

**DREAMS AND LOVERS:  
THE SYMPATHETIC GUIDE FRAME  
IN MIDDLE ENGLISH COURTLY LOVE POEMS**

by

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## Abstract

When is a dream not a dream? The Middle English convention of the ‘dream vision’ has been read by modern scholars as a genre that primarily reveals the medieval understanding of dreaming and dream theory, so that events and stories presented within a dream frame are necessarily read through that specific hermeneutic. But what might reading ‘dream visions’ without this theoretical framework do to our understanding of the text? Can removing this default mode of interpretation inspire cross-genre comparisons between narratives that present themes of courtly love? My thesis embraces this ‘genre-blind’ standpoint and traces the development of rhetorical frames through texts of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth century. Beginning with Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* as a ‘dream vision’, which takes inspiration from the highly popular *Romance of the Rose*, I move to Lydgate’s two ‘dream visions’ *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and *The Temple of Glas*, and then finally into the realm of ‘romances’ with Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, and the anonymous *Squire of Low Degree*. All six texts contain a lover’s complaint within their narrative bodies that is uniquely encased by what I have termed the sympathetic guide frame. The progression of this frame from Chaucer’s writings and beyond shows the sympathetic guide frame as an increasingly conventional device in courtly love texts due to its ability to effectively present and intensify emotion. Without the constraints of genre expectations, the modern reader can focus on the literary and emotional importance of a text, guided by a character specifically created by the author to witness a lover’s complaint and then respond emotionally to it. The identification of this kind of development of a rhetorical device would not be possible if one is hesitant to compare any texts that do not share the same genre classification. I advocate for a renewed understanding of ‘dream visions’ as more than just a dream.

## Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Tessa Madeleine Cernik. The idea for this project began in the final semester of my undergraduate degree in the term paper I wrote for Dr. Kathy Cawsey in May 2013, titled “Genre and Chaucer’s Dream Visions.” I picked up and clarified the thesis of that paper for the final project of a graduate seminar taken with Dr. Robert Rouse in Fall 2014, titled “The Dream Frame in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*.” I presented an iteration of that paper at the McGill English Department’s Twenty-First Annual Graduate Student Conference in February 2015, titled as “A Medieval Instagram: The Dream Vision Genre and Courtly Culture.” Both these versions of the paper provided the foundation for the first and second chapters of this thesis.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

An introduction to Middle English literature often begins with expectations of genre. Recognizing and grouping genre markers or tropes is an easy place for modern readers to enter the writings of the mid-fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. Working in the English academic field, the status of genre theory in scholarship is still strong: “genre as a term and concept is applied widely” to all periods of English history and will most likely remain as a useful tool (Monte 418). But rigid definitions of a genre can be restrictive and reductive, especially for medieval writings: even if a narrative demonstrates the characteristic of a ‘genre’, the use of such characteristics or tropes does not necessarily mean that the author intended for their work to be hemmed in by such generic expectations. This restrictive quality of genre and genre theory dissuades reading texts as representative of more than one genre, and/or imposes generic expectations and ways of reading that may or may not be appropriate or useful for any given text. Theorist Hans Robert Jauss states that this “question of the reality of literary genre in the historical everyday world, or that of their social function, has been ignored in medieval scholarship” and argues overall for the fact that “the theory and history of the literary genres of the Middle Ages can no longer contribute to the understanding of the literature of our present” (99, 109). But how can we get away from this idea of ‘genre’ if critical writings insist on categorizing the medieval English literary tradition into such manufactured boxes?

My interest is the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer and those who felt his influence. Accordingly, this thesis begins with a consideration of the medieval English ‘genres’ in which he wrote, specifically the place of overlap between the ‘romance’ genre and what has been named the ‘dream vision’ genre. The tropes of the ‘romance’ genre are widely known: the chivalrous

knight questing, the superlatively beautiful lady, the lovesick dreamer, the beautiful garden, the May morning full of bird song and blooming flowers, etc. Even those less familiar with the expansive English (and European) 'romance' tradition can easily identify such markers across multiple texts. 'Dream vision', on the other hand, is used as a capacious term for writings that employ a dream framework and as a 'genre' is perhaps not as widely known. According to Steve Kruger, "the dream vision genre includes any text in which the main narrative (or sometimes lyric) expression is framed by an account of falling asleep and dreaming" ("Dialogue" 72). This definition does not give much indication as to the subject matter of the 'dream vision'; in fact the genre of 'dream visions' encompasses narratives that are courtly in theme, that are literary vehicles for philosophical and psychological theory, that take place in either apocalyptic or realistic landscapes, and/or that describe events that could only take place in dreams. Even though there are no overt expectations for the narrative content of a 'dream vision', scholarly writings on Middle English 'dream visions' over the last seventy years have created a set of expectations that inherently colour a modern critical reading of any example of this genre.

Chaucer's first work, the *Book of the Duchess*, does not escape this generic categorization and is, I argue, a text that is hermeneutically railroaded by reading it within the theoretical standards placed on all 'dream visions' of the mid-fourteenth century. Like some other narratives categorized as 'dream visions' (but by no means all), the *Book of Duchess* presents themes of courtly love. It contains plenty of recognizable 'romance' tropes, but seems to be considered only in terms of its use of the dream frame. Chaucer's first known narrative is not the only one to confuse the lines of genre in this way. The *Romance of the Rose*, a highly-popular and influential thirteenth-century French love poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, melds the 'dream vision' and 'romance' genres together seamlessly. Like Chaucer's text after it, the



*Romance of the Rose* presents a lover's complaint contained within a dream, but critics seem content to let this particular narrative sit external to genre expectations and classification.

Instead, "the art of the *Rose* presupposes that the writer will be interested above all in the means and literary process of expressing love" (Butterfield 210). If this reading of the *Romance* as free from the restrictions of genre is standard, why has scholarship not treated courtly love narratives with dream frames, such as the *Book of the Duchess*, in the same way? Why is the value to critical scholarship of the *Book of the Duchess* and 'dream visions' by other authors found only in their potential to reveal something about medieval dream theory? When is a dream not a dream?

In Kruger's summary of critical responses to 'dream visions', it is stated clearly that all academic work on the genre "has, in large part, involved intellectual and literary historical approaches – placing [this text] into longer traditions of thinking and writing" (Kruger "Dialogue" 74). To read a 'dream vision', then, is to read it in terms of its intellectual and/or philosophical merit within the broader context of dream theory. In 1967, Constance B. Hieatt posed the question, "why did medieval poets so frequently prefer to cast their works into the form of a dream? Did the dream form have characteristics and advantages which made it particularly attractive to poets of this period?" (9). Her approach to the study of 'dream visions', particularly those written by Chaucer, marked a change away from just tracing sources to asking "to what degree, and in what respects, and to what purpose, the Middle English dream visions were like real dreams?" to which she concludes that her findings prove 'dream visions' were "a most appropriate vehicle for the type of allegory used in the period" and that they had "a real validity as artistic representations of dream experience" (Hieatt 10-13). It is clear that Hieatt was highly influenced by 'dream psychology' as theorized by Sigmund Freud, and scholarship of

‘dream visions’ continued along this vein. In 1976, A.C. Spearing’s study on what he calls medieval dream-poetry asserted that “the dream-poem becomes a device for expressing the poet’s consciousness of himself as a poet and for making his work reflexive,” and that Chaucer was “interested in dreams as they really are... [His dream-poems make] use of his understanding of real dreams, in producing works which are dreamlike, not only in superficial details, but in matters of method and structure” (“Dream-Poetry” 6, 49). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, studies by J. Stephen Russell (*The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form*), Kathryn L. Lynch (*The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and the Literary Form*) and Steve F. Kruger (*Dreaming in the Middle Ages*) continued the exploration of ‘dream visions’, particularly Chaucerian ones, as medieval studies of dream philosophy and psychology as well as cultural history. One of the most recent book-length studies of medieval ‘dream visions’ is the collection of essays edited by Peter Brown, titled *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, and published in 1999. Again, the title confirms that the focus of the studies are involved in the interpretation of dreams and understanding of how the medieval mind perceived dreams and dreaming. In his introduction to Brown’s book, A.C. Spearing notices “how strongly [the essays] confirm that in past centuries, as in that now ending, people have been unable to rid themselves of the feeling that dreams matter” (“Introduction” 20). Twenty-five years later, however, I am left wondering why medieval ‘dream visions’ have to be read as representations of the real action of dreaming at all.

This thesis is an exploration of what happens when this kind of critical straightjacket is removed from a Middle English courtly love narrative and the dreamer/dream frame is read as just another literary convention working in a text together with other devices. Narratives that would otherwise be segregated into different ‘genres’ can be explored alongside one another,

revealing rhetorical patterns that have not yet been explored in this way. I begin with Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, a narrative that is, at its core, a lover's complaint – a convention that is, as mentioned above, associated with courtly romance. It is a text that includes references to canonical works of the ancient past and, as Kathryn Lynch lists, "other texts and fields of learning as well: Aristotelian epistemology, Boethian philosophy, the dream theory of Macrobius, medical practice and physiology derived from Galen and Hippocrates, the Bible, and the rules of chess" ("The Book of the Duchess" 4). This referencing of various sources and discourses is a talent of Chaucer's that is evident throughout his writings, including his relatively conformist 'romance', the *Knight's Tale*. The combination of framing the Man in Black's lament in a dream and a discussion of Boethian philosophy or Macrobian dream theory, however, does not necessarily mean that Chaucer intended the *Book of the Duchess* as a meditation on theory.

Lynch states that,

The very form in which he worked – the philosophical dream vision – carried assumptions about the right subordination of imaginative and bodily experience to a unitary spiritual truth that was bound to work ultimately against an over-valuation of romantic love. ("Book of the Duchess" 6)

This statement is a perfect example of how modern academic readings of the 'dream vision' can straightjacket any narrative that contains a dream with theoretical and philosophical importance beyond the scope of the actual writing at hand. The *Book of the Duchess* gets far less attention in these studies of 'dream visions' as spaces for philosophical and psychological exploration than, for example, Chaucer's second 'dream vision' *The House of Fame*, because of the very obvious differences in the narratives: it would be remiss to apply the same degree of analysis to a poem that presents the dreamer flying around space discussing theory with an eagle as to a poem in which the dreamer converses with a knight in a garden.

Without the burden of understanding what the dream frame means in the *Book of the Duchess*, I question why Chaucer chose to present this lover's complaint as experienced by a dreamer. The alternative would have been to write a straight lover's complaint, a short courtly love narrative with a third-person omniscient narrator where the knight's words come through to the reader without any mediation beyond the author's written words. The Man in Black's lover's complaint is instead communicated through the Dreamer's experience of it; it is framed by the Dreamer's second-hand experience of the emotions being expressed by the knight. Why? I find that Chaucer has encased this lover's complaint within a specific rhetorical device, which I name the sympathetic guide frame. This frame works to intensify the emotional value of a lover's complaint by demonstrating the reaction of the person observing the complaint to the reader. The Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess* reacts with sympathy to the Man in Black's complaint, cueing to the reader how affecting the knight's words are. I then explore the development of the sympathetic guide frame in other works by Chaucer – namely his 'romances' the *Knight's Tale* and the *Tale of Sir Thopas*), the 'dream visions' of his literary successor John Lydgate (*A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and *The Temple of Glas*), and the anonymous romance *The Squire of Lowe Degree*. These selected texts all contain scenes of an observed lover's complaint and are thus all within the rhetorical landscape of English courtly love culture.

