ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Is *The Book of the Duchess* by Geoffrey Chaucer a Consolation?

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January 2022

For, certes, swete, I nam but ded.
Ye shul me never on lyve yse.
But, goode swete herte, that ye
Bury my body, for such a tyde
Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde;
And farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!

(Chaucer, 204-209)

The Book of the Duchess by Geoffrey Chaucer is a medieval dream vision written between the years 1368 and 1372 to commemorate the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and the wife of John of Gaunt, who died during the plague. The dream vision typically features a man who gains knowledge and truth that is not normally available in his waking state. *The Book of the Duchess* begins with a sleepless narrator complaining of his insomnia and reading the Greek myth of Ceyx and Alcyone. He then falls asleep and, in his dream, tries to console a bereaved knight who is deep in sorrow due to the death of his beloved lady named White. Overwhelming evidence suggests that White is an allegorical figure of Blanche, and coupled with the fact that Chaucer uses the first person narrative, the dreamer's attempt to console the knight is commonly read as a reflection of Chaucer the writer's effort to offer John of Gaunt consolation. Thus, the poem is often categorized as a piece of Consolatio that comforts someone who suffers from a great loss through relieving their grief. Chaucer's inclusion of the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, in which Ceyx is drowned in a sea voyage and Alcyone takes her own life due to sadness, creates another layer of parallel characters as Alcyone, the knight, and John of Gaunt are all tied together by what Fichte refers to 'a common emotional experience' of mourning over a deceased lover (56). Chaucer uses classical sources and their association with wisdom to convey consolatory messages in hopes of easing the pain of the bereaved, firstly through his recount of Ceyx's message to Alcyone after he died and secondly by characterizing the dreamer as a therapist after the fashion of Lady Philosophy in *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius. However, despite Chaucer's utterance of these consolatory messages, their effect is limited. The dreamer's inability to understand the depth of Alcyone and the knight's pain undermines the validity of his consolation. Furthermore, the continuation, or even intensification of sorrow as a result of the attempts at consolation in both Alcyone and the knight's cases demonstrates that

consolation is unable to mitigate the unspeakable agony of losing a loved one. Notwithstanding, the process of reliving past glory reminds both Alcyone and the knight, hence John of Gaunt, of their bliss of having once possessed happiness, and this acknowledgment might be the most comforting consolation one can receive. As such, it is unwise to place *The Book of the Duchess* under the category of Consolatio without acknowledging the complexities springing from the consolatory messages Chaucer put forth and the way they are presented.

Firstly, consolation is expressed through Chaucer's retelling of Ceyx's encouragement to Alcyone to desist from sorrow based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Alcyone acts as a counterpart to the knight in the narrator's dream, as well as to John of Gaunt, the reader of the poem, thus Ceyx's words to Alcyone indirectly address John of Gaunt as well. In Ovid's version, the character Morpheus, in the voice of Ceyx, demands Alcyone to 'Get up, act, shed tears, wear mourning: do not let me go down unwept to Tartarus's void.' (XI, 669-70) In Chaucer's version however, instead of asking Alcyone to lament for him, Ceyx urges her to abandon sorrow as she will not find remedy in it. The following passage is what Boardman refers to as 'the most explicit consolation in the entire poem' (576):

Awake! let be your sorwful lyfl,
For in your sorwe there lyth no red;
For, certes, swete, I nam but ded.
Ye shul me never on lyve yse.
But, goode swete herte, that ye
Bury my body, for such a tyde
Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde;
And farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!
I praye God youre sorwe lysse.
To lytel while oure blysse lasteth! (202-211)

