



## *The Book of the Duchess*

THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS begins with an elaborate picture of a man made sleepless through unfulfilled desire. His loss of sleep makes him idle, indifferent to good or evil, and above all full of sorrowful imaginings. Death, he thinks, will soon result from his unnatural state, for the spirit of life is dead within him. In his "mased" or irrational condition,<sup>1</sup> he is so confused by phantasies that he is unable to decide "what is best to do" or to determine the cause of his sleeplessness. In Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*, from which Chaucer probably developed the introduction to *The Book of the Duchess*, the speaker specifically declares himself to be a lover languishing for his mistress;<sup>2</sup> but Chaucer's speaker says that if men ask him why he is sleepless, he will be unable to answer. He knows merely that one physician can cure him, and that the physician seems impossibly beyond his reach:

I holde hit be a sicknesse  
That I have suffred this eight yeer,  
And yet my boote is never the ner;

<sup>1</sup> In *The Harrowing of Hell*, 247, "mased" is an alliterative synonym of "madde."

<sup>2</sup> Ed. Scheler, lines 1-12.

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For ther is phisicien but oon  
That may me hele; but that is don. (36-40)

The professed ignorance of the speaker presents a problem to the reader, particularly about the identification of the one physician. On the one hand, the image of the lady as the only physician to her lover's discomfort is traditional. On the other hand, the image of Christ the Physician represents an even earlier and more pervasive tradition. A similar ambiguous clue is afforded by the eight years' malady, which may simply indicate the temporal extent of the lover's suffering, or, with reference to the Physician, Christ, it may be a specific reflection of an eight years' malady found in the New Testament, that of Aeneas in the Acts of the Apostles. The eight years' malady of Aeneas is elaborately glossed. Aeneas himself is taken to represent humanity; his malady of eight years symbolizes earthly delight which is cured in the name of Christ, the Physician.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Acts 9.33-34. For the interpretation, see Bede, *PL*, 92, 965: "Aeneas iste genus significat humanum, infirmorum prius delectatione languescens, sed apostolorum opere et ore sanatum. Quia etenim mundus ipse quatuor plagis sublimatur, et cursus saeculi annuis quatuor temporibus variatur, quicunque praesentia labentiaque gaudia complectitur, quasi bis quaternario annorum numero, grabato sternitur enervis. Grabatum quippe est ipse segnitias, ubi requiescit animus aeger et infirmus, id est, in voluptate corporis et omni delectatione saeculari. *Aenea, sanet te Dominus Jesus Christus. Surge et sterne tibi.* Quem de paralypsi curaverat, mox surgere et sternere sibi praecepit, spiritualiter insinuans ut quisque fidei solidamentum in corde perceperit, non solum torporem, in quo fessus jacuerat, discutiat, sed etiam bona opera, in quibus requiescere valeat, paret." This explanation is repeated in the *Glossa ordinaria*, *PL*, 114, 449. The figure of Christ the Physician is sufficiently commonplace. The number "eight" frequently suggests Christ, who brings about a cure for the languor described by Bede.

In the biblical figure of the Physician, the audience is given one way of understanding the portrait of the sleepless man. He is one who knows that there is but one Physician, but he has lost access to Him because he has been so overcome by a temporal loss that he has almost fallen into despair. He sees, for the moment, no way to the "sleep" or quiet of life which he knows that God alone can give him.<sup>4</sup> In short, the reader is made aware that the temporal loss suffered by the poet is

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See Isidore, *Liber numerorum*, PL, 83, 189; or Bede, *Hexameron*, PL, 91, 149 and 162. For the idea that the sorrow of the *persona* at the opening of the poem is sorrow for Blanche, and not for some conjectural lost mistress, see Marshall W. Stearns, "A Note on Chaucer's Attitude Toward Love," *Speculum*, xvii (1942), pp. 570-574. R. S. Loomis, *MLN*, LIX (1944), pp. 178-180, thinks that Chaucer was simply being conventional. Chaucer had probably read Henry of Lancaster's *Livre de Seyntz Medicines* and was thus thoroughly aware of the Scriptural connotations of figures like "malady," "physician," and so on.

<sup>4</sup> *Quies vitae* is one of the standard allegorical meanings of "sleep." E.g., see *Allegoriae in sacram scripturam*, PL, 112, 913. The fact that "sleep" has a number of other meanings equally commonplace need not be disturbing, since they do not fit the context of our poem. To indulge for a moment in an analogy, the fact that a word may have various meanings does not imply that it is useless for poetic purposes. The meaning intended is usually clear from the context. On the source of true rest, see St. Augustine, *De catechizandis rudibus*, 16: "Nam et in hac vita homines magnis laboribus requiem quaerunt et securitatem, sed pravis cupiditatibus non inveniunt. Volunt enim requiescere in rebus inquietis et non permanentibus; et quia illae tempore subtrahuntur et transeunt, timoribus et doloribus eos agitant, nec quietos esse permittunt." This is, of course, one of the lessons of Boethius in the *De consolazione*. The poet or speaker at the beginning of Chaucer's poem has been disturbed by a temporal loss.

very great, a measure of the worth of the subject of eulogy, Blanche the Duchess, so sorely mourned by one of her followers.

In his imaginary self-portrait, Chaucer stresses his idleness. He suggests thereby that for one who, like himself, has lovingly served Blanche, her loss may lead to an almost inconsolable bereavement, that is, to the condition of *tristitia*,<sup>5</sup> the nature of which may be suggested by John the Scot's definition of Hades as "*tristitia vel deliciarum privatio*."<sup>6</sup> *Tristitia* prevents the speaker from performing any good works and even from desiring to do so. To him, as well as to her other mourners, Blanche had presumably been a source of spiritual inspiration, one among those who, with Queen Philippa, helped to instil ideals of courtesy and chivalry in Edward's court, which, for a time, was the most brilliant in Europe. But just as love for Blanche in life inspired noble action in her friends and admirers, so also that love may be turned toward even greater inspiration at her death. The problem of the poem is to show how this "conversion" may be effected. And the solution is suggested at the opening by the eight years' malady and by the play on the idea of the physician.

Continuing in his "mased" search for consolation, the speaker, lacking sleep, considers various kinds of slothful distraction. A French book, or "romance," seems better game than chess or tables. It is an ancient book, translated and rhymed by poets who wrote "while men loved the lawe of kinde," or, that is, while they re-

<sup>5</sup> See Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, p. 297: "Now comth wanhope, that is despeir of the mercy of God, that comth somtyme of to muche outrageous sorwe. . . ."

<sup>6</sup> *De div. nat.*, PL, 122, 954. Hell involves the ultimate "despeir of the mercy of God."

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spected Nature, whose precepts are violated by the speaker's slothful condition. He finds in the book stories about kings and queens which seem irrelevant to his condition and hence trivial. But one story seems "a wonder thing," perhaps because it is relevant to him in mirroring and commenting upon his own grief. It reveals one possible consequence of his despairing grief, which he has, in fact, already considered, that is, self-destruction. When her husband, Seys, is lost at sea, Alcyone laments for him inordinately. She vows to her god that she will never eat bread until she hears from Seys. In answer to her prayer, Juno sends a messenger to Morpheus, who lives in a dark, barren cave, demanding that he bring the body of Seys to Alcyone in a dream. When Seys comes to her through Morpheus, he tells her that her sorrow is futile:

My swete wyf,  
Awake! let be your sorwful lyf!  
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! (201-211)

The message is essentially philosophical; it urges Alcyone to awaken from worldly concern and to act as a true widow should, realizing herself to be "bereft of every aid except that of God alone."<sup>7</sup> But Alcyone, who is blind to truth of this kind, cannot understand him:

<sup>7</sup> Alanus, *Distinctiones*, PL, 210, 1002. Chaucer's version of

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With that hir eyen up she casteth  
And saw noght. (212-213)

She continues to lament, and dies on the third day. The selection of this story from among the others in his book may indicate that the speaker is in a parallel situation of bereavement. If he too had a vision, would he be able to understand a message like that of Seys?

At the point where Alcyone is unaware of the fate of her husband, saying that she will not eat bread until she hears certainly of him, the speaker pauses to attest his sympathetic grief for her:

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

Alcyone's grief was at first like that of David before he knew certainly the fate of his first son by Bathsheba. He mourned and refused to eat before the boy died, but afterward, unlike Alcyone, when he knew that his son was dead, he threw off his mourning and broke bread, declaring to his servants the futility of further lament. His statement is not unlike that of Seys in its import (2 Kings 12. 22-23): "And he said: While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept for him: for I said: Who knoweth whether the Lord may not give him to me, and the child may live? But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Shall I be able to bring him back any more? I shall go to him rather: but he shall not re-

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the story should be contrasted with the original, where Cey says (*Met.* 11.669), "da lacrimas lugubriaque indue." In effect, the sense of the original is reversed.

turn to me." Death has effectively removed all justification for further show of grief.

Alcyone, on the contrary, continues to lament after she has learned the truth, refusing consolation. At first glance, for the speaker to fare the worse "al the morwe after" in thinking of her sorrow seems inconsistent. Since the morrow would be after he had awakened from the dream which he recounts in his own poem, he betrays inordinate sympathy for an irrational grief, and he appears to be left sorrowful rather for Alcyone than for the lamented Blanche. These inconsistencies disappear if we remember that one should not grieve for a true Christian who has gone to his reward, although one may grieve, but not inordinately, over the lamentable fate of a misled sinner. As St. Jerome explains in one of his consolatory epistles, "David justly lamented the death of his son who was a parricide; but afterward, when he could not bring it about that his other son might live, he did not lament his death because he knew that he had not sinned."<sup>8</sup> Chaucer's statement of grief over Alcyone can represent a foreshadowing of the consolation he attains at the end of the poem. Seys brings a philosophic message of comfort which that other "mased" creature, Alcyone, chooses not to hear; in consequence, it is her sorrow which is lamentable, not the death of Seys, the occasion for her grief. The application of the *sentence* of her fate to the plight of the grieving poet is clear. He must regard his own loss as something other than a blow of adverse Fortune, and he must learn to understand the relevance of Seys' message to his own situation.

In spite of his statement that he grieved for Alcyone

<sup>8</sup> *Epistolae*, ed. Hilberg (Vienna, 1910), Pars I, 301. See also Hugh of St. Victor, *PL*, 177, 495.

"al the morwe aftir," the poet indicates no immediate, overwhelming concern for Alcyone's plight. He merely wonders about any god who can cause a man to sleep, and speaks in "game," though his mood is not playful. When he has read his Ovidian story, he makes a joking vow to Morpheus or to Juno or to "som wight elles," and falls immediately to sleep. The fact that he prays to Morpheus "in game" and at the same time asserts that he knows only one God shows that he does not take the personages to whom he prays seriously as deities. Whatever power they have to "make men sleep" is not their own, but God's. Their power is illusion. The sleep of the poet, if it is to provide rest from his torment, must result from a deeper understanding of the story of Seys and Alcyone, which he had read "wel" and "overlooked everydel."

Alcyone prays to Juno for help:

Helpe me out of thys distresse,  
And yeve me grace my lord to see.  
Soone, or wite wher-so he be,  
Or how he fareth, or in what wise,  
And I shal make you sacrifice,  
And hooly youres become I shal  
With good wille, body, herte, and al. (110-116)

Whatever meaning Juno may have in this context, it is clear that Alcyone is interested only in what she may see or hear and not in the intangible but nevertheless real virtues which Seys may have had. In Christian terms, her prayer is in substance idolatrous.<sup>9</sup> In terms of pagan wisdom like that found, for example, in Cic-

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, line 859: "Certes, be it wyf, be it child, or any worldly thyng that he loveth biforn God, it is his maumet, and he is an ydolastre."

ero's *De amicitia*, a work which Dante praised for its efficacy in consolation, it is unreasonable. Alcyone is subject to "fantasye" in her solicitude and is therefore not in a position to heed any reasonable counsel her vision may suggest to her.<sup>10</sup> As a result of her plea to Juno she falls into a "ded slepe," a sleep of spiritual torpor, reflected in the details of the dark vision of the rocky cave of Morpheus.<sup>11</sup> If his habitation suggests the mind, it

<sup>10</sup> On "phantasies," see St. Augustine, *Epistolae*, 7, to Nebrius. The most widely known interpretation of the story of Ceyx during Chaucer's maturity was probably that which appears in Holkot's commentary on Wisdom. W. A. Pantin, *The English Church in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1955), p. 145, says, "Holkot on Wisdom was one of the best-sellers of the age, the sort of book you would be sure to find in every respectable late medieval library." The remarks on this story were incorporated by Berchorius in his commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, with a reference to their source. Following Ovid's account in *Met.* 11.633 ff., Holkot explains, *In librum sapientiae* (Basel, 1586), pp. 632-634, that there are three dream messengers: Morpheus, Icelos, and Phantasos. Morpheus appears to the dreamer in human form with human speech and gesture. Icelos assumes the shapes of beasts and birds, and Phantasos appears in the forms of inanimate objects. All three represent types of worldly solicitude. Chaucer's Alcyone is obviously suffering from solicitude of this kind over the loss of what is to her a gift of Fortune in human form, and it is clear that her dream originates within herself. On the other hand, it was widely held in the fourteenth century, even by such authorities as Bradwardine, that the substance of dreams frequently incorporates divine warnings. In Chaucer's poem, the dream results from solicitude, but the message it contains may be thought of as Providential, even though Alcyone is unable to understand it.

