

*THE FALL OF PRINCES* AND LYDGATE'S KNOWLEDGE OF *THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS*

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Among John Lydgate's various tributes to Chaucer, one of the most puzzling is his reference to the *Book of the Duchess* in the *Fall of Princes* (c.1438). In the prologue of this lengthy retelling of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, Lydgate introduces an extensive homage to 'my maistir Chaucer', which lists several of Chaucer's literary accomplishments: it opens with stanzas on 'Troilus & Cresseide', 'Boeces book, The Consolacioun', and 'a tretis, ful noble & off gret pris/ Vpon thastlabre' (Lydgate 1924-27, 1:8-9). About midway through this catalogue, Lydgate turns to Chaucer's elegy for Blanche of Lancaster:

He wrot also ful many day agone,  
Dante in Inglissh, hymself so doth expresse,  
The pitous story off Ceix and Alcione,  
And the deth eek of Blaunche the Duchesse,  
And notabli dede his bisynesse (ibid).

What is remarkable here is not that this text is mentioned, but that it appears to be listed twice. In consecutive lines Lydgate refers to 'the deth...of Blaunche the Duchesse', acknowledging the putative occasion of the *Book*, as well as naming the 'story off Ceix and Alcione'. This apparently refers to the Ovidian episode Chaucer retells in lines 69-230 of the text, as his narrator turns to the *Metamorphoses* 'for defaute of slep', and recites the story of 'dreynte Seys the kyng' he reads there (Chaucer 2008, 333). What Lydgate refers to, then, is an episode embedded in the larger structure of the *Book of the Duchess* itself, which he seems to treat as a separate item.

One possible solution to this issue is that proposed by the great Victorian editor Walter Skeat, who argues that Lydgate is simply conflating similar lists made by Chaucer across his works, pulling together scattered references from the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales*. Skeat writes: 'it is clear to me that Lydgate is simply repeating the information which we have already had upon Chaucer's own authority...merely following Chaucer's own language' (Skeat 1888, xi). It is true that both of these names occur in Chaucer's work in

much the form that they are given here: Chaucer includes ‘the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse’ amongst his works in the *Legend* (F 418), while the *Introduction* to the *Man of Law’s Tale* states that he ‘made Ceys and Alcione...in youthe’ (Chaucer 2008, 57). But what complicates matters is that Lydgate was clearly familiar with the *Book of the Duchess* by this point in his career. His knowledge is testified by the poem variously known as the *Complaint of the Black Knight* or *Complaynt of Loveres Lyfe*, which J.A. Burnley terms ‘a blatant imitation of the *Book of the Duchess*’ (1979, 42). This reprises many of the features of the *Book*, from its setting in a ‘parke walled with grene stone’ to its central complaint against ‘Loves firy cheyn’, delivered by a motionless knight ‘in blake and white, colour pale and wan’ (Lydgate 2004, 92, 95). The imitation was in fact sufficiently close for the poem to have been accepted as Chaucer’s work from the fifteenth century to the late nineteenth, appearing under his name in manuscript compilations and early printed editions (Edwards 1996; Forni 2001, 173-74), and routinely being classified as ‘another poem written for John of Gaunt’ by Victorian scholars (Morley 1867, 2.1.202-3). Although the *Complaynt* has proven resistant to dating, with Walter Schirmer (1961, 31) and John Norton-Smith (1966, 161) placing it in the first decade of the fifteenth century, and Derek Pearsall preferring a date of 1427-29 (1997, 31), it is almost certainly an earlier work than the *Fall of Princes*. Even the latest of these estimates would still place it at least nine years before the *Fall*, which is usually dated to 1438 or 1439 on the basis of its author’s reference to his ‘mor than thre score yeeris’ (Gray 2004, 843). As a result of this, it seems unlikely that Lydgate would unthinkingly reproduce two titles for the same text, as he had by this stage sufficient awareness of the *Book of the Duchess* to compose his own close reproduction of it.

A second explanation is that developed by Haldeen Braddy and Larry Scanlon. Braddy and Scanlon have each argued that Lydgate’s separation of ‘Ceix and Alcyone’ from the rest of the *Book* might signal that this ‘portion of the work circulated separately’ (Braddy 1940, 95), or that ‘Chaucer may have treated this episode independently’ (Scanlon 1994, 333): that is, that Lydgate did indeed know ‘Ceix and Alcyone’ as a distinct poem. This suggestion seems more plausible than Skeat’s. It gains further authority from a recent essay by David Carlson, which notes that Lydgate often seems to be working with different versions of Chaucer’s texts than we now have access to, such as ‘a pre-*Canterbury Tales* Palamoun and Arcite’ (2004, 251). However, accepting this view also raises further questions. In particular, it has some rather troubling implications for our knowledge of the *Book of the Duchess* itself. If Lydgate is referring to ‘Ceix and Alcyone’ as a piece distinct from the *Book*, then this also

implies that he may have read a version of the *Book* which did not contain this sequence. After all, this is the text that he demonstrably knew well: his classification of ‘Ceys and Alcyone’ as a separate piece could therefore suggest that he did not recognise it as part of the text of the *Book* he had read.

