

**CHAUCER THE BEGINNER: IMAGINING CHAUCER'S
CREATIVE PROCESS IN CREATING "BOOK OF THE DUCHESS"**

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Matthew Edwards

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ABSTRACT

Chaucer's first major poem, *Book of the Duchess*, represents a devoted reader's best attempt at creating a meaningful and authoritative text of their own. After extensive reading, Chaucer's first attempt to write a text draws significant inspiration from past texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the medieval French dream vision *Romance of the Rose*. It is aspects of texts such as these which Chaucer mimics in order to imbue his own text with meaning and authority of its own. Chaucer's process of composing this first authoritative text will be discussed at length below, with a strong emphasis on the function of *voice* and *imitation*, and how *inspiration*, a simultaneous source of ideas and motivation, drives Chaucer's entire creative process. Chaucer utilizes and manipulates a great many voices in *Book of the Duchess*, many of which obviously do not belong to Chaucer but rather to authors of the past. It is these multiple already-authoritative voices, in addition to a single nameless voice narrating the story, that ultimately constitute Chaucer's own, original voice.

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of the Duchess, being Chaucer's first major work as an author, provides us with Chaucer's initial, most uninhibited attempts to draw on his various inspirations in order to fabricate his own voice, and his own authority. *The Book of the Duchess* (hereafter *BD*) contains multiple scenarios involving reading, interpreting, and writing, and examining these instances will provide us with a good idea of Chaucer's own creative process as a beginning writer. If there is one thing most beginners (to writing or some other activity) are guilty of, it is over-analysis. It is not until one is no longer a beginner-author that one knows which aspects of authorship should receive the most attention and which aspects are not worth conscious consideration. Beginners on the other hand, though they may have done their research on the proper way to engage in an activity (as Chaucer certainly has), do not benefit from the "muscle memory" — those various unconscious decisions which affect an author's writing process — that seasoned authors have no doubt come to acquire through repeated participation in the act of writing. Instead of simply focusing on the story he wants to tell, and how he wants to tell it, Chaucer-the-beginner also pays attention to the sources he is using, how he is using them, how they will affect *BD*'s reception, and how inspiration plays into the whole process of authorship. Naturally, this ends up being very helpful when it comes to trying to understand *how* Chaucer created.

After extensive reading, Chaucer's first attempt to write a text draws significant inspiration from past texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the medieval French dream vision *Romance of the Rose*. It is aspects of texts such as these that Chaucer mimics in order to imbue his own text with meaning and authority of its own. Chaucer's process of composing this first authoritative text will be discussed at length below, with a strong emphasis on the function of

voice and imitation, and how *inspiration*¹ drives Chaucer's entire creative process. Chaucer utilizes and manipulates a great many voices in *Book of the Duchess*, many of which obviously do not originally belong to Chaucer but rather to authors of the past, but it is these multiple already-authoritative voices, in addition to a single nameless voice narrating the story, that ultimately constitute Chaucer's own, original voice.

Book of the Duchess opens with a sleep-deprived narrator complaining that he is unable to sleep and as a result has a mind full of negative and idle thoughts. He declares that no creature should have to live in this way, but he seems to not be actively trying to find healing, and we are never told the cause of his condition. Then, realizing that sleep will not come to him anytime soon, he decides to read a tale by Ovid. The tale involves a queen grieving over the fate of her husband who has been gone at sea for a long time, causing the queen to wonder whether he has died at sea or not. The anxious queen prays to the goddess Juno to send her a dream that reveals the fate of her husband. The narrator continues to recount the rest of the tale, but it is this plea for a dream that the narrator finds the most interest in. After the story's conclusion, in which the queen ends up receiving her wish and discovering that her husband is dead, the narrator, having learned that there is a goddess of sleep, copies the queen's request. Instead of asking for a dream, however, the narrator asks only for sleep. After making this request, he immediately falls asleep, with his head resting on the book he has just read. The narrator then "wakes up" (in a bed, in his

¹ The Oxford English dictionary defines "inspiration" as I intend it to be read, defining it generally as "a breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, etc. into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, esp. of an exalted kind." The OED also offers a specifically theologistic definition: "A special immediate action or influence of the Spirit of God (or of some divinity or supernatural being) upon the human mind or soul; said *esp.* of that divine influence under which the books of Scripture are held to have been written." While the latter definition is inherently religious and may not seem applicable to Chaucer and *BD*, it suggests a potential source of inspiration, which the first definition avoids altogether. While I will not attempt to argue that Chaucer's inspiration comes from God, or that it ultimately does not, I do believe that texts are the main source of Chaucer's inspiration, that Chaucer himself is aware of the inspirational qualities reading has on his mind, and that Chaucer alludes to all of this in *Book of the Duchess*. This will be discussed in greater detail later on.

dream) in a ceiling-less room with windows depicting the history of Troy and walls containing the text and gloss of *Romance of the Rose*.² The narrator hears a hunting call, and then mounts a horse, which has seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and rides out of the room in order to find the group of hunters. He catches up to them and learns they are hunting with Emperor Augustus. The narrator follows the hunters to a forest, before seeing a lone dog and following it until he comes into a clearing where a knight dressed in black sits, complaining loudly of his sorrow. The narrator and knight have a conversation in which the knight uses highly figurative language to explain the cause and intensity his sorrow, which stems from the death of his wife, but the narrator fails to correctly understand anything the knight says. After a long discourse, the knight, frustrated by the narrator's ignorance, states *literally* that his wife is dead. The knight then rides off towards a castle, and the narrator wakes up. The narrator, being so moved by the dream he has just dreamt, finds himself motivated to record his dream in the form of a poem. It is this *recounting* of the narrator's story — his ailment and remedy, and consequent dream — that we, the reader, have just read.

Current relevant scholarship on Chaucer and *Book of the Duchess* has focused on the function of the narrator within the context of the poem or on various aspects of authorship in — reading, interpreting, and writing — but not on authorship as it relates to *BD's* narrator. Inspiration, another necessary component of authorship, has not received attention. It is inspiration, however, that leads the narrator to write down his dream or, by extension, Chaucer to compose his *Book of the Duchess*. My focus on *Chaucer's* authorship — his use of ideas from others' inspirational texts to compose his own, original text — will thus hopefully lead to a new

² *The Romance of the Rose* is a french allegorical dream vision poem written some one-hundred years before the likely composition date of *Book of the Duchess*, sometime between 1369 and 1372 (*Wadsworth Chaucer*, p. 329). The poem was obviously adored by and had a significant impact on Chaucer, who had translated the poem from French into Middle English prior to composing *The Book of the Duchess* (*ibid*).

understanding of Chaucer's creative process, and of his unique self-awareness of his own creative process, a self-awareness likely originating from his status as a beginner. A major focus will be placed on Chaucer's use and manipulation of *voice*, an aspect of Chaucer's authorship that has remained relatively untouched.

AUTHORITY (*AUCTORITAS*) AND AUTHORSHIP

All medieval authors, regardless of skill level, would at some point need to find a way to gain and maintain *auctorite*. The term *auctorite* here means something similar to the modern term authority, but also has additional meaning — "In literary context, the term *auctor* denoted someone who was at once a writer and an authority, someone not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed."³ The title of *auctor* was given by scholars and writers to popular artists of the past, usually requiring the author to be deceased — "No 'modern' writer could decently be called an *auctor* in a period in which men saw themselves as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giant, i.e. the 'ancients.'"⁴

In his book *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, Alastair Minnis points out an interesting paradox illuminating the difficulty medieval authors would have had in making their texts worth reading: in order for authors to be read and trusted they had to have *auctorite*, but in order to have *auctorite* an author must be read and trusted by their audience. Chaucer must have been aware of this problem, and later on I will discuss a few ways his writing works to subvert this system and grant himself *auctorite* while still alive.

While secular writers, such as Chaucer, had to somehow gain their own authority, writers of Scripture were automatically granted this authority. This is because God was seen as the source of all *auctoritas*, and so the human writers gain *auctoritas* by extension due to being responsible to recording the Scripture's infallible text.⁵ Authors recording text which does not come directly from God will naturally draw inspiration from other authors. It was even *expected* that an author's work would include other authors' material, in addition to the new material that

³ Minnis, Alastair. *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), p. 10

⁴ *ipid*, p. 12

⁵ *ipid*, p. 95

was responsible for making a text original. An author who utilizes others' material but introduces no significant material of his own is not considered an author at all. St. Bonaventure, in the thirteenth century, explained additional distinctions between authors and other kinds of writers. At the time, the differentiation between different kinds of writers became important, and Bonaventure explains that "authors" were those who engaged in the most original variety of writing (emphasis mine) —

The method of making a book is fourfold. For someone writes the materials of others, adding or changing nothing, and this person is said to be merely the scribe. Someone else writes the materials of others, adding, but nothing of his own, and this person is said to be the compiler. Someone else writes both the materials of other men, and of his own, but the materials of others as the principal materials, and his own annexed for the purpose of clarifying them, and this person is said to be the commentator, not the author. Someone else writes both his own materials and those of others, but his own as the principal materials, and *the materials of others annexed for the purpose of confirming his own*, and such must be called the author.⁶

Chaucer can easily be declared an *author*, for despite including a significant portion of Ovid's text in his own, the role Ovid's story plays is obviously to support Chaucer's own story, which comes later and is far lengthier. The importance in describing not only the problems facing new authors but also what constitutes an author will become more apparent when the discussion later begins to revolve around Chaucer's unique manipulation of voices.

⁶ Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, p. 94

CHAUCER-THE-BEGINNER

The *Book of the Duchess* is unique in that it is Chaucer's first major work,⁷ being composed after his translation of *Romance of the Rose*, and after Chaucer had done extensive reading.⁸ For this reason, it makes sense that the story focuses so intensely not only on grief and consolation, which are arguably the main themes of both Ovid's tale and the narrator's dream, but also on the processes of reading and writing. The reason for the poem's overarching themes of grief and consolation likely arises from the occasion of the death of John of Gaunt's (6 March 1340 – 3 February 1399) wife, Blanche of Lancaster (25 March 1345/1347 – 12 September 1368). John of Gaunt was Chaucer's patron and would have been one of the probable audiences for *BD*. Luckily for us, a significant portion of *BD* is also devoted to detailing the narrator's creative process — his thinking, reading, and writing. Instead of the entirety of *BD* being devoted to Ovid's tale and to the narrator's dream, Chaucer presents us also with moments where we can experience the narrator (who is also the text's "author") as he really is.