<sup>11</sup> For this variety of "sleep" as distinguished from that referred to above in note 4, see Rom. 13.11-13, 1 Cor. 15.34, Eph. 5.14, 1 Thess. 5.4-8. The awakening here urged is sometimes celebrated in the medieval *aube*.

suggests one darkened by loss of the guiding light of reason. The approach to the cave is a valley between two rocks where nothing grows. The cave is dark as "helle-pit," it contains Lethean streams, and the figures within it are asleep.<sup>12</sup>

Morpheus is awakened rudely by Juno's messenger, who cries "'Awake,' wonder hie." Morpheus provides that an image of Seys be brought to the dreaming Alcyone. Seys reveals the truth of his condition, and thus of her own, if she will awaken:

My swete wyf,  
Awake! let be your sorwful lyf!  
For in your sorwe there lyeth no red  
For, certes, swete, I nam but ded. (201-204)

Seys is dead and thus, like Troilus as he ascends through the spheres, beyond illusion and beyond remedy. Thus Seys is able to reveal a truth which would have been available even to pagans like Cicero; but Alcyone, whose mind is darkened by grief, does not respond to her husband's message. Seeing nothing but her temporal loss, she does not hear the wisdom he has to offer.

To the speaker, who knows "phisicien but oon"—"I ne knew never god but oon"—and can thus see in Alcyone's vision the wisdom which she is unable to perceive—"Ne she koude no rede but oon"—the story could suggest a solution to his own difficulties. If he desired the truth and was prepared to heed it, he would be able to receive a vision which would bring the peace of mind he desires. Alcyone received without understanding a message that the speaker would like to find again for himself. Thus he vows to give Mor-

<sup>12</sup> For the streams see the *Ovide moralisé*, 10.258-269.

pheus or Juno, or "som wight elles," a bed. The vow of the bed is elaborately developed. It is to be of dove's feathers, white within, adorned with gold, and covered in black satin. More than this, the feather-bed will be ensconced in a magnificent chamber with surrounding halls. These rooms will be painted entirely in gold and adorned with tapestry "of oo sute." Someone up there takes this vow seriously so that the poet falls asleep over his book, and dreams a dream.

The poet's splendid offer and its unexpectedly sudden soporific result are so happily ludicrous as not to need comment. On the other hand, the elaborateness of the vow does open up the possibility of highly appropriate symbolic values which provide another level of transition from wakefulness to dream. The bed is a traditional symbol for contemplation; so too are the feathers, the gold, the black cover, and the pillows.<sup>13</sup> The rooms which he vows also suggest contemplation. The manner of their decoration is reminiscent of that of Solomon's Temple, traditional symbol of the inner mind adorned to receive the Truth in prayer and contemplation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The meaning of the bed is fairly obvious. However, see, for example, Rabanus, *De universo*, PL, 111, 79; Peter Lombard on Ps. 6.6, PL, 191, 107. For feathers, see Alanus, *Distinctiones*, PL, 210, 897. Although gold is usually associated with wisdom, it may also suggest contemplation; see *ibid.*, 714. The black cover probably suggests outward tribulation or penance. See *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 1006. Cf. the epithet "Black Prince" adopted by Edward of Woodstock. For pillows, see Bede on Mark 4.38, PL, 92, 174. These references do not imply that Chaucer had specific Scriptural verses in mind as sources for the details. Rather, the context of the details is so arranged as to suggest certain commonplace associations.

<sup>14</sup> See Bede, *De templo Salomonis liber*, PL, 91, 757-758. For the gold, see col. 752, and tapestry, col. 770.

If the possibility of such fairly obvious symbolic values is granted, behind the humor of the transitional passage rests a further signification; the poet has responded sufficiently to the story of Seys and Alcyone to recognize that he must order his own mind if he is to find the comfort in his bereavement which the true Physician alone can give. Alanus says, in defining the symbolic sense of a bed, "just as in bed the sick man labors, the healthy man is at peace: so in the conscience the sinner labors, the just man is at peace."<sup>15</sup> On the symbolic level, the transition to the dream suggests that the poet finds sleep because his reading has prepared him to dream dreams purposefully. The transition also suggests that the dream will have a curative effect.

When the speaker has expressed his proper intentions, the contemplation he desires comes to him "so-deynly"; he falls asleep "ryght upon" his book. Chaucer comments that the dream he saw was so "ynly" sweet and so "wonderful" that no one—not even Joseph or Macrobius—could interpret it correctly. The exaggerated surface humor of the preceding passage is maintained, but obviously Chaucer is not saying that there is no use listening to the dream because any attempt at interpretation will be futile. What he does instead is to hint that the wonder and inward sweetness of the dream make it well worth interpreting. The statement is a humorous admonition to go beyond the sense to the doctrine within.

The dream begins (290-293) with a definite indication of time of year, May, and the time of day, dawn. The dreamer is awakened by the singing of birds (294-320), sitting on his "chambre roof" and singing a "solempne servise," that

<sup>15</sup> PL, 210, 843.

But hyt had be a thyng of heven—  
So mery a soun, so swete entewnes,  
That certes, for the town of Tewnes  
I nolde but I had herde hem synge. (308-311)

He discovers that his chamber is windowed with painted glass, depicting the "story of Troye," and the walls are "peynted" with "both text and glose of al the Romaunce of the Rose" (321-334). Through the windows the sun is shining. It is a cloudless, temperate day (335-343).

Are these details merely empty "convention," borrowed purely imitatively by Chaucer, or do they have significance? A leading question, for the great poet (our assumption) will not merely dress up conventions; he will use them meaningfully. And what is meaningful in the details which open the dream is not hard to come by, even for the modern reader if he is willing to make use of the obvious.

Most obviously, staying within the poem itself, the beginning of the dream contrasts sharply with the details of the story which put the poet to sleep. The temporal setting of the story of Alcyone is not given, except for the fact that Seys appears to Alcyone in her swoon, "a quarter before day," that is, in the dark or the false dawn in contrast to the poet's awakening in the bright, full dawn of a May day. Other details are contrasted: Morpheus' rocky cave, dark "as helle-pit," filled with "a dedly slepyng sown," the difficult awakening of Morpheus, as against the brightly painted, radiantly lighted room filled with the "solempne servise" of the birds which seemed "a thyng of hevene," and, finally, the poet's pleasant awakening. If the details of the story of Seys and Alcyone had relevant sym-

bolic values, so should the contrasting details of the dream.

The transition from story-reading to dreaming is stressed by triple repetition:

Loo, thus hyt was, thys was my sweven,  
Me thoghte thus: that hyt was May,  
And in the dawenyng I lay  
(Me mette thus) in my bed al naked. (290-293)

Emphasis is thus given to the details of the dream which must not be left unexamined as merely suggestive of Spring or as merely conventional or as providing merely a poetic parallel to the dawn in the Alcyone story. In interpreting the symbols in the dream we must posit its locale as the mind of a poet, darkened by loss, but incipiently lightened if he has understood the story of Seys and Alcyone, that he may sleep and in a dream perhaps hear and heed the message of the one Physician. To put the matter simply, the poet is suffering because Blanche the Duchess has died; his comfort must come from Christ, who died and was resurrected. And the Spring is the season of the Resurrection. In the annual calendar of his memory the Resurrection is a recent event, a reminder of the source of comfort. The dawn, too, is a conventional symbol not only of the Resurrection, but of the *lux divinae cognitionis* in the individual.<sup>16</sup>

The birds, in singing the "solempne servise" which awakens the dreamer, are performing what appears to be a symbolic action. The harmony of the bird's song is a conventional reflection of the heavenly harmony,<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 1009. Cf. St. Ambrose, *Hexameron*, PL, 14, 237-238; Gregory, *Moralia*, PL, 76, 97. It may be significant that in

but the "solempne servise" would appear to have specific relevance to the subject of bereavement. The song of heavenly harmony provides an appropriate device for awakening the dreamer to the May dawn and the sun, with its omnipresent symbolic value, perhaps here of the *lux divinae cognitionis*. Suggesting, as it does, the service of Lauds and the Resurrection, the song provides very different awakening from the rude awakening of Morpheus in the unilluminated cave.

Whatever one's reluctance to add to the number of Chaucer's puns, here he does appear to play with words in such a way as to enforce the symbolism of "solempne servise":

So mery a sown, so swete entewnes,  
That certes, for the town of Tewnes  
I nolde but I had herd hem synge. (309-311)

Literally as "town of Tunis," the phrase has no apparent value except to provide a rhyme. But "town of tewnes," allowing for the usual flexibility of vocalic shifting common to word play, may also be read as "tune of tunes," i.e., song of songs, or "Town of Towns," i.e. the New Jerusalem. The Song of Songs is the song of love between Christ and His Church, or between Christ and the soul of the faithful which seeks union with Him in the New Jerusalem. The dreamer's awakening has placed before him the possibility of peace for his unquiet heart. And immediately he notes the sun illuminating his painted windows, with their Aeneid-like story, and lighting the painted walls, with their story and gloss of the *Romaunce of the Rose*.

Bede's account of the Temple of Solomon, *PL*, 91, 751, the roof is made up of *tabulata* on three levels where the three types of faithful in the Church sing in praise of God.

No reader of Dante will need to be reminded that the medieval reader considered that the *Aeneid* was illuminated through Christian understanding, which saw in Aeneas' search for the new city the pilgrimage of the human spirit. Similarly in the light of doctrine, the gloss on the *Romaunce of the Rose* would serve as a warning against the idolatry of the lover who enters the garden of amorous delight.<sup>18</sup> "Late, this other night," presumably by candlelight, the poet had read the story of Seys and Alcyone in a collection,

That clerks had in olde tyme,  
And other poets, put in rime.

Now other stories are presented to him, dreaming, in the light of the sun shining through or illuminating them. Perhaps only coincidentally, but none the less aptly, it was another Aeneas who was cured of his eight years' illness by the one Physician, and in the description of the poet's illness at the beginning of the poem, one possible diagnosis was love-sickness, the illness of the lover of the Rose.

At all events, the sun illumines the bed of the dreamer, as it does the atmosphere outside the room. The air is temperate, and the sky is without any clouds. In the *Miscellanea* attributed in Migne to Hugh of St. Victor is a passage which may help to explain the significance of these details and their relation to the dreamer. Heaven is described as a place of light without

<sup>18</sup> For Chaucer's attitude toward the meaning of the *Roman*, see *LGW*, Prologue (G) 458ff. His use of the poem suggests that his attitude toward it must have resembled that taken later by Pierre Col, rather than that taken by Christine de Pisan and Jean Gerson. Cf. D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton, 1962), pp. 91-104.



clouds, "lux sine nubes." It is filled with the praise of God sung by the bands of the blessed. This Heaven cannot be seen with the eyes, but only through the mind guided by the Church. Perhaps this is why the dreamer can see the sun only as it shines through painted windows or as it is reflected on the painted walls. In his mind alone may the dreamer catch a glimpse of the heaven he may attain by faithful attention to the teachings of the Church.<sup>19</sup> In his dream the poet may find curative peace by seeing the experience of his grief in the light of the truth of God's heaven. It is not enough, however, to contemplate; action is required, and the dreamer is called from his bed.

As Morpheus was aroused by a horn to provide Alcyone with the image of her husband, the dreamer is aroused to activity by hearing a hunting horn blow and the sounds of hunters speaking of hunting the hart, and of how the hart has become "embosed," exhausted. The dreamer declares:

I was ryght glad, and up anoon  
Took my hors, and forth I wente  
Out of my chambre. (356-358)

He meets with a "route" of hunters and learns from one, leading a dog, that it is "th' emperour Octovyen" who will be hunting. Again the dreamer is pleased.

"A Goddes half, in good tyme!" quod I,  
"Go we faste!" and gan to ryde. (370-371)

The hunt begins in earnest. The hart is discovered, chased, and then,

This hert rused, and staal away  
Fro alle the houndes a privy way. (381-382)

The "forloyn" is blown.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *PL*, 177, 702.