While this might appear to be at best a problematic claim, since the Ceyx and Alcione story is present in all three extant manuscript copies of the *Book*, it is consistent with Lydgate’s own engagement with the text. In his *Complaynt*, for instance, Lydgate offers nothing that corresponds with the Ovidian episode, or with the larger frame narrative in which it occurs. The events of the *Complaynt* pick up instead from line 290 of the existing text of the *Book*, the point at which Chaucer’s dreamer is awoken by ‘smale foules a gret hep’, and reports, ‘Me thoghte thus: that hyt was May,/ And in the dawenyng I lay’ (Chaucer 2008, 334). Lydgate’s poem commences at this point, as it opens with the narrator also waking ‘in May when Flora...the soyle hath clad’, and venturing out into a world where ‘the briddes sing’ (Lydgate 2004, 90). Lydgate does not include any framing sequence before this, or any reference to his narrator reading himself to sleep. Such an omission has in fact proven difficult to interpret, given that the text is in most other respects a faithful retread of the *Book*. A.C. Spearing, for instance, is only able to explain it as a ‘playful reversal’ of Chaucer’s precedent (1993, 219), while Judith Davidoff claims that Lydgate is developing a new, separate genre altogether, which she dubs ‘the dream vision analogue’ (1988, 89). However, when placed alongside Lydgate’s treatment of ‘Ceix and Alcyone’ and ‘the deeth of Blaunche’ as distinct texts in the *Fall of Princes*, it seems equally likely that Lydgate did not include his own version of Chaucer’s preamble because he was aware of it only as an unconnected text, not included in the version of the *Book* he knew.

The possibility that Lydgate’s *Book of the Duchess* lacked the preliminary Ceyx and Alcione episode also finds some support in criticism of Chaucer’s text, as it resonates with questions that have arisen repeatedly over the last fifty years. In particular, it feeds into dissatisfaction with what William Quinn calls the ‘most widely accepted context of interpretation’ of the poem, its ‘specific relevance...to John of Gaunt and the Duchess Blanche’ (1999, 114). Although it is undeniable that the text must have had some connection to Blanche’s death, given Chaucer’s own testimony to that effect in the *Legend of Good Women*, some commentators have suspected that the existing text of the poem might not be the one that was composed for this occasion, but a version revised later. As far back as 1952 H.S. Bennett had

some intimation of this, bluntly stating ‘it is hard to believe that *The Book of the Duchess* was written solely to commemorate the death of the wife of John of Gaunt’, and holding that some elements in the text might not be connected to the aftermath of her death in 1368 (Bennett 1952, 6). Indeed, the debate surrounding the precise date of the text has led to similar speculation. As Kathryn Lynch has written in a recent summary of the issue, the text seems to date itself both ‘before 1372’ and ‘around or even after that year’: it addresses Gaunt as ‘thys kynge’ in line 1314, which he ‘took to styling himself’ only after 1372, and alludes to him as earl of Richmond in its reference to ‘ryche hil’ in line 1319, a title he gave up in 1372 in order to pursue his claim to the kingdom of Castile (2007, 4-5). Attempting to account for such discrepancies has raised questions about possible revisions to the text. For instance, Howard Schless, arguing for the 1371-72 date, suggests that this might highlight a later interpolation: ‘that the conclusion of the *Book of the Duchess* may well have been composed about 1371-72 does not necessarily implicate the dating of the rest (that is, the bulk) of the poem’ (Schless 1985, 274). Likewise Edward Condren, moving the date to 1376-77 on the basis of the narrator having ‘suffred this eight year’ (Chaucer 2008, 331), suggests that the surviving text is a reworking of an ‘original version of the *Book of the Duchess*’, which permits ‘a 1377 Chaucerian persona to confront an earlier version of himself’ (Condren 1971, 200). Along the same lines, Zacharias Thundy (1995) argues that the poem was comprehensively rewritten in 1399 as a ‘political celebration’ commemorating the accession of Blanche and Gaunt’s son Henry IV. For such authors, then, the text of the *Book of the Duchess* is something of a palimpsest, containing the traces of several dates at once, suggesting that it has been revised at different periods of Chaucer’s career: while it might initially have been written as a tribute to Blanche in some form, whether to commemorate her death in 1368 or for one of the later memorial services (Hardman 1994), the version now known to us can be seen as a reworking of this first version. The structural ‘problems’ many critics have found in the poem might also lead to a similar conclusion. The charge that several of its episodes are ‘at odds with the dominant tone of the poem’ (Muscatine 1957, 102) or ‘break in decidedly upon the solemnity’ (Cazmian 1930, 100-1) is a relatively common one in mid-twentieth century scholarship, and could further signpost where later additions have been made. That there were other, lost manuscripts of the *Book* which differed from the three known to us is in fact highly likely: as N.F. Blake has shown (1981), the unique sections of William Thynne’s 1532 printed edition suggest precisely this.

Given these theories and observations, it is entirely possible that Lydgate is not merely working with a different version of the *Book of the Duchess*, but an early, perhaps unrevised text. More importantly, his apparent failure to recognise that the ‘pitous story off Ceix and Alcione’ was part of the ‘deth...of Blaunche the Duchesse’ gives us some idea what this conjectured ‘original’ might have looked like. It suggests that Chaucer’s tribute to Blanche might have initially opened at the point at which Lydgate starts the *Complaynt*, and at which Chaucer’s literary models De Lorris, Machaut and Froissart begin their own dream-visions, with the narrator waking into a springtime dream-world (Pelen 1976); as a consequence, the framing narrative to which the Ceyx and Alcyone section belongs may not have been part of the original text. On the other hand, the ‘pitous story of Ceyx and Alcyone’ could have started life as a separate piece that was later integrated into the revised text, in much the same manner that ‘the love of Palamon and Arcite’ and ‘the lyf of Seynt Cecile’ were grafted into the *Canterbury Tales* as the *Knight’s Tale* and *Second Nun’s Tale* (Chaucer 2008, 600). The fact that Chaucer claims to have composed this Ovidian adaptation ‘in youthe’ might be taken as a further hint at its original autonomy. At any rate, while much of this remains highly speculative, it remains true to say that Lydgate’s testimony raises some powerful questions about the *Book of the Duchess*, and especially the relationship between the text we now possess and the historical ‘deth of Blaunche’. It at least offers proof of the ongoing complexities and areas of uncertainty that surround the poem.

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