, on seeing it as at least in part an actual description of the lady. In one sense it may be, but it is hardly a visual portrait. We know more, in so far as details of feature are concerned, about some of the characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. What does Chaucer, in fact, tell us? Blanche outshone the other ladies as the sun does the stars. She was of good stature, she maintained a steadfast countenance, and her demeanor was noble and friendly (ll. 817-847). She danced, sang, laughed, and played in an attractive way; she had golden hair, a steady glance, and an eye that seemed merciful (ll. 848-877). She was temperate in mood, neither too solemn nor too gay, and she loved charitably (ll. 878-894). She had a beautiful face, red and white, that was "sad, symple, and benygne" (ll. 895-918). She spoke softly, reasonably, and truthfully, without malice, flattery, or chiding (ll. 919-938). Her neck was round, fair, and straight. Her throat was like a round tower of ivory and of moderate size (ll. 939-947). She had fair shoulders, a long trunk, well-proportioned arms, white hands with red nails, round breasts, broad hips, and a straight, flat back (ll. 948-960). She outshone the other ladies in comeliness of manner, and was, like the Arabian Phoenix, unique (ll. 961-984). The description goes on to consider intangibles: Blanche's goodness, truth, and well-ordered love (ll. 985-1034). He who looks for an individualized "portrait" in these lines will look in vain. Did the lady have long lashes? What color were her eyes! Was her nose long or short, her chin slightly jutting or round and dimpled! Was her lip full?

We are told that Blanche was a beautiful, attractive, and well-mannered blonde, exceptionally well-shaped and with the coloration to be expected. In other words, the description is highly stylized and is not, in the modern sense, a "portrait" at all. If we look carefully at the description in the original we shall find it to contain much more emphasis on *invisibilia* than on *visibilia*. Moreover, it contains features like the ivory tower which are clearly iconographic, or, in other words, features that point to ideas rather than to things. The *invisibilia*, both stated and implied, moreover, all point to Blanche's virtues,

so that ll.895-1032 form a logical conclusion to the description. The emphasis on virtue in the description, which may be detected even without reference to conventional iconography (a subject which seems to irritate most of my fellow Chaucerians about as much as virtue itself does), is hardly surprising in a funerary poem. What is surprising is that the Black Knight fails to see the wider implications of what he has said. He has been lamenting the loss of Blanche as a physical being, a gift of Fortune. But the virtues he has described have nothing to do with Fortune and cannot be destroyed by anything Fortune may do. This fact could hardly have escaped Chaucer's audience, and did not escape the Black Knight's interrogator, who remarked,

Hardely, your love was wel beset;
I not how ye myghte have do bet.
(1043-1044)

A lady of such virtue is truly lovable.

Two "characters" in the poem remain to be discussed: the Emperor Octovyen, and the speaker. The usual notion that the Emperor or king (line 1314) is meant to represent Edward III is hardly very convincing. What, exactly, would have been the point of the dreamer's undertaking a hunt under the auspices of King Edward in which the king himself did nothing but ride toward the manor of Richmond after an unsuccessful day in the field! If Octovyen was meant to be Edward, we can conclude only that Chaucer must have succeeded very well in puzzling his royal master.

There remains the speaker, who acts also as interrogator in the questioning of the Black Knight. It is usually assumed that the dream in the poem is, in spite of the warnings in ll. 270-290, a literal dream experienced, or feigned to have been experienced, by Geoffrey Chaucer, our young squire. Let us picture the situation. Chaucer, a member of the court of comparatively low rank, rises at a memorial gathering for Blanche, and says, in effect, "I am in very low spirits, having suffered for the past eight years, and cannot sleep. But I read a tale about Ceys and Alcione and went to sleep. Then I dreamed about waking in an elaborately decorated chamber and taking part in a hunt, led by the Emperor Octovyen, where I met a Black Knight lamenting the death of a lady under a tree. He told me how much he loved Blanche, whom he described; but he refused to be consoled. As I woke up, I saw Octovyen riding to Richmond." If we are to believe the most recent critics of the poem, he added somewhere in this account a remark like the following: "Oh, I say. Life, love, and all that. Frightfully ambiguous, what!" The only reasonable reaction to all this would have been to send the poor squire to St. Bartholomew's. Nobody in the audience, unless Philippa Chaucer were there, could possibly have had any interest in the squire's personal feelings, or in whether he had been ill for eight years or twenty, or in what he might have dreamed. What is the Emperor Octovyen, or, if you prefer, Augustus Caesar, doing in the English countryside? It is small wonder that a distinguished literary historian finds the poem "crude," with a "story" that "drags," full of "hackneyed" conventions, and without "profound emotion" or "piercing thought."³² As it is usually read today it is worse than this. It is a piece of foolishness which would have been an affront to the court and a disgrace to its author. Those who insist on clinging to "what the

poem says literally" are only offering some justification for the usual connotations of the word *academic*. Do they also engage in disputes about the number of petals growing on the girl whom Burns describes as being "like a red, red rose"?