The word 'awake' carries double meanings. It refers to Ceyx's command for Alcyone not only to wake up from her sleep, but also to depart from dejection and revive emotionally. The use of the high modality diction 'certes' reinforces that Ceyx's death is an absolute fact that Alcyone cannot alter. Line 205 delivers the same meaning as 'I nam but ded' in the previous line, but further emphasises the impossibility for Ceyx to return to Alcyone. Ceyx's subsequent request for Alcyone to bury his body which will be found at the seaside creates a tranquil image and a peaceful mood. This contrasts with Ceyx' harsh demand for Alcyone to not let him pass away without being wept for in Ovid's version, reflecting Chaucer's more tender way of consolation. This more serene mood created by Chaucer suggests that Ceyx wants to console Alcyone by encouraging her to gain closure and cease her despair by burying him, instead of having her dwell in sadness. The final line in this passage conveys the fleeting nature of earthly bliss, a key idea in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* which Chaucer himself translated and alludes to throughout the poem. Ceyx acknowledges that at least they once shared 'blysse', hence bringing comfort to his lady and attempting to lessen her pain. By ending the Greek myth on a bittersweet note, Chaucer must also wish to solace John of Gaunt who can probably identify with Alcyone's pain of losing her beloved. Moreover, Chaucer removes the part of Ovid's tale where both Ceyx and Alcyone are transformed into halcyons. Philips sees Chaucer's edits of Ovid's version 'as an opportunity to voice a certain kind of consolation: that which comes from a recognition that all earthly joy, including a beloved person, has to be subject to transience' (35). By highlighting the Boethian idea of the mutability of life, Chaucer urges John of Gaunt to accept the unchangeable death of Blanche and to gain consolation in this final acceptance.

Secondly, Chaucer heightens the consolatory effect of his poem by depicting the dreamer as a wise and sensitive figure like Lady Philosophy in Boethius' *The Consolation of*

Philosophy, an exemplary work in the genre of Consolatio. Although the dreamer is often seen as dull-witted due to his apparent inability to grasp the reason for the knight's sadness, some critics consider his naivety as a deliberate tactic to guide the knight in talking about his grief, through which he can achieve catharsis. Through reading about how the knight talks about his pain, John of Gaunt might release his emotions as well. While the knight recites a dirge for White, in which he explicitly says that she is 'fro me ded and ys agoon' (479), the dreamer is eavesdropping and has already learned about the source of the knight's misery. He then approaches the knight and apologizes for disturbing him, and starts a conversation around the hunt, which took place earlier in the poem, for which the knight responds, 'My thought ys theron never a dele' (543). Only after the knight indirectly reveals his grief to the dreamer by showing no interest of the hunt due to the preoccupied sadness overwhelming him, does the dreamer probe the knight to open up. Kreuzer perceives this as proof of the dreamer's 'mature, sensitive awareness of the knight's plight and the cathartic benefits of "talk-ing out" one's grief (546). Chaucer further demonstrates the dreamer's tactfulness and compassion in the following passage:

For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool
I wol do aile my power hool.
And telleth me of your sorwes smerte;
Paraventure hyt may ease your herte, (553-556)

Instead of aggressively prying into the knight's affairs, the dreamer uses the word 'paraventure' to soften his tone and gently guide the knight to unload his desolation. The dreamer's promise to the knight shows his 'sympathetic eagerness to afford the knight the only help in his power' (Kittredge, 43). After the knight conveys the source of his grief through ambiguous references to a chess game with Fortune, the dreamer urges the knight to

be more explicit, asking him ‘In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore/ That ye have thus youre blysse lore’ (747-748). The consecutive use of question words creates a more demanding tone than his previous attempt to ask the knight about his sorrow. Recognising the potential benefits of therapy in the form of simply talking about his grief, the dreamer becomes more pressing in urging the knight to unburden himself, showing that ‘the dreamer’s failure to understand the Knight is a consciously contrived failure designed to help him lessen his grief’ (Kreuzer, 546). The dreamer’s therapeutic qualities mirror Lady Philosophy’s sage and calm characteristics, and the content of his advice to the knight also carries similarities with that of Lady Philosophy’s to Boethius. By drawing these parallels between the personified figure of consolation that philosophy provides for Boethius and the dreamer, Chaucer raises the dreamer’s ability in consoling the knight. Lady Philosophy and the dreamer, having heard Boethius and the knight complain about Fortune’s vicissitudes, respond by proposing ideas alike. As Cherniss observes, ‘the Narrator's attempt to convince the Knight to scorn Fortune likewise follows the pattern of the Consolation’ (658). The dreamer consoles the knight with the wisdom of Socrates, ‘a Greek philosopher, often praised in medieval literature for his indifference to Death and Fortune’ (Philips, 82):