There's a self-awareness that comes with being new to something, and Chaucer's "newness" to authorship causes him to think carefully about everything decision he makes that goes into the creation of the *Book of the Duchess* — from thinking up the idea for the story after struggling with writer's block, to writing everything down in the most effective way possible. It is in the poem's explicitly narrator-focused moments where we can see Chaucer's habits reflected in the narrator's actions.

At the start of *The Book of the Duchess*, we find the narrator sleep-deprived and devoid of productive thoughts, saying "I have so many an ydel thoght / Purely for defaute of slep" (4-5).

⁷ Chaucer, Geoffrey, and Larry D. Benson. *The Wadsworth Chaucer*. Boston, Mass: Wadsworth, 2000, p. 329

⁸ A.C. Spearing states that Chaucer was "widely read" and thus "familiar with many of the visionary works, dream-poems, and *dits amoureux*", and that his readers and listeners were likely familiar with these works as well. (*Medieval Dream Poetry*, p. 48)

The *Middle English Dictionary* provides two definitions of "idle" which pertain to the usage of the word in *Book of the Duchess*. The first describes that which is "Of no effect or significance, futile, vain, worthless; also, false, sinful", while the second definition relates more to physical and mental inactivity, rather than to the quality of one's physical or mental actions — "engaged in nothing, idle; without work, unemployed; also, lazy, sluggish; also, not engaged in official business."

One can easily imagine this is how a beginning author, or someone *intending to be an author*⁹, would feel once faced with the task of putting one's own words down in writing. This is not a situation unique to authors, either. Whether having to write an essay for school, paint a picture, create a computer program, or do some other creative task, everyone will face the dreaded "blank canvas" at some point. Eventually, becoming proficient at a task may eliminate the fear or intimidation once derived from the blank canvas, but until one reaches that point, figuring out how to fill a blank canvas with *anything* can be a daunting task.

Chaucer, lacking experience as an author, does not yet have these "expert" habits. It is for this reason that I believe the narrator's idle thoughts can be seen as representing, likely in a dramatized way, Chaucer's thoughts on the creative process. This idea, that beginners are far more unrestricted in their handling of tasks than experts, is best stated I think by Shunryu Suzuki, a famous Buddhist monk and teacher — "The mind of the beginner is empty, free of the habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which

⁹ T.S. Miller (*Writing Dreams to Good*, 2011) argues that Chaucer's narrator in *BD* progresses from reader to writer throughout the course of the poem, with the help of the content of the dream. I believe, not quite contrarily, that the narrator in *BD*, while certainly not an *able* writer at first, does have the *intent* to become an author throughout the story. This does not necessarily contradict what T.S. Miller has to say, because although reading can seem to be a precursor to writing, as T.S. Miller stresses, both are to be done simultaneously — "the good writer, of course, must remain an excellent reader whose own texts emerge from a conscientious process of rereading" (p. 529). So, just because we find the narrator engaging in reading at the start of the poem does not preclude the narrator from *wanting* to write even while he reads — he could be reading in order to find the inspiration to write.

can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything."¹⁰

When Chaucer attempts something new, it is not only important to understand that he will not have any "expert habits", but that the result of not having these habits will likely result in a kind of uneasiness from not knowing how exactly to get started. Chaucer's narrator, himself a beginning author,¹¹ expresses exactly these sentiments immediately after complaining about his idle thoughts and lack of sleep —

Defaute of slep and hevynesse

Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknesse

That I have lost al lustyhede.

Suche fantasies ben in myn hede

So I not what is best to doo. (25-29)

While it is sufficient to provide definitions for *quyknesse* ["The state of being alive, life; vigor; also, sensitivity of perception"] and *lustyhede* ["Joyfulness, cheerfulness; enjoyment of life;"] sans discussion, *fantasies* will require much more attention. The *Middle English Dictionary* provides us with two potentially relevant definitions: "A mental image or a notion produced by

¹⁰ While this quote may appear out of place, hailing from the world of Zen Buddhism and Japanese martial arts and being utilized to explain the creative process of a medieval English author, the concept of *beginner's mind* explains concisely my thoughts on Chaucer's state of mind while composing *BD*. I will, of course, support my use of this quote in the following paragraphs.

¹¹ Since both Chaucer and *BD*'s narrator are likely writing their first major text, I expect that what I say describing one's creative process can easily be seen as describing the other's, and vice versa, at least to some extent. Henceforth I will describe either the "narrator's" or "Chaucer's" creative process depending on which is more appropriate at the time, with the implication that I am simultaneously describing the other's creative process. In "Medieval secular allegory: French and English", Stephanie Gibbs Kamath and Rita Copeland explain that the first-person voice utilized in vernacular secular poetry was a key element that distinguished it from earlier Latin allegory (p. 136). Particularly relevant to our conversation is their claim that the writer was present to some extent in the character of the narrator in these texts. Since Chaucer drew inspiration from these vernacular first-person texts, it would not be controversial to claim Chaucer's narrator is meant to resemble Chaucer in some respects: "In the *Roman de la Rose* and the allegories that followed it, this voice is identified with the historical writer, not only narrating as writer but acting as character, participating in the drama that structures the narrative" (p. 136).

fantasie. (b) a deluded notion or false supposition; an unfounded speculation or suspicion; hence, untruth, a lie." The former definition then requires an additional definition of *fantasie*:

"One of the mental 'faculties' or 'bodily wits', variously classified in scholastic psychology and literary tradition as to its supposed location in the brain and its functions, whether the imagined apprehension and recall of sensory data, the formation of delusive images or ideas, musing about the past or speculation about the future, the devising of works of art, etc.; the imagination (in various of its functions); also, the supposed seat of this faculty; (b) the operation of this faculty; the use of the imagination (in various of its functions)."

When we read the aforementioned lines of *BD* with the intent of seeing in the text Chaucer's creative process, something Chaucer would expect and tolerate (if not encourage) due to its unavoidability,¹² we can interpret the last two lines as describing a sense of anxiety or dread which a beginner-author is very likely to experience once tasked with writing their first work, not knowing how or where to begin, due to having never begun before. The narrator is unable to sleep and lacks spirit, and is either unable to have any worthwhile ideas or is so full of ideas he cannot possibly decide which to focus on. Either way, the narrator is clearly concerned with ideas, and his ability to have worthwhile ideas — and so obviously has the intent to write. He just is unsure how to actually begin the act of writing — "I not what is best to doo" (29).

¹² Chaucer himself was aware of the unavoidable multiple-interpretability of texts, so reading *BD* as a portrayal of Chaucer's creative process is something Chaucer would not find issue with. Judith Ferster argues that *BD* "proposes a morally based etiquette of reading through which one tries to understand the author, just as the narrator tries to get the knight to understand White's death as her own" (*Meaning in The "Book of the Duchess"*, p. 23). T.S. Miller expands upon this, saying that "Chaucer recognizes that all kinds of people will be interpreting ("reading") his dream, and in all kinds of different ways" (*Writing Dreams to Good*, p. 542). It is expected that readers will interpret texts in all kinds of ways, and the best an author can do is hope that readers are not maliciously misinterpreting their texts: "[Chaucer] does not demand that his audience receive it "aryght" in exactly the way he intends, but only that they not "hyt mysdemen in hir thoght / Through malicious entencioun" (*House of Fame*, 92-3)" (ibid, p.541)

DIFFERENT READERS, DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

Just prior to complaining of his head full of fantasies and stating he does not know what to do, the narrator complains that he is "Alway in poynt to falle a-doun; / For sorrowful ymagynacioun / Ys alway hooly in my mynde" (13-15). Depending on whether we read *BD* as being about grief or authorship, we can interpret *ymagynacioun* differently. In the former case, it makes most sense if the word means "thought, cogitation, idea,"¹³ and in the latter case could carry additional meaning, also incorporating into its usage "mental ability; inventiveness, ingenuity, craftiness." Either the author-narrator is imagining sorrowful scenarios and things to write about, in order to make his text relatable to John of Gaunt or any non-author audience member, or is *unable* to imagine such situations due to a lack of "mental ability." In either case, this causes the narrator great distress.

It may seem peculiar to try to assign, as readers, multiple meanings simultaneously to various words in the poem, but it is not unlike Chaucer to do just this, using the same word in multiple ways all within the same text. T.S. Miller points out, for example, that Chaucer uses the word "rede" "in all of its meanings and across all of the dream visions" (532), with many different interpretations of the word existing within *Book of the Duchess* alone. Because of this inclination to provide readers with a text permitting multiple interpretations, of both words and the text as a whole, it is easy to observe that the same idle thoughts and melancholy which plague the author-narrator can also serve to describe a grieving narrator. Thus, Chaucer's introduction to *BD* can be seen as simultaneously describing his experience writing for the first time and representing what he believes are John of Gaunt's feelings following the death of his wife.

¹³ *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. imăġinăcioun (n.) def. 3, 4. This and all subsequent Middle English definitions also come from the *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan. Web. May 19.

The lines immediately following those previously quoted — which deal with Chaucer's *fantasies* — seem to imply that Chaucer is going for this kind of ambiguously interpretable introduction, describing two different individuals' situations simultaneously, depending on who is reading the text and with what point of view:

But men myght axe me why soo

I may not slepe and what me is.

But natheles, who ask this

Leseth his asking trewely.

Meselven can not tell why

The sothe; but trewly, as I gesse,

I holde hit be a sicknesse (30-36).

If Chaucer's narrator claims to not know the cause of his sickness, then as readers we cannot be expected to know what is ailing the narrator without a shadow of a doubt, or that there are not additional causes of suffering. The narrator's lack of clear prognosis permits multiple, possibly simultaneous diagnoses of the narrator's condition.