The language I use throughout this thesis to talk about the conventions I see in all the texts mentioned above developed out of a need for more precise terms, particularly when discussing 'dream visions'. I have already stated my concern with talking about texts as part of the two genres of 'romance' and 'dream vision', by which I am referring to the groupings of texts according to what we know as the medieval canon. But again using these terms here is problematic because I am working to strip back such labels and concentrate on conventions

within individual texts that are noticeably repeated in the progression of English literature. I use these generic terms sparingly throughout the following chapters when I need to call back to the established tradition of Middle English genres. I refer often to the lover's complaint, which is normally lumped in as a typical scene or convention of the 'romance' tradition. Its importance to my argument is simply that it is a type of scene that displays courtly love themes, that often occurs within the same romance setting across many texts, and is a speech made by similar characters. It is also important to recognize that it is a scene that occurs in both 'romances' and 'dream visions' so should not have an expected affiliation to either label. Rather, the lover's complaint is an indicator of courtly/chivalric culture in the late medieval period. I also refer often to what I call the dream frame, particularly present within texts that are labeled 'dream visions'. The dream frame, in my usage, means simply the choice made by the author to narrate a piece of writing through the eyes of a person who has fallen asleep and is experiencing a scene within his dream, and then wakes at the end of the narrative. Again, I do not see this frame as particularly representative of the 'dream vision' genre like most critics do because it is not uncommon for characters to fall asleep and experience a dream scene in 'romances' as well. These scenes (regardless of their narrative content), in my language, are contained within a dream frame, but the entire narrative that contains this dream frame may not necessarily fit the expectations of a 'dream vision'.

Separate but related to both the lover's complaint and the dream frame, as defined above, is what I have coined the sympathetic guide frame. This term refers to the pattern I identify in the presentation of lover's complaints first by Chaucer and then in later texts influenced by Chaucer. My study of this frame begins with the *Book of the Duchess*: the sympathetic guide frame is recognized in this context as the Dreamer listening to the Man in Black's complaint from a

hidden vantage point. The Dreamer is thus a guide for the reader to understand the emotionally charged scene. We understand the complaint in terms of how it affects the Dreamer in the moment and how he reacts at the conclusion of the knight's monologue. The sympathetic guide frame is thus a rhetorical device that encases a lover's complaint in order to enhance its emotional intensity. The application of this rhetorical frame to lover's complaints by writers who would have read Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* indicates that it was seen as a device with great literary utility.

The sympathetic guide frame is special because of its ability to forge a connection between the reader and the text. The emotional intensity of a lover's complaint is encased within the frame, communicated through a guide character who expresses their own emotional involvement to the complaint, and presented to the reader as an emotionally significant moment in the narrative. The connection between author and reader, although separated by multiple layers of character development, is strengthened by the use of this device. The next chapters explore how the frame takes its first form in Chaucer's early works and develops over the course of the following half-century. The Chaucerian legacy remains strong into the fifteenth century, so to see the sympathetic guide frame in works of this period is not surprising. The utility of the frame to communicate intense emotions of love and grief is universal, and perhaps the most important reason it is identifiable in such a diverse cross-section of Middle English courtly love texts. By focusing in on a common rhetorical device, these poems I present become more familiar to each other, no longer ostracized by the confines of 'genre'. Theme and similarity trump categorization in a way that allows for a more dynamic understanding of Middle English courtly love literature over time.

## Chapter 2: *The Book of the Duchess*

The *Book of the Duchess* is Chaucer's earliest work and contains what I identify as his first iteration of the sympathetic guide frame. Dated between 1369 and 1372, it is the first of his four 'dream visions', followed by *The House of Fame* (1379-80), *The Parliament of Fowls* (1343-1400), and *The Legend of Good Women* (1380s). A.C. Spearing suggests that *The Book of the Duchess* "may well be the first fully courtly poem in the English language" (*Readings* 98). The narrative follows the most basic conventions of the 'dream vision' genre: a man falls asleep and has a dream. The character of the Dreamer is introduced as a failed lover who cannot sleep due to "a sickness/ That I have suffred this eight year" (36-7). He reads a book, specifically "a romaunce", recounts its events, then eventually "such a lust anoon me took/ To slepe that ryght upon my book / I fil aslepe," sending him into his dream (48, 273-5). As the dreamer falls asleep, the reader travels with him into the location of the dream. This action is integral to the generic mode of the 'dream vision', as crossing this threshold into the consciousness of Chaucer's narrator "transforms reality: the other world which the Dreamer enters is both like and unlike the familiar one of the waking experience" (Brown 36). The Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess* wakes up and describes his setting:

Me thought thus: that hyt was May,  
And in the dawenyng I lay  
(Me mette thus) in my bed all naked  
And loked forth, for I was waked  
With smale foules a gret hep  
That had affrayed me out of my slep  
Thorgh noyse and swetnesse of her song. (291-7)

It is true that because this is a narrative presented within a dream frame, the location the Dreamer wakes up in is "like and unlike" the location he falls asleep in, but this particular location in

which Chaucer's dreaming narrator finds himself would be recognizable to a medieval reader as a standard setting for a 'romance' narrative. This locale is thus not an otherworldly one, but rather a familiar 'romance' world, a heightened version of the 'real' world commonly described in Middle English literature. It is in fact the same type of world gestured to in the dream recounted in the *Romance of the Rose*: as the *Romance*'s Dreamer articulates,

I dreamed that I was filled with joy in May, the amorous month... The birds,  
silent while they were cold and the weather hard and bitter, became so gay  
in May in the serene weather, that their hearts are filled with joy until they  
must sing or burst out. (31-2)

Both the dreamers of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Romance of the Rose* are led in their dreams to a garden, a paradise of manicured beauty, where the actual action of the dream takes place. Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* Dreamer suggests that in this garden, "both Flora and Zephyrus,/ They two that make floures growe,/ Had mad her dwellynge ther.../For hit was, on to behold, As thogh the erthe envye wolde/ To be gayer than the heven" (402-7). The Dreamer comes upon a "man in blak" and overhears the beginnings of his lover's complaint:

I have of sorwe so gret won  
That joye grete I never non,  
Now that I see my lady bryght,  
Which I have loved with al my myght,  
Is fro me ded and ys agoon. (475-479)

Instead of continuing to listen to the knight's lament from a secretive vantage point, Chaucer's Dreamer reveals himself and engages the mournful lover in conversation. I begin my discussion of the *Book of the Duchess* with passages that reference recognizable tropes of Middle English literature to locate my reading of Chaucer's first 'dream vision' as part of the broader rhetorical landscape of courtly love. Tropes like the May morning, lovesickness, birdsong, and beautiful gardens demonstrate how Chaucer is locating his poem within a setting that would be immediately recognizable to medieval readers. Chaucerian and, more generally, medieval



literary scholarship have placed great importance on any use of these tropes; in fact, such “internal signals to literary type, working in conjunction with a recognizable style, have led modern critics to assume that certain medieval texts signal that they are to be read” within a certain genre context, be it Middle English ‘romance’ or ‘dream vision’ (Fewster 5). If Chaucer is using the tropes of ‘romance’ to set the scene for the *Book of the Duchess* and has framed his whole narrative with a dream frame (which is the most recognizable trope of the ‘dream vision’), is he aligning his poem with one genre over the other, or is he simply using easily repeated tropes? Why is it important that the *Book of the Duchess* be classified as one single genre, or is it possible to read Chaucer’s use of tropes as isolated conventions that can freely occur in a variety of texts? My exploration here of the use of the sympathetic guide frame within a dream frame in the *Book of the Duchess* for its rhetorical effect relies upon the reader’s willingness to read this poem without the intention of boxing it up into a discrete genre, free of the modern impulse to categorize.

The *Book of the Duchess* is, admittedly, an atypical use of the rhetorical device of the sympathetic guide frame because the Dreamer does not act as simply a witness and recorder of events, but is an active participant in the narrative. His interaction with the Man in Black, the lamenting lover, is a Chaucerian twist on the mode of ‘dream visions’: the Dreamer’s initiation of a dialogue is what propels the narrative. So how can I use the *Book of the Duchess* as a representative ‘dream vision’ for this study of the sympathetic guide frame? Why choose Chaucer as a representative author if it is his habit to subvert generic functions in his texts? I begin with this ‘dream vision’ precisely because it is written by Chaucer and is, as such, influential on the late Middle English courtly love narrative tradition. Although it may not meet a reader’s expectations for what a typical ‘dream vision’ should be, the *Book of the Duchess* is

nonetheless representative of the wider love/dream tradition because of how famous Chaucer was during his life and how important his work was to the writers who came after him.

Chaucer's 'dream visions' suggest that he "recognizes that the writer has another option besides that of surrendering himself over to old masters, acting as their medium and revitalizing traditions...Chaucer exploits the expectations of this audience, previously based on tradition, by undermining the usual single focus [of a dream vision]...and the unequivocal nature of the dream frame" (Donnelly 421-2). *The Book of the Duchess* and his following three poems that use the dream frame signal a change in the English 'dream vision' tradition. His writings progressed it by "respon[ding] to and expan[ding] the tradition of *fin amor* of the French love poets," with such changes and influence outlined in the examples of 'dream vision' narratives discussed in Chapter 3 (Donnelly 422).

But why choose this particular Chaucerian 'dream vision' and not one of his other three famous examples of the mode? As discussed in Chapter 1, I am narrowing my scope to examples of 'dream visions' that engage with the courtly love tradition and how the rhetorical device of the sympathetic guide frame can bring particular emphasis to such love elements within a broader narrative context. *The Book of the Duchess* fits here better than Chaucer's other dream poems because it is a lover's complaint contained within a dream, and is an excellent model of courtly love writing. While the *House of Fame*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Legend of Good Women* all include 'romance' elements, their primary functions are less focused on the concepts of courtly love than the *Book of the Duchess*. The *House of Fame*, for example, presents a dream far more concerned with the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of the human condition, especially with respect to states of awareness (consciousness versus dreaming) and interactions (fame versus rumour).