Remembre yow of Socrates,
For he ne counted nat thre strees
Of noght that Fortune koude doo. (717-719)

Likewise, Lady Philosophy asks Boethius to turn away from false happiness based on his belief of Fortune by asking the rhetorical question ‘And what else doth the weeping muse of Tragedy deplore, but the flourishing state of kingdoms overwhelmed by the indiscriminating strokes of Fortune?’ (Book 2, Prose 2). Through the parallels between the

dialogue of the dreamer and knight, and that of Lady Philosophy and Boethius, Chaucer portrays the dreamer as a perceptive and wise man who understands the benefits of speech in assuaging pain, and who genuinely desires to console the knight.

However, despite Chaucer's delivery of the consolatory messages of the lack of remedy in sorrow and the inherent fleeting nature of joy, he also shows that there is a limit to the effect of consolation as it is always overridden by grief. In *The Book of the Duchess*, although consolatory messages are voiced, the emotional suffering of the bereaved is difficult to mitigate. With this consideration, other critics maintain that the poem is not written with the aim of consoling John of Gaunt. Referring to Chaucer's recounting of the myth of Ceyx and Alcyone, Boardman suggests that Chaucer's decision to remove the element of Ovidian mortality shows 'his failure to see the significance of this suggestion of immortality, and this failure of the narrator is responsible for the lack of a more hopeful, perhaps even Christian, consolation in the poem.' Opposing to Philips' view that Chaucer's edit conveys the unavoidable transience of earthly things as a consolatory message, Boardman sees it as Chaucer's avoidance of comforting the bereaved with the hope of being with her lover forever. With regards to the parallels between Lady Philosophy and the dreamer, one can argue that the dreamer, who himself is suffering from an unknown illness and overcame by melancholy, is much less authoritative than Lady Philosophy, who is Boethius' personification of the wisdom of philosophy itself. Hence the influence of the dreamer on the knight is no match to that of Lady Philosophy on Boethius. Also considering the dreamer's inability to fully understand the pain of Alcyone and the knight, as well as their continuance of grief even after hearing consolatory words indicate that the lamenting remains inconsolable in the poem.

Firstly, the dreamer reveals his failure to commiserate with both Alcyone and the knight due to his lack of capacity to comprehend their losses. The use of humour in retelling the Greek myth of Ceyx and Alcyone proves extremely unsuited to such a solemn story. In Chaucer's version of the myth, comedic elements are added to the scene of the waking of Morpheus by Juno's messenger:

'O how! awake anoon!'
Hit was for noght: there herde hym non.
'Awake!' quod he, 'Whoo ys lythe there?'
And blew his horne ryght in here eere,
And cried 'Awaketh!' wonder hye. (179-183)

By having Juno's messenger call 'awake' three times for Morpheus to rise, Chaucer portrays Morpheus as an idle and slothful character. The dignified Greek God has been reduced to an absurd laughingstock. Juno's messenger's action of blowing a horn into Morpheus ears in order to wake him is comically childish, contrasting with the supposedly grave mood of the tale as a whole. This use of comedy is inappropriate to the dreamer's attempt to retell the lamentable tale, lessening the power of his words of consolation voiced through Ceyx. As Boardman argues, 'The narrator's attempt to retell a solemn and lamentable tale is undermined by his impulse toward humor'. Although Chaucer encourages John of Gaunt to accept and let go of the death of Blanche through Ceyx's final words to Alcyone, 'his sympathy trails off into comic fascination with the God of Sleep' which greatly reduces the impact of his consolation (Boardman, 572).