There is in all this, at least on the surface, a dream-like air of inconsequence. When the dreamer hears of the hart it is "embosed," but the hunt begins in earnest later, and only then does the hart steal away. The dreamer apparently mounts his horse inside his chamber.<sup>20</sup> He is utterly unsurprised, but he is delighted first to hear that the hunt has begun and then to hear that the hunter is the "Emperor Octovyen." The symbolic level may provide a consistent meaning for these details.

The exposition of this symbolism may well begin with the double meaning of "hert," *hart* and *heart*, and the commonplace allegorization of God as the Hunter-King hunting after the human soul.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the name of the King, "Octovyen," may contain an etymological pun: *octo*, "eight," and *vyen* "coming." The number *eight* signifies Christ's Resurrection, the recollection of which has already been suggested by the song of the birds in the May dawn, or the resurrection of the faithful on the Day of Judgment. Again, it suggests the kind of inner resurrection implied by the end of the eight years' malady.<sup>22</sup> The mounting of the horse

<sup>20</sup> This inconsequence has been noted, and in one case has seemed sufficiently inexplicable to warrant an unsupported emendation of the text. See Robinson's notes on lines 357-358 and 368.

<sup>21</sup> See Ps. 41.1 and Lombard, *PL*, 191, 415-416. The idea is taken up in Bede's *Soliloquium*, *AH*, 50.114-115. Cf. 3 Kings 4.23, and Rabanus, *PL*, 109, 131. The idea is reflected in *The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc*, trans., G. C. Druce (Ashford, Kent, 1936), ll. 2815-2816. See also *Gesta romanorum*, *EETS*, LXIX, p. 320.

<sup>22</sup> On "eight," see Rabanus, *De universo*, *PL*, 111, 491; Bede, *De templo Salomonis*, *PL*, 91, 806; Gregory, *PL*, 76, 1341, 1391;

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may be used to suggest the proper intention of the dreamer.<sup>23</sup> The apparent inconsequence of the "embosed" hart, for whom the hunt begins in earnest only after the dreamer joins the hunt, but who later escapes, has relation to the two states of mind of the dreaming poet. On the one hand, he is a "mased" creature like Alcyone, insensible to comfort; the "hart" who steals away is like the heart of the poet, too overcome by grief to heed the message of wisdom. On the other hand, the poet, because he is aware of the Physician who can cure his malady, vaguely realizes the solution to his problem. There are, as it were, two parts of the poet's mind, one grieving at the loss of what appears to have been a gift of Fortune, and another aware of the sources of rational consolation. Medieval readers were familiar with inner divisions of this kind, most obviously, perhaps, in the *Consolation* of Boethius, where, as glosses like Trivet's explained, a dialogue takes place between two aspects of a single person, one wise and knowing, the other confused by the whims of Lady Fortune. We should understand that inner divisions of this kind in medieval texts are not aspects of "psychology" in the modern sense, but of moral philosophy.

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Lombard, introduction to Ps. 6, *PL*, 191, 103. Cf. the meaning of the octave in St. Augustine, *De trinitate*, 4.3, and, for some notion of the pervasiveness of the idea, Richard Krautheimer, "Introduction to an 'Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture.'" *JWCI*, v (1942), p. 11. The Resurrection was celebrated on the eighth day (Sunday), and late medieval baptismal fonts commonly had eight sides to suggest the resurrection of the baptized Christian with Christ. See Berchorius, *Reductorium morale*, Book XIII, xxviii, "octonarius signat beatitudinem et tempus future resurrectionis." Cf. Robertson, *Preface*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>23</sup> For the horse and horn see Alanus, *Distinctiones*, *PL*, 210, 780 and 949.

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This division in the mind of the dreamer may suggest an important clue to the meaning of the ensuing action. Suddenly, after he hears the "forloyn," the dreamer says,

I was go walked fro my tree,  
And as I wente, ther cam by mee  
A whelp, that fauned me as I stood,  
That hadde yfolowed, and koude no good.  
(387-390)

He, in turn, follows the whelp along a flowery path in a shady wood, until he comes to a "man in blak" with his back to an old oak tree. The remainder of the dream reports the conversation between the dreamer, who had left his tree, and the grieving Black Knight, who is found leaning against a tree. The Black Knight is commonly identified as John of Gaunt, but beyond the reasonable assurance that the poem is about his deceased Duchess, there is little basis for this identification, which has not gone unchallenged. There are reasons to distrust it. The Black Knight's age is given very specifically as twenty-four; John was twenty-nine when Blanche died—a small discrepancy, but the argument for the identification must take it into account. There is no evidence to suggest—as with Richard II—any extravagant grief over the loss of his wife; indeed he remarried very soon, although for purely political reasons. This fact supplies no evidence either way, but does raise the question of whether Chaucer was writing to console the Duke or to eulogize the Duchess, two matters not necessarily the same. At any event, would not Chaucer in picturing the Alcyone-like violence of the Black Knight's grief have been treading on potentially tactless ground? Would the Duke have

been flattered? Further, the line of description, "upon his berd but lytel her" (456), seems hardly designed to flatter. John may not have been vain, or, at best, vain about his beard. But the beard was considered the "ornament of a man's face," and a sign of masculinity.<sup>24</sup> To say that John's beard had "little hair" would hardly have been tactful. Finally, how pleased might John have been with Chaucer's picture of himself as the Black Knight under the tutelage of Blanche, so that, in effect, he overcame his youthful folly through her?

Such arguments as these have convinced us that the Black Knight was not intended as the dream representative of John of Gaunt, but rather as a sorrowing alter ego of the speaker in the poem, like the poet himself representative of all those who have honored and loved Blanche and lost her in death. However, the biographical question is not central to our reading of the dream dialogue. We find it more consonant with what is in the poem and with historical probability to assume that the Black Knight is not John of Gaunt. For us the importance of the Black Knight in the poem rests in the fact of his being Alcyone-like in his grief. He *is*, in effect, grief itself. Whether the dreamer learns the nature of his own sorrow from observing a simulacrum or the dream representative of an historical person is not too material; those who feel strongly that the Black Knight is John of Gaunt can replace the general with the particular. For them the dreamer will discover the

<sup>24</sup> Berchorius, *Reductorium morale*, II, xiii. Berchorius cites Chaucer's "daun Constantyn." He equates the beard with virtue, and states that three types of persons are lacking in beards, women, *castrati* and boys, types of the effeminate, those cut off from virtue, and the ignorant. See also Alanus, *PL*, 210, 826.

truth of his own sorrow through observation of John's grief; for us he discovers the truth in an alter ego, representative of his own grief. In what follows we assume that the Black Knight is *not* John of Gaunt.

The situation in the dream very possibly suggests the story which inspired the poet to dream in the first place. At the heart of his dream he finds a "mased" Alcyone-like person. Just as Seys came to Alcyone, so he as a rational being confronts a creature like that part of him which is immersed in irrational grief because of an act of Fortune. Here is the significance of the dreamer leaving his tree to find the Knight in mourning leaning against a tree.<sup>25</sup> In effect, the point is a fairly simple one, however devious the allegorical vehicle may seem to be. Grace is available to man, but only if he prepares himself to receive it. The sorrowing poet must search his own heart for understanding, and this is the "hunt" with which the remainder of the poem is concerned. The loss of Blanche must be seen not as a loss of a gift of Fortune but as an inspiration. It is important, moreover, not that the dreamer specifically be led to see this, but that the audience of the poem be led to understand it. The subject of the poem is not the poet, but the Duchess whom it eulogizes.

The details of the poet's discovery of his mourning self through facing its simulacrum are perhaps symbolic. The whelp, for example, may have a fairly specific significance in relation to the hounds from whom the hart had stolen away. In the symbolism of the hunt, the hounds have a traditional role as preachers. But the

<sup>25</sup> If other precedents are wanted in addition to the *De consolatione* for the kind of inner dialogue suggested here, cf. St. Augustine's *Soliloquium*, Dante's *Vita nuova*, or Petrarch's *Secretum*.

hart has escaped the hounds, and it is the whelp, who could not thrive in the hunt, who leads the dreamer to the vision of his "mased" inner self. What is intended here is perhaps suggested by the symbolic distinction between dogs and whelps in the *De bestiis et aliis rebus*, a commonplace book. After discussing the various functions of hounds, the author describes the curative functions of hounds and whelps considered symbolically as priests. Hounds with their tongues represent priests who heal sins which are revealed at confession. Whelps represent priests in their function of curing both by word and by example sins unwittingly retained in the mind and thus not confessed.<sup>26</sup> The cure "in opere vel sermone" is much the same as that which succeeded with Aeneas after his eight years' malady.<sup>27</sup> The poet, as he is pictured at the beginning of the poem, is unrepentant, but the words and examples of those who seek to console him nevertheless bring him to a realization that only a part of him is lost.

The hart, as we recall, escaped the hounds "a privy way," which may imply that he separated himself from his fellows by retiring into his private sorrows where no external ministrations could reach him. To help him find himself, the whelp leads the dreamer down a flowery path through the woods.<sup>28</sup> The grove is so flowery

<sup>26</sup> That the whelp "koude no good" (390) suggests in context his wordless, humble role of teaching by example rather than by preaching. Further, the hart is symbolically complex. The "defaute" (389) of the hunters does not represent their inability but the lost state of the mourner. The whelp, too, may reflect this state.

<sup>27</sup> See above, note 3.

<sup>28</sup> One of the traditional meanings of *semita* is *cogitatio*. See Alanus, *Distinctiones*, PL, 210, 940. The "privy" way suggests solitude which, *ibid.*, 948, may represent "separatio ab Ecclesia." Cf. *Gregorianum*, PL, 193, 269-270.

that the earth seemed to wish to be "gayer than the heven." It is a typical earthly paradise whose delights are transitory. The branches shade the grass and flowers so as to form a sort of "via tenebrosa" whose shadows indicate oblivion. Finally the dreamer finds an image of his grief-stricken self in the black of tribulation, leaning against an oak, the tree of despair, perhaps the same symbolic tree from which he in rationality had walked.<sup>29</sup>

Whatever the meaning of the whelp, the dreamer has walked from his tree, through a wooded path, to find his own suffering, but now viewed in another person. In his grief the poet had lost sight of the only source of comfort, God. The true reason for his sorrow is error; the speaker had been temporarily misled to believe that the loss of another human was the cause of his grief. In Christian fact there can be no sorrow except that arising in separation from God. A man's love has two sides, one false (cupidity) the other true (charity); his grief has two sides, one *tristitia*, false grief caused by the loss of an object of desire, the other a true grief caused by his enforced bodily separation from God. What the speaker had taken as grief was itself false worldly vanity. It is to understand this that the dreamer, representing the released rationality of the poet, is led to view in another person the false sorrow into which he had chosen to fall. Therefore, the recognition of the man in black by the dreamer is not immediate, but follows only, as it were, his awakening to the realization of the sober truth about himself.

<sup>29</sup> The scenery in general resembles that of the garden of Deduit in the *Roman de la rose*. For the blackness of the knight and the oak, see *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 1006, 1036. Cf. the oak under which Delyt stands alone in *The Parliament of Fowls*, discussed below, Ch. III.

As he approaches, the dreamer sees that the man in black seems by his manner to be "A wonder wel-farynge knyght." The knightly status need not be either literally autobiographical or indicative of "historical allegory." All Christians became knights spiritually at Confirmation. Symbolically all who live are in battle either as knights of God or as knights of the world.<sup>30</sup> His age of twenty-four may have an incidental symbolic value. It would place the Black Knight in the period of adolescence, which extended from fourteen to twenty-eight. It is the period when man should be informed by precepts and ruled by counsel, so that he may learn to conquer himself.<sup>31</sup>

The dreamer takes up a position behind the Black Knight and hears him complain piteously:

Hit was gret wonder that Nature  
Myght suffre any creature  
To have such sorwe, and be not ded. (467-468)

In this detail and in the subsequent description of the Knight's condition, it becomes clear that he is exactly in the same situation as the speaker at the beginning of the poem whose mode of life was "ageynes kynde." In contrast to the song of the birds, which had reminded the dreamer of the "toun of Tewnes," the song of the Black Knight is "withoute noote, withoute song." The song that the birds sang was one of joy in God. The Black Knight's song is without melodious joy; it is a song of sorrow for an earthly object.<sup>32</sup> The song itself states explicitly the desperate sorrow of the poet's

<sup>30</sup> Gregory, *Moralia*, PL, 76, 618, 1079.

<sup>31</sup> On adolescence, see above, Ch. I, note 19.

<sup>32</sup> A "song without song" is probably one that does not reflect celestial harmony. Cf. Ch. III, note 5, below.

heart. He will never be joyful again because his lady is dead and gone from him. She is good beyond compare. He should himself have died because only his lady can bring him joy. When the Knight has finished his song, the blood rushes to his heart, where the internal wound lies. He falls into a state parallel with that described in the opening lines of the poem. He is oblivious to outward circumstances, wonders how he may live, and lapses into a state contrary to Nature.