It is much more probable that the "I" at the beginning of the poem represents not Chaucer individually and specifically but the initial reaction of the mourners for Blanche generally, somewhat exaggerated for poetic purposes. The story of Seys and Alcione is not something he chanced to have read, but something of significance for all the mourners, who have set before them an example of someone who cannot endure a temporal loss "comme homme fort et de grant cuer," and cannot understand the consolatory implications of the message,

Awake! let be your sorwful lyf!
For in your sorwe ther lyth no red,
For, certes, swete, I nam but ded,...
(202 -- 204)

There is only one sense in which the statement "I nam but ded" can be taken as a reason for not sorrowing, and, considering both the occasion for the poem and the nature of the audience, that sense would have been obvious. It can be found explained fully in the Epistle of the Mass for the Burial of the Dead, which begins, "Brethren: We will not have you ignorant concerning them that are asleep, that you be not sorrowful, even as others who have no hope; for if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them who have slept through Jesus, will God bring with Him." Alcione, who looked up and "saw noht," is among those "who have no hope."

In the dream, as we have seen, there is an obvious parallel between the interrogator and Lady Philosophy in the *Consolation*, and between the Black Knight and the mournful "Boethius" of the same work. Every man, including every man in Chaucer's audience, has, as it were, two parts, one involved in the senses and the other capable of comprehending the intelligible. What is revealed in the Black Knight's long confession is the significance of an Alcione-like attitude, an attitude typical of that part of any man that is involved in temporal things. It is for this reason that Spenser names his "man in black" in the *Daphnida*, who is certainly not John of Gaunt, "Alcyon." The attitude depends on our being overcome by idleness (or neglect of virtuous activity) in the first place, and by love for those things that may be apprehended by the senses. Then the object finally settled upon becomes, through desire, a gift of Fortune, the loss of which leads to "accidie" and despair. But at the promptings of the interrogator, the Black Knight, together with the audience, is led to dwell upon Blanche's virtues. If Blanche was as virtuous as the description implies, as noble, temperate, truthful, and charitable as the Black Knight indicates, then a despairing attitude like that of Alcione is neither necessary nor, in fact, complimentary to her. Aside from a few hints, like the observations on suicide, and a generally reasonable tone (sometimes described as "realistic" or inappropriately humorous), the interrogator leaves the positive side of his message unstated. It was stated openly in the Burial Service and in Commemorative Masses, but *The Book of the Duchess* is a poem, or, in other words, a work in which indirect statement

may lead the audience to certain conclusions that are only suggested. Meanwhile, the Black Knight and the dreamer represent two aspects, not only of Geoffrey Chaucer, but of everyone who loved Blanche.

Whether the poem conveys "profound emotion" depends entirely on the reader's experience and training. The Burial Service can in itself be very moving, and the ideas in the *Consolation* of Boethius can be moving also. Whether the doctrines of St. Paul and of Boethius actually constitute "serious thought" I leave to the gentlemen who, a moment ago, were discussing the number of petals growing on the girl. In the past, some of them have complained loudly about the inadequacy of Pauline and Boethian doctrines, which fail somehow to cope with the rich ambiguity of life. However, there is no reason to imagine that there was much sniveling about "ambiguity" in the court of Edward III. Had there been peaches there, men would have dared eat them.

The chivalric character of the poet and of his audience remains for our consideration. It is manifested, first of all, in the pervasive shimmer of good humor that glances from the surface of the poem, a tone that we can detect, without too much difficulty, in the little lament from Froissart quoted at the beginning of this essay. In a famous letter to his brother Toby, Mr. Walter Shandy strongly urged him to have his beloved Widow Wadman read "devotional tracts" and to keep from her such authors as Rabelais, Scarron, or Cervantes. Their books "excite laughter," thus making them inappropriate, for "there is no passion so serious as lust." Mr. Shandy here hit upon a great truth. If he had lived in our age, he might have added that certain forms of aesthetics and psychology share the same seriousness, since they are not unrelated to the passion mentioned. Morality, except in its nineteenth-century guises, is not nearly so serious, a fact that has resulted in the destruction of much of Chaucer's humor at the hands of the aesthetically or psychologically inclined. In the fourteenth century specifically, young noblemen were discouraged from maintaining a solemn attitude in public, for "papelardie," or false holiness, was considered foolish and in bad taste.³³ The light tone of much of Chaucer's poem is not difficult to point out. For example, when the speaker introduces his book of "fables," he says that it spoke