Moreover, the dreamer might be interpreted as an actual simpleton whose slow wit and ignorance prevent him from comprehending the knight's grief, making it impossible to offer any kind of helpful consolation to him. This opposes the interpretation that the dreamer

is a skilled therapist who pretends to be naive with the aim of leading the knight to come to terms with the loss of his beloved lady. Ellis observes that the dreamer might have taken the knight's revelation that White is 'fro me ded' (479) as 'a conventional expression for the loss of love and not literally', implying that the dreamer simply does not recognize the depth of the knight's pain (256). This overturns the argument that knowing the source of the knight's grief, the dreamer carefully designs a conversation to prompt him to express his feelings. Having already gone through a long conversation in which the knight gives both implicit and obvious clues for the reason for his sorrow, the dreamer still needs to ask towards the end of the poem 'Where [is] she now?' (1298), followed by the second question 'Allas, sir, how? What may that be?' (1308) after the knight responded 'God wote, allas, ryght that was she!' (1307). The straightforward quality of his questions suggests that by this point in the poem, he is still genuinely confused about the reason for the knight's heartache. In Boardman's words, 'its bluntness is a result of his failure to perceive the depth of experience behind the knight's words'. The dreamer's obtuse questioning finally forces the knight to state in the most direct way possible that 'She ys ded.' Nay!' 'Yis, be my trouthe' (1309). In response, the dreamer says 'Is that your los? By god, hit is routhe!' (1310). His question in the first half of the line shows his need for confirmation of the knight's meaning, implying that this is the first time he registers the reason for the knight's misery. His expression of condolences is startlingly abrupt and short compared to the lengthy speeches and questions he had made to the knight before. This indicates that in the moment of shocking realization, the dreamer does not have anything more comforting to say other than expressing his sympathy which remains only at a surface level.

Even if taking the dreamer's attempt at consolation as genuine, both Alcyone and the knight remain inconsolable as the dreamer's attempt at offering consolation often causes the

bereaved even more grief than before. In *The Book of the Duchess*, Morpheus reanimates Ceyx' body and brings it to Alcyone, as told in the lines 'Tooke up the dreynt body sone/ And bare hyt forth to Alchione' (195-196). By making an alteration to Ovid's tale in which Morpheus, instead of the deceased Ceyx, appears before Alcyone, Chaucer is able to utilize the grotesque detail of Ceyx' resuscitation to induce discomfort in his readers. Contrary to the supposedly soothing and comforting effects that a piece of Consolatio is expected to provide for the bereaved, Chaucer's modification of the original myth makes the passage unpleasant to read, undercutting its consolatory purpose. John of Gaunt's mourning of the death of his wife is unlikely to be softened after he reads about the revival of the dead body of the lover of Alcyone who shares the same grief with him. This is because the grotesque details are likely to make him uneasy and thus worsen his pain. For Alcyone herself, her pain escalates after the revived Ceyx tells her that he is dead indeed, as shown in her eventual suicide:

With that hir eyen up she casteth,
And sa we noght. 'Alias!' quod she for sorwe,
And deyede within the thridde morwe. (212-214)

The use of the French octosyllabic verse in the poem allows Chaucer to write rhyming couplets, which connects the word 'casteth' with 'lasteth' in Ceyx's final words 'To lytel while oure blysse lasteth' (211). Through uniting these two words together, Chaucer emphasizes the immediacy of which Alcyone dies right after learning that her lover is dead. Thus, Ceyx's consolation to Alcyone not only fails to make her depart from sorrow, it escalates her woe and prompts her to act on her intense emotions.