Finally the Knight sees the dreamer, and the two exchange courtesies, during which the Knight impresses the dreamer as being strikingly amiable. He spoke

As hyt had be another wyght. (530)

Perhaps this line means that the Knight is pleasant in spite of his sorrow. He acts like any other man, even though he seems bound in despair. At all events, he is "treatable" even in sorrow. At this point the dreamer has observed the Black Knight closely and overheard his joyless song. He has all the facts at hand to recognize his despair. The questions which he asks, as Professor Kittredge observed, cannot be asked in ignorance but must be part of a deliberate plan. This attitude is supported by the dreamer's statement,

I gan fynde a tale  
To hym, to loke wher I myght ought  
Have more knowynge of hys thought. (536-538)

By causing the alter ego of his grieving self to make a sort of confession, the dreamer, symbolizing the poet's own rational self, may indicate the way to the solace of truth to the poet, or at least to the reader. The Knight is unconcerned that the hart has escaped:

Y do no fors therof, quod he;  
My thought ys theron never a del.

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By oure Lord, quod I, y trow yow wel;  
Ryght so me thinketh by youre chere. (542-545)

If the hunt for the hart is significant, then the Knight's statement is indicative of his despairing state. The dreamer promises that if the Black Knight will tell his woe to him, he may be able to amend it. But the despairing one is unable to believe in this possibility of comfort:

No man may my sorwe glade,  
That maketh my hewe to falle and fade,  
And hath myn understondynge lorn,  
That me ys wo that I was born! (563-566)

The sorrow upon which he is wilfully fixed has deprived him of understanding, which the intellect alone can supply. He demonstrates that he has lost his understanding in his list of impossible cures. Ovid cannot cure him of his love. Orpheus with his melody may not raise his spirits. Dedalus with his magic may not divert him. The speaker at the beginning of the poem knows that there is one Physician who may cure him, but the despairing Black Knight feels that there is no cure because the lady has died. When he speaks of the impossibility of any physician curing him, he refers to the founders of medicine:

Ne hele me may no phisicien,  
Noght Ypocras ne Galyen.  
Me ys wo that I lyve houres twelve. (571-573)

Because his lady has died, it is painful to him even that he must live for twelve hours. But in rejecting the twelve hours, perhaps the Knight inadvertently reveals the cause of his sorrow. There are twelve hours in the day, and he who walks in the day walks under the pro-

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tection of the Physician.<sup>33</sup> His complete abandonment to sorrow is also indicated in his unavailing desire for death and his considerable self-pity. His pains are greater than those of "Cesiphus"; indeed, he exclaims,

For y am sorwe and sorwe ys y. (597)

Sisyphus was a thief whose futile task was thought to represent, not, as some would now have it, the Fate of Man, but the punishment of those who persist in their iniquity.<sup>34</sup> If the Knight's sorrow is, as he says, greater than that of Sisyphus, he has indeed created for himself a Hades of *tristitia*.

The Knight's worldly virtues and comforts, as he explains at some length, have become vices and discomforts. As a result, among other things, he is sorrowful, idle, wrathful, ill, fearful, foolish, wakeful, and at strife. This change from his apparently happy former state he attributes to the hypocritical falseness of Fortune, the idol of false portraiture, as he calls her. She promises all, but keeps no promise. She seems to walk upright in integrity, but actually she is halt. She seems fair, but is inwardly foul, and so on. There is a direct relation between the doubleness of Fortune and the abrupt change in all that has been dear to him.

<sup>33</sup> John 11.9. Cf. Bruno Astensis, *PL*, 165, 541-542: "Si quis autem hunc diem sequatur, si quis in eo ambulaverit, si quis mihi crediderit, non offendet. Cur? *Quia lucem huius mundi videt. Ego sum lux mundi. Si vero in nocte ambulaverit, si errorem et tenebrarum principem secutus fuerit (hoc est enim in nocte ambulare), offendet et cadet. Cur? Quia lux non est in eo.*"

<sup>34</sup> G. H. Bode, *Scriptores rerum mythicarum* (Cellis, 1834), p. 177. This work, attributed variously to Alexander Neckam and Albericus of London, was extremely popular. Petrarch had a copy made for his library.

Actually, he has been defeated by Fortune because he has relied on her in too great love for one of her gifts, so that his life partakes of the instability of Fortune. His complaint against false Fortune is another indication of his blindness. Not Fortune but he himself is at fault, for he has relied upon her completely.<sup>35</sup> Figuratively, the Knight ventured to play chess with her in setting his love on things subject to Fortune. The figure is itself a delusion because it implies that a man may win in a game with Fortune. If he had known the truth, the Knight would have realized that when Fortune took his "fers" she was acting in accordance with her nature. His virtues and comforts were dependent on Fortune's external well-seeming. When her true nature becomes apparent, he loses the object of his love, and his comforts and virtues vanish.

The figure of the chess game is used to emphasize the element of Fortune in the Knight's loss and his own lack of reason. It is based on the account of Fortune given by Reason in *The Romance of the Rose*, where King Manfred of Sicily, flaunting the Church, subjects himself to Fortune but is mated by a "paonet errant," losing his "fierce" on the first day of battle. Having told this story, Reason admonishes:

Veiz ci genz qui granz eneurs tindrent,  
Or sez a quel chief il en vindrent:  
N'est donc bien Fortune seüre;  
N'est bien fos qui s'i asseüre,  
Quant ceus qu'el veaut par devant oindre  
Seaut ainsinc par darriere poindre?  
E tu, qui la rose baisas,  
Par quei de deul si grant fais as

<sup>35</sup> See Boethius, *De cons.*, 2, Pr. 1.

Que tu ne t'en sez apaisier,  
Cuidaies tu toujourz baisier,  
Toujourz avoir aise e delices?  
Par mon chief, tu iés fos e nices. (6741-6752)

The Black Knight had unreasonably expected to maintain "aise e delices," a wish, like Manfred's proud ambition, "Contre la fei de sainte iglise." The only way that he conceives to contend with Fortune is to be more skillful at the "jeupardies," or problems of the game. He is aware that hope of overcoming Fortune by skill is deceiving, but he does not really understand why, except in terms of his blind adoration for his lost lady. He says that if he had been in Fortune's place, or if he had been God who controls Fortune, he would have taken the Queen too, because of her great worth. The Black Knight sees that there is a power which governs Fortune, but he does not see that only by trusting in this power may he triumph over Fortune. In short, the chess game reveals the Black Knight as one who believes in God but must be shown that he must turn to God for comfort.

The contrast between the Black Knight and the dreamer is made explicit. The latter not only knows his Physician but knows also that his Physician may easily be approached, since He is seeking him. Morally, the situation is uniquely that of the will and the intellect. The will must be guided in its love by the knowledge furnished it by the intellect. Not seeing beyond Fortune, the self-willed Knight is reduced to desperation. Since he has lost his bliss, he has no recourse but to end his life:

But through that draughte I have lorn  
My blysse—allas! that I was born!—

For evermore y trowe trewely;  
For al my wille, my lust holly  
Ys turned; but yet, what to doone?  
Be oure Lord, hyt ys to deye soone. (685-690)

What follows is an explanation from the Black Knight's point of view of why death is the only recourse for him. He is determined not to abandon his sorrow over the loss of his lady. Since he lives for the lady, he must either find her or die. He looks to the sky and the earth, but cannot find her, so that the world brings him only weeping. But his sorrow brings him nothing; that is, he owes it nothing for anything gained from it. No gladness may refresh him, and he has lost the sufficiency that makes life possible. Thus only death is left. Like Tantalus (709), who, as Trivet explains in his commentary on Boethius, was too avaricious to supply himself with necessities,<sup>36</sup> the Knight is too much concerned for his loss to take any care for his own needs.

When the dreamer hears the lament of the Knight, he remarks,

Unnethe myght y lenger dwelle,  
Hyte dyde myn herte so moche woo. (712-713)

The woe of his own "heart," the rused "hart" of Christ's hunt, is almost unbearable to him. Intellectually, he strives to correct the false basis of the Black Knight's despair, asking the Knight to pity his "nature" that formed him "to creature." This request suggests that the Image of God, in which he is made, is distorted in the idolatry of the will.<sup>37</sup> He reminds the Knight of Socrates, who cared nothing for Fortune, just as Reason

<sup>36</sup> London, British Museum MS Burney 131, fol. 49 verso.

<sup>37</sup> See our "*Piers Plowman*" and *Scriptural Tradition* (Princeton, 1951), pp. 107-109.

in *The Romance of the Rose* reminded the dreamer of the same example.<sup>38</sup> This the Knight refuses to heed.

The Black Knight blinds himself to the truth, in part by means of the simile of the chess game. The dreamer is aware of this self-deception and knows that the truth must be acknowledged plainly if the cure for sorrow is to be effective. He takes up the figure that the Black Knight has suggested, but in such a way as to indicate that he understands it figuratively. Literally, there is only one "fers"; yet the dreamer says that even if the Black Knight had lost the "ferses twelve," he would not be justified in committing suicide. Actually, since he has overheard the Black Knight's opening complaint, the dreamer knows that he is elegantly alluding to his lady in the figure of the "fers." But he knows that the plain statement of the loss must preface the acknowledgment, to paraphrase Seys, that in

sorwe there lyth no red  
For, certes . . . [she is] but ded.

The Black Knight had said only "I have lorn my blysse." For his own purposes the dreamer accepts this statement, later saying,

Good sir, telle me al hooly  
In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore  
That ye have thus youre blysse lore. (746-748)

By the loss of the "fers" the dreamer pretends to understand the only loss acknowledged by the Knight, the loss of his bliss.<sup>39</sup> The dreamer now demolishes the

<sup>38</sup> RR, 5847-5856. It is significant that Reason in the *Roman* and the dreamer in Chaucer's poem play very similar parts. The lines are from the same discourse on Fortune which suggested the figure of the chess game.

<sup>39</sup> Note that "bliss" may have a double meaning: the Knight's



Black Knight's argument that the only course open to him is suicide. First of all, he shows that the amount of the loss has no bearing on the issue, for even if the Black Knight had lost not only bliss but the other fruits of the spirit as well, and had committed suicide, he would be as guilty of homicide as was Medea; for Phyllis, Dido, and Echo, who had committed suicide or died in sorrow, were like Medea, damned for the folly they had done because of earthly grief. The four women also have in common a self-deception caused by idolatry of a gift of Fortune. His last illustration is Samson:

And for Dalida died Sampson,  
That slough hymself with a piler. (738-739)

Samson's death, however, is significantly different from the others since he did not die "for Dalida," at least in the context of the dreamer's examples. Rather he died in sorrow for his sins, obedient to God's purpose. Moreover, his death was universally taken as prefiguring Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The other suicides are wickedly idolatrous; Samson's death is one of self-sacrifice, of repentance, following God's wishes:<sup>40</sup>

But ther is no man alyve her  
Wolde for a fers make this woo! (740-741)

Samson, prefiguring the Redeemer, may be said to have

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false view of it, and the true. Peter Lombard, *PL*, 192, 160, explains *gaudium* as "puritas conscientiae et elatio animi super his quae digna sunt exultationis." According to Alanus, *PL*, 210, 138-139, *gaudium* frees the mind of care. It is like the garden of Paradise and is a sure protection against the whims of Fortune. Again, it is like the Temple of Solomon.

<sup>40</sup> For Samson as a figure of Christ, see *Glossa ordinaria*, *PL*, 113, 532. The idea is, of course, a commonplace in medieval art.

given his life for a "fers," the supreme act of charity, but no man may throw away his life because he has made his earthly good another human creature.