In the same way that I personally am interpreting *BD* as being a description of Chaucer's creative process, and seeing text which supports my view, anyone reading *BD* with the intent of seeing it as a story about grief and consolation will find the text supports their view as well. The unavoidable ambiguity of dream-vision interpretations is discussed in Spearing's *Medieval Dream Poetry*, where Spearing explains that interpreting one of Chaucer's dream-vision poems depends on the kind of dream — following Macrobius' description of the types of dreams.¹⁴

¹⁴ Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* provides a description of *actual* dreams as they were understood at the time, and on the purpose of allegory, both of which interested Chaucer. The types of dreams are the enigmatic dream (*somnium*), prophetic vision (*visio*), oracular dream (*oraculum*), the nightmare (*insomnium*), and the

Some of these types of dreams were seen as possessing a meaning, but some were seen as meaning nothing at all, resulting only from indigestion or other strictly physical experiences. Because Chaucer leaves the classification of the narrator's dream up in the air, not only can one not be sure of the dream's interpretation, but also whether the dream is worth interpreting at all. By having the dream exist in a kind of limbo between "worth interpreting" and "not worth interpreting", Chaucer can present the story to John of Gaunt, or whoever, without much risk. The reader will read his work, and interpret the value or lack of value of the dream, however they wish. If Chaucer had made the dream obviously be one worth interpreting, for example, and John of Gaunt ended up not agreeing with the message the story presented, then Chaucer could be in trouble. If it is ambiguous, however, and John of Gaunt does not agree with the poem's message, he can simply choose to believe that the dream was not worth interpreting after all. Ambiguity is not always a bad thing for an author, even though it may appear that way at first.

Chaucer also prevents his text from having a single "correct" interpretation by having the narrator state that his dream is uninterpretable. The narrator's claim that not even famous historic dream interpreters such as Joseph or Macrobius would have been able to interpret his dream lends itself to the poem's ambiguity. In addition to making the dream able to be interpreted, or not, in multiple ways, it also eliminates any pressure on readers to come up with some interpretation of the text. If the reader struggles with understanding the poem figuratively, like the dreamer in *BD* fails to understand the black knight's figurative language, then the claim that the dream is uninterpretable should be sufficient to prevent the reader from feeling inadequate. It

apparition (*visum*). Of these, the last two "are not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance" (p. 88). As for the three "reliable" dreams, an enigmatic dream "conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding" (p. 90), an oracular dream involves an authority figure providing the dreamer with advice or a course of action, and a prophetic vision is only able to be classified as a prophetic vision after it comes true, if it ever does.

also, more importantly, prevents Chaucer from being to blame for any reader's potentially negative interpretation of the text. If all interpretations are equally possible, this prevents any single interpretation from being deemed "correct". Not even Macrobius or Joseph can interpret the narrator's dream, so Chaucer's readers obviously should not expect themselves to be able to understand it, or feel inferior when they cannot.

Interpretation-ambiguity naturally also results from Chaucer's use of figurative language, for reasons discussed earlier. While some authors may feel uncomfortable with readers interpreting their work in various, perhaps unexpected ways, Chaucer realizes that this possibility comes with the use of figurative language and uses it to his advantage. If Chaucer *expects* that his poem will be interpreted in multiple ways, he can make the conscious effort to present certain aspects of the story less ambiguously, or more ambiguously. If there is a portion of the text he feels should be interpreted in a single way, he can hint in various ways at this "correct" interpretation without resorting to potentially less effective, literal language. Chaucer's knowledge of the caveats of figurative language enable him to find benefits in its limitations, enabling him to imbue his poem with the ability to be read differently by different readers.

The narrator's focus on his own thoughts this early in the poem, and to this extent, clearly places a certain emphasis in the story on the act of thinking and having ideas, whether intentional or not. The poem *overall* reads as one about grief and consolation, but I cannot help but feel that *BD's* 61-line introduction is Chaucer's semi-autobiographical strategy to fill up a blank canvas, making it less intimidating and giving himself a starting point from which to depart from, before finally getting around to tackling the issues of grief and consolation. Of course, Chaucer could have come back to and reworked the introduction after completing more of the poem, but the at-least-somewhat-autobiographical introduction does not seem to be something that could have

been *originally* composed after the composition of the poem's dream vision. So, the introduction could — and would have likely — been revised after being initially composed, but the semi-autobiographical aspect would have likely already been present from the start.

THE NARRATOR'S AMBIGUOUS SICKNESS: LOVESICKNESS OR WRITER'S BLOCK?

Chaucer's introduction bears great similarity to the introduction to a work by French author Jean Froissart.¹⁵ However, as Arthur W. Bahr points out, despite Chaucer echoing Froissart directly, he "invents his own narrator" by using language which is, unlike Froissart's, "lively, conversational, emphatic, dramatic":¹⁶

Chaucer:

I have gret wonder, be this lyght
 How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
 I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
 Purely for defaute of slep
 That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
 Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
 Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.
 Al is ylyche good to me —
 Joye or sorowe, wherso hyt be —
 For I have felynge in nothyng,
 But as yt were a mased thyng,
 Alway in poynt to falle a-doun;
 For sorwful ymagynacioun

Froissart (translated¹⁷):

I am quite amazed at myself, how I live
 so long, for I stay awake a great deal,
 and one could not find anyone suffering
 more from staying awake than I am; for
 know that in staying awake, thoughts
 and bouts of melancholy that are bound
 up in my heart often come to torment
 me. And I cannot loose them, for I do
 not want to forget the beautiful woman,
 for love of whom I have entered into
 this anguish and stay awake so much"
 (1-12)

¹⁵ *Le Paradis d'Amour et L'Orlage Amoureux*, Jean Froissart

¹⁶ First quotation is Bahr's (*The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative*, p. 44), second is quoted within Bahr's text and belongs to D.S. Brewer ("The Relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions", in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer (Alabama, 1967), 3.)

¹⁷ This translation is by Arthur W. Bahr for his paper *The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer's the "Book of the Duchess"*

Ys alway hooly in my mynde. (1-15)

Chaucer's narrator could also be suffering from a different malady, as mentioned earlier. Froissart's narrator does not mention having idle thoughts, only love-sick thoughts, which he cannot stand to lose for that would also mean losing the thought of a beautiful woman. The emphasis in Froissart's poem is on the narrator's thoughts as a symptom rather than a cause of his condition. Chaucer's narrator, on the other hand, never explicitly mentions the source of his condition as Froissart's does. He states not only that even he does not know what the cause is, and that consequently whoever asks him is wasting their time — "who aske this / Leseth his asking trewely" (32-3). Not only does he claim to not know what he suffers from, but he further states that he will likely never be healed because there is only "phisicien but oon" (39) that is able to cure him. Chaucer obviously does not want to draw attention to the narrator's ailment but rather to his conditions — loss of sleep, idle thoughts, melancholy, and the like. The Physician¹⁸ — that which is able to heal the narrator — could be a woman (providing him with love), God (providing him with inspiration and productive thoughts), Ovid (providing him indirectly with the ability to author his own text), or whatever else the audience wants to believe.

So, in addition to Chaucer's manipulation of the kind of language used to describe the narrator's condition, part of Chaucer's manipulation of Froissart's introduction involves swapping out the explicitly love-sick narrator with one who also cannot sleep, but whose main concern seems to instead be his lack of productive ideas and inability to think in the way he desires to. If Chaucer is changing this aspect of the narrator's persona, it must be because this scenario — having only idle thoughts — is interesting or relevant to Chaucer in some way, or else he could

¹⁸ "phisicien" can mean "doctor of medicine, a physician as distinct from a surgeon", as expected, but also "a healer" in a figurative sense. *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. phisicien (n.)

have left Froissart's cause of malady unchanged. It would seem unlike Chaucer to change something so drastically without good reason. Since the *cause* of the narrator's ailment does not contribute to Chaucer's unique adaptation of Froissart's introduction, as described by Bahr, Chaucer's decision to burden his narrator with the same idle thoughts but not the same love-sickness must serve some other purpose. If not an autobiographical injection of Chaucer's experience writing his first major poem into the work he is writing, then Chaucer's ailment-swapping could serve to prevent his potential patron, who had recently experienced the loss of his wife, from reading about a sadness he also suffers from and being forced to remember the extent of his sorrow. Even if the secrecy of the ailment's origins serves mostly to emotionally protect John of Gaunt, the idea for the "new" ailment which Chaucer bestows on the narrator likely comes from experience, for having his narrator unable to have any *productive* thoughts does not obviously mimic Froissart. The idea for having a narrator focus on his thoughts and symptoms instead of his ailment must have been Chaucer's own.

The narrator, after stating that there is only one "phisicien" that can heal him, immediately diverts attention from anyone attempting to discover the source of his sorrowful condition by stating "but that is don. / Passe we over untill eft; / Our first mater wil not be mot nede be left; / Our first mater is good to kepe" (40-3). This further supports the idea that the narrator does not wish to divulge the cause of his condition to readers — either to prevent his story from triggering a negative emotional response in readers, or to leave the cause of the narrator's condition up to interpretation, or both.

Once in the dream, the narrator does not experience any kind of love-sickness, but the black knight does. If sleeping and dreaming is able to cure, or at least begin to cure the narrator of his condition, then either his condition cannot possibly arise from lovesickness, or the

narrator's psychological condition while awake is simply not preserved in his dream.¹⁹ While the imbuing of a dream character with lovesickness could be an artifact of the subconscious construction of dreams (creating a dream-character from details from Ovid's tale), it could also mean that the narrator is not himself love-sick, but is attempting to understand another's love-sickness.

If we look to an old text by medieval French poet Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300 – April 1377), *Voir dit*, we see Machaut intertwine love and "writer's block", as Chaucer has done, but in a less ambiguous way. The poem's narrator, like *BD*'s narrator, finds himself with an initial condition arising "not from love but from his lack of writing inspiration."²⁰ Whereas *BD*'s narrator finds his cure in an old text, or perhaps in another person's love-sickness, the narrator of *Voir dit* is cured by a lady, despite his sickness not being love-sickness — "The lady who re-inspires him loves him for his literary skill rather than for his person."²¹ If Chaucer drew inspiration from this text in writing *BD*, it was not without consciously modifying it to suit his needs, obscuring the source and remedy of the narrator's condition to allow more interpretations. And even if Chaucer did not come in contact with this particular text, the mere fact that other poets at a similar time were similarly concerned with "writing inspiration" makes it seem even more plausible that Chaucer was concerned with this as well.