Critics have claimed that a study of one of these four ‘dream visions’ cannot occur in isolation of the other three because “what is said about the Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* applies quite as much to ‘Geffrey’ in the *House of Fame* as to the wide-eyed tourist in the *Parlement of Foules*, the penitent sinner in the *Legend of Good Women*, [and even to] the pilgrim ‘Chaucer’ in the *Canterbury Tales*” (Garbáty 98). While some have found it fruitful to point out similarities in narration throughout Chaucer’s oeuvre, we must also recognize that these four narratives were written over the entire duration of his writing career and thus must be different: “the function of the dream appears to be essentially different in each case, and therefore the elements which can be called ‘dreamlike’ are subtly different in each of the three later poems” than in the *Book of the Duchess* (Heatt 74). Because my study of the rhetorical sympathetic guide frame of late fourteenth century England expands beyond only Chaucerian works, the *Book of the Duchess* works as a representative of Chaucer’s style and its subject matter is most relevant to my analysis. I read it is the most straightforward expression of the sympathetic guide frame and courtly love and thus is Chaucer’s most conventional ‘dream vision’.

But as much as it could be considered a conventional work, the *Book of the Duchess* also represents Chaucer’s critique of the ‘dream vision’ mode as the tradition he inherited from famous poets from the continent. The very fact that it is a dream that contains a ‘romance’-driven narrative (the lover’s complaint) places this poem in the Medieval European poetic tradition. Allusions to the *Romance of the Rose* have already been detailed above, but there are clear references to other important French love vision texts. In fact, the *Book of the Duchess* has been called the “most Gallic and most derivative” of Chaucer’s major texts, as “approximately one-half of the poem is adapted directly from *Le Roman de la Rose*, [Guillaume de] Machaut, and [Jean] Froissart” (Calin 10). Colleen Donnelly reads direct references to Machaut’s “Remede of

Fortune” and “Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne” (425, 428). She is not the only recent scholar to explore this inheritance in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*: Steven B. Davis claims that “Chaucer deploys elements typical of Machaut and his literary milieu to create a Machaut-like central character” in the Dreamer, who he calls a “Machauldian narrator” (392). This European inheritance is felt most in how literary the *Book of the Duchess* is: William Calin asserts that “the greatest gift Machaut offers Chaucer is the notion of a poet writing poetry about the writing of poetry by a poet” (14). There are many references to reading and writing throughout the text, notably the fact that the Dreamer falls asleep on a “romaunce” (and thus suggestively falling directly into the ‘romance’ world of the story he is reading) and upon waking from his dream asserts, “Thy sys so queynt a sweven/ That I wol, be processe of tyme,/ Fonde to put this sweven in ryme/ As I kan best, and that anoon” (48, 1330-3). Chaucer’s writing is thus informed by the literary traditions of dreaming and courtly love, and yet is actively working to break out of the bounds of such generic expectations, a movement that has been remarked upon in post-Kittredge Chaucerian scholarship. Gregory Stone says, “The *Book of the Duchess* has come to be seen as the place where Chaucer renounces the courtly lyric tradition, where he moves beyond the conventional song sung by a collective *langue* to a biographic *historia* spoken by an individual” (Davis 391). The *Book of the Duchess* is traditional enough in its form and use of courtly love tropes to be the continuation of the European courtly love ‘dream vision’ tradition, but inventive enough in its narrative and commemorative value to be the tradition’s forward development. Its utility to my analysis here is precisely due to Chaucer’s implicit critique of his French influences for the *Book of the Duchess* specifically and his impact on future English writers.

Returning to the text, the exchanges Chaucer gives us between the Dreamer and the Man in Black situate the knight as the lover of a matchless lady. He describes in great detail his

beloved's superlative qualities, firmly stating his lament, and the narrative as a whole, as engaging in and expressing themes of love and loss. It is generally accepted that the *Book of the Duchess* was written by Chaucer as a commemoration of Blanche, the deceased wife of John of Gaunt, Chaucer's patron at the time (Wilcockson 329). Recent contention on this point has been expressed by scholars, such as Edward I. Condren, that Chaucer's narrative may be in honour of a different noble lady does not take away from its value as an fictionalized emotional commemoration (8-62). Nancy Dean explores the use of the love complaint in the *Book of the Duchess* as a way of expressing intense emotion, suggesting that Chaucer was "unusual in his wish to make convention express emotions convincingly" (13). Building upon Dean, I argue that the rhetorical function of the sympathetic guide frame is to convey emotion in the *Book of the Duchess*. A close analysis of Chaucer's first 'dream vision' raises questions regarding why Chaucer chose this particular mode to encase the Man in Black's complaint. The complaint could very easily have been written by Chaucer as a stand-alone piece of writing, or as a scene within a longer romance. Is the dream frame a necessary rhetorical casement for this complaint? It is clear that the dream frame is no longer acting as "simply a conventional mode of evoking the dream vision tradition and eliciting the readers' expectations and passive acceptance of the tradition" (Donnelly 424). Donnelly suggests (and I agree) that the "frame challenges and manipulates the dream vision conventions and forces the audience to read afresh as they see their expectations thwarted," although I would add that the use of the frame within a courtly love context also challenges the conventions of 'romance' (424). What she does not explore is if and how the specific sympathetic guide frame of the *Book of the Duchess* creates these challenges and manipulations to the 'dream vision' genre. To view the sympathetic guide frame as a rhetorical device as opposed to a trope aids in an understanding of what Chaucer is doing in this particular

‘dream vision’. By very definition, a rhetorical device has more of a utilitarian connotation than does a literary trope. The OED defines a literary rhetorical device as a means “to achieve eloquence or ensure the greatest possible effect on the reader or listener” (“rhetorical”). A trope, on the other hand, is defined as being an instance of “figurative or metaphorical language” in one OED entry, and “a significant or recurrent theme, especially in a literary or cultural context; a motif” in another (“trope”). The using of a rhetorical device in a literary context, then, is to be conscious of its utility to convey something the author deems important to the reader, and perhaps also to the characters contained within the narrative itself.

Chaucer’s use of the sympathetic guide frame as rhetorical device in the *Book of the Duchess* is an example of such an authorial awareness. It does not serve the same passive purpose of setting recognition as his use of courtly love tropes do. The sympathetic guide’s function within the text is rhetorically useful in its ability to convey and evoke genuine emotion through the mediation between the reader (or listener) and the author. The reader can only understand the author’s intentions through their written representations of the actions, events, and characters of the (presumably) fictional story being told. The use of a sympathetic guide frame within a narrative provides an even deeper level of mediation. With this type of frame, not only is the reader’s experience of the text being filtered through the written word of the author, it is being filtered through the Dreamer’s (or narrator’s, or observer’s) experience of his world within the narrative (which in this case is in the internal world of his dream). The Dreamer is both a character created by the author and a guide for the reader to help navigate the events being presented. For Chaucer to write a lament and then encase it within a sympathetic guide frame focuses the reader’s attention on the lament itself. By following the Dreamer into the garden to hear the Man in Black’s lament of his lost love White, the reader is implicitly drawn with the

guide into the heart of the *Book of the Duchess*. The Dreamer and sympathetic guide frame delineate what is important within the 1334 line narrative. If this lament was a scene in a longer romance and was not separated out by the use of a rhetorical sympathetic guide frame, the words of the Man in Black (and, subsequently, any intended commemoration of a historical figure) might not stand out from a longer and more complicated plot. The sympathetic guide frame, as such, intensifies emotional response: it allows for emotion to be efficiently and effectively portrayed to the reader without the excess weight of a surrounding narrative. The Dreamer mediates the reader's access to the Man in Black's lament by probing the knight to go into further and further detail about White, her superlative qualities, and what events led to his mourning. After coming upon the Man in Black and listening in on his complaining from the trees, the reader knows what the Dreamer is thinking:

Anoon ryght I gan fynde a tale  
To hym, to loke wher I might ought  
Have more knowynge of hys thought. (536-8)

The Dreamer desires to engage the Man in Black in conversation in order to better understand his thoughts, his mental condition, and his sad tale. Chaucer's Dreamer here accomplishes this desire by stepping out into the clearing and engaging the knight with guiding questions. He asks the nobleman to "telleth me or your sorwes smerte" (555), and to "telle me al hooly/ In what wyse, how, why, and wherefore/ That ye have thus youre blysse lore" (746-8). The Dreamer's questions are thus a further intensification for the reader's access to the Man in Black's emotional state. Through his continued questioning to the knight about his lady's character, their story of meeting and falling in love, and why she is no longer around (contained within lines 759-1297), the Dreamer is providing access for the reader to learn more and more of the story

and about White, bringing immediacy to the commemorative nature of the sequence within the sympathetic guide frame.

I claim that the heart of the *Book of the Duchess*, its emotional core and most significant plot points, occur within the dream frame, after the Dreamer has fallen asleep and before he wakes up. I do not think it is a coincidence that when reading the *Book of the Duchess*, the first 290 lines are set aside as merely an introduction to the core of the narrative, or forgotten entirely. This first section details the Dreamer's reading of the 'romance' of Seys and Alcyone, a tale of love and lovesickness from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that moves the Dreamer to state,

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

This section has been referred to as functioning "as an extension or support of the dream itself," to which A.C. Spearing adds that "it is not by accident that Chaucer has brought together in the same poem [...] a dream and an elaborate introduction" because "the introductory part of the *Book of the Duchess* serves to provide a psychological explanation for the dream that follows" (*Dream-Poetry* 53-5). As discussed in my introduction, most recent scholarship on Middle English 'dream visions' treats the dream space created by an author as revealing of the medieval understanding of dreams and their psychological/philosophical impact on human consciousness. Following Spearing's confirmation that this preoccupation with dream theory in literature is dominant in the academic understanding of the *Book of the Duchess*, some would read the reason for the Dreamer's dream as due to his psychological instability caused by both his own lovesickness and by reading about the lovesickness of others. The interactions the Dreamer has with the Man in Black becomes coloured with associations of mental health and wellness, which



in turn supposes that Chaucer anachronistically possessed an understanding of modern psychology. As Lou Thompson states, “recent psychological studies of grief and its healing provide a modern reader with insights into the problems of bereavement that Chaucer so astutely portrays in the *Book of the Duchess*...The importance of talking out one’s grief has been confirmed by psychologists; such articulation is a crucial part of growth in facing the reality of loss” (Thompson 435, 439). Reading both the Dreamer’s and Man in Black’s emotional and psychological states this way initiates a comment on the current movement in medieval literary scholarship to study representations of masculine emotion, especially around the subjects of death and grief. Such studies have been taken up by individual scholars like Travis W. Johnson, and by journals (namely the entire current special issue of *Paragon* titled “Medieval and Early Modern Emotional Responses to Death and Dying”). Although it would be of great interest for some to read the Man in Black’s loss of his lover within this new, popular lens (which might, in turn, suggest something about the Dreamer’s consciousness), reading Chaucer’s work as such is just outside the scope of my study. Focusing on the theoretical and medical experience of grief as communicated in literature in this way takes us outside of the actual plot and content of the narrative, much like the expectations created by ‘dream vision’ scholars, and thus I leave it to others to pursue. In light of my understanding of Chaucer’s use of the dream frame here, the introductory Seys and Alcyone section is only important in that it presages Chaucer’s use of courtly love tropes and themes within the dream section. The use of a dream frame does not automatically mean that the ‘dream’ being presented is a true ‘dream’ or that any revealed emotion presupposes a psychoanalytic reading.