But the Black Knight does not understand why he should not lament over the loss of an earthly object, and he does not learn the lesson which the dreamer implies. Rather, he continues in his belief that the greatness of his loss is sufficient reason for his unnatural grief:

Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;  
I have lost more than thow wenest. (743-744)

These lines become something of a refrain for the remainder of the dialogue as the dreamer, through pretended misunderstanding, draws the Knight into a full confession. The dreamer knows that the Black Knight has lost an earthly object of surpassing worth, but the Black Knight believes that he has lost more than he actually has, for he fails to see his loss in the light of God's Providence. Acknowledging its loss and accepting it as coming from God is the end to which the will must be directed. The dreamer now asks the Black Knight the circumstances of his loss of bliss. The terms of his question are those of the confessional, suggesting that the succeeding dialogue will take the form of a confession in which the true state of the Black Knight will be revealed. Specifically, the dreamer asks two of the traditional circumstantial questions: How? and Why?<sup>41</sup> Before beginning his confession of love, the

<sup>41</sup> For the "circumstances," see *Parson's Tale*, pp. 309-310. For Chaucer's use of confession as a symbolic device in a secular poem, W. A. Pantin's comment on Gower's *Confessio amantis* is to the point, *op.cit.*, p. 227: "Here we have in fact an elegant, moral parody of the contemporary treatises on confession. At first sign it sounds like a piece of profanity, but it is simply an

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Black Knight has the dreamer swear to listen attentively. The swearing of the oath is humorously formal, indicative of his patient willingness to hear out the Black Knight. The Knight in being so earnestly insistent that the dreamer realize the seriousness of the situation appears from the outset a little ridiculous. He demands

That thou shalt hooly, with al thy wyt,  
Doo thyn entent to herkene hit. (751-752)

When we remember that the Knight is simply asking the dreamer to be attentive, his pertinacious solemnity seems humorously childish, and witless. The simple reply of the dreamer, "Yis, syr," dissatisfies him. "Swere thy trouthe therto," he insists. "Gladly," replies the dreamer, but this is not enough for the Knight: "Do thanne holde therto." Patiently, the dreamer makes his formal vow:

I shal ryght blythely, so God me save,  
Hooly, with al the wit I have,  
Here you, as wel as I kan. (755-757)

Except for one important detail the dreamer's vow recalls that which Alcyone made to Juno:

And hooly youres becom I shal  
With goode wille, body, herte, and al. (115-116)

The contrast is that the dreamer's vow significantly involves only his wit. The roles played by the Knight and the dreamer in their dialogue seem to be those of will

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example of the medieval love of allegory; men were as ready to make moral allegory out of the technique of confession as they were to make a moral allegory out of Noah's Ark or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*."

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and wit, roles suggested not only by the contrast between the wording of the dreamer's vow and that of Alcyone, but more strongly by the Knight's self-reported vow to love, which is almost identical with that of Alcyone. He vowed to Love that he would

hooly with good entente  
And through plesaunce become his thrall  
With good wille, body, hert, and al. (766-768)

A parallel between the Knight and Alcyone is suggested, as well as their difference from the dreamer. As they are associated with the will, he is associated with the wit.

The confession begins with due solemnity, "A Goddes half." For the Black Knight, however, what ensues is not a confession but an act of self-justification for the extremity of his grief. His basic position is that the greatness of his loss excuses the greatness of his sorrow. He explains why he was susceptible to such a great loss, disclaiming in this way any responsibility. First he explains that it was "kyndely" understanding and his "owne wyt" that led him to do homage to love,

That hyt plesance to hym were,  
And worship to my lady dere. (773-774)

However, at the time he made the vow to serve his lady, he had not met her.

And this was longe, and many a yer,  
Or that myn herte was set owher,  
That I dide thus, and nyste why;  
I trowe hit cam me kyndely. (775-778)

The Knight seems to say that he has the will's natural propensity to love so that his service to love was in accord with nature and thus justified. What is more, he

continues, offering still another explanation, his mind when he came to love was "as a whit wal or a table" (780) prepared to receive any kind of impression. Any impressions he received were not his responsibility; his thought, or wit, put love there. Since love was there first, he chose it, and since he chose it first, it has been there ever since. This happened before too much knowledge had turned his heart to malice, which stands in opposition to love. As a final explanation, he says that love came to him in early youth when man is naturally idle and when his thoughts are uncontrolled.<sup>42</sup>

On the surface, these hasty and inconsistent explanations, however typical of the earthly lover, are not reasonable. Considered on the level of *sentence* they involve an unwitting confession of lost innocence, but not a very good confession. The Knight's sorrow is not the sorrow of true repentance,<sup>43</sup> but sorrow arising directly from his error. Moreover, he disavows responsibility, thus repeating the sin of Adam in blaming Eve for his fall.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, he blames his wit for his own wilful irrationality in paying homage to Love as the abstract of his desire. He blames nature, saying that his tendency to earthly love came to him "kyndely." This was evidently a favorite device. A typical warning against it in a standard handbook of penance runs: "He [the penitent] should know the sin to be his own, nor should he wish to excuse himself lest he make his crime greater, as Adam did."<sup>45</sup> The "white table" he mentions is a symbol of innocence, so that the description of its dedication to earthly love is an unwitting description of lost

<sup>42</sup> On *pueritia*, see above, Ch. I, note 19.

<sup>43</sup> On true contrition, see *Parson's Tale*, p. 310.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. St. Augustine, *Sermo xx*, *PL*, 38, 139.

<sup>45</sup> *De vera et falsa poenitentia*, *PL*, 40, 1126.

innocence.<sup>46</sup> In youth he was governed by idleness, the sin which leads to cupidity; his works were not the works of charity, but "flyttinge"; and everything was "ylyche good" to him. He was thus exactly in the same confused condition as Alcyone or as the speaker at the beginning of the poem. It is a condition which he should long since have overcome, since the age of adolescence is one in which one subjects oneself to discipline, is informed by precept, and is ruled by counsel.<sup>47</sup> In short, the Knight reveals that through wilfulness he has lost his innocence in youth because he was governed by idleness.

Continuing his apologia, the Knight tells of his first encounter with his lady. He was introduced to a fair company, not by "hap or grace," but by Fortune, "false trayteresse pervers" (813). Among the ladies in the company, one was much fairer than the others, excelling them in beauty, in manner, and in every way. The Knight was caught so suddenly that he took "no maner counseyl but at hir lok" and at his own heart (840-841). Fortune, as Boethius shows, has control under God only over that which happens externally to man. It has no control over his heart unless he wills his service to Fortune by loving too much one of its gifts and thus abandoning reason. To complain of Fortune is thus irrational; it is a false way of shifting responsibility. He complains of Fortune,

For now she worcheth me ful woo. (813)

<sup>46</sup> The table, like most of the other details in this passage, is from Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*. Lines 26-28 (ed. Hoepffner) read, "Car le droit estat d'innocence / Ressamble proprement la table / Blanche. . . ." Innocence is necessary for a place in the New Jerusalem.

<sup>47</sup> See above, Ch. I, note 19.

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Fortune is appointed by God as a trial to the just in prosperity and grief, leading man to turn from God either in the delights of the world or in the world's adversity. The Black Knight has succumbed to both temptations, as his complaint against Fortune reveals. In admitting that it was in answer to his plea that Love brought the lady into his thought and that he took counsel only at her look and at his heart, the Knight implies that the wit was responsible:

That purely tho myn owne thoght  
Seyde hit were beter serve hir for noght  
Than with another to be wel. (843-845)

He irrationally shifts the blame to wit in the very act of disregarding wit. Actually, as we begin to discover, both Fortune and wit have benefited the will, revealing to him a lady so virtuous that through her example he is led into good action. In the description that follows, we are shown how the lady leads him to virtuous love through the love of her virtues. She brings him out of his wilful childishness and governs him in his first youth. Like Dante's Beatrice, she serves as a model and guide.

As we shall see, in the description of the lady, the details are contrived so as to suggest not only the beauty of the flesh which the Knight sees, but also the true beauty of the spirit. Her beauty is like that of the sun; she surpasses others in beauty as the sun surpasses the moon or the seven stars. That is, she surpasses others as Christ surpasses the church and the saints and yields them the brightness of his own light. Rabanus gives the key to the comparison: "For the sun expresses the idea of the Savior in that just as it exceeds the other sidereal bodies, that is, the moon and the stars, in bril-

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liance . . . so also Christ, radiant with His own virtue and needing assistance from no one, lends the radiance of virtue and wisdom to holy Church and to its saints."<sup>48</sup> The luminosity here suggested is also the light of charity, which is most intense in Christ. This light may radiate from the human heart throughout the whole body, producing an incomparable beauty. St. Bernard's account of this process suggests several of the features of the Black Knight's description:

"But when the splendor of that charity fills the depths of the heart more abundantly, it is necessary that it shine forth without, like a light hidden under a bushel [cf. Mark 4. 21-22, Luke 8. 16-17], or, more appropriately, like a light which shines in the darkness and does not know how to be hidden [cf. John 1. 5]. Then the body, the image of the mind, receives it shining and throwing forth its rays, and diffuses it through its members and senses, until it appears in its actions, its words, its looks, its gait, its laughter (if there is laughter) mingled with gravity and full of dignity. Then when the movements, actions, and functions of the members and senses are grave, pure, modest, free from all insolence and effrontery, foreign to both levity and listlessness, but disposed in equity and devoted to piety, the beauty of the soul will become manifest, provided that no hypocrisy lurks within it. For these things may all be simulated and may not be derived from an overflowing heart. And that this beauty of the spirit may be understood more clearly, that virtue in which we find it may perhaps be defined: it is that noble demeanor of the mind solicitous to preserve with a good conscience the integrity of reputation. Or, according to the Apostle [2 Cor. 8. 21], *we forecast what may be good*

<sup>48</sup> *De universo*, PL, 111, 268.

not only before God, but also before men. Blessed is the spirit which invests itself with that chaste beauty, as if with the whiteness of celestial innocence through which it achieves for itself a glorious conformity not with the world but with the Word, whence it is said that it is [Wisdom 7. 26] *the brightness [candor] of eternal life*, and [Heb. 1. 3] *the brightness of his glory and the figure of his substance*."<sup>49</sup>

The lady's serious yet joyful demeanor, her radiance, her "whiteness," all arise from charity. The white radiance of Blanche is a reflection and a promise of the white radiance of the celestial city.

The theme of the description of the lady is set in the opening lines:

I sawgh hyr daunce so comlily,  
Carole and synge so swetely,  
Laughe and pleye so womanly,  
And loke so debonairly,  
So goodly speke and so frendly,  
That, certes, y trowe that evermor  
Nas seyn so blysfyl a tresor.  
For every heer on hir hed,  
Soth to seyne, hyt was not red,  
Ne nouthur yelow, ne broun hyt nas,  
Me thoghte most lyk gold hyt was. (848-858)

These attractions serve as a summary of the lady's beauty, in act and word. The attributes of singing and dancing on the level of sense are social graces appropriately put first on the list of those things which attracted the Black Knight to the lady. If these actions are truly

<sup>49</sup> *Sermones in cantica*, PL, 183, 1193, or *Opera* (Rome, 1957 ff.), II, pp. 314-315. Cf. E. de Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale* (Bruges, 1946), I, p. 9.

beautiful by medieval standards, they are performed in the worship of God, the source of all beauty.<sup>50</sup> Otherwise they are delusory and false. Singing, as we have suggested, is a typical expression of man's highest activity, praise of God. Beautiful dancing signifies the devotion of a generous heart manifested in good works. Her laughter and play express her spiritual joy. Her eyes, the light of the body, reveal her charitable intention, and her speech is the "goodly" and "friendly" speech of faith. These virtues are crowned by her golden hair, symbolic of the beauty of the virtues in the faithful soul.<sup>51</sup> In these terms the lady is a treasure which thieves may not steal nor moths corrupt, since her virtues are above Fortune. At the very opening of his description, therefore, the Knight indicates the true remedy for his own sorrow. He has been lamenting over the loss of a physical being, although the virtues which inspire his love are not subject to earthly corruption. He

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Peter of Blois, *De amicitia Christiana*, ed. Davy (Paris, 1932), p. 146.

<sup>51</sup> For singing, see Gregory, *Hom. in Ezech.*, PL, 76, 885, or *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 887. The significance of dancing is explained by Bede on Luke 7.32, PL, 92, 422, and by St. Bonaventura, *Opera* (Quaracchi, 1895), VII, p. 181. Singing and dancing are popular themes in fourteenth-century art. For an example, see the Bohun Psalter in the Nationalbibliothek at Vienna (Cod. 1826\*), fol. 85 verso, where Moses and his followers sing and dance after crossing the Red Sea. Cf. Robertson, *Preface*, pp. 130-132, and Fig. 37. On laughter, see *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 1040 or Alanus, *Anticlaudianus*, PL, 210, 551. Rabanus explains, *De universo*, PL, 111, 149, that the eyes indicate the intention of the heart. For the hair, see *ibid.*, 145. The details in the description show no indication of being "realistic" reflections of the appearance and demeanor of the Duchess of Lancaster. They are, rather, conventional figurative devices designed to indicate her character.

must realize this fact if he is to be cured. The remainder of the description, to the dreamer's first interruption, is concerned with the development of detail.