¹⁹ Bahr argues in *The Rhetorical Construction of Narrator and Narrative in Chaucer's "Book of the Duchess"* that "Psychological consistency of character is a literary phenomenon that has been only relatively recently valorized", also that "Whatever the poem's drama of character lacks in psychological credibility, it makes up in emotional force with its concurrent resolution of this structural drama", p. 55.

²⁰ "Medieval secular allegory: French and English", p.138.

²¹ *Ibid.*

INSPIRATION FROM OLD TEXTS

When the narrator finally realizes he will not be getting to sleep, he decides the best course of action to take is to read a book, "To rede and drive the night away" (49). The only other activity the narrator can think of doing is playing "ches or tables" (51), and the narrator states that he chooses to read because he thinks it is "better play" (50) than playing either of the aforementioned games. Why the narrator considers reading to be "better play" is unknown — perhaps he is simply bad at chess and tables — but irrelevant. It does not matter if the narrator is fully aware of the inspirational power of old texts prior to reading Ovid, as Ovid's text is able to inspire him regardless. All that ultimately matters is the fact that the text inspires him — provides him with the idea for and motivation to write down his own story.

The first glimpse we get of the ability of old texts — and the act of reading — to subconsciously inspire ideas in the narrator comes in the narrator's description of the book he wishes to read to pass the time (emphasis mine) — "And in this bok were written fables / That clerkes had in olde tyme, / And other poetes, put in ryme / *To rede and for to be in minde*" (52-5). The narrator is at least to some extent aware, at the time of writing this, that what he reads ends up in his *minde* — "the seat or instrument of memory, thought, reason, will, imagination, emotion, etc"²² — in some way or other. The story he reads ends up giving him an idea which enables him to sleep, but the narrator wrongly assumes that the book's inspiration ends here. The narrator's subsequent dream obviously draws heavily from the tale he reads by Ovid — both involve conversations between someone who is grieving and someone attempting to console them — but the narrator remains oblivious of this until after his dream vision. It is experiencing Ovid's story a second time, when writing it out after having previously read it, that enables the

²² *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. *mīnd(e)* (n.(1)) def. 1

narrator to understand how the book had affected him the first time around. However, even without understanding the full impact of the text on his ability to think and write, and to sleep, the narrator is able to benefit from the text's content. I will further discuss the text's subconscious inspiring of the narrator at the conclusion of Ovid's tale.

VOICE & AUTHORITY

There are a few aspects of the narrator's recollection of Ovid's tale worth pointing out. It should first be noted that, although the narrator's first reading of Ovid's tale provided the narrator with the idea necessary to end his sleep deprivation, what we read when we read *Book of the Duchess* are the narrator's **post-dream** thoughts on the story. So, we are seeing not just a recollection of past events, but the narrator's selective inclusion of information as he recollects events of the past for readers. He recalls only what he deems necessary to his poem as a whole, not every single detail of Ovid's tale or every thought the (now non-existent) sleep-deprived version of himself had. In this way the narrator, in addition to presenting Ovid's story to different effect,²³ presents his own story — real events that happened to him — to different effect. Instead of *Book of the Duchess* being about conquering sleep deprivation, which is initially the narrator's main focus, the narrator is able to present the events of the past in an alternate way which suggests an alternative message — his experience with authorship.

This phenomenon of utilizing past voices, voices originating from a source which no longer is capable of producing words of its own accord, plays a major part in *Book of the Duchess*, and will continue to receive treatment throughout the duration of this discussion. So far, we've already witnessed this "voice reanimation" in a few different ways. The narrator most obviously reanimates Ovid's voice, but also reanimates his own voice in speaking as a past-version of himself. The former would obviously not be sufficient to make the narrator an *author*, leaving him instead as one of the other, less authoritative kinds of writer described earlier —

²³ Ovid's tale, as told by Ovid, ends with the King and Queen being transformed into seabirds and reunited in death. Chaucer must have not seen this as a fitting ending to a poem meant for someone who had recently lost their wife and had no chance of such a reunion in the afterlife. Chaucer also alters the husband's attitude towards his wife, which is similarly important given his audience: "Ovid's Ceyx seems rather boorish, expressing no love for his wife and upbraiding her for "failing" to save him with her prayers. In Chaucer's version on the other hand, Sey's love for his wife is preminent. He rarely seems able to say something that bears on his death without softening it with some endearment" (Bahr, 46).

scribe, compiler, or commentator. However, in combination with the narrator's original voice — made up of both the narrator's present and past voices — the narrator is able to benefit from the reanimation of famous author's voices while simultaneously claiming his own status to be that of *author*.

This blending of voices benefits Chaucer in a few ways. Ovid's tale was well-known so including it at the start would have piqued readers' interest in the tale, and consequently Chaucer's poem as a whole. People enjoy having stories they are familiar with pop up in other stories (this is even true today), and if a reader is interested enough to read through the retelling of Ovid's tale, they will undoubtedly be invested enough in the poem to finish reading.²⁴

Chaucer's inclusion, and manipulation, of Ovid's voice more importantly gives Chaucer's poem authority. By utilizing Ovid's tale, Chaucer implicitly declares *Ovid* to be authoritative and worth reading. Chaucer then reuses the ideas presented in Ovid's tale in the dream vision that follows, giving his *own* poem authority due to its similarity to Ovid's work. Whereas an author must usually depend on their audience to determine whether they are authoritative or not, Chaucer does not wait for any audience to grant him authority and endows his own work with

²⁴ As a slight digression, but to elucidate the effectiveness of this strategy, I will compare Chaucer to modern amateur musicians, as Chaucer's inclusion of a popular work in his own original text is strikingly similar to a modern amateur musician's inclusion of popular songs in their song-repertoire. The same circularity encountered by writers is encountered by musicians as well — to be worthy of being listened to a musician must be authoritative, and to be authoritative a musician must be listened to. It is quite common for amateur musicians to cover — create their own renditions of — popular songs when first getting started, in an attempt to get noticed. These renditions, like Chaucer's retelling of Ovid's tale, are often not exactly like the original, but are similar enough to be recognized and enjoyed by anyone who enjoys the original version. While some musicians never move past this stage of playing "authoritative" songs, and many never gain any popularity, there are some who gain an audience by covering popular songs, and then transition into sharing original songs. Once they have amassed an audience using previous musicians' songs, they are able to create and share original songs, since their audience at this point is already interested in them. If a musician begins by playing original songs only, they will have a much more difficult time gaining popularity. They will have to fabricate their own authority, something Chaucer does not see as being particularly viable. As an example, Justin Bieber was "discovered" via YouTube from his renditions of already-popular songs. Now he performs his own, original (as original as possible, that is) songs.

authority, by reanimating the voice of a dead, authoritative author.²⁵ Ovid is not alive to defend his own work and explain that Chaucer manipulated the meaning of his story. Dead authors are incapable of producing new content, except when living authors such as Chaucer reanimate their voices and enable them to. It is this continual process of building off of the work of past authors — saying things which are very similar to what's already been said but which differ in some significant way — which Chaucer realizes is the key to be relevant and gain authority. If an author too closely mimics past authors and does not sufficiently depart from past tradition, he runs the risk of being a commentator, compiler, or scribe, and not an author at all. Similarly, if an author attempts to stray too far from literary tradition, they will not be able to gain any traction. They will not inherit any authority, as Chaucer's work does, by containing or being similar to a work which already possesses authority, and will never be able to, due to the circular nature of authority described earlier. If a work does not have any authority to begin with, it will not be read, and if a work is not read, it will not gain any authority.

Chaucer's utilization of past authoritative voices is particularly interesting and unique because he *manipulates* his sources. He does so subtly enough, however, that his manipulations are not made obvious to readers. This creates the illusion that Ovid (or Froissart, etc) has said something which Chaucer then restates in his own words, making Chaucer's words worth

²⁵ Chaucer's attempt to gain authority while alive would otherwise be futile, as *auctorite* was usually bestowed only upon an author once they were deceased. A common tendency at the time, explaining this phenomenon, was to "accept improbable attributions of currently popular works to older and respected writers" (Minnis, p. 11). This was likely due to a commonly held view that past authors possessed "greater mental powers" or "may have applied themselves more diligently to study" (ibid, p. 12). And so, unless one subverts the system as Chaucer attempts to do, "it would seem that the only good *auctor* was a dead one" (ibid, p. 12).

Chaucer draws inspiration from other sources and authors: "The *Book of the Duchess*, the earliest of [Chaucer's] dream poems, derives much of its setting and circumstances from Froissart's *Paradis d'amours* (*Paradise of Love*); the Ceyx and Alcyone episode from Machaut's rewriting of Ovid in the *Dit de la fontaine amoureuse*; the dreamer-narrator's overhearing of the Black Knight's complaint from Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* (*Judgement of the King of Bohemia*); and the themes of the complaint from Machaut's *Remede de fortune* (*Remedy against Fortune*)" ("Medieval secular allegory: French and English", p.142).

reading. If Ovid says *A*, and Chaucer also says *A*, then Chaucer must also be worth reading and believing. In reality, the ideas of past authors have not so exactly matched Chaucer's ideas in *BD*. Chaucer utilizes other authors' voices in *BD*, and relies on his audience believing the voices originate from their original sources, not from an imitator. As long as the illusion is not broken, Chaucer's work will be authoritative and worth reading.