The *Book of the Duchess* becomes an unexpected example of a ‘dream vision’ because the narrative involves a high level of interaction between the Dreamer and the one character he

encounters in his dream. Much critical work has focused on this interaction in terms of the possibility that the dialogue between the Dreamer and the Man in Black is in some way biographical, revealing of historical events as Chaucer experienced them. The poignancy of the lover's complaint has thus been considered in terms of how it communicates Chaucer's sympathy for the historical figure that the Man in Black represents. However, I propose that if we remove all we think we know about how Chaucer wrote this narrative as a response to the death of an important noblewoman, the *Book of the Duchess* still exists as a piece of courtly love literature that successfully engages the reader's emotions by presenting convincingly the grief of the Man in Black. In my reading of this text, it is Chaucer's use of the sympathetic guide frame more than any other literary device that is the effective mode of emotional communication. Again, it does not seem to matter that the lover's complaint is contained within a dream frame as the reader becomes involved emotionally with the Dreamer when he comes upon the knight, an event that occurs when the Dreamer is already dreaming. Those who prescribe to the Freudian-influenced critique of this work might posit that there is a perceived intimacy to 'following' someone around in their 'dream', although, of course, we must not forget that the dreamscape in the *Book of the Duchess* is entirely a fictionalization by Chaucer. Thus we cannot have 'intimacy' with the Dreamer because he does not have a real consciousness for us to experience his 'dream' within. The very fact that the reader is 'within' a dream does not create the emotional intensity that the Man in Black performs; it is the sympathetic guide frame that allows for the emotional connection between reader and knight through the Dreamer as the guide figure.

My argument for why the use of the sympathetic guide frame in the *Book of the Duchess* is noteworthy is because it is the first iteration of the frame by any medieval English author that we know of. Chaucer created a rhetorical device to enable better communication of emotion in

writing. By arriving in the garden alongside the Dreamer, the reader relies upon the Dreamer as a guide to what will happen next. This is the basic way the sympathetic guide frame operates: the reader follows the emotional reaction of the Dreamer as he listens to the complaint of the Man in Black. Chaucer, however, does even more to connect the reader with the emotions of the lamenting knight. He creates a more nuanced, innovative use of the sympathetic guide frame when the Dreamer engages the Man in Black in conversation. Again, the Dreamer is acting as a guide, drawing out the emotions of the knight in the garden in order for the reader to find a deeper connection with the fictional character. Our sympathies lie with the knight; we as readers care about him, his past experiences and uncertain future, more than we care about the Dreamer. The character development that results from Chaucer using the sympathetic guide frame to deliver his lover's complaint is interesting because it comes through the reactions of another character.

In this way, I see Chaucer as creating a new opportunity for how to use the rhetorical sympathetic guide frame in the courtly love context. He is not using the dream frame of the 'dream vision' genre so much as he is using the sympathetic guide frame to play with the expectations and tradition of both the 'dream vision' and 'romance' genres. His technique of consciously subverting and differently interpreting conventional genre tropes is often commented upon in his later works, most notably in the *Canterbury Tales* (Russell 145). Perhaps Chaucer is doing the same thing (or starting to do the same thing) in his first poem by placing it within a dream frame. Stephen J. Russell hints at this, stating that in the *Book of the Duchess*, "Chaucer's exploitation of conventional language and form reflects his sense of the operation of the dream vision, with its fabulous, labyrinthine, and finally pointless surface which nonetheless leads to an ultimate revelation of an identify between dreamer and reader" (145). Paired with the

sympathetic guide frame, the dream frame becomes a device used for its rhetorical efficacy instead of as a genre marker: Chaucer desired to present his lover's complaint through the perceptions of a guide and a dreamer fit the role well. Chaucer has linked the dream frame with the lover's complaint in a unique and novel way in the *Book of the Duchess* by taking these two identifiable literary conventions, traditionally separated from each other by modern expectations of medieval genre, and mixing them alchemically in one text. The mix of these generic expectations provides a rhetorical landscape for the Man in Black's lament, but the emotion being conveyed to the reader is poignant because of its containment within the rhetorical device of the sympathetic guide frame. In the next chapter, I take this notion of Chaucer's impact on Middle English 'dream visions' of the latter half of the fourteenth century, and trace this new Chaucerian use of the sympathetic guide frame as rhetorical device in the works of John Lydgate.

### Chapter 3: *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and *The Temple of Glas*

The Chaucerian sympathetic guide frame, as first deployed in the *Book of the Duchess* to present a lover's complaint, is found in the works of English poets who were undoubtedly influenced by this text. John Lydgate's *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* (or alternatively *The Complaint of the Black Knight*) and *The Temple of Glas* are generally acknowledged to have been influenced by Chaucer's 'dream visions', and in fact this influence is so evident that Lydgate has been named "Chaucer's immediate successor, [because] he addresses the Chaucerian oeuvre more consistently and energetically than any other writer" (Simpson 207). As Frans Diekstra puts it, "in a sense, reading Chaucer after the *Romance [of the Rose]* is like reading Lydgate after Chaucer," a relationship that sets up my use of these texts perfectly (12). Chaucer's 'dream visions' and his sympathetic guide frame developed out of the French tradition as exemplified in the *Romance of the Rose*, and Lydgate's use of the sympathetic guide frame is a further development in this tradition. Chaucer's advancing of the English courtly tradition is described by A.C. Spearing: "In *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer, having perhaps been the first to create a poem in English that possessed the eloquence of the French courtly tradition, also went a little further, setting eloquence in the context of truth and truth in the context of eloquence" (*Readings* 106). Lydgate, as I will explore in this chapter, successfully continues this new practice of English courtly writing. He is lauded as one of England's most prolific writers, with approximately 145 000 lines of verse attributed to him, which surpasses both Shakespeare and Chaucer (Pearsall *Lydgate* 4). His writing career directly followed Chaucer's, with most of his works being first circulated in the early years of the fifteenth century. And although Lydgate was obviously prolific and popular, he has been described by scholars like Derek Pearsall as

“prolix and dull”; notwithstanding, “he is so perfectly representative of the Middle Ages” (Lydgate 14). Although this chapter consists of a comparison of Lydgate’s writings against Chaucer’s, my purpose here is not to pass a value judgement. Instead, it is to trace the trajectory of the use of the sympathetic guide frame from Chaucer to his immediate successor, which suggests that Lydgate was much more creative than literary critics have given him credit for.

It is evident when reading *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* that Lydgate borrowed a great deal of literary material from the *Book of the Duchess* (Pearsall “Innovator” 8). Lydgate’s version of the narrative is set in the same conventional romance setting of the garden on a day in May, reminiscent of both the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Book of the Duchess*. It has the same cast of characters: a narrator who is looking “to fynde socour of my smert, / Or attelest summe relese of my peyn” (19-20) and a man, presumably a knight because of the courtly context, “in blake and white colour, pale and wan” (131). Because of our familiarity with Chaucer’s version of this story, we would expect Lydgate to present the knight’s complaint within a dream frame too. However, whether the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* takes place within a dream is ambiguous. Unlike the *Book of the Duchess*, which has a lengthy and, as I argued in Chapter 2, not particularly productive introduction to the Man in Black’s complaint, Lydgate’s *Complaynte* jumps right in to the action:

And wyth a sygh I gan for to abreyde  
Out of my slombre and soddenly out stert,  
[...] I rose anon and thought I wolde goon  
Unto the wode to her the briddes sing...(15-23)

Where in the *Book of the Duchess* we get a detailed account of how and where the Dreamer falls asleep, Lydgate’s Narrator seems to only wake up with a start. It is unclear as to whether this ‘waking’ is within a dream state, which prompts the question of whether or not this complaint can be considered to be presented within a dream. Is Lydgate’s version of Chaucer’s complaint a

‘dream vision’ by typical genre expectations or just a complaint? Is Lydgate doing something different from Chaucer or is he imitating Chaucer badly? I argue here that whether or not Lydgate’s complaint is occurring in a dream state is irrelevant to a critical reading of the Black Knight’s complaint. The rhetorical utility of the sympathetic guide frame I demonstrated in the *Book of the Duchess* does not rely on the dream frame, as discussed in Chapter 2, but on the use of a guide figure to observe a complaint and magnify the emotions of the lamenting lover for the reader. *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* fulfills the conditions of the sympathetic guide frame despite its genre ambiguities. Thus we find Lydgate following Chaucer in presenting a lover’s complaint in the same frame, but with even less concern for generic expectations in the narrative as a whole.

Lydgate’s continuation of the English courtly love tradition still resonates with French influence. Susan Bianco has begun a preliminary investigation into Lydgate’s connections to the French love writers, and suggests that her arguments are an initial stage of “peeling away the dense overlay of Chaucerian criticism which overshadows Lydgate’s work” because it has been customary to only see Chaucer as Lydgate’s literary influence (60). In the same way Chaucer was greatly influence by Machaut, it is possible that “Lydgate was familiar with the French work of at least Froissart” (Bianco 66). And yet, the Chaucerian influence on his work is undeniable: “the birth of the English tradition of court poetry was still taking place at the time that Lydgate was writing” and because of Chaucer’s heavy influence on this, “Lydgate turned to his work for inspiration” (Bianco 66). His hesitant Narrator might be a reflection of Lydgate’s own acknowledgement of his appropriation of Chaucer’s literary legacy, especially in the reworking of Chaucer’s first major love poem. It is also possible that he removed any interactions between the Narrator and the Black Knight to demonstrate his awareness of Chaucer’s use of the *Book of*

*the Duchess* as a commemorative lament for a real person – without the explicit dreamer mediation that Chaucer uses, Lydgate's version of the Man in Black's lament is far less personal, and more clearly fictional than Chaucer's.

Lydgate's presentation of the sympathetic guide frame in the *Complaynte*, however, seems to be a simplified version of the original Chaucerian one. If the Dreamer's constant questioning of the lamenting lover in the *Book of the Duchess* is instrumental in heightening the levels of emotion presented by the Man in Black beyond that of the basic sympathetic guide frame that encases the complaint (the observer coming upon a lamenting knight in a romance setting), the Narrator of Lydgate's version acts in the opposite manner. Even though he, like in the *Book of the Duchess*, comes upon the Black Knight in a clearing, the Narrator does not engage with the lover at all. Instead, he remains hidden while continuing to listen to the Knight's complaint:

Wherof astonied, my fote I gan withdrawe,  
Gretly wondring what hit might be  
That he so lay and had no felowe,  
Ne that I coude no wyght with him se,  
Wherof I had routhe and eke pité;  
I gan anon, so softly as I coude,  
Amonge the bushes me prively to shroude;  
If that I might in eny wise espye  
What was the cause of his dedely woo...(141-9)

The Knight's complaint is thus a monologue describing his lovesickness; any deep insights into his character that could be drawn out by questioning from the Narrator are left undiscovered. So again, why does Lydgate even bother to have the Knight's complaint observed by a narrating figure? Why does he not just present the complaint without any surrounding material? The Narrator's wanderings to and from the garden bookend the Black Knight's complaint, functioning the same way rhetorically as the Dreamer's wanderings in the *Book of the Duchess*



in that they present the complaint within a frame, but also to draw attention to the function of the Narrator as a type of guide.