The lady's eyes, expressing the intention of her heart, are not only gentle and good; they are also "glade and sadde." Although the last two attributes seem to be contradictory, they do not appear so when one considers that the joy is the joy of charity and the seriousness is the seriousness of charitable purpose. Her eyes are also "symple," or without hypocrisy,<sup>52</sup> of great good, and not too wide or staring. Not as in the description of Envy in *The Romance of the Rose*, or commonly in the visual arts, with eyes looking aside, the lady Blanche looked directly, "not asyde ne overthwert," at the object of her attention, seeing it wholly and steadily. The impression of her eyes, because of the charity they expressed, was that "anon she wolde have mercy." Fools, seeing her as an object of desire, mistook this look for what in *The Romance of the Rose* is called "franchise," the generosity of the submissive coquette. But the temperateness of her glance, expressive of temperance within, was completely natural. She never feigned a foolish interest in anyone, even in play. In spite of his understanding of the virtue revealed in the lady's eyes, the Knight, pledged to the God of Love, saw the mercy that fools thought they saw:

But ever, me thoght, hir eyen seyde,  
Be God, my wrathe ys al foryive! (876-877)

Her eyes reveal the spiritual joy which illumines her so

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gilbert de Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum*, PL, 184, 114-115: "Prudenter quidem, quoniam si simplex oculus fuerit, totum corpus lucidum erit. . . . Bona enim est oculata simplicitas, ita simulationem excludens, ut non caliget in veritate."

that "dulnesse was of hir adrad" (879). With spiritual wisdom, *sapientia*, she lives without dulness or *taedium* that accompanies immersion in the world.<sup>53</sup> The steadiness of her eyes reveals her "mesure," temperance. In temperance she follows the middle way: *medium tenere beati*. She is familiar with none, but equal to all. Her eyes do harm, but as we have seen, only to fools who desire her carnally. These persons she does not suffer gladly, but in temperance does not chide them.<sup>54</sup> Those foremost in pursuing her with earthly desire were always farthest from her love:

The formest was alway behynde. (890)

Finally, she has charity, loving her neighbors, "goode folk" who are just, above all others.<sup>55</sup> She loves prudently, turning her affection only to those who deserve it. To sum up, the intention of the lady's heart was the intention of charity, the source of true beauty and the opposite of the amorous desire with which the Knight first approached her.

The themes already set are carried out in the description of the lady's face, indicative of the nature of her soul.<sup>56</sup> The Knight speaks concerning it with more truth than he knows:

I have no wit that kan suffice  
To comrehenden hir beaute. (902-903)

The red and white of her complexion, as applied to the soul, imply her imitation of Christ, continuously re-

<sup>53</sup> See Wisdom 2.1, 8.16, 11.13.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Alanus, *Summa de arte praedicatoria*, PL, 210, 161.

<sup>55</sup> For the meaning of these "good folk," see Alanus, *Distinctiones*, PL, 210, 913.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Rabanus, *De universo*, PL, 111, 147: "Vultus autem animorum qualitatem significat."

newed in charity.<sup>57</sup> Among her attractions, the face is thus especially beautiful. Its radiance, which is wisdom,<sup>58</sup> shines for the Knight "be hyt never so derk." That is, the example of her wisdom is a beacon to him in tribulation. Her face without "a wikked sygne" symbolizes an innocent soul without spot, "sad, symple, and benygne." The beauty of the lady is thus the beauty of charity, wisdom, and innocence, virtues which for the Knight in his grief have become temporarily submerged. Her speech, sweet, friendly, and founded on reason, reveals the goodness of her soul, since in speech the spirit is attested.<sup>59</sup> She was true of tongue in faith and never used speech to harm others; she never flattered nor chided but always adhered to the truth.

The Knight refers briefly to the other features of the lady's body. Her neck was white and round, like the tower of ivory in Cant. 7.4. The reference indicates that she was an example to others, beautifying those around her. The whiteness of ivory, symbolizing chastity or innocence,<sup>60</sup> is emphasized in the lady's name:

And goode faire White she het;  
That was my lady name ryght.  
She was bothe fair and bryght;  
She hadde not hir name wrong. (948-951)

Finally, her other physical features were harmonious

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Gilbert de Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum*, PL, 184, 252: "Si sponsa es, aemulare misturam gemini coloris hujus a sponso tuo, ut similiter candida et rubicunda sis, id est sincera et succensa."

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Eccl. 8.1.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Alanus, *Summa de arte praedicatoria*, PL, 210, 163: "Qualis sermo ostenditur, talis etiam animus comprobatur."

<sup>60</sup> *Glossa ordinaria*, PL, 113, 1161; Bede, PL, 91, 1192; Alanus, PL, 210, 99; *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 882.

with these virtues. The description of the lady's eyes was followed by an account of the spiritual truth they reveal; the description of her face by an account of the virtue of her speech. The description of her person is now followed by an account of her actions, her "play." She was like a torch of inexhaustible brightness, furnishing a perpetual example to all others.<sup>61</sup> From such good example every man

Myght cacche ynogh, yif that he wolde,  
Yif he had eyen hir to beholde. (969-970)

As the chief mirror of the feast, the lady is preeminent in good example.<sup>62</sup> Without her, any company would be as a crown without jewels, and without her the Black Knight is without a guide.<sup>63</sup> The Knight concludes by comparing his lady to the Phenix. To the Christian the resurrection of the Phenix was a symbol of hope in the Resurrection.<sup>64</sup> In the same way the death of Blanche should be a source of hope rather than despair to the Knight. The comparison should remind him that his lady has not died, but lives.

From the physical description of his lady, the Knight turns to an account of her virtues. In this account, the qualities which have been symbolized in the preceding description are summarized, so that the passage serves as a fitting conclusion to the description. He considers first her goodness. She was as debonair as Hester, who

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Matt. 13.13, and *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 921, and 981; Alanus, *In cantica*, PL, 210, 106.

<sup>62</sup> *Allegoriae*, PL, 112, 1050: "Per speculum exempla bona. . ."

<sup>63</sup> On the crown, cf. Alanus, *Distinctiones*, PL, 210, 830.

<sup>64</sup> The symbol of the Phenix became a commonplace because of the influence of the *De ave phenice* of Lactantius. See *De bestiis*, PL, 177, 48-49.

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symbolizes mercy and humility.<sup>65</sup> Her intellect was directed wholly toward the good, so that she was always cheerful. In action, she was innocent, harming no one, although this innocence did not spring from ignorance. She knew the evils she avoided. Next, the Knight describes her truthfulness. In truth she was so perfect

That Trouthe hymself, over al and al  
Had chose hys maner principal  
In hir, that was his restyng place. (1003-1005)

That is, in terms of the dreamer's vision, she had prepared her Temple well. As a "maner principal" she resembled the Virgin Mary in whose imitation she lived. She was steadfast and temperate, never deviating from the truth,

So pure suffraunt was hir wyt. (1010)

Since she was wise in truth, her goodness followed naturally, and she did well gladly. Then, too, her will was guided by her intellect so that her heart was turned toward justice. She wronged no one, and through her righteousness prevented anyone from shaming her. She was no tyrant to her admirers, since she had no desire to enslave anyone. Nor did she deceive them with suggestions and half-truths. Finally, she made no unreasonable and unnatural demands on them,

Ne sende men into Walakye,  
To Pruyse, and into Tartarye,  
To Alysaundre, ne into Turkye,  
And byd hym faste anoon that he  
Goo hoodles to the Drye Se

<sup>65</sup> See Rabanus, *In Esther*, PL, 109, 646. Cf. Machaut, *Remede de Fortune*, pp. 123-124.

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And come hom by the Carrenar;  
And seye Sir, be now ryght war  
That I may of yow here seyn  
Worshyp, or that ye come ageyn.  
She ne used no such knakkes smale. (1024-1032)

She served as a good example and as a worthy object of love, but did not take it upon herself to send men on vain crusades. Overcome by his own recollection, the Knight exclaims that all his love was set on her. She was everything to him, and he was entirely hers. In view of what he has just said, it is clear that his bondage is self-imposed.

The Black Knight in his youth was blind to the true character of his lady, which his description has revealed. Because he saw Blanche only as an object of desire she was his "worldes welfare," and his "godesse." The dreamer, who has perceived the implications of the description, exclaims,

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

But the Knight insists on the uniqueness which the lady has for him as the object of his desire.

Bet? ne no wyght so wel, quod he. (1045)

The dreamer corrects him mildly, pointing out that he can think she is the fairest only because she seems so to him. The implication is that the judgment is predicated upon a false value derived from a self-centered love. But the Knight's failure to understand this implication is shown in his reply: Everyone said she was most beautiful, and his love for her was independent of his own beauty, strength, worth, wealth, bravery, or wisdom (1052-1074). It is significant that the vir-



tues the Knight lists are worldly virtues associated with pagan exemplars: he says nothing of such virtues as humility or innocence.<sup>66</sup> His love, he implies, was destined; he "moste nede" love Blanche (1074). This again is an excuse for sinning. He is not responsible; destiny forced him to do what he did.<sup>67</sup> Realizing the foolishness of this extreme excuse, the Knight hastily amends it, and in doing so admits the truth of the matter. He loves Blanche because his heart "hyt wolde" (1077). He turned to her of his own free will, for she was as good as Penelope or as Lucrece and so overcame him with her virtue. However, the Knight does not elaborate this hasty admission of responsibility. Instead he returns to further excuses. When he first saw his lady, he was young and had much to learn. Again he holds his wit responsible:

After my yonge childly wyt,  
Withoute drede, I besette hyt  
To love hir in my beste wyse,  
To do hir worship and the servise  
That I koude thoo, by my trouthe,  
Withoute feynynge outhur slouth. (1095-1100)

The very sight of Blanche in the morning was enough to make his whole day a happy one. She has such a firm place in his heart that he would not cease to think of her for anything. In his present despair the Knight has forgotten that the virtues of Blanche, which he revealed in his description of her, were the features of

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the corresponding list of virtues in Machaut, *Remede de Fortune*, pp. 109 ff., where Solomon, Job, Judith, Esther, and Abraham appear along with Alexander and the rest. Chaucer has deliberately avoided Christian virtues here.

<sup>67</sup> See note 45 above.

her character which actually gave rise to his happiness. With his will turned to her in frustrated longing, he can only despair. Like Alcyone, he keeps the memory of his loved one as an earthly object in his heart. He cannot see that what he loved in her is immortal and that it is only as an earthly being that she is "but ded."

The dreamer interrupts for the first time with direct reference to the Knight's desperate situation:

Now, by my trouthe, sir! quod I,  
Me thyngketh ye have such a chaunce  
As shryfte wythoute repentaunce. (1112-1114)

Or, as Skeat paraphrases it, "You are like one who confesses but does not repent." As we have said, in explaining his sorrow the Knight is actually confessing. Excuses aside, he has admitted his own responsibility. If he continues to mirror in his soul only the earthly love of his lady, his confession will be worthless and false, so that no absolution may follow to bring him peace of mind. In searching his heart, the Knight must learn to place the loss of his lady in the perspective of God's Providence. He must learn to love his lady's virtues, which endure, rather than her presence, which has gone. But the Knight still understands only the suggestion that he cease to adore his lady, and he refuses to accept the suggestion:

Repentaunce! nay, fy! quod he,  
Shulde y now repente me  
To love? nay, certes, than were I wel  
Wers than was Achitofel,  
Or Anthenor, so have I joye,  
The traytor that betrayes Troye,  
Or the false Genelloun,

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He that purchased the tresoun  
Of Rowland and of Olyver.  
Nay, while I am alyve her,  
I nyl foryete hir never moo. (1115-1125)

The dreamer has not suggested that he forget her, but only that he repent his misdirected love which has led him to desperate grief. The Knight's assertion that he is not like Achitophel is ironic, since Achitophel represented heresy, or turning away from God,<sup>68</sup> and it is precisely in turning away from the Hunter that the Knight has brought himself into despair.

The dreamer, recognizing that the Black Knight merely continues in his blindness, takes up the theme of the confession, again utilizing the terminology of circumstances. Having learned "how" and "where," he wishes to know the manner of the Knight's first address to his lady, and the circumstances under which she first knew of his love. Since the virtues of the lady as the Black Knight has described them are imperishable, he has suffered no enduring spiritual loss. To imply that the loss was merely physical, the dreamer asks again what the Knight has lost. The Knight replies somewhat impatiently, almost with the identical words that he used when the dreamer pointed out that the amount of his loss did not entitle him to immoderate grief:

Yee! seyde he, thow nost what thow menest;  
I have lost more than thou wenest. (1137-1138)

The dreamer replies, deliberately skirting the true situation, of which he is aware. He asks whether the lady does not return the Knight's love, or whether he has

<sup>68</sup> See Rabanus, *PL*, 109, 107. Peter of Blois, p. 156, cites the followers of Absalom, such as Achitophel, as examples of false lovers, that is, fleshly lovers who abuse love.

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offended her. By stating these alternatives directly he forces the Knight ultimately to make a direct statement of his loss. Further, the two alternatives place the Knight's loss in perspective. Both are remediable. The Knight can perhaps do something to be worthy of his lady's love, or to restore himself in her grace. There would be some point in grief over a loss which might be remedied. But if the lady is dead, grief is pointless. The only action possible is to turn to God.