Of queenes lives, and of kinges,
And many other thinges smale.
(BD 58-59)

The bantering tone continues in the story itself. Alcione's grief is not always treated with great solemnity:

Ful ofte she swouned, and sayd "Alas!"
For sorwe ful nygh wood she was....
(103-104)

Again, the scene between June's messenger and Morpheus is openly humorous:

This messenger com fleyng faste
And cried, "O, ho! awake anon!"
Hit was for noht; there herde hym non.
"Awake!" quod he, "whoo ys lyth there!"
And blew his horn ryght in here eere,
And cried "Awaketh!" wonder hye.
This god of slep with hys oon ye
Cast up, axed, "Who clepeth ther!"
"Hyt am I," quod this messenger.
(178-186)

The light tone is marked in the dreamer's reaction to the story -- in his elaborate promise to Morpheus "in game," and in his introduction to the dream that "nat skarsly Macrobeus" (284) could understand. Although the speeches of the Black Knight are serious in intent, his behavior as he describe it not infrequently borders upon the ridiculous, and, in any event, the reactions of the interrogator maintain a courteous but good-natured tone. His response to the final revelation of Blanche's death, for example, is one of detached but good-natured sympathy:

"Is that your los? Be god hyt ys routhe!"
(1309)

Most critics of the poem have been disappointed by the fact that this response is not more lugubrious. Its tone is not very different from Froissart's

Haro! Metté moi une emplastre
Sus le coer....
(242-243)

In neither instance should the light tone be taken as an indication of lack of feeling. Chaucer was not attempting to encourage the serious, basically lustful attitude of the Black Knight. He had no desire to encourage grief. On the contrary, the serious, melancholy, slothful mood was exactly what he wished to discourage. He is saying, in effect, to all the mourners for Blanche, "let be your sorwful lyf!" When the light of reason is allowed to play on the scene, grief departs from those who have hope. Meanwhile, the general tone of the poem is aristocratic and good-humored, consistent with the predominantly chivalric nature of the audience.

In addition to presenting a contrast to a reasonable attitude toward Fortune, the Black Knight's behavior contrasts sharply with the current conception of chivalric love. In the little poem that Edward III is said to have written for the Black Prince, the poet says,

Des femes venent les proescs
Et les honours et les hautescs.

He refers to the fact that great ladies were frequently regarded as sources of chivalric inspiration to men who loved them for their nobility and virtue. Such love had little to do with lust or sentiment and did not have sexual satisfaction, readily available elsewhere, as its aim. It was basically similar to the kind of love any vassal owed to his overlord or any subject owed to his queen. In short, it was exactly the kind of love that Chaucer himself and the noblemen in his audience owed to Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster. In an age like ours when a long period of adolescent frustration, or semi-frustration, is common, and when love of any kind involving generosity of spirit is reported to be difficult,³⁴ we may find this convention hard to understand. But the attitude had been popularized in the fourteenth-century poems of Machaut, and it is illustrated in Chaucer's poem itself.

When the Black Knight first approaches Blanche, he feels that he will die if he does not speak to her (1188). He is so fearful that he can only grow pale and blush by turns (1215), and when he does finally speak, he can say nothing but "mercy!" (1219) The lady, who, as we have been told, "loved as man may do hys brother" (892), and "loved so wel ryght, she wrong do wolde to no wyght" (1015-1016), quite properly refuses to have anything to do with the Knight. His approach shows no virility, and, certainly, no chivalry. On the contrary, it reveals a merely selfish "sensible passion" without any virtue to commend it. The fact that the lady shows no resemblance to the Parisian ladies who, years later, were to be so overwhelmingly impressed by the antics of M. Grimm should surprise no one. "Another yere" (1258), when the Knight is able to desire nothing but the lady's "good," he receives a ring, and his inclinations become harmonious with hers. If the description of Blanche means anything at all, this harmony implies a virtuous and noble demeanor on the part of the Knight. In other words, Blanche was an inspiration to truly chivalric conduct to those who loved her reasonably. This, after all, is exactly the idea Chaucer wished to get across. If the virtues of the Duchess were an inspiration to reasonable and noble conduct in life, her memory should continue to inspire such conduct. Once this point has been made, or strongly suggested, the "characters" in the poem -- the Black Knight and the dreamer -- have served their usefulness and may be quickly dismissed. They are, of course, not "characters" at all in the modern sense, and what happens to them is not a "story." Their dismissal is a logical consequence of the poem's thematic development. The poem itself ends "abruptly" only if we read it in the same spirit that we read, let us say, "The Little Red Hen."