If we do not see the narrator as being a completely accurate representation of Chaucer himself,²⁶ then we can also see Chaucer as (re)animating the voice of a fictional character — someone who has never had a voice of his own. It is because the "narrator" is fictional, and thus has no voice of his own prior to Chaucer writing *BD*, Chaucer is able to claim the narrator's voice as his own — the narrator either represents Chaucer in some way or he does not, but the narrator certainly does not belong to another author, otherwise Chaucer would not be an *author*.²⁷

So, the narrator's voice necessarily originates from Chaucer, as there is no other source it could possibly originate from. The narrator's thoughts and state of mind do not necessarily need to reflect Chaucer's own thoughts or state of mind, but Chaucer is responsible for giving the narrator a voice. The narrator, and by extension Chaucer, cannot be seen as being the author of Ovid's tale, however, as Ovid actually existed at some point in time and had a voice of his own. For this reason Chaucer can only reanimate Ovid's voice for the sake of supporting his own voice, or voices. Chaucer, in reanimating Ovid's voice, is restricted to saying that which Ovid

²⁶ A.C. Spearing indicates that fourteenth-century convention often had a narrator representing the author "in some sense", but who was "characterized as naive and socially inferior" (Spearing, 68). The dreamer, on the other hand, is less likely to represent Chaucer in any way. G.L. Kittredge explains that the dreamer is too stupid to be Chaucer: "This childlike Dreamer, who never reasons, but only feels and gets impressions, who never knows what anything means until he is told in the plainest language, is not Geoffrey Chaucer, the humorist and man of the world. He is a creature of the imagination, and his childlikeness is part of his dramatic character" (*Chaucer and His Poetry*, pp. 48, 50).

²⁷ Because being an *author* required one to introduce their own content into a text alongside the work of others. See the description of what makes an author an author on pp. 5, 6

himself *could* have said, as otherwise the illusion that Ovid himself is speaking will be broken. This effectively reveals Chaucer to be an imitator, pretending to *be* Ovid rather than only speaking on Ovid's behalf. When it comes to the narrator, however, Chaucer can have the narrator say anything he wants. It is through this intermingling of the narrator's unrestricted (non-authoritative) voice and other, restricted (authoritative) voices that Chaucer must attempt to construct a text, because doing so will provide his work with the authority of the latter voices.

INSPIRATION COMES TO THOSE WHO DO NOT *CONSCIOUSLY* SEEK IT

The Queen in Ovid's tale initially has a mental state similar to that of the narrator — "She longed so after the king / That certes it were a pitous thing / To telle her hertely sorowful lif / That she had, this noble wif" (83-6). Unlike the narrator, however, the Queen already knows how to at least attempt to remedy her sorrowful condition. Since she cannot possibly know the state of her husband who is away at sea without help, and after seeking assistance from man — "Anon she sent both eest and west / To seke him, but they founde nought" (88-9) — she realizes her help must come from divine sources if it is to come at all. She calls upon the goddess Juno to send her a dream revealing the fate of her husband. Contrasting the Queen's plan of action with the narrator's, we see that the narrator has no plan of action. Only a few lines after we hear of her distressed state, the Queen sends out men to search for her husband, but it takes the narrator over forty lines to admit defeat and decide to read a book, not to remedy his condition, but only to "drive the night away" (49). Whether the narrator suffers from not knowing how to get started writing a book of his own, lovesickness, or some other illness, his lack of hope is apparent. The narrator acknowledges that he feels bad, but fails to consider there may be a way for him to get better. Creative ideas often do not come to those who simply sit still and try to conjure up ideas out of thin air, but it is easy to see why anyone getting started in a creative field can have trouble realizing this — it is somewhat counter-intuitive to realize ideas can come to one when focused on other tasks.

The narrator is only able to initiate the creative process when he stops thinking about it, when he finally ceases trying to have conscious control over his unconscious mind (the part of the mind responsible for the having thoughts and ideas). There is a point in the creative process where the conscious mind must take over, but this necessarily must come after the unconscious

mind does its thing. It is uncertain whether the narrator realizes this, but Chaucer certainly does, as *BD* contains the *entire* creative process from start to finish — from having trouble getting started, to finding inspiration and motivation from outside sources, to the final act of writing something new. Ferster points out a particular passage which encapsulates all stages of reading — "reading, responding, remembering, and then writing one's own version" (9):

Such sorowe this lady to her tok
 That trewly I, that made this book,
 Had such pittee and such rowthe
 To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe,
 I ferde the worse al the morwe
 Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe. (95-100)

All that is left at this point is for a reader to read what Chaucer has written, which we have done, and which starts the reading-interpreting-writing cycle anew.

The Queen wishes to have a certain dream, but the narrator wishes only to sleep. He does not, in his mimicking of the queen's request for a dream, request a *specific* dream. He asks only that the gods — not a singular god, as in the Queen's case — "make me slepe and have some reste" (245). Both the Queen and the narrator require sleep to be cured, but the Queen requires a specific dream once asleep, whereas the narrator would be fine with any dream he ends up having, as his focus is not on his dream's content at all, at first. However, the narrator, like the Queen, ends up having a dream which benefits him. His dream inspires him to write. He is finally able to author a text after sleeping and dreaming, and the queen is finally able to be at peace (to some extent) after sleeping and dreaming.

It is that it is only when the narrator awakens after having had a text-inspired dream that

he is able to recognize the extent to which he received inspiration from Ovid's tale. The narrator falls asleep on the book, which means that he also wakes up on his book. Despite losing consciousness and regaining it in the same physical position, it is not until his dream concludes and he sees the book again that he is able to make the connection. He cannot see the book while he is in his dream, so must necessarily wake up in order to realize the connection between the book and his dream. This is not to say that Ovid's tale is responsible for the whole of the narrator's dream, just that it was the *cause* — contributing to the narrator's subconscious in such a way as to result in the creation of an idea. As easy as it would be for the narrator to attribute the entire dream's content to Ovid's tale, he would be wrong to do so, as there are obviously other texts at work in creating his dream vision. For one, he awakens in his dream in a room depicting two non-Ovidian stories. Also the narrator (or Chaucer, if you prefer) obviously takes inspiration from Froissart and other authors, as he utilizes manipulated versions of conventions and devices in writing his own text — something which could not have occurred without his complete awareness of this.

The dream world can be seen as representing an individual's unconscious mind, where ideas drawn from different sources interact with each other and form new ideas without an individual's awareness. Chaucer was well aware of the contemporary understanding of dreams and was interested in literal dreams, as well as dreams as a literary device.²⁸ The text enters the narrator's mind, interacts subconsciously in some way with what is already in his mind (in the dream-space), before leaving the narrator's mind, bundled up with many other ideas, in the form

²⁸ "Chaucer, more than any other dream-poet known to me, was interested in dreams as they really are. [...] In looking at Chaucer's dream-poems, we shall see again and again that he is making use of his understanding of real dreams, in producing works which are dreamlike, not only in superficial details, but in matters of method and structure" (p. 49). For example, speaking of the narrator's reading leading to sleep, Spearing claims that Chaucer's "major innovation in the tradition of medieval dream-poetry was to identify this point of contact in the experiences of the previous day with the reading of a book" (p. 52).

of his "original" poem.

Ideas, by nature, arise seemingly instantly in one's mind. At one point in time, one can be without any ideas, and then, provoked by some event (reading a book, in the narrator's case), one has an idea. The transition — how exactly some thing or event has triggered the creation of an idea in one's mind — is mysterious. It occurs subconsciously, without an individual's complete awareness. One may be *partially* aware how some event has inspired an idea, but one can never know the full extent to which any particular event has contributed to the generation of an idea. This is reflected in the narrator's dream-room, which depicts the history of Troy and the *Romance of the Rose* — the two texts which undoubtedly contributed in some way to his dream, but which he never consciously recognizes as being integral to his inspiration. The narrator knows that reading the tale of Ceyx and Alcione was an integral part of his subsequent inspiration, but he does not explicitly recognize that it was not the reading alone which inspires him. It is the conglomeration of past and present experiences which have cooperatively built his dream. The narrator may not be aware of this, but Chaucer certainly is. And A.C. Spearing would agree: "I believe that one of Chaucer's greatest achievements in his early poems was to make use in consciously contrived works of literature of the creative and constructive methods employed by the unconscious mind to make dreams" (*Medieval Dream Poetry*, 62).²⁹ If we look at the narrator's mind only while he is *conscious* — omitting the period of time where he is unconscious during his dream — then we can see the true instantaneousness of the narrator's inspiration. He is at first idealess and not doing any writing of his own, but upon waking is

²⁹ And so would Freud. Spearing explains that "Freud frequently calls attention to the similarity between the 'dream work' and the methods by which literature shapes experience, and he points out in particular that, just as dreams demand a multiple interpretation if they are to be fully understood, so 'all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation'" (p. 62). Freud's quotation comes from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.266

inspired and motivated to write — it appears that no conscious effort went into generating a creative idea.

VOICE IMITATION

After requesting the goddess Juno send her a dream of her husband, the Queen immediately falls asleep. Her husband's fate is then revealed to her in a peculiar way — a god, Morpheus, "creeps" into her husband's dead body and speaks to her disguised as her husband. Morpheus is told by one of Juno's messengers to speak *as though he were Ceyx*, so that the Queen does not realize that her husband's body is being reanimated without its original voice intact. The Queen's original message, to be relayed by a messenger to Morpheus, is as follows (emphasis mine):

"Go faste into the Grete Se,
 And byd hym that, on alle thyng,
 He take up Seys body the kyng,
 That lyeth ful pale and nothyng rody.
 Bid hym *crepe into the body*
 And doo hit good to Alcione
 The quene, ther she lyeth allone,
 And shewe hir shortly, hit ys no nay,
 How hit was dreynt thys other day;
And do the body speke ryght so,
Ryght as hyt was woned to doo
The whiles that hit was alyve." (140-51)

We have two kinds of voice imitation occurring in close proximity here: Juno's messenger speaks *on behalf of Juno* to a distant audience (Morpheus), and Morpheus speaks *as*

King Ceyx to a distant audience (the Queen). Obviously if Juno could have spoken directly to Morpheus she would have, but they are physically separated so Juno entrusts a messenger to relay her message accurately, expecting Morpheus to hear the messenger's words as her own. Chaucer entangles these two forms of voice imitation. He portrays himself as someone who is only acting as Ovid's messenger, but alters the meaning of Ovid's words. In this way he gives the impression that Ovid is responsible for the message when it is Chaucer himself who is speaking while disguised in Ovid's body.