The Knight answers the questions about the manner and circumstances of his revelation of love to his lady. At first she knew nothing of his love, and she remained in ignorance of it for a long time. The Knight dared not tell her, for fear of angering her. She controlled him, for

She was lady  
Of the body; she had the herte,  
And who hath that may not asterte. (1152-1155)

When a man is in such a situation he may not escape. He wished his will to be at one with hers, so that he did not wish to express a desire that was not hers. He could not deny her will any more than he could his own. On the level of the Knight's understanding, the statement is pure idolatry. Since the lady was obviously not responsible for his capture, and since, as the Knight has explained, she had no wish to enslave anyone, it is clear that he was enslaved by his own desire. The complex image involved is that of the hunt—in the false hunt of earthly love, desire itself ensnares the heart, so that perversely it escapes from the true Hunter from whom by nature it should not desire to escape. When Blanche is admired for her virtues, the love involved is charity. This love is alone eternal and thus ultimately inescap-

able. But in his despair the Knight's love is earthly, since he longs for her physical presence. Thus he escapes from his Physician.

In recognition of his lady's example, the Knight did attempt to abandon his former mistress, idleness (797-798). But in his blindness, he succeeded only in going from one kind of idleness to another. He spent his time making idle songs. The references to Lamech and Tubal (*sc.* Jubal) are again revealing, for Lamech's three sons and one daughter, Noema, whose name is said to mean "voluptas," complete the generation of Cain which is figuratively the generation of the wicked.<sup>69</sup> Tubalcain wrought images in metal, and the sound of his labors at the anvil was thought to have inspired his brother Jubal, or Tubal as he was frequently called, to invent the art of music.<sup>70</sup> If the Knight's melodies were like Tubal's they were in all likelihood not derived from the melody which is said in *The Parliament of Fowls* (60 ff.) to come from the "speres thryes thre" but were instead harmonious with the melodies of Venus or amorous pleasure. The Knight's first song, which he quotes, has only one significant detail: the lady is "semly on to see." At this point he sees only the external beauty of the lady.

One day the Knight thought of his sorrow and of the dilemma in which he found himself:

Allas, thoghte I, y kan no red;  
And but I telle hir, I nam but ded;  
And yif I telle hyr, to seye ryght soth,

<sup>69</sup> *Glossa ordinaria*, PL, 113, 101.

<sup>70</sup> See Paul E. Beichner, C. S. C., *The Medieval Representative of Music, Jubal or Tubalcain?* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1954), esp. pp. 5-13.

I am adred she wol be wroth.

Allas! what shal I thanne do? (1187-1191)

This rather foolish dilemma ironically reflects that of the Knight after he has lost his lady. The alternatives are absurd. Unless he tells her, he is "but ded"; yet he is afraid to tell her. In his present plight, unless he finds her, he is "but ded"; yet he cannot find her in any physical sense. Thus, he rightly says he knows "no red." The solution to the dilemma in both instances is obvious: he must speak out, facing the truth as it is. The Knight now describes the woe he suffered because of this "debat." Finally, he remembers that Nature is not deceiving, so that a lady as beautiful as Blanche must also be merciful. But he is asking for a wrongful mercy which in fact signifies surrender to desire. For this reason he speaks in worldly shame and distress of spirit, making a most ludicrous figure of himself:

Bowyng to hir, I heng the hed;  
I durste nat ones loke hir on,  
For wit, maner, and al was goon.  
I seyde "mercy!" and no more.  
Hyt nas no game, hyt sat me sore. (1216-1220)

His "wit" was indeed gone. After this false beginning, the Knight found that his "hert was come ageyn." He has just said that "she had the herte," so that it becomes obvious that in order to speak to her, he has to get it back. Then with "hool herte" he beseeches and swears and "hertely" promises

Ever to be stedfast and trewe  
And love her alwey fresshly newe. (1227-1228)

His heart is now within him, yet he calls his lady his "herte swete." The empty word-play on *heart* em-

phasizes the inherent fatuousness of his love. Although his conduct gives little promise of steadfastness, he swears it none the less. The Knight swears, moreover, that he will never be false to his lady unless he dreams, but he dreams amorously at the very moment he swears. Although he has indicated the lady's dislike of enslaving her admirers, he says to her,

For youres is alle that ever ther ys  
For evermore, myn herte swete! (1232-1233)

She recognizes him as one hurt by her look, of whom "she ne roughte a stree" (887). The lady, whose wisdom has been attested, answers him in some detail, but he has forgotten the details because his wit was gone, and he could not comprehend them. He knew only enough to understand that "she sayde 'nay.'" At this, the Knight was thrown into sorrowful despair. "For pure fere" he "stal away," and for many a day he suffered in sorrow in his bed. In his present despair over the loss of his lady he has come full circle back to sorrow.

However, in his sorrow over his rejection by the lady, he did not abandon himself completely to despair. In another year, evidently after time for meditation on the lady's virtue and a recognition that the steadfastness of his love was more than mere desire, the Knight recovered from his callow wilfulness. There was a marked change in the heart which he wished to disclose to her. The foolish vows had disappeared, and the lady understood

That I ne wilned thyng but god,  
And worship, and to kepe her name  
Over alle thyng, and drede hir shame,

And was so besy hyr to serve;  
And pitee were I shulde sterve,  
Syth that I wilned noon harm, ywis. (1262-1267)

The reason for this change of heart is not made explicit, but it is clear from the earlier description of the lady. In his enforced separation from her, when the desires of the flesh have been refused, he has learned to love her for her virtue; he has come to a realization of the nature of true love; he is no longer moved by simple natural desire, but has made a rational selection of an object worthy of love.<sup>71</sup> This temporary earthly separation with its beneficent results could serve as a model of the greater separation of her death. As the former served to teach him the lesson of true love, so the separation occasioned by death should bring his heart to a realization of the ultimate love of which true love is but a mirror, the love of God. In being apart from her he learned to love what was true and everlasting in her. In the separation of death, the lesson should be made even clearer. Instead of his earlier foolishness, the Knight wished now to defend the lady's name, to keep her from shame, and to serve her. The relationship he desired was not physical worship but spiritual direction. He wished her to become his spirit-

<sup>71</sup> Love taken simply is an appetitive force. True love, or *amicitia*, involves a rational choice of a human object. See Peter of Blois, *op.cit.*, p. 108. *Amicitia* is highly desirable, *ibid.*, p. 116: "In rebus humanis nihil dulcius amicitia invenitur, nihil sanctius appetitur, nihil fructuosius custoditur; habet enim fructum vitae quae nunc est et futurae. Ipsa propria suavitate virtutes alias condit, adversa temperat, prospera componit, tristitiaque jucundat." Finally, this love is a step toward God, *ibid.*, p. 120: "Amicitia quidam gradus est hominibus ad Deum. Dilectione enim mediante, homo Deo approximat, dum ex hominis amico Dei amicus efficitur."

ual overlord. Seeing that he meant no harm, the lady granted his wish, allowing him to serve her. The ring she gave him is a token of faith to her and to the virtues she represents, an investiture which grants him the advantage of her company in return for faithful good works.<sup>72</sup> To his joy, the lady took him "in her governaunce," directing his youthful waywardness. He learned to share her joys and her sorrows without strife. And thus he lived guided by her virtue "ful many a yere." The example of the lady brought him from a state of childishness to a condition reflecting her own virtues.

The Knight has reached the point where the consolation open to him is clear from the context of what he himself has said. The dreamer has brought him to admit that his love for his fair White was a love for her virtues. If that is true, it follows that her death, although it is grievous, is not a cause for despair. The virtues of the lady have not died with her. The grief the poet feels in his heart is sufficiently great so that it is not easily to be assuaged, but its nature has been exposed to the intellect. He has lost nothing in comparison to that which still lives in his memory, the example of the virtue of the lady. His true love for her has been a medicine for his foolish youth. She was his physician under Christ while she was alive. In death her memory should lead him to seek the true Physician:

Pon giù il seme del piangere, ed ascolta:  
sì udirai come in contraria parte  
mover dovieti mia carne sepolta. (*Purg.*, 31, 46-48)

<sup>72</sup> The ceremony of the ring is not, of course, a marriage ceremony, which we should expect if John of Gaunt were the Black Knight. Rather, the ceremony in the poem suggests feudal investiture.

His dream began in the time of the promise of the Resurrection. The Hunter Octovyen and his hunt also afford the promise that Blanche is dead only in the body. To remind the Knight of these things, and to force him to speak plainly, the dreamer asks, "Sir, where is she now?" The Knight has already eliminated the alternative possibilities suggested in the dreamer's earlier question; the lady did not refuse him, and he did not offend her. They lived together in peace and harmony. Only one further possibility remains, but even now the Knight cannot quite make the direct statement. He says simply what he is forced to say:

Allas, that I was bore!  
That was the los that her-before  
I tolde the that I hadde lorn.  
Bethenke how I seyde here-beforn,  
Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;  
I have lost more than thow wenest—  
God wot, allas! ryght that was she! (1301-1307)

The meaning is unmistakable, but the dreamer persists and the Knight speaks the truth, simply, without equivocation,

She ys ded!

The dreamer attempts no consolation,

Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe! (1310)

The loss is a pity; that is all. The natural grief of affection is inevitable, but it is not a cause for despair. And the grief itself should vanish in time before the memory of a lady as good and virtuous as was Blanche. The important thing is to face the truth rationally in the promise of Christian comfort. In Blanche the speaker

had found a guide to his Physician. In his memory, even though she has died, she remains his guide. Just as her first refusal brought him to reject false love, so her death, after a temporary lapse, should bring him even closer to his Physician.<sup>73</sup>

In the Seys and Alcyone story, Seys says to Alcyone in her vision:

My swete wyf,  
Awake! let be your sorwful lyf!  
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 farwel, swete, my worldes blysse!  
I praye God youre sorwe lysse.  
To lytel while oure blysse lasteth! (201-211)

Alcyone refused to recognize the implications of the statement, "I nam but ded." Immersed in her sorrow, she could not accept the idea of death, so that there was no remedy for her. When she looked up, she "saw noght." The speaker in the poem, through contemplation, has acquired intellectual instruction which enables him to see more than Alcyone saw. He has looked within himself for the image of God there, in search of his Physician. He has been reminded of the Resurrection of Christ in token of man's salvation. of the joy of the faithful in praising God, of the emptiness of false desire which leads to despair, and of the lightening of

<sup>73</sup> A similar attitude toward physical death appears in Boccaccio's letter "A Francesco da Brossano" on the death of Petrarch, *Opere latine minori*, pp. 222ff.

man's search by the hunt of Octovyen. Moreover, in his memory of Blanche he has seen not only her physical beauty but her virtue as well. And he has learned the nature of true love which is a step toward the Physician. In short, he has been prepared to make the admission which Alcyone refused to make.

Thus, with the simple admission that the lady has died, the search for the hart has come to an end. The rest remains simply in the healing hands of time if the bereaved turns to Christ, his Hunter:

And with that word ryght anon  
They gan to strake forth; al was doon,  
For that tyme, the hert-huntyng. (1311-1313)

The symbolic hunt ends. Significantly, the dreamer and the Knight see the King, Octovyen, returning home to his long castle with white walls on a rich hill. The punning reference to Lancaster and to Richmond is only a small part of what is here implied:

With that me thoghte that this kyng  
Gan homwardes for to ryde  
Unto a place, was there besyde,  
Which was from us but a lyte.  
A long castel with walles white,  
Be seynt Johan! on a ryche hil. (1314-1319)

The King is returning to his Heavenly Home, the white City of Jerusalem, on the rich hill of Sion, which Saint John described. Through the dialogue with grief, his alter ego, the dreamer, who is the poet's rational self, has turned toward his true Physician. He watches the Savior return to His home. The action which he observes symbolizes the Ascension, with its promise of the Resurrection of the just. The references to Lan-

caster and to Richmond, fixing at this point the historical allusion to Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster, suggest that Blanche is among the just, and that the speaker must turn to her in memory not as an earthly figure but as a follower of Christ in the New Jerusalem. In the manner of Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura she is now at one with the Physician. As he sees the vision of Christ returning to the Heavenly City, the castle bell tolls twelve, the vesper hour which signifies the time of reward for the just in the heavenly kingdom. The sound is a promise of comfort in loss and of hope of future joy. Moreover, it brings the dream to a rounded conclusion, since the dream itself began in the "dawenyng." That is, it began at Lauds when Christ is praised for His light. There are twelve hours in the day, which is Christ, the day which begins with Lauds, the promise of the Resurrection, and ends with Vespers, the promise of the reward of the just.<sup>74</sup> The dream itself, which is concerned with Christ's hunt, is thus in its true structure a symbol of the Physician the poet seeks. Through it he finds the approach to the Physician he had lost at the beginning. The one physician who was his lady and the one Physician who can cure him are now united. The poet has found them both.