The *Complaynte*'s Narrator is similar to the *Book of the Duchess*'s Dreamer in his impulse to write down the complaint in order to share it. He states his purpose:

And for me semeth that hit ys sytting  
His words al to put in remembraunce,  
To me that herde al his compleynyng  
And al the grounde of his woful chaunce,  
Yf therwithal I may yow do plesaunce,  
I wol to yow, so as I can, anone  
Lych as he seyde rehearse everychone. (169-75)

The Narrator reveals to the reader that he is intentionally eavesdropping in on the Knight's complaint in order to record it as a "remembraunce" for public consumption. Lydgate's Narrator is thus solely an emotional guide for the audience. This is contrary to Chaucer's Dreamer who actively engages with the Man in Black first for the sake of dialogue and then decides to transcribe their conversation only after waking from his dream. Chaucer's Dreamer is primarily acting as a guide to the Man in Black, and secondarily as a guide for his reader. Although the Dreamer qualifies that he will put his "sweven in ryme/ As I kan best," this is the only comment Chaucer gives the reader about the literary practice of writing (1331-2). Lydgate's Narrator, in contrast, spends far more lines of verse questioning his aptitude to record the complaint he will hear. He states, "But I, alas, that am of wytte but dulle/ And have no knowyng of suche mater/ For to discryve and wryte at the fulle/ The wofull compleynt," a statement that recalls the self-deprecating Chaucerian narrator of the *Canterbury Tales* (190-3). For Lydgate's Black Knight, the lament is "the distress of a 'real' lover who does not know he is being recorded, whose record is made by one who admits – even dwells on – his inadequacy for such a task" (Symons 75). Nevertheless, after being moved to tears by the Knight's words of love, the Narrator takes

up a pen “and gan me fast spede/ The woful pleynt of this man to write/ Worde be worde as he dyd endyte” (598-600). It has been stated that throughout Chaucer’s works, his narrating figures are remarkable because they are so involved with the stories they are helping to tell. A.C.

Spearing’s theory on this is not in line with the common criticism that reads Chaucer’s “narratorial mannerisms...either as means of characterizing the narrator (as naïve, pedantic, clumsy, incapable of understanding the story he is telling, and so on) or as a means of ironizing the entire text”, but instead finds it more satisfying “to think of such mannerisms as calling attention to the textuality of the poem, and also to its intertextuality – that is, to its existence within a field of texts, on its difference from which it is dependent for its own meaning” (*Readings* 91-2). Following this, the Dreamer’s interaction with the Man in Black in the *Book of the Duchess* is not as a humorous figure, but as a guide to understanding this text within the context of the courtly tradition. Lydgate as Chaucer’s successor is using his Narrator in the *Complaynte* in the same way: the Narrator is a call to the textuality of the Chaucerian tradition that Lydgate is continuing, and is a guide to the courtly emotion of the Black Knight’s complaint.

Having discussed its position within the English medieval literary context, I return now to the consequences of Lydgate’s use of Chaucerian techniques to magnify emotion in *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*. The sympathetic guide frame in the *Complaynte* suggests a separation from the generic notion of the ‘dream vision’ and a union between the utility of this rhetorical device and the utility of the lover’s complaint. As most scholarship that deals with the *Complaynte* in relation to the *Book of the Duchess* ends with the well-documented relationship between the two narratives, the idea that Lydgate understands a Chaucerian technique enough to develop it in new ways with his own writing is an unexplored line of thought. It would not have escaped any medieval reader’s attention that the *Complaynte* was a new take on the *Book of the Duchess*, and

so most readings of Lydgate's version of the complaint would have been necessarily coloured by a reading of Chaucer. It may have even occurred to medieval readers that Lydgate was taking what Chaucer did but doing it badly. The inconsistencies in the *Complaynte* as to whether or not the Narrator is in fact dreaming, and the uncertainty within the Narrator's character that he could accurately and effectively reproduce the complaint, suggest an inferior telling of the narrative.

Here I read Lydgate's use of the same sympathetic guide frame in his *Complaynte* as a simplification of the frame used in the *Book of the Duchess*. If Chaucer's goal in using the sympathetic guide frame to encase his Man in Black's complaint was to intensify the emotions being conveyed, Lydgate's use of the sympathetic guide frame still fulfills this same goal. Regardless of whether or not the poem itself is a 'dream vision' by conventional standards of genre, Lydgate deploys all the stereotypical marks of the sympathetic guide frame: a guide coming upon the courtly love setting of the idyllic garden and setting the stage for the reader to listen with him to a complaint of a noble lover. Lydgate does not employ his sympathetic guide (his Narrator) to the same degree that Chaucer employs his Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* however. He instead leaves the Black Knight to recount his love and loss unprovoked. As I argued above, Chaucer's Dreamer works in the *Book of the Duchess* as an extension of the rhetorical device of the sympathetic guide frame by allowing the reader access to the interiority of the Man in Black, something that Lydgate's readers experience in a reduced way in the *Complaynte*. Lydgate's Black Knight, however, is no less sympathetic because of the Narrator's choice to stay hidden in the bushes. The intensity of emotion he is demonstrating in his complaint is more palpable from being presented within a sympathetic guide frame than it would be if presented as just a complaint of 356 lines.

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What happens when this rhetorical sympathetic guide frame is used to encase lover's complaints beyond that of the Man in Black/Black Knight? I turn now to Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*, a love poem that would be considered traditionally a 'dream vision' and uses a clear dream frame. It is a much more substantial poem than the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, and is the "longest sustained composition in which Lydgate does not work from a direct source" (Pearsall *Lydgate* 104). Many scholars have remarked upon the ties between the *Temple of Glas* and Chaucer's *House of Fame*. My second chapter claimed the use of the *Book of the Duchess* as the preeminent example of Chaucer's use of the sympathetic guide frame because of its encasement of a specifically 'romance' narrative that included a relatively realistic landscape. The *Temple of Glas*, however, takes its landscape from the decidedly more other-worldly dreamscape of the *House of Fame*. Lydgate is using this text of Chaucer's more as a springboard than as a model, like the *Complaynte* does. The borrowings from Chaucer in this narrative are more situational details than plot points. Lydgate's dreamer opens the narrative with his struggle to fall asleep on a day in December:

Within my bed for sore I gan me shroude,  
 Al desolate for constreint of my wo,  
 The longe nyght waloing to and fro  
 Til ate last, er I gan taken kepe,  
 Me did oppresse a sodein dedeli slep, (10-14)

Within his dream he finds himself "ravysshid in spirit in a temple of glas," into which he enters, beginning the narrative contained within the dream frame (16). The *House of Fame* dreamer too falls asleep on a day in December and dreams that he is "withyn a temple ymad of glas," which he soon discovers is filled with art and dedicated to Venus, the goddess of love (111-30). Lydgate's Dreamer finds that the walls of the temple he encounters in his dream are filled with "many a faire image/ Of sondri lovers" who are speaking their "complaint, wofol and pitous,"

With doleful chere to putten to Venus,” actions that are mimicked by the actual worshipers of Venus in the temple (45-6, 51-2). This is the point where Lydgate establishes a different trajectory for his narrative than what is encountered in the *House of Fame*. While his setting of a strange glass temple would not have been a natural setting for a medieval person to find themselves, it is still a setting of the ‘romance’ tradition. The Dreamer is in a place dedicated to love and lovers and remains in this place, while the Dreamer of the *House of Fame* quickly moves on from Venus’s temple to explore the dream lands of Fame and Rumour. We are encountering yet another text presented within a dream frame that could potentially be subjected to the restrictive psychoanalytic expectations of the ‘dream vision’ genre. And again, I resist this type of classification of Lydgate’s text in favour of focusing on the content of the narrative and its courtly love themes.

The *Temple of Glas* and the *Complayte of a Lovers Lyfe* share similar structural and thematic features. The *Temple of Glas* Dreamer switches his attention from the strange spectacle of the temple to a superlatively beautiful woman who “forto compleyne she hade gret desire” (316). The Dreamer then recounts the complaint to Venus read aloud by the woman from “a litel bil” she brought with her (317). After this first lover’s complaint, the Dreamer recounts the exchange between the woman and Venus as an impartial narrator. The second section of the narrative focuses on yet another “man that welke al solitarie” who he overhears vocalizing his complaint “for lak of his desire” (550-64). This lamentation is directed to no one in particular, but soon transitions into a more formal prayer to Venus: as the Dreamer recounts, “This woful man...knelid doun in ful humble wise/ Tofore the goddess, and gan anon devyse/ His pitous quarrel with a doleful chere” (695-9). Again, the Dreamer recounts this interactions between the woman, man, and goddess, acting much like the Narrator of the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* as

he does not interact directly with the lovers at all. The poem closes with the typical sympathetic guide frame ending, the Dreamer vowing “to maken and to write/ A litil tretis” for the lovers of his dream and lovers everywhere (1379-80). Lydgate’s two poems are thus primarily located within the courtly tradition, and employ the same sympathetic guide frame as a means of presenting laments. Yet Pearsall argues that the originality of the *Temple of Glas* lies specifically “in the way it takes as its ‘story’ a literal human situation, in which the true love of the Knight and his Lady is temporarily frustrated by the fact that she is married” (*Lydgate* 107). He goes on to state that “Lydgate develops the set-speeches [the complaints] with skill and energy. He is always at his best thus, writing within a strong convention [the courtly love tradition of lover’s complaints], where the material is already to some extent selected for him” by the nature of its popularity (Pearsall *Lydgate* 109).

It is here that my argument for the rhetorical effectiveness of the sympathetic guide frame seems to provide the reason behind both Pearsall’s statements. Although, as Pearsall admits, Lydgate is writing very comfortably within the culture of courtly love, his lover’s complaints are still compelling I believe because of his borrowing of Chaucer’s sympathetic guide frame. His deployment of a “literal human situation” through the vocalizations of two lovers attracts attention because it is familiar yet different, conventional yet heightened. He is picking up on a pattern of presenting relatable situations and emotions in a literary form to be consumed by the public and is successful because of his popularity. Following this, an argument has been made that the *Temple of Glas*, much like the *Book of the Duchess*, works to comment on the historical events of early fifteenth-century England. Allan Mitchell suggests that “Lydgate borrowed many details from this veiled elegy to the Duchess of Lancaster [in the *Book of the Duchess*], and possibly took courage from Chaucer too when making coded historical references

to real events and royal personages in pleasing allegory” within the *Temple of Glas*, referring to the possible reference to Queen Katherine, rumoured to have had extra-marital affairs (63).