The dreamer consistently tries to persuade the knight to unburden his grief onto him despite his rejection of his suggestion, and the knight remains inconsolable by the end of the

poem. The constant refusal to open up on the knight's part invalidates the critical approach that some scholars take to prove the dreamer's role as a therapist because the target of consolation is fundamentally uninterested in being consoled. After the dreamer approaches the knight and apologizes for disturbing him, the knight responds 'Yis. Th'amendys is lyght to make,'/ Quod he, 'For ther lyeth noon therto:' (526-527). His blunt tone and honesty directly convey the inconsolable nature of his sorrow, and make clear that there is nothing to be done on the knight's part to alleviate his pain. The dreamer then asks the knight to 'telleth me of your sorwes smerte' (555), but the knight 'loked on me asyde' (558) and says 'Nay, that wol not be' (559). The knight's action of looking aside reflects his reluctance to communicate with the dreamer, and the use of the two words of negation 'nay' and 'not' further underline his unwillingness to confide in the dreamer. The knight further declares that 'No man may my sorwe glade,/ That maketh my hewe to fal and fade' (563-564), emphasizing through his resolute tone the impossibility of lessening his grief. He then proceeds to make a list of classical figures whom he regards as also having no power in lifting his spirits:

May noght make my sorwes slyde,
Nought al the remedyes of Ovyde.
Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,
Ne Dedalus with his playes slye;
Ne hele me may noo phisicien,
Noght Ypocras ne Galyen. (567-572)

Chaucer's mention of Ovid echoes his retelling of the myth of Ceyx and Alcyone previously in the poem. By invalidating consolation one might potentially find in the myth, Chaucer once again subverts the consolatory purpose of the poem. The repetition of the word of negation 'ne' underscores the absolute impossibility of consolation from the knight's

perspective, a view that is further reinforced by the fact that the dreamer is no match in wisdom and knowledge of these classical figures. Furthermore, the conversation between the knight and the dreamer operates in a recurring structure that revolves around in circles, showing no sense of progression. Every time the dreamer suggests the knight confide in him, the knight states that 'I have loste more than thow wenyst' (744, 1138, 1306), a line that has 'become almost a refrain in the poem' (Boardman, 573). The repetition of this line in which the knight expresses that the dreamer can never fully comprehend his grief runs throughout their conversation, showing that the words of the dreamer consistently fail to offer any kind of solace. The mood of the knight has not shown the slightest improvement, and he remains pessimistic and hopeless throughout their conversation. This lack of progression in their conversation also reveals that there is no genuine connection between the dreamer and the knight, as Fitche argues that 'there is no meeting of minds'. With their conversation remaining stagnant, the knight remains inconsolable. At the conclusion of the poem, the dreamer asks where is White now, and these lines follow: 'Now? 'quod he, and stynte anoon./ Therwith he waxe as dede as stoon' (1299-1300). The knight temporarily ceases talking because the pain is too great for him to say aloud. The simile comparing the knight with a stone emphasizes his stiffness at that moment when being reminded that his beloved White is deceased, further signifying that the knight feels even greater sorrow after their long conversation.

Despite both Alcyone and the knight continuing to dwell in their sorrow after Ceyx and the dreamer's attempts at consoling them, Chaucer certainly demonstrates an attempt at relieving their mourning. *The Book of the Duchess* may not have greatly reduced the grief of John of Gaunt. However, it highlights the central message of the fleeting nature of earthly bliss, and acceptance of this unchangeable fact might be the best consolation one can receive

when confronted with the overwhelming woe of having lost a loved one. Moreover, in both the story of Ceyx and Alcyone and the knight and White, Chaucer underlines that at least they have once experienced the bliss of love. Ceyx tells Alcyone that their bliss lasts too shortly, and in confiding in the dreamer, the knight confesses that:

As helpe me God,I was as blyve
Reysed as fro dethe to lyve;
Of al happes the alderbeste (1277-1279)

‘This remembrance of the lady, as well as his joy at having possessed her, is, in fact, the strongest consolation available to the knight in the dream’ (Boardman, 575). This poem might not have directly relieved John of Gaunt’s immeasurable pain of losing Blanche, but it serves to remind the bereaved of his golden past with his beloved lady, which might be the only way to offer comfort to someone in great pain.

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