<sup>74</sup> On the morning hours of worship and their symbolism see Honorius, *Gemma animae*, PL, 172, 625-626: "A mane autem dicitur matutina, quasi laus Deo pro luce exhibita. . . . Hac hora Christus victor a morte resurrexit, et diem nobis ab inferis revexit, et populum sanguine suo redemptum a regno tyranni reduxit, et hostes eorum barathro immersit." For Vespers, see *ibid.*, 637: "Duodecima hora dies clauditur, et operariis jam peracto opere denarius dabitur (Matt. 20). Finis autem unicuique intelligitur, cum pro transacta vita merces cuique redditur." Cf. Alanus, PL, 210, 812.

The poet wakes at the sound of the Vesper bells of his dream:

Therwyth I awook myselve. (1324)

He finds himself with the book in his hand

Of Alcione and Seys the kyng,  
And of the goddes of slepyng. (1327-1328)

Since he is now in a position, through illumination, to understand the *sentence* of the story, the reference to the Seys and Alcyone story at this point is not irrelevant. Alcyone did not heed Seys' warning, "Awake!" but continued in spiritual torpor. But through his contemplative vision the speaker has awakened himself from slumber. The story provided the key to his own release from sorrow when he consulted "the goddes of slepyng" within himself. Having recovered from despair and inaction, he determined "to put this sweven in ryme." At the beginning of the poem, he was alienated from his Physician—"but that is don" (40). Now his problem has been solved: "now hit is doon" (1334).

The progression here outlined finds a clear parallel in the progress of Dante's love for Beatrice as pictured in the *Vita Nuova*. As Professor C. S. Singleton has shown, Dante first moved from earthly love to a love of Beatrice's virtues, then to a love of God through the inspiration of Beatrice. The stages are identified by Singleton with the three degrees of spiritual ascent: "This itinerary of the mind to God, as Augustine had conceived it, began, at its first level, outside of man. It turned *inward* at its second level or degree. And in its third and last stage, it rose above man. St. Bonaventura, in Dante's own century, is still tracing much the same pattern. In his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* the stages,

as with Augustine, bear the names of *extra nos*, *intra nos*, and *supra nos*.<sup>75</sup> Like Dante, the Black Knight first looked outside of himself at Blanche's physical attractions. Being repulsed, he turned to his memory to learn the love of Blanche's virtues. Finally, like Dante, after the death of Blanche, he looks above toward the Physician whose creature Blanche is.

In *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer celebrated the virtues of a great feudal lady with whom he was connected, either directly or indirectly. Specifically, he wrote an elegy extolling the virtues of the deceased lady, portraying the grief of the bereaved, and offering consolation. The great danger of the elegy as a type is that it becomes too complimentary for belief, or becomes trite beyond endurance, stating the timeworn obvious truths which are too general to be specifically consoling, or becomes a statement of truths which have only casual connection with the avowed elegiac purpose. In *The Book of the Duchess*, through deft use of the allegorical method with its demand that the readers or hearers heed the *sentence*, Chaucer has managed to convey a sense of personal grief over the loss of a virtuous woman and at the same time to present the great consoling truths of the Christian faith in such a way as to make them fresh and new. Above all, the poem is a graceful tribute to one of the most widely admired ladies of the English court. It is an achievement in its kind almost without parallel in English literature. However much one may be willing to admit of over-subtlety in this poem, it is difficult, once one has grasped what Chaucer is saying, to continue to patronize the book for the "something of his vivid imagination" which lies in "this relatively crude work." It is a work

<sup>75</sup> *An Essay on the Vita Nuova* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), pp. 105-106.

of imagination making fresh, vigorous use of traditional symbol and truth. Its structural excellence is attested in its subtle use of repetition and in the use, for example, of the illustrative story of Seys and Alcyone as a counter-theme to the main theme of Christian consolation. The poem is thoroughly coherent. Once the symbolic context is established, the rest unfolds clearly. The problem, especially for the modern reader, is to find the one key. This found, the understanding of the poem ceases to be an exercise in ingenuity and becomes a stimulating discovery of new relationships and unexpected correspondences, of the clear and inevitable unfolding of the truths of Christian consolation.

The opening lines present the key to the poem by means of an ambiguity which, when resolved, leads to only one conclusion. The speaker is distracted to a degree that death seems a likely outcome of his grief. The portrait points on the one hand to a distracted lover, but in the figure of the one Physician who can cure the eight years' malady, the truth is shown. The speaker is one who is lost in the cares of the world. At the same time the nature of these cares is indicated by the suggestion of the lover's malady. The griefs are those of a bereaved lover who knows though darkly that his comfort cannot ultimately come from his lady. Since the circumstances of the poem were clear to Chaucer's audience, the tenor of this portrait was also clear. The speaker is suffering from his grief caused by the death of the Duchess. He is lost in worldly cares since she is gone, as was Dante after the death of Beatrice:

Piangendo dissi: "Le presenti cosi  
col falso lor piacer volser miei passi  
tosto che il vostro viso si nascose."  
(*Purg.*, 31, 34-36)



He must learn that the physician who was his lady derived her curative powers from the Physician. Although the beginning of the poem seems to be chiefly concerned with the sorrow of the poet, the heart of the poem is the description of the lady. This difference between the parts of the poem, when the structure of the whole is realized, is not the result of patchwork, but of subtle craftsmanship. In the introduction a climate of belief for the eulogistic portrait is prepared through the picture of a grief which almost transcends consolation.

The desperation of the poet leads him to one of the comforts of physical sleeplessness, reading, and his reacting to a story of one whose grief refused consolation. Although her grief was for an object of infinitely less intrinsic worth than Blanche, it was to a certain extent more justified than was the poet's. Unlike Blanche, Seys did not provide a perfect example. Alcyone's despair led to the supreme folly of self-destruction over the loss of an earthly joy. Although Alcyone did not succeed in overcoming her grief, her story does suggest the proper mode of Christian conduct. The poet has an inkling of the true meaning of the tale.

The Seys and Alcyone story has significance not only as a skillful introduction to the ensuing sleep and as a foreshadowing of the theme, but also as an indication of the process by which the grieving heart may find peace. The perception of this meaning brings a kind of gaiety to the speaker, who, in spite of the heaviness of his heart, joyfully vows gifts to the "goddess of sleep," for him symbolizing the faculties which give contemplative understanding. But, as in effective penance, the speaker must have the intention of effective action. His vow symbolically affords the promise that he will aspire to God. If he is granted understanding, he will effectively

act to implement this understanding. The sleep and the dream ensue after a mock-serious warning that even Joseph would be nonplussed to interpret the vision.

Skillfully contrived as to atmosphere, the dream opens with several definite symbolic indications of its purport. The room of the mind where the dreamer awakes suggests contemplation. To the ears of his mind are given the sounds of the praise of God and to its awakened eyes are shown pictures illuminated with Truth. The intellect of the speaker awakens in faith at the symbolic season of the Resurrection. He hears the horn of hope sounding the call of the hunt of Christ and His Church for the human soul. Taking his horse in preparation for spiritual battle, he encounters the hunt of Octovyen, Christ coming for the salvation of man. But the hart escapes from the effort to take the heart by strength. That is, the will of the speaker is too overwhelmed to accept at once the formal consolation of the Church. It is necessary that the hunt be pursued within the mind of the speaker, that his will be made to recognize the truth, accepting the truth for itself. The little dog, perhaps symbolic of the elucidation of the hidden cares of the human soul through example, leads the dreamer to the place of worldly concern where his will has escaped. His wilful grief is epitomized in the Black Knight, who is found leaning against the tree of despair. Through the course of a patient questioning, the dreamer brings the Knight to reveal the true nature of his grief. In doing this he reveals the spiritual grace of Blanche and demonstrates how she effectively cured him of his youthful idleness and led him into the paths of virtue.

The poet in the person of the dreamer receives a reminder of the significant facts of the faith: the Resur-

rection, the Resurrection of the Just, the necessity to praise God, the necessity to look toward the light of charity, and the necessity to seek Christ the Hunter. Only in the light of faith may the true virtue of Blanche be seen and the implications of her death be appreciated.

Thus instructed, the dreamer is led to regard his own despairing will objectively. The condition of the Knight is unworthy of Blanche's memory. As a woman pre-eminent in virtue, she would have been shamed to be the cause of an unrighteous sorrow. For this reason, the grief of the Knight is treated with some humor. He is at times amusingly obstinate, but by means of a skillful interrogation he is led from a desperate attack on Fortune to the recollection of Blanche's real virtue. The portrait of the lady is itself motivated by the desire of the will to excuse itself for its temporal grief. But with this spiritual portrait as a background, we can understand his account of his own transformation under her influence from youthful cupidity to true *amicitia*. Again, with the virtues of the lady and the character of the Knight's actual love assumed, the implications of his final confession—"she is dead"—became clear. In this simple statement Chaucer achieves an extraordinary resolution of apparently conflicting elements: an appreciation of the beauty of the lady, and thus of the greatness of her loss, along with the understanding that her death was not cause for grief but for a resolution to take comfort and joy in her memory. The memory of Blanche can be revered only by turning to the Physician, the source of her virtues and exemplar of the kind of love she encouraged. The poet recovers and finds the true memory of Blanche as he sees the Redeemer returning at the vesper hour of Hope to the Heavenly Jerusalem. Blanche is dead, but in the image

of Christ's Ascension rests the complementary truth that she has not died in the spirit. The dreamer awakes with the determination to set forth his vision, no longer so distraught as to be incapable of poetic activity. Even the conclusion, for all its apparent haste, contains an externally gracious compliment. The writing of the poem hinges on the poet's discovery that Blanche the Duchess remains even in death a source of inspiration.

Structurally, the dream operates on three symbolic time sequences. With reference to the Black Knight it covers the period from his early youth to maturity, a development from waywardness to responsibility. The shadow of his loss of Blanche has reduced the poet to the first of these states, but in the course of the poem he regains the latter. With reference to the ecclesiastical year, the dream develops from the period immediately following Easter to the Ascension. That is, it begins with a theme of promise, *mors Christi qua vivimus*, and ends with fulfillment. In terms of the liturgical day, there is a parallel sequence from the first hour of the day to the last, from Lauds to Vespers, from praise to final reward. Within this triple framework the dream develops through the reactions of the Black Knight as seen by the dreamer. At the outset, the Knight's situation is almost an echo of the poet's situation at the beginning of the poem, except that we are enabled through the dream to evaluate his condition in the light of Christian truth. The portrait of the lady, the central portion of the poem, serves not only its obvious function of praise, but reveals the relationship between the lady and the Physician. The beauty of the "goode faire White" springs from the same light which the dreamer saw through his windows in the dawn. Her whiteness sets off in contrast the blackness of the Knight's sorrow.

### *The Book of the Duchess*

The process of the love affair reinforces the parallel between Blanche and the Hunter. Through her radiance she attracts men to the truth, hunts them for God. When the Black Knight, in misdirected desire for her physical beauty, "ruses" in desire, he is lost in the temporary despair which follows his repulse. When he looks for Blanche in his own heart and comes to see her in her true light, he finds his heart and wins the lady.

Finally, the Knight's realization of the actual nature of his love makes any added moralizing after his last confession unnecessary. In general, the technique of the poem is one in which certain truths are revealed first, and then events are described in the light of these truths. The implications, after due warning, are left to the reader or listener. Since the poem develops on the level of these implications, the ending is abrupt only on the surface. The implications which arise from what has been said in the body of the poem are more powerful than any direct statement of them could be. *The Book of the Duchess*, like all significant poetry, exists only partly in what it says. Its reality is a series of controlled developments touched off in the mind of the reader.



### *The Parliament of Fowls*

LIKE MOST MEDIEVAL POEMS, both *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls* begin with a statement of theme. The beginning of *The Parliament of Fowls*, however, has none of the purposeful ambiguity of *The Book of the Duchess*; its initial statement is clear. The poem opens with a mocking and humorous account of the "wonderful werkyng" of Love:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,  
The dredful joye, alwey that slit so yerne:  
Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge  
Astonyeth with his wonderful werkyng  
So sore iwis, that whan I on hym thynke,  
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke. (1-7)

Although the poet disclaims knowledge of this Love "in dede," he has frequently read "Of his myrakles and his crewel yre" (11). He "wol be lord and syre," and "quiteth folk" unkindly, so that this lord of earthly love rivals God in wishing to have dominion over mankind. As one may read in the Old Testament of a God who performs miracles and is a God of Vengeance, so the poet has read in books of the god of Love and of his miracles and of his wrath. The poet humor-