Much like the potential history surrounding the *Book of the Duchess*, any veiled references made by Lydgate in this poem do not interfere with my reading of the *Temple of Glas* as a love poem within a sympathetic guide frame.

Lydgate’s employment of the frame in this extended work is different from what has already been investigated in this study due to the particular details of the narrative. The pattern of use for the sympathetic guide frame is no longer limited to encasing the complaint of one (male) lover. Instead, it encases two versions of a lover’s complaint, by two different characters, as well as the resolution of those complaints. I read this as a development in the accepted use of the sympathetic guide frame within the English courtly love tradition. Chaucer established its usefulness in provoking emotional intensity in one complaint, which was taken up in the same way by Lydgate in *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, and now Lydgate is employing the rhetorical device in an expanded context. The connection between the sympathetic guide frame and the lover’s complaint is recognizable enough as a rhetorical technique in the *Temple of Glas* and feels like a natural progression of English literature over time. But again, the question of why Lydgate is choosing to frame the *Temple of Glas* within a sympathetic guide frame instead of just as a stand-alone piece of romance writing must be addressed. What is the evidence with this particular narrative that makes the sympathetic guide frame a particularly effective medium within which to present his complaints? I return to the notion of the increasing levels of emotional intensity that can be conveyed by authors with this device. If Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* is a demonstration of the highest level of efficacy of the sympathetic guide frame because it both encases the Man in Black’s lament as well as provides the reader with access to

the interiority of the grieving knight through the interactions that the Dreamer initiates, then the most basic employment of the sympathetic guide frame is the simple encasement of the complaint, like in Lydgate's *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, where the complaint is the full, unmediated focus of the narrative due to the limited involvement of the Narrator beyond setting up the frame. The *Temple of Glas* seems to present a sympathetic guide frame that falls in the middle of the accepted spectrum of use.

The *Temple of Glas* Dreamer is a rhetorical guide removed from the action of his dream. He does not interact with the lovers other than to observe and recount their actions, so he is not as involved as Chaucer's Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess*. And yet Lydgate's Dreamer here offers more to the reader of his own reactions to the scenes he encounters in Venus's temple than does the narrator in the *Complaynte*. At multiple points, the Dreamer openly remarks upon how affected emotionally he is by the love story he is witnessing. He states after recounting the man's complaint that "For routhe of which his wo as I endite,/ Mi penne I fele quaken as I write./ Of him I had so great compassioun" (946-7). He even invokes the muse Thesiphone for help to "lete youre teris into myne inke reyn/...To tell the maner of this dredful man,/ Upon his complaint" (958-65). Lydgate is evoking an image of literally spotting the page of his story with tears of ink, projecting the difficulty of effectively recording emotion for an audience who cannot witness such intensity firsthand. This self-awareness in his poetic art is quite a marker of Chaucerian influence. The Dreamer expresses his own interiority for the benefit of his readers a final time at the close of the poem. He awakes from his dream:

Whereof I made great lamentacioun  
Because I had never in my life aforne  
Sein none so faire, fro time that I was borne. (1375-7)



Lydgate is employing the techniques of an emotionally vulnerable Dreamer to provide a guide for how the laments with the *Temple of Glas* should affect the reader. Pearsall comments upon this kind of Chaucerian influence. He says, “Lydgate profited in a multitude of ways from Chaucer’s example, but nevertheless in all his writing he reasserts medieval traditions and habits of mind against Chaucer’s free-ranging innovations. He throws into sharp relief not only Chaucer’s greatness but also his differentness” (*Lydgate* 14). This comment is quite a disservice to Lydgate. Yes, his employment of rhetorical techniques that were created by his predecessor is inherently unoriginal and, by my definition, is less effective than Chaucer’s original use. But his use of the sympathetic guide frame to encase his laments shows his understanding of the device as a powerful, intensifying tool for his own writing. It is perhaps Lydgate’s use of the sympathetic guide frame that makes it more acceptable to use within the medieval literary tradition. If he is the prolific, popular writer to Chaucer as the ‘different’ one, his use of Chaucerian techniques says much about his ability to take Chaucer’s influence and make his ‘difference’ conventional, all the while contributing to the development of courtly love literature.

The following chapter looks at examples of particular deployments of the hint of a sympathetic guide frame to encase a lover’s complaint within the different genre of the traditional English ‘romance’. The prevalence in Chaucer’s writing and in the writing of others of this specific use of the sympathetic guide frame necessitates a consideration of why Lydgate did not just situate the narrative of the *Temple of Glas* within a longer, more complicated romance. If he was able to recognize Chaucer’s use of the sympathetic guide frame in his ‘dream visions’ then Lydgate would most likely have recognized his variation on the frame to contain laments in his other non-‘dream vision’ works. I see this as a comment on the conventional understanding of the ‘dream vision’ genre that I have argued against, as opposed to a comment

on the utility of the sympathetic guide frame. Perhaps we have to give Lydgate more credit for his work than some are wont to give him. By choosing to locate the *Temple of Glas* fully within the frame of a dream and with the purpose of using an emotionally involved Dreamer to elicit emotionally involved readers, I see Lydgate as choosing the riskier, more innovative method for telling his story; hardly prolix and dull. This statement relies upon the reader understanding that it is more work for an author to use the sympathetic guide frame in this rhetorically specific way. Again, Lydgate is not getting the sympathetic guide frame wrong by using it in simpler ways in the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and the *Temple of Glas* in comparison to Chaucer's use of the frame in the *Book of the Duchess*. He is instead revealing the standards of courtly love culture at the time and presenting the sympathetic guide frame in a way that is accessible for all.

## Chapter 4: Late Middle English Romances

As has been discussed in my previous chapters, the lover's complaint is a trope present in many of the most popular romances of the English tradition. My treatment of the complaint thus far has been to view it in this respect: as a marker that indicates why the particular narratives I present here are within the English courtly love tradition. When a complaint occurs in a romance, it implies a certain set of conditions: the lover lamenting is of noble birth (usually a male knight); there are obstacles preventing the lover from being with their beloved; and the lover is within a world where this expression of lovesickness is conventional. So far my chosen complaints have all been contained by narratives that Steve Kruger or Kathryn Lynch would group within the 'dream vision' genre. But, as I have suggested, the lover's complaint has more of a relationship with the rhetorical frame of the dreamer/dream than with the critical expectations of the 'dream vision' genre. The encasement of a complaint within a sympathetic guide frame, I posit, begins with Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and continues through the courtly literature of the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Lydgate's use of the sympathetic guide frame to present his complaints in the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and the *Temple of Glas* suggests this pairing was read as conventional by the fifteenth century. However, up until this point, I have only explored the sympathetic guide frame within shorter narratives that are segregated into a 'dream vision' categorization because of their use of the dream frame. I move on to explore if and how the sympathetic guide frame is linked with the lover's complaints within traditional English 'romances'. My findings are convincing: the sympathetic guide frame continues to be useful in presenting a lover's complaint within a longer, more complex romance because it is a device that focuses the reader's attention on a moment of emotional turmoil. What is particularly interesting

about this rhetorical frame in a 'romance' is that the story continues on after the lover's complaint, and the reader can see how overheard emotions advance character and plot development.

I advocate in the previous two chapters for the presentation of a lover's complaint within a sympathetic guide frame to be considered as a rhetorical device used in 'dream vision' texts, but does this interpretation work in the same way within the context of standard 'romance' narratives? In my study of how the sympathetic guide frame functions differently in non-dream narratives, I will again begin with Chaucer, comparing the *Book of the Duchess* with the *Knight's Tale*. The *Knight's Tale* is the first tale included within Chaucer's major text *The Canterbury Tales*, but it is accepted that it was written early on in his writing career, before his largest project was begun, and then was adapted to fit within the pilgrimage/storytelling structure (Benson 6). It is a chivalric 'romance', meaning that it contains all the expected tropes, including the settings already explored in my analysis of the *Book of the Duchess*. Although the *Knight's Tale* is set in ancient Greece, its rhetorical landscape is no different from other English 'romance' landscapes, and we are again in the same rhetorical world as the Dreamer and the Man in Black. The first scene of action within the *Knight's Tale* occurs in a beautiful garden in full bloom on a May day. Emelye, a superlatively beautiful princess, is introduced on "a morwe of May, / ...in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste" where she is gathering flowers (I.1034-53). On this same morning Palamon goes to the window, looks down at the garden below, "cast his eye upon Emelya, / And therewithal he bleynte and cride, "A!" / As though he strongen were unto the herte" (I.1075-9). His cry alerts Arcite, who comes to the window where he too sees Emily below in the garden, so "and with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so, / That, if that Palamon was wounded sore, / Arcite is hurt as much as he, or moore" (I.1114-6). The conflict of the tale

unfolds because of the rivalry created between the cousins over who can win the love of Emily, and both voice their own lover's complaints over their separation from her in different sections of the romance.

After the knights are either released from prison and exiled (Arcite), or escape from the cell (Palamon), neither can stand being separated from Emily any longer and make plans that, coincidentally, place them at the same moment in the same forest. Palamon, fearing that he will be tracked down for escaping his prison cell, decides that "in that grove he wolde hym hyde al day," and so conceals himself in the foliage of the trees and surrounding brush (I.1481). It is then that Arcite comes to the same wood and speaks his own complaint about being separated from Emily:

And over al this, to sleen me ourtrely  
Love hath his firy dart so brennyngly  
Ystriked thurgh my trewe, careful hearte  
That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte.  
Ye slene me with youre eyen, Emelye!  
Ye been the cause wherefore that I dye. (I.1563-8)

Palamon hears these words from his hiding place, and decides that "no lenger wolde he byde./ [...] And whan that he had herd Arcites tale,/ As he were wood, [...] He stirte hym up ou of the buskes thikke" and reveal himself to his cousin (I. 1576-9). The plot conditions that surround Arcite's complaint are strikingly similar to those we have seen before in the works of Chaucer and Lydgate: the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess* first listens to the Man in Black lament from a vantage point in the woods, and the Narrator of the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* purposefully remains hidden from the Black Knight in the forest to hear his full complaint. This repetition of elements that imply the sympathetic guide frame that I have identified in Chapters 2 and 3 (a guide listening to a lover speak his complaint without interference) within a 'romance' like the *Knight's Tale* where the narrative is clearly not occurring in a dream is curious. What is

the purpose for Chaucer presenting Arcite's lover's complaint within the same rhetorical parameters as the presentation of the Man in Black's complaint? If the *Knight's Tale* is not a 'dream vision' why does it contain allusions to a dream-like frame?