Reminding ourselves of what Bahr says about King Ceyx in Ovid's original tale, that he is cold and harsh, we can also see Morpheus as potentially being the one responsible for manipulating the King's voice, making it comforting and emotional instead. The emphasis on Juno's request to Morpheus to make Ceyx's voice speak "as hyt was woned to doo" (150) serves then to convince readers that Morpheus will speak only in such a manner that the King would. For the Queen to realize that the voice she is hearing is not her husband's, despite coming from the King's mouth, would ruin the effectiveness of Morpheus's consolation. Likewise, for readers to realize that Morpheus does not speak as the King does would ruin the poem. The illusion of Chaucer's authority, deriving from the fact that his dream complements Ovid's tale, would be ruined if Chaucer's manipulations of Ovid were to be noticed. To present a poem to John of Gaunt containing a tale by Ovid which contains an unlikable husband would be unthinkable.

So, Chaucer manipulates Ovid's tale in a few ways. He causes Morpheus to manipulate the King's voice to make it more empathetic, and he has his narrator manipulate Ovid's voice by cutting Ovid's tale short in order to present a more acceptable ending than that of the original, unaltered tale. Both of these manipulations, beyond affecting how the retelling of Ovid's tale will be read, also affect how *BD* will be read. Chaucer manipulates Ovid's tale without the audience's

awareness, and this lends authority to the narrator's dream and to *BD* as a whole, due to the dream's restating of themes presented by an authoritative author. Chaucer, not Ovid, is the authoritative author because he "creeps" into Ovid's body and speaks his own words as Ovid. To restate this in terms of "inspiration" as we defined it earlier, Ovid *breathes life into* Chaucer when Chaucer reads Ovid's text and becomes motivated to write, and then Chaucer proceeds to literally *breathe life into* Ovid by reanimating Ovid's voice. This particularly unique situation involves not only an old text inspiring an author, but also an author utilizing, in their new text, the source text responsible for providing that inspiration. Ovid gained authority from his own works, and Chaucer utilizes Ovid's already-existing authority in order to provide himself with authority, rather than relying on his readers to do so posthumously, if at all.

DIVINE INSPIRATION, OR NOT

After the narrator's recounting of Ovid's tale we learn that he believes he would have actually died had he not read the tale, the follow up to his earlier amazement at not having died yet: "I had be dolven everydel / And ded, ryght thurgh defaute of slep, / Yif I ne had red and take kep / of this tale next before" (222-25). The narrator attributes the tale's healing power to its teaching him of a goddess of sleep. Despite invoking Juno in exactly the same way as the queen, the narrator takes an alternative approach.

The narrator's invocation of the goddess of sleep reveals Chaucer's understanding of the major source of medieval *auctoritas*. Whereas the Scripture was granted *auctoritas* by default, since its authors were considered to be divinely inspired, Chaucer's text will obviously not benefit from this kind of authority. Chaucer's invocation of a non-Christian goddess, then, comically attempts to subvert the system and grant *BD* its own divine authority. The comicality derives from the fact that only the Christian god can imbue a text with authority but Chaucer has the narrator invoke a non-Christian god anyway, as different gods in the past once had this authority-granting capability. Also contributing to this scene's comicality, or working to downplay the inclusion of non-Christian gods in his text, the narrator stumbles through his invocation: "I wolde yive thilke Morpheus, / Or hys goddess, dame Juno, / or som wight elles, I ne roghte who" (242-43). While amusing, however, the most relevant aspect of this invocation to my arguments is its authority.

Chaucer has *BD's* narrator find inspiration from a pagan god, intermingling divine and non-divine inspiration. The Christian god was seen as the cause of a Scriptural *auctor's* writing, and this caused the Bible to be seen as inherently authoritative. For Chaucer to have his narrator

invoke pagan gods suggests a divine source of inspiration, but since only the Christian god could grant a text with authority, the inclusion of these pagans gods places Chaucer's text somewhere between divine (and authoritative) and secular (and having to earn its authority from its audience). Conceptions were changing in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries however, lending to a more open view to pagan literature: "In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, all kinds of *auctores*, Whether Christian or pagan, were being examined in terms of both moral and literary activity."³⁰

So, Chaucer's inclusion of pagan gods in his story does not necessarily indicate that Chaucer believes ideas can come from pagan gods, but it does seem to preclude his ideas from originating from the Christian god. The narrator's dream need not be seen as originating from the pagan gods the narrator calls upon. It is more likely that one reads *BD* and perceives the source of the narrator's dream as being his own mind, in which Ovid's tale now resides. This seems especially likely given Chaucer's unique inclusion in the poem of the narrator's waking-life experiences which are responsible for his dream, suggesting that the narrator's dream arises from thoughts already in his head and not from a divine source.

³⁰ Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 112-13

THE DREAM'S SETTING

The narrator (henceforth called "the dreamer" while dreaming³¹) wakes in a room constructed from his various inspirations, but soon departs this room for a wide-open dream world not dependent on authors of the past. The narrator wakes up in an environment created by his subconscious, which includes details of Ovid's tale and other stories he has read. There are small birds singing the most beautiful song imaginable, the temperature is perfect, the sun's beams shine through glass windows that stunningly depict the entire history of Troy, and the walls contain both the text and gloss of *Romance of the Rose*. It is a wonder the narrator ever leaves this room, and but for the hunting horn he hears, he might not have. Prior to hearing the hunting horn he only lays in bed admiring the room, and it is this external stimulus which drives him to rise up, mount his horse (which has seemingly appeared out of nowhere), and ride out in search of the hunters. This scene strikes me as depicting any author's necessary departure from "old" texts. Anyone who wishes to create something of their own must at some point stop admiring the great work that has already been done, and also, anyone writing their own text must at some point introduce their own, original content, otherwise they are only copying. This scene mirrors the narrator's book as a whole — his book opens with Ovid's famous tale but then leaves this famous author's text behind in order to present the reader with original content unique to Chaucer's text.

³¹ This distinction is worth making because the dreamer behaves differently than the narrator. In Spearing's *Medieval Dream Poetry*, he points out that the numerous commentators' points of view on the dreamer's point of view, how some think he is dull, others believe he is tactful, etc. The point remains however, that the dreamer's point of view appears to be different than the narrator's. Spearing's rationalizes these point of view problems (inconsistencies): "Perhaps the situation for Chaucer about 1370 was that, while the dream-poem exerted a distinct pull towards a 'personal, dramatic point of view', it did not yet demand that such a point of view should be maintained with complete consistency" (p. 69).

THE SUBCONSCIOUS HUNT

Now that the dreamer "exists" in the subconscious realm, he is capable of actively searching for ideas to overcome his writer's block. The dreamer can, by observing the contents of his dream, see that which has influenced him while awake, granted his dream is one of that allows interpretation and is not of divine origin. While awake he does not possess the ability to probe his consciousness, and this leaves his attempts to force an idea from himself likely do more harm than good, but once he is asleep his mind reveals his influences to him without much effort on the his (the dreamer's) behalf.

The dreamer, after analyzing the obvious influences on his mind present in the construction of the room he is in, hears a hunting horn outside. The dreamer soon joins them in their hunt for a "hert." The obvious interpretation here of "hert" is "a male of the red deer",³² but "hert" can also mean "The conscious self, the true self as opposed to the outward persona; the center of psychic and sensitive functions"³³ or "The center or seat of human emotion, love, etc."³⁴ Looking at this hunt less literally, as representing something going on in the dreamer's mind, the "hert" being hunted can quite possibly represent John of Gaunt's "heart", which the dreamer is seeking to understand. Our idea-less narrator, now *consciously* inside his own head, is able to effectively seek out ideas. The awake-narrator must wait for the subconscious to do its thing and provide him with ideas, but the dreamer can actively seek out ideas — the "physical" world surrounding the dreamer is the narrator's "mental" world, and while one cannot easily navigate one's own subconscious, the conversion of the mental into the physical enables the dreamer to do just that.

³² *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. mīnd(e (n.(1)) (n.) def. 1

³³ *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. herte (n.) def. 2a

³⁴ *The Middle English Dictionary* s. v. herte (n.) def. 3a

The dreamer eventually abandons the hunters at the edge of a forest when the hunters lose track of the deer at the edge of a forest. At this point, a whelp appears and watches the dreamer, before fleeing into the forest. After following the whelp for a bit while admiring the nature around him, the dreamer finds himself in the presence of "many an hert and many a hynde [female deer]" (427). There are so many creatures here that their number is so large as to be uncountable. At last, the creatures clear out, and all that remains is a man dressed in all black. This is the "hert" — the source of human emotion and love — that the dreamer is searching for.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE DREAMER AND THE NARRATOR

In the queen's dream, the entity responsible for reanimating her dead husband is a god, but in the narrator's dream, the narrator's own mind is responsible for animating the black knight who speaks with the dreamer.³⁵ One can imagine that until the dreamer interacts with the black knight, that lamenting, subconscious construction of the narrator's mind, he never does anything but sing his sorrowful lays to nobody in particular. The first portion of the lay details quite literally the knight's situation:

"I have of sorwe so gret won
That joye gete I never non,
Now that I see my lady bryght,
Which I have loved with al my myght,
Is fro me ded and ys agoon." (475-79).

It is the dreamer's entering into the knight's presence that enables the knight's words to be heard, and then his probing questions that cause the knight to reveal additional information about his situation. The narrator while awake is incapable of experiencing his subconscious mind in such an active and aware manner. Once dreaming however, he is able to obtain a better understanding of John of Gaunt's situation by questioning the knight, who should be seen as no more than his mind's representation of John of Gaunt, not the actual John of Gaunt, who cannot possibly exist in the narrator's dream.