In conclusion, let us consider very briefly the poem "as a poem." At the time it was delivered, the memory of the young duchess was still fresh in everyone's mind. England was still free of the disillusionment that was to result from failures abroad and social unrest at home, justly confident of its place as a great European power. In the minds of the nobility, the inspiration afforded by noble ladies like the Duchess of Lancaster, gracious and beautiful in demeanor and steadfast in heart, was at least in part responsible for their success. What does Chaucer's poem, then, mean to us? It means nothing at all in so far as "emotional profundity" or "serious thought" are concerned unless we can place ourselves by an act of the historical imagination in Chaucer's audience, allowing ourselves, as best we can, to think as they thought and to feel as they felt. If we cannot take the themes of the *Consolation* of Boethius seriously, if the text of the Burial Mass leaves us unmoved, and, above all, if we insist on demanding romantic and post-romantic

emotionalism in everything we read, there is small likelihood that Chaucer's poem will move us in any way. The poet was not seeking to create "purely literary" effects; and there is no virtue in poetry itself, in spite of certain recent notions of Frazerian-Jungian archetypes, operating by sympathetic magic in the enchanted mists of the collective unconscious, that will bring Chaucer's tribute to life for us in any other way. It would be better, indeed, not to read the poem at all unless we can, in imagination, picture Blanche, young, gay, and of humble cheer, suddenly lost to the family of the Duke and the court of the King, and exclaim with Froissart, "Haro!"

NOTES

1. The war with France was resumed in this year, the enemy now being the astute Charles V rather than the chivalrous King John. John of Gaunt's venture into Artois and Picardy met with little success, and the invasion of Robert Knowles in the following year was a failure. Edward fell under the influence of Alice Perrers, a woman hardly of the type to inspire chivalric idealism, leaving the guidance of the realm to others. England faced a period of decline, marked by financial crises, social and political unrest, and general decay.

2. *Chronicles*, trans. T. Johnes, Book 1, Ch. 272.

3. *Le joli buisson de jonece. Oeuvres*, ed. Scheler (repr. Geneva. 1977), Vol. 2, lines 241-250.

4. The services were elaborate. For that held in 1371 the Duke allowed Sir William Burghbrigg of his council £38 18s, a considerable sum. See *John of Gaunt's Register*, ed. S. Armitage-Smith (London, 1911), no. 943. For information about the first service attended by the Duke in person (1374), see N. B. Lewis. "The Anniversary Service for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, 12 Sept., 1371." *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 21 (1937), pp. 176-192.

5. On June 8, 1374 (*Register*, no. 1394), we find the Duke ordering alabaster for "new work" on the tomb. He was especially concerned to find material suitable for the effigies. On Jan. 26. 1375 (*Register*, no. 1659), arrangements were made to pay Yevele for his work.

6. For all of these arrangements, see Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (repr., New York, 1964), pp. 75-78.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 76, 77.

8. This point has been well made with reference to the lyric especially by John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Lincoln, 1961). See especially Ch. 10, and the remarks about "applied" or "practical" art on p.235.

9. See *John of Gaunt*, Ch. X. The Duke may have been more concerned about ecclesiastical abuses than these pages indicate, although it is probable that he thought of them as being personal rather than institutional. The revolutionary character of Wyclif's thought was not due merely to the fact that he attacked abuses, for the abuses he attacked were deplored also by many persons whose inclinations were essentially conservative. His desire to reform the organization and theology of the Church was revolutionary.

10. There is a good discussion by Derek Brewer, *Chaucer in His Time* (London, 1963), pp. 226-237. The quotation from *Clanvowe* on p. 226, however, is not a condemnation of "courtlinss" or "chivalry," but of worldly wisdom, which is a different matter entirely.

11. See most recently J. Burke Severs, "The Sources of 'The Book of the Duchess,'" *Mediaeval Studies*, 25 (1963). 355-362.

12. E. K. Rand, *Founders of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1928), p. 178.

13. Ed. V. L. Dedek-Héry, *Mediaeval Studies*, 14 (1952), 165-275. Jean's Preface, here briefly summarized, appears on pp. 168-171.

14. Jean is here reflecting the Augustinian distinction between use and enjoyment. See Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, 1.1.3.

15. This idea may also be found in Trivet's commentary. See *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962). p. 359.