Chaucer is here creating a way for lover's complaints to be presented to the reader within the broader context of the already well-established 'romance' tradition. The sympathetic guide frame in this context is another example of the same frame Chaucer created in the *Book of the Duchess*. Because of his popularity during his lifetime, it is conceivable that any reader would see Palamon's covert listening to Arcite's complaint as a continuation of the work being done to develop the sympathetic guide frame as a rhetorical device. The notion I used in previous chapters to indicate the different levels of emotional intensity communicated through the use of a sympathetic guide frame is again useful here. I have already provided textual evidence for why there is a sympathetic guide frame encasing Arcite's complaint, which I equate to the most basic function of the frame. The reader's focus is drawn to the lover complaining because he is following the lead of the character listening in to the complaint. Our attention to the complaint is cued by the attention being paid by the listener. In the *Book of the Duchess* I suggest there is also a second, higher level of intensification being created by the dialogue between listener (Dreamer) and lover (Man in Black) because of the Dreamer's desire to know more about the conditions of the knight's lovesickness and loss. In the same way that the reader gains more and more insight into the emotional depths of the Man in Black through the questions posed by the Dreamer, the reader of the *Knight's Tale* is also swept up in the emotional intensity of the moment by the action and dialogue that follows Arcite's complaint. After Palamon steps out of the protection of the trees and reveals himself as having heard Arcite's declaration of love for Emily, the two engage in a heated exchange of words. Palamon swears that "I wol be ded, or elles thou shalt

dye. / Thou shalt nat love my lady Emelye, / But I wol love hire oonly and namo” (I.1587-9), to which Arcite responds by drawing his sword and saying, “Verray fool, think wel that love is free, / And I wol love hire maugree al thy myght!” (I.1606-7). This passionate exchange between the cousins works in the same way rhetorically as the exchange between the Dreamer and the Man in Black: the reader becomes very invested in the emotions of the characters being portrayed.

The sympathetic guide frame and the lover’s complaint seem to now be firmly connected within the courtly love tradition. It also seems that the use of the sympathetic guide frame within a ‘romance’ does not lose any of its rhetorical power despite the fact that it is seemingly out of place (i.e. not within a shorter narrative that makes explicit the fact that it is a dream related by a dreamer). If the point of the sympathetic guide frame is to draw the reader into the story by heightening their access to the emotional state of a lover complaining, then Chaucer’s use of the frame to encase Arcite’s complaint in the *Knight’s Tale* fulfills this purpose. I read the emotion-driven response by Palamon to confront Arcite and threaten violence as a similar impulse to the one experienced by dreamers (like in the *Book of the Duchess* and even in Lydgate’s *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*) who are compelled to write down a complaint after they hear it. Both responses reveal the overwhelming reaction characters experience when listening to a lover’s complaint. Again, this reaction provides guidance for the audience as to how they too should be moved by the complaint. The reaction of Palamon in the *Knight’s Tale* is appropriate in its difference from, for example, the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess* because he is a character in the romance, not a removed observer of a narrative. Palamon is not removed from the overall story of the *Knight’s Tale* by becoming the guide to Arcite’s lover’s complaint; his reaction after the complaint is emotional and violent precisely because he is an active participant in the plot, not a poet listening to the complaint out of curiosity. If a sympathetic guide frame to encase a lover’s

complaint in a 'dream vision' works to isolate and intensify the emotional moment from any surrounding text (as suggested in Chapter 2 with the *Book of the Duchess*), perhaps this same sympathetic guide frame works to highlight a lover's complaint in a longer 'romance' for the purpose of heightening the emotions of the lamenting knight and advancing the plot of the surrounding narrative.

As mentioned above, the *Knight's Tale* contains multiple scenes of lovers complaining, but only one is presented within what I identify as a progression of the Chaucerian sympathetic guide frame. Earlier on in the text, both Palamon and Arcite speak lover's complaints but speak them in private, with no other character overhearing them. These are true moments of soliloquy and thus only contribute to the reader's understanding of the character, not to the advancement of character conflict or plot development. But if the sympathetic guide frame is such an effective method of expressing and highlighting the emotions of a lover's complaint within the much more complex context of a 'romance', why does Chaucer not use it to contain all passages of lament in this tale? I see a distinction here in using the sympathetic guide frame to encase a lover's complaint when it benefits the development of the narrative for the lamenting lover to be overheard by another character. Unlike the *Book of the Duchess* or *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, the *Knight's Tale* follows a multi-layered plotline, presenting through the omniscient third-person narrator the private feelings and thoughts of multiple characters. My readings of the sympathetic guide frame up to this point have been to describe their utility as a window into the interiority of a complaining lover, with an understanding of the dreamer/guide figure as a means of accessing this emotion. The dreamer is not overly important and is not the character that the reader cares about. However, this condition changes in 'romances', where all protagonists and the reader's access to their emotional state are equally weighted. In the particular passage of



complaint I am exploring here from the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer is creating equal investment in Palamon and Arcite, even though the use of the sympathetic guide frame should indicate that one feels more connection to the emotions of Arcite (the knight lamenting) and sees Palamon as just a guide helping to reveal these emotions. This lover's complaint is not segregated from any other plot points by the sympathetic guide frame like it would be in a narrative where it is contained within a dream frame as well and has no connection to the rest of the story once the dreamer wakes up. Instead, this moment of complaining within the broader plot of the romance is given increased visibility by the use of a sympathetic guide frame. It is the moment that is the real catalyst for all following action in the *Knight's Tale* and thus the emotions presented by both Arcite and Palamon are identified to the reader by way of a familiar rhetorical device.

This lover's complaint passage in the *Knight's Tale* might, to some scholars, be considered part of the critical work already being done on moments of eavesdropping and spying in Middle English romances. A.C. Spearing recognizes that "medieval romances are full of schemes in which a concealed character spies on one or more others, watching what they do or listening to what they say, and such spying is nearly always connected with the supremely private and secret activity of sexual love" ("Secrecy" 273). All the conditions he outlines certainly do apply to this passage: Palamon is purposely concealed while listening to Arcite and the speech he hears deals with Arcite's sexual desire for Emily. Spearing outlines the motivations he reads behind these scenes of eavesdropping and concealment, most notably that "the watcher is a deviser of plots and in effect a surrogate for the storyteller, present in order to ensure that the story he has devised follows the course he desires" ("Secrecy" 273). However, this seems a more apt description of Chaucer's Pandarus (of *Troilus and Criseyde*) than Palamon, who is only listening in on Arcite due to coincidence. Spearing continues, stating that

the “spy’s position is in a sense one of impotence, for he can only watch, not directly participate in, the scene he witnesses; yet the secret knowledge he thereby gains may also become a means of control over those he watches, enabling him to intervene in current events and influence those yet to come” (“Secrecy” 273). Again, his reading of the covert spy of ‘romances’ does not comfortably fit the *Knight’s Tale*. Spearing seems to give much more agency to the spying character than I think is due to Palamon in this particular scene. It is true that the knowledge the knight gains from overhearing his cousin’s complaint does forward the plot in that his reaction to the complaint spurs on the conflict between the two characters, which culminates in the climactic duel to decide who wins Emily’s hand in marriage. But again, I read his overhearing as a rhetorical technique of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, rather than a calculated action of Palamon’s character. He does not hide in the woods to purposefully listen in on his cousin in order to gain information and influence to use later. Like the Dreamer does in the *Book of the Duchess* or the Narrator does in *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, Palamon just listens to Arcite’s words then reacts to them for the benefit of the reader and the continuation of the story.

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My study of the sympathetic guide frame in ‘romances’ has thus far only considered its application in Chaucer’s most stereotypical chivalric text. I move on now to a consideration of later Middle English romances that demonstrate use of this frame as conventionalized, much like Lydgate’s use of the frame in his ‘dream visions’. My evidence for this comes from close readings of ‘romances’ that are commonly considered by modern critics as parodies of the ‘romance’ genre, for in order for a literary element to be parodied, it must be a familiar enough element to the intended audience for them to notice how and when an author is playing with it. Chaucer again is considered by most to have written the ultimate ‘romance’ parody in Middle

English. The *Tale of Sir Thopas* is contained within his *Canterbury Tales* and is well-known to be a play on the many popular ‘romances’ of his time. Wim Tigges provides an excellent sentence-long summary of why it is considered a parodic tale:

Anyone who is at all familiar with the conventional themes, motifs, form and style of Middle English romance will have a shrewd idea that there is something odd about this Flemish knight-errant with his girdle-length beard but otherwise somewhat effeminate appearance, pricking like mad through the buck-and-hare-infested forest that smells of licorice and nutmeg, and who goes out to find an elf-queen – blissfully ignorant of the fact that elf-queens, by convention, cannot be searched for but come and search one out if one is lucky – and bravely informs a three-headed giant that he will come back and fight when better armed on the next day, only to forget all about this self-imposed agreement when he rides out again after a sumptuous feast of gingerbread soaked in wine. (136)

Significant to my purposes is the passage where Sir Thopas, after riding all day “fil in love-longynge” falls asleep and has a dream (VII.772). The reader is not brought into the knight’s consciousness, but finds out the nature of his dream when he awakes: “me dremed al this nyght, pardee, / An elf-queene shal my lemman be / And slepe under my gore. / An elf-queen wol I love, ywis, / For in this world no womman is / Worthy to be my make” (VII.787-92). Here we see a use of a true dream (so far only seen in examples of ‘dream visions’) within a ‘romance’. Even in this very short passage, I read hints at the sympathetic guide frame: Sir Thopas fell asleep, had a dream that, even if it did not contain an observed lover’s complaint, certainly engaged in themes of courtly love, and allowed him to wake up compelled into action. This dream also signals a turning point in the very short tale as it provides a purpose for Thopas so that he is no longer just “priking” around the countryside.

Even if *Sir Thopas* does not present the sympathetic guide frame in the same way as in the *Book of the Duchess* or the *Knight’s Tale*, Chaucer’s subtle references to it in his intentionally bad ‘romance’ suggest that it is a convention that can be parodied. Tigges provides

a longer discussion of ‘romance’ features that prove common enough to be manipulated for humorous effect, stating that “all these elements [including tropes like a questing knight, a love theme, or even the high style of ‘romance’ verses] lend themselves easily to parody or ridicule” but what is important “is that in a parody the convention, of whatever kind, should be *noticeably* ridiculed,” not just exaggerated (133). Perhaps we can read the sympathetic guide frame here as being noticeably ridiculed because it spurs Thopas on to a ridiculous quest and demonstrates that there is very little internal thought or understanding to the knight at all. Regardless of whether or not the sympathetic guide frame is successfully deployed in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* for the benefit of highlighting the emotional interior of the knight, it still works in this romance as a means of plot advancement. The reader may not gain any understanding of the knight that suggests he is anything more than a silly, vapid man on an aimless country ride, but at least after his dream Sir Thopas has a potential quest to pursue. However veiled the use of the sympathetic guide frame is in *Sir Thopas*, the result I argue is still the same as the more fleshed out example of the *Knight’s Tale*: it still acts to create an intense emotional reaction. Thopas’s actions after his dream are incited by the same impulse we see after the lover’s complaints in Chaucer’s two other texts that present this frame. He rides off to find his Elf Queen with the same resolution the Dreamer possesses to write down the Man in Black’s complaint, and that Palamon feels to fight Arcite for Emily’s love. *Sir Thopas* is a markedly different example of a lover’s complaint – within a sympathetic guide frame, within a dream frame – because we as readers are only given access to what happens before and after the dream. This leaves our experience of Thopas’s dream with an absent rhetorical centre: we can only guess at what happens to make him understand that he should be questing to find his fairy-tale love.