At this point it will be worthwhile to present some current research on John of Gaunt and his connection with the grieving Black Knight of the narrator's dream. Phillipa Hardman posits that there is "little real dispute with the assumption that the personae of the Man in Black and the

³⁵ Changing the source of the dream's contents from one of divine origin to the dreamer's own mind likely arises from Chaucer's understanding of physical origins of dreams, which I have mentioned earlier.

lady White are related in some way to the historical persons of John of Gaunt and Blanche of Lancaster; the question is, in what way?"³⁶ Hardman concludes that *BD* was meant to function as a monument to Blanche of Lancaster more so than as a consolation for John of Gaunt: "In this sense, then, I would argue that the poem functions as a verbal equivalent of the tomb erected by John of Gaunt as a memorial to Blanche and to his own grief."³⁷ Even if one believes *BD* was not meant to console John of Gaunt, however, voice imitation is still present and of great importance to the poem.

BD's composition date, however, potentially complicates the correspondence between John of Gaunt and the black knight. Michael Foster³⁸ explains that *BD* was likely written several years after the death of John of Gaunt's wife, due to the fact that Chaucer was likely not close enough to John of Gaunt prior to John of Gaunt's subsequent relationship with Chaucer's sister-in-law Katherine Swynford. He argues, however, that this late composition date should not be seen as affecting the consolatory intent of the poem, and that John of Gaunt would still have been a member of Chaucer's intended audience, even this long after Blanche's death:

If we maintain that *Book of the Duchess* was written at least partially for John of Gaunt, Chaucer's anticipation of the nobleman's reaction is a part of the fabric of the poem. Gaunt publicly mourned Blanche's death for the rest of his life, even after marrying Katherine Swynford over 20 years after their relationship had begun in January 1396, so we can expect *Book of the Duchess* to have elicited thoughts of Gaunt's feelings toward Blanche while expressing, or creating, an emotional bond between the nobleman and poet

³⁶ "The *Book of the Duchess* as a Memorial Monument", 1994, p. 205

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

³⁸ "On Dating the *Duchess*: The Personal and Social Context of the 'Book of the Duchess'", 2008

regardless of when it was written.³⁹

Even though Blanche of Lancaster died before Chaucer would have had any significant relationship with John of Gaunt, his writing about Blanche's death is not out of place, as John of Gaunt would have mourned her up to and through the time when Chaucer composed *Book of the Duchess*. More importantly, this maintains that the black knight can be seen as representing John of Gaunt.

The distinction, that the black knight represents the narrator's representation of John of Gaunt and not John of Gaunt as he objectively is, is important because Chaucer cannot know exactly how John of Gaunt feels from the way John may appear in real life. The narrator (or the narrator's subconscious mind to be more precise) breathes life into John of Gaunt, rendering the black knight similar enough to John of Gaunt to be seen as representing him, but in an ambiguous enough manner so that the black knight can also be seen as someone other than John of Gaunt. This ambiguity helps prevent Chaucer from offending a social superior by including him in his poem, if John of Gaunt ends up not identifying strongly with the black knight. The narrator's mind gives John of Gaunt a voice in his dream, just as Chaucer's gives Ovid a voice in his poem.

By questioning a *representation* of John of Gaunt in his dream with the intention of understanding the extent of John's feelings, however, the dreamer can at least get closer to a more accurate understanding, without possibly offending the actual John of Gaunt. The dreamer and narrator — who both originate from the same mind — are then engaging in a kind of discussion where the dreamer asks questions and the black knight (a figment of the narrator's

³⁹ "On Dating the Duchess", p. 189

imagination) responds how the narrator *imagines* John of Gaunt would. It makes sense then for the dreamer to be, or act, ignorant.⁴⁰ The dreamer is only able to get the black knight to open up about his situation as much as he does because of his incessant and ingenuous questioning. It would do the dreamer no good to be content with his understanding of the black knight's situation after hearing only the knight's lay — he would learn nothing.

Why does the narrator never state or imply (for the reader or otherwise), in his recording of his experience, that he had known the knight's wife had died and was simply feigning ignorance to get the knight to open up more? The most obvious reason Chaucer does not have his narrator do this would be the implications doing so would have on Chaucer's audience. To have the narrator state or even just imply that he knows how the black knight — who could represent John of Gaunt — feels would be disrespectful to one of Chaucer's social superiors. It would also cut the narrator's story short and probably render it not worth telling.

The dreamer, even if he happens to know, in general, how the black knight must feel, is aware that he can obtain a greater understanding of the man's grief by having a discussion with him about his sorrow. The dreamer's understanding benefits the most from his questioning technique — asking the grieving knight questions carefully to draw out additional information, but without eliciting a completely literal response at first.

⁴⁰ Spearing explains this best in explaining that "delivering [*BD*] must have been a public act. It would not do for Chaucer to lecture his noble patron on what his attitude should be towards his wife's death, still less to promise a heavenly reunion — for all we know, Gaunt may have been planning his second marriage by the time the poem was read. It would be better to contrive some way in which Gaunt himself would be the central figure of the poem, noble and glamorous in the depth of his grief, and the dead lady would live on only in his memory" (*Medieval Dream Poetry*, p. 70).

FIGURATIVE AND LITERAL LANGUAGE

The black knight tells multiple, increasingly literal stories to the dreamer, who does not appear to understand the magnitude of the knight's situation until the knight's final, completely literal revelation that his wife is dead. With each new story from the black knight, the dreamer learns more about the black knight, however. One should keep in mind that the black knight's voice in the dream comes not from John of Gaunt or anyone other than the narrator himself, even though the narrator does not consciously control the black knight. Previously we experienced two other kinds of voice imitation — speaking *on someone's behalf* and speaking *as someone* — but this kind of voice imitation is different. It combines the aforementioned kinds of voice imitation — is the black knight meant to speak on John of Gaunt's behalf or *as* John of Gaunt? — by obscuring the source of the black knight's voice. The voice imitation is represented as occurring subconsciously, in a dream, so whether the knight's voice originates from the narrator himself or elsewhere cannot be determined with certainty.

Understanding that this kind of voice imitation occurs is important to the creative process. Chaucer is aware, as discussed earlier, that multiple sources contribute to a creative thought, not only one, and this idea of inspiration manifests itself physically in the narrator's dream. Chaucer seems somewhat hesitant to claim himself an *auctor* of original content, as a good portion of what he writes can be traced back to an external source. If even much of what is in the narrator's head is unoriginal, what chance does the narrator have of ever writing anything original?

Originality, however, as Chaucer realizes it, is not the creation of something entirely new, but rather the creation of something relatively new *from* that which is old. One must depart far enough from the old in order to create something new (and be an *auctor*), of course, and the

dreamer's departure from the heavily inspired room represents this necessary departure from old texts. This departure from the old does not render old content insignificant, for it is the old which is responsible for the new, in the never-ending creation of new content from old. Acknowledging one's inspirations is important of course, even in modern times, but often one will not be able to cite all their inspirations even if they really wanted to — there is no way of knowing the extent of one's inspiration, which experiences contributed to the generation of an idea or ideas. This has already been mentioned, but is worth mentioning because it is integral to *BD*'s representation of the creative process.

Prior to hearing the knight's first story, the narrator describes the black knight as best he can. This description is based solely on the knight's appearance, as the dreamer does not yet have any understanding of what is going on in the knight's mind. He describes the knight as being "faynte"(488) and "pale"(498) and lacking spirit, and then speculates that the knight does not hear him because he is lost in his own thoughts. The dreamer will need to hear more from the knight himself in order to learn more about the knight's condition.

The black knight's first story describes game of chess played by the knight against Fortune. In the game of chess, the knight loses his queen, and this causes the knight to give up on playing the game — "And when I sawgh my fers [queen] awaye, / Allas, I kouthe no lenger playe, / But seyde, 'Farewel, swete, ywys, / And farewel al that ever ther ys!'" (655-58). From this story, the dreamer learns that the knight believes Fortune to be unfair and malicious — "To lyen, for that ys hyr nature; / Withoute feyth, lawe, or mesure / She ys fals" (631-33). The black knight feels *cheated* and *hopeless*. The dreamer did not know this about the knight prior to this story.

The dreamer inquires why the knight does not do as Socrates does and be indifferent to

fortune, an inquiry that seems to probe further at the black knight's newly revealed feelings of being cheated and hopeless. When the black knight denies being able to do this, the dreamer makes references to many historic literary figures who have similarly lost someone they loved to Fortune and reacted poorly, either by killing those around them or themselves. The dreamer sees the black knight's sorrow as having the potential to negatively affect his judgement and wishes to understand more about the knight's inability to move on. The dreamer does not seem interested at this point in hearing the knight reveal that his wife is dead in literal language, especially because the dreamer probably already knows this from the knight's initial song, but wants to continue the discourse for as long as possible without the knight inevitably ending it by admitting outright that his wife is dead. The black knight is shocked that the dreamer supposedly does not understand that his wife is dead — "Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest" (743) — but reluctantly agrees to tell another story if the dreamer does his best to understand it this time — "I telle the upon a condicioun / That thou shalt hooly, with al thy wyt, / Doo thyn entent to herkene hit" (750-52).

The black knight's second story is more literal, describing a situation where he falls in love with a lady at an event, explaining how she is the most beautiful woman to ever have lived, through a series of comparisons and other uses of figurative language that lasts over two-hundred lines. The dreamer then asks to hear more about the knight's first contact with her — "the manere / To hire which was your first speche" (1130-31) — and whether she believed the knight truly loved her or not at first. The knight is at first offended, repeating the lines spoken at the conclusion of the last tale — "thow nost what thow menest" (1137). The dreamer ignores the fact that the knight's wife is dead, and inquires whether the lady left the knight because of something the knight did wrong or because she did not love him. Not only does getting the knight thinking

about his love help the dreamer understand it more fully, it also brings the knight's love back into the knight's mind. This would function therapeutically for the knight, causing him to reflect on the love he shared with his wife, who loved him back. Neither of them is to blame for their loss of love, which is not always the case when one lover "leaves" another, so the knight should be thankful for this at least.