16. Lines 759-804. In effect, the Black Knight tells us that he entered the Garden of Deduit as it is described in the *Roman de la Rose*. Although we may expect this to have been a fairly common procedure, it was nevertheless a foolish one, leading to what Chaucer calls in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* (F 472, G 462) "falsnesse" and "vice." The early reputation of the *Roman*, which was not attacked on moral grounds "in its own century," is discussed by John V. Fleming, "The Moral Reputation of the *Roman de la Rose* before 1400," *RPh*, 18 (1965), 430-435.

17. *Register*, no. 608, as cited in note 4.

18. *Register*, no. 1662.

19. Donald R. Howard, *Speculum*, 39 (1964), p. 541.

20. *Cons.*, 4.pr.4 and m.4. For the manner in which these passages were understood in the fourteenth century, see Chaucer's translation.

21. Cf. H. S. Bennett's discussion of the word alone in connection with the "pathos" of Arcite's farewell to the world ("Knight's Tale," line 2779), *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1947), p. 83. It has, he says, "little of the evocative effect that it has for

us with centuries of association behind the word "alone"-- associations magnificently called on by Coleridge in

Alone, alone, all, all alone,
Alone on a wide wide sea ...

Chaucer, it is said, had to rely on "cumulative effect" rather than association. It may be objected in the first place that the word alone had, in the fourteenth century, associations which had been gathering for some centuries since the text of *Ecclesiastes* 4:10 became available in the West. Moreover, at the risk of being accused of "literary insensitivity" once more, let me add that the passage in question is not "pathetic" at all. We shall do better to forget Coleridge, except for purposes of contrast, when we read Chaucer.

22. Trans. Lucy Norton (London, 1951), p. 192. The great painter was troubled by feelings of multiple personality and loneliness. E.g., see pp. 15, 40, 214. He speaks, p. 97 (1849), of an "unbearable sense of emptiness" to his friend Chopin, who was suffering acutely from "boredom."

23. "Parson's Tale," line 677.

24. Magnanimity, for example, is defined as "'greet corage," which "maketh folk to undertake harde thynges and grevouse thynges, by hir owene wil, wisely and resonably." (X[I]731) The virtue of magnificence appears "'whan a man dooth and perfourneth grete werkes of goodnesse.'" (X[1]735) It is not difficult to think of these virtues in connection with the Knight as he is described in the General Prologue.

25. The more "advanced" figures in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, like the Monk and the Pardoner, are not treated with much sympathy.

26. *Confessions* 2.8 (1750-1752). It is possible that this story is colored by Rousseau's later hostility to Grimm.

27. For some hints of this change, see Jan H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (New York, 1961), Ch. 3. For the nineteenth century in particular, see the brilliant study by Werner Hofmann, *The Earthly Paradise* (New York, 1961), especially Ch. 10.

28. Medieval houses, even among the wealthy, afforded little bedroom privacy. In this connection, see also Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood* (New York, 1962). pp. 100 ff., and p. 128.

29. See *John of Gaunt*, pp.460-462, as cited in note 4.

30. In 1396 the Duke and Katherine petitioned the Pope to sanction their marriage, stating as one of the impediments the fact that they had lived in adultery during the lifetime of Constance. In connection with "sin" itself, we should be aware of the fact that the connotations of the word have changed enormously since the Middle Ages. The intense

introspective concern for the subject exhibited by Bunyan in *Grace Abounding* would have then seemed unnatural, and Arnold's feeling that sin is "a positive, active entity hostile to man, a mysterious power" would have seemed Manichean, smacking a little of devil-worship. Arnold's further view that "the true greatness of Christianity" lies in "righteousness," a view that seems to be taken for granted by many modern writers, would have been regarded as Pelagian. Perhaps it would be better to translate "sin" in most medieval contexts as "unwise conduct." Christ was conventionally regarded as the "Wisdom of God," and His message was love, not righteousness, which was the message of the Old Law.

31. *De rerum natura* 4.1058-1072.

32. *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, p. 36, as cited in note 22.

33. See *A Preface to Chaucer*, p. 161.

34. E.g., by such diverse witnesses as T. S. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party* and Camus in *The Stranger*.

Criticism of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, the first major work of a young man who was to become England's most famous poet, has sometimes neglected not only the immediate historical setting of the poem and the most probable circumstances of its first publication, but also the mores of its audience.Â Robertson, *Historical Setting of BOD*, p. 2. Aussi sa fille de Lancastre --Haro! mettÃ©s moi une emplastre Sus le coer, car, quant m'en souvient, Certes souspirer me couvient, Tant sui plains de melancolie. Elle morut jone et jolie, Environ de vingt et deux ans; Gaie, lie, friche, esbatans, Douce, simple, d'umble samblance; La bonne dame ot Ã nom Blanche.3 (241-250).