The knight then begins to explain how neither he nor his lady is to blame. He loved her with all his heart from the start — "On hir was al my love leyd" (1146) — and she would eventually come to love him as well, making them a perfect couple: "Oure hertes wern so evene a payre / That never nas that oon contrayre / To that other for no woo" (1289-91). At first however, the lady rejects the knight's advances. He composes songs for her, but when he finally gets the courage to perform them for her, she rejects his request for her to be his lady. After a sorrowful year passes, the knight decides to explain his love for the lady to her including his great woe. This causes the lady to at last understand that the knight "ne wilned thyng but god, / And worship, and to kepe hir name / Over alle thynges" (1262-64). The knight and lady then lived together happily — "And thus we lyved ful many a yere / So wel I kan nat telle how" (1296-97).

From this last story, the dreamer is able to learn, as the lady also does at one point, the extent of the knight's love for her. The lady does not know to what extent the knight loves her until he explains his sorrow resulting from his lack of requited love, and the dreamer does not know the extent either until the knight explains his sorrow in a way not involving figurative language. The knight's songs were incapable of expressing his love for the lady in the same way that describing his sorrow were. In a similar way, the knight's literal description of the development of his relationship expresses the magnitude of the knight's requited love in a way

his figurative chess story cannot. So, while literal language was useful in some cases, namely *after* the knight had told his figurative stories, it is at other times ineffective. When the knight sings that he is sad because his wife died, in his song, the magnitude of the knight's emotional response is lost. Figurative language can better capture human emotions, but in doing so introduces ambiguity into a text. Both literal and figurative language have their uses, and Chaucer consciously uses both to his advantage in *BD*.

Now that the dreamer has gotten to the heart of the issue (and remember, there is a hunt for a "hert" going on elsewhere), the dreamer is able to end the conversation by spurring the knight on to finally speak in the most literal way possible. The dreamer asks "where is she now?" (1298), which can only be seen as an attempt at prying this out of the knight, since the dreamer has already learned that the knight and lady's love was mutual, and that neither of them did anything wrong to the other. After pleading "Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest" (1305) for a third and final time, the knight exclaims "She ys ded!" (1309). At this time, a horn is heard signalling the hunt for the "hert" — since the dreamer has learned all he can from the knight at this point — and the knight rides off towards a castle. The dreamer hears the castle bell twelve times, before waking in his bed.⁴¹ In his hands is the book he had read before sleeping — "Of Alcione and Seys the kyng, / And of the goddes of slepyng" (1327-28).

The narrator then directly expresses his interest in his dream — "Thys ys so queynt a sweven [dream]" (1330) and indirectly expresses his motivation in his stating he wishes to record his dream not in prose, which would be easier, but in "ryme" (1332). The narrator is inspired to write. At the start of the poem, if you remember, the narrator mentions his sickness, but then, supposedly to divert attention from his condition, says "but that is don" (40) before he then

⁴¹ This is another instance of Chaucer's awareness of the functioning of dreams. He connects stimuli from the waking world with stimuli in a dream.

returns to describing his experience of reading Ovid late at night. Looking now at the poem's concluding line — "This was my sweven; now hit ys doon"(1334) — we see the same line previously used to divert attention from his incurable ailment signaling the conclusion of the writing process. Perhaps, however, the initial "but that is don" renders the narrator's ailment less ambiguous than it had seemed. Instead of withholding information from readers, it can be seen as indicating that the narrator has been, at the time of recording these past events, healed — his sickness is "done". If the narrator is to be considered lovesick at the start of the poem, then his condition must have been healed by the introduction of a new love interest into his life — writing.

After his dream and the events leading up to it, the narrator not only has an idea to write about at last but also the intrinsic motivation to execute the idea. Thus concludes the narrator's creative process: he began with no ideas or positive thoughts and no desire to do anything at all, had an idea thanks to an old book, entertains the idea in his head for a while and lets it interact with everything else in his mind, and then finally (thanks to the motivation arising from his being inspired) authored his *own* text, which the reader can then read and possibly be inspired by.

SUMMARY

So, by now we have shown that through Chaucer's portrayal of the narrator, Chaucer is aware that creative ideas come to those not actively looking for them, and that being inspired does not arise from a single event or experience. Once one has a creative idea, however, then the conscious effort must be made to capture the essence of the idea as effectively as possible in writing, where "effectiveness" here means that readers get out of a text what the author hopes they will, without the author's explicit revelation of the text's purpose or meaning. This is because, as discussed earlier, writing allegorically runs the risk of being interpreted incorrectly, despite being able to express more significant and impactful emotions and meaning than literal writing. Figurative writing can also be utilized to emit a different message from the same text to different audiences, something Chaucer takes advantage of in *BD*. It also has its drawbacks, however, and occasions may arise where literal language is most sufficient. These insights into the creative process, coupled with his extensive reading experience, undoubtedly contributed to Chaucer's ability to consciously create authoritative texts which would not only be worth reading in the present, but worth drawing inspiration from in the future. Chaucer would be glad to know his *Book of the Duchess* inspired the creation of new texts in the future — among those new texts, this thesis.

CONCLUSION

Writing a thesis is not unlike writing a medieval dream vision. I think it might be useful at this point to provide a modern authorial scenario which bears great resemblance to Chaucer's writing process. Hopefully the reader will see the resemblance and usefulness of this comparison following my discussion of Chaucer and *Book of the Duchess*. This comparison should make the arguments made above, regarding Chaucer's composition of *Book of the Duchess* and his authoritative *voice*, more relatable, if not more understandable.

We'll start at the beginning, with the formation of the idea for a thesis. The idea for a thesis is never "100% original", and this is certainly not a bad thing. In fact, *one-hundred percent originality* is an impossible thing to achieve. When it comes to writing *anything*, whether a research paper or a medieval dream vision, one must necessarily draw on past experiences. Past experiences contribute not only to the "idea" of a work — the main point in writing something, the argument attempting to be proven, the meaning hopefully imparted to readers via an author's text — but also to the *interest* in writing in the first place.

One often gets an idea for research by doing a good amount of reading or other exploration of something they find interesting. Chaucer's narrator gets the idea to ask the goddess of sleep for help after reading something he finds interesting. Prior to this, the narrator has only "idle" thoughts. Likewise, scholars will read that which they find interesting in order to find inspiration for what to do research on. The narrator is not seeking anything specific in his reading at first, just as scholars do not know exactly what their research will be on until they survey the field a bit first. Authors and scholars both also do a lot of re-reading, each time with the possibility of discovering something new. The narrator of *Book of the Duchess* interprets the tale he reads differently the two times he encounters it.

Chaucer attempts to cause *readers* to receive from his text a meaning or understanding of some kind, while researchers' goals with their research is to advance *humanity's* understanding in some particular area. These aims are similar, with the latter focusing on a much larger audience. Source texts are pulled in and used to serve this purpose in both instances, although in Chaucer's case the source texts he draws ideas from are not always referenced, as they are (or should be) for the most part in research. Chaucer presents Ovid's tale and *Romance of the Rose* for example, as belonging to other authors, but does not mention Froissart at all, whose introduction he has utilized without attribution.

Chaucer manipulates his source texts in order to cause them to better support his story. For example, the introduction to the *Book of the Duchess* very closely resembles one written by the previous french author Froissart, but Chaucer alters the introduction enough to cause it to work to different effect. The introduction is similar enough to still be considered to be inspired by the previous author, but is different enough to "belong" to Chaucer's text — Chaucer's text is supported by the previous authors' texts, not vice versa. Researchers do something similar when pulling in outside sources to support a claim. While a researcher will not manipulate another person's text, they do still participate in the act of manipulating the intention of the source text. If a researcher finds a paper showing A, and uses it in order to support their own claim, B, then it is obvious that the portion the researcher reuses from the previous paper is functioning differently than in the context of its own research. A portion of the text that once supported A is now present in a paper arguing B, and it can easily be seen that it no longer serves to prove A, its original author's intent.

In order to utilize an idea from a past author or scholar, one must first be able to interpret the original work. After doing this, they will then be able to communicate, in different words and

to different avail, an idea "stolen" from a source text. The quote by Pablo Picasso, "Good artists copy, great artists steal", amply describes this process of turning another's idea into one's own, original idea. To *copy* something means to take it as it is, and reproduce it as it is. This requires no interpretation on the copyist's part, and causes one to copy whatever meaning is present in the text, whether they are aware of it or not. To *steal* something means to take something of someone else's and use it as if it was your own, which is exactly what both Chaucer and researchers do with the work of previous authors. I do not mean to imply here that both Chaucer and scholars are guilty of intellectual theft, only that even when an author attributes a portion of their text to an old author, the attributed portion will function differently in the new text than it originally did in the context of the old text. So, this kind of "stealing" occurs without the negative consequence usually associated with stealing, because when an author steals something, the original author does not lose anything. There is a net increase in ideas overall — the original text and idea still exists, and so does a new text with a modified but similar idea. In the end, Chaucer produces an original text built upon the work of past authors but which is entirely his own, which is strikingly similar to how scholars produce original research built upon the work of past scholars. There is a continuous cycle of *present* researchers (or authors) utilizing *past* researchers' authoritative work in their own work, which then gets utilized by *future* researchers, and so on.

Once in the hands of readers, the interpretation of the *Book of the Duchess* will be out of Chaucer's hands, leaving readers free to interpret or misinterpret the book however they wish. This is obviously true for research work as well, however uncomfortable that may sound. The goal of Chaucer's work may seem to differ a bit from the goal of research, because poetry involves the use of allegory and other poetic devices, but I believe allegory is utilized at least

partly in Chaucer's case because of the inability of literal language to accurately describe things. For this reason authors often out of necessity utilize figurative language in order to not undermine the magnitude of the meaning imparted. Macrobius, one of Chaucer's more obvious inspirations, even expresses this same sentiment: "philosophers make use of fabulous narratives; not without a purpose, however, nor merely to entertain, but because they realize that a frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature."⁴² When a concept cannot be done justice using literal language, one can then acceptably utilize figurative language. While researchers often do not require the use of figurative language, they would certainly agree with me in saying that many concepts *cannot* be simplified in order to make them more accessible to readers without experiencing a loss of information or accuracy. So the overall goal for both Chaucer and a scholar are the same — to use the most appropriate language for the task at hand. However, this means different things for each kind of author.

⁴² Macrobius, Ambrosius A. T, William H. Stahl, and Marcus T. Cicero. *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 86

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