Another example of a seemingly parodic ‘romance’ that contains a lover’s complaint encased in a more recognizable version of a sympathetic guide frame is *The Squire of Low Degree*. This anonymous fifteenth-century verse ‘romance’ is most often considered, like the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, to be a parody because it is “purposefully structured to serve the poet’s humorous intentions” (Kiernan 345). However, as the most recently-written text of all the ones I am considering, the *Squire of Low Degree* is most helpful here as a text that seems to have been written as a tribute to a past era. This text appears at the “tail end of romance production in English” after three hundred years of the popular convention, and is a text “whose conventionality demonstrates the continuing appeal of the genre’s structures” (Seaman 175). In 1924, Laura Hibbard posited that the *Squire of Low Degree* was “a perfect mosaic of the romantic conventions which Chaucer burlesqued so gaily in *Sir Thopas*” (Seaman 175). Tigges’s response is more complex because he believes that “*The Squire of Low Degree* is (as romances go) a well-written text, catering for the fifteenth-century high bourgeois preoccupation with the grandiloquent, the gruesome and the grotesque” so that it is “neither a romance in the traditional sense, nor is it a parody or a burlesque of one” (143). My use for this text (as it was with the *Tale of Sir Thopas*), however, is not to interrogate whether or not it was written as a parody, as a humorous ‘romance,’ or as a straight ‘romance’ which has been perceived by modern scholars as parody. It is useful to me because it is a text that can reveal tropes and conventions of ‘romance’ that were carried on post-Chaucer. To reiterate points made above, in order for a literary element to be considered as working to parody its conventional use, it has to be an element that is recognizably conventional to its intended audience. The *Squire of Low Degree* contains highly conventionalized and recognizable elements, one of which is a lover’s complaint.

What is important about this lover's complaint is that it also has very familiar sympathetic guide frame elements to highlight it within the longer 'romance'.

We as readers are introduced to the Squire as a man who has been in love with the princess of Hungary for "more than seven yere / Yet was he of her love never the nere" (17-8). To express and wallow in his lovesickness, he goes to a garden which has "an arber fayre and grene" with a large cypress tree and many beautiful, blooming flowers and singing birds (28-62). We are returned to the familiar location for a complaint, the typical 'romance' setting that connotes past centuries of courtly love writing. The Squire speaks his complaint in this garden, which is coincidentally beneath a window of the Princess's chamber:

Alas, that I was borne!  
That I were ryche of golde and fer  
That I might wedde that lady fre,  
Of golde good, or some treasure,  
That I might wedde that lady floure! (68-72)

As could be expected, his lament is overheard by the Princess, concealed from him by virtue of her being high above him in a tower. She opens her window, leans out, and addresses the Squire:

Syr, why makest thou that mone?  
And whi thou mournest night and day  
Now tell me, squyre, I thee pray. (106-8)

This scene is resonant of the texts I have previously discussed. The Squire laments in a garden, much like the Man in Black in the *Book of the Duchess*, the Black Knight in *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, and Arcite in the *Knight's Tale* (although, admittedly, Arcite's complaint takes place in a more natural wood instead of in a man-made arbour). He is overheard by a bystander, again like all of these other lovers. What is different here (and perhaps is the element of parody for this literary device) is that the Squire is overheard by the object of his lament, the Princess herself. Her questioning him as to the content of his lament is both like and unlike the

questioning of the Man in Black by the Dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess*. It is like because it allows the Squire to reveal more emotions for the benefit of the reader; it is unlike because it is an exchange with the person his complaint concerns who is thus not an objective observer. The usefulness of this sympathetic guide frame is again to highlight emotional conflict and progress the plot of the *Squire of Low Degree*. After confirming that his lovesickness is caused by his being unable to have her as his own, the Princess proceeds to give the Squire tasks and advice on how to win her as his lady:

For and ye my love should wynne  
With chivalry ye must begynne,  
And other dedes of armes to done,  
Through whiche ye may wynne your shone (171-4)

The following one hundred lines detail exactly which chivalric deeds the Squire needs to do to satisfy the Princess and her father of his fitness as a husband. If we as readers take the Squire to be a parody of a romance hero, there is definitely humour (and refreshing honesty) in the fact that the Princess is telling her lover exactly what to do in order to be worthy of her, tasks that other romance heroes would know and do instinctively. As a comparison, in the *Knight's Tale* both Arcite and Palamon spring into chivalric action and begin to duel when it is confirmed by Arcite's complaint that they are both in love with and vying for the same lady. Palamon's witnessing of Arcite's complaint is the catalyst for the continuation of the romance in the same way that the Princess's witnessing of the Squire's complaint is. Her hearing of the lament, coaxing out the Squire's true emotion, and then providing directions for his advancement, are all actions that facilitate the continuation of the 'romance' narrative. She is the guide figure who allows the reader access to the emotional state of the lover (like the *Book of the Duchess* Dreamer), but like Palamon is still a character fully invested in the story and not an onlooker removed from the action.

There is a clear difference in the use of the sympathetic guide frame within ‘romances’ versus ‘dream frames’ and I move on now to discuss its presence within different texts in terms of these two generic classifications. The sympathetic guide frame within a dream frame identified in ‘dream visions’ is the reason for why the guide’s role is different from their role in ‘romances’. A dream frame, as I have stated previously, demarcates a separation in location and rhetorical worlds in a narrative. We travel with one character (for example, the Dreamer of the *Book of the Duchess*) to another world where they too are an outsider. Thus when they act as a sympathetic guide for the reader while listening to a lover’s complaint, they are just as removed from the character lamenting as we are. In ‘romances’, this is not the case. Since there is no dream frame in ‘romances’ like the *Knight’s Tale*, those who observe a lover’s complaint (like Palamon) are part of the same world as the character lamenting. The reader is still guided by the character overhearing a complaint, but we know that we are the true outsider/observer. This is not to say that the use of a sympathetic guide frame within a dream frame is better or worse than its use without it. It is a frame for a narrative that still has nothing to do with dream theory or really any genre expectation. Noticing the difference in use between narratives that may be considered of different genres suggests that the sympathetic guide frame is more of a universal device than a generically specific one. This studying of the frame in texts that have not otherwise been compared side-by-side is revealing of a scholarly bias to only compare texts that present genre-identifying tropes. The *Book of the Duchess* and the *Squire of Low Degree* have never been linked as sharing common tropes, which seems now an obvious oversight. The sympathetic guide frame has become a conventionalized trope by the fifteenth century and solidifies the inheritance of Chaucer’s inventions by those who came after him.



## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The literary examples I use throughout this thesis work together to de-privilege ‘genre’. I present texts that connect with the reader through the effective representation and communication of emotion, despite the fact that they are texts that are often considered too different in genre to be useful comparisons to one another. ‘Dream visions’ and ‘romances’ are still categorized by scholars on somewhat arbitrary grounds: the dream frame is an example of this, as it is a device I read in both ‘romances’ and ‘dream visions’ but still remains the defining characteristic of the ‘dream vision’ genre. I am not necessarily suggesting that the generic expectations placed around Middle English ‘dream visions’ should be discarded; I am more interested in a loosening of generic expectations based on an author’s use of this frame within the larger context of the narrative. Perhaps the use of devices like the dream frame could be treated in the same way as any other medieval trope (like a lover’s complaint), especially when paired with devices like the sympathetic guide frame, substantial in that it suggests a genre to the reader but not powerful enough to dictate how the narrative is read within the literary tradition. Helen Cooper reminds her readers that “the very familiarity of the pattern of the motif, the meme, alerts the reader to certain kinds of shaping and significance, and sets up expectations that the author can fulfil or frustrate,” and so we must be open to any unconventional or unexpected uses of the dream frame in any Middle English texts, especially Chaucer’s (15).

The sympathetic guide frame is a universal rhetorical device not at all dependent on a set of ‘genre’ expectations, and transferable to different authors, decades, and narratives. Its connection to the lover’s complaint links it to the theme of courtly love, but this link is productive rather than constraining. The sympathetic guide frame draws the reader’s attention to

what is important in a text: the narrative content and its emotional reception. The interaction between the author and the reader through the guide figure is a tactic that has been proven successful by its endurance through generations of medieval writers. It is a frame that was created and popularized through the fourteenth century and conventionalized in the fifteenth century, but has not been appropriated by any one genre. I have found it to be a productive device through which to question the perceived disconnect of texts that are thematically similar but are separated by 'genre'. The sympathetic guide frame is a rhetorical device that can bridge an imposed divide between 'dream vision' and 'romance', a device that suggests an alliance between two areas of English literature.

The connection I propose between the 'dream vision' genre and the 'romance' genre is not a new concept. A.C. Spearing acknowledges that "there is some doubt whether the dream-poem can properly be considered an independent literary genre" because, as in the French courtly love tradition, which was a great influence on Chaucer, "many of the conventional characteristics associated with poetic dreams are also found in poems about love which did not adopt the dream-form" (*Dream-Poetry* 2). 'Romances' too are notoriously flexible in their genre definitions. Christine Chism finds that it is this mutable expectation that "explains the centuries-long appeal of romance, and the genre's longevity in post-medieval times despite enormous changes in language and literary tradition" (58). In fact, Chism lists Pearl-Poet's *Pearl* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman* amongst many other typical, traditional 'romances'. Most readers, however, would view these texts as highly identifiable 'dream visions', categorized this way because both narratives use a dream frame (68). With their inclusion in a chapter that discusses 'romance', the example of *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* as texts that fit within this genre because they both present 'romance' tropes (specifically the trope of the 'romance' quest in *Piers*

*Plowman* and the ‘romance’ landscape of *Pearl*) begs one of my initial questions: why is Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, a text that is undoubtedly presenting ‘romance’ tropes and themes, discussed in scholarship without acknowledging this fact? Why are many ‘dream visions’ studied with little to no consideration of their narrative and thematic content?

I read a fundamental problem with ‘genre’; that every ‘genre’ is a hybrid, and that no text fits exclusively into one ‘genre’. Placing Middle English texts into discrete boxes because they contain one or more defining feature can discourage readers from taking a closer look at any non-defining yet shared characteristics. Cooper suggests that the ‘romance’ genre be read as a branching family, shooting off in many directions rather than “clones of a single Platonic idea” (8). With my proposed linking of the ‘romance’ and ‘dream vision’ genre, it stands to reason that narratives like the *Book of the Duchess* could be categorized as one of the many off-shoots of the ‘romance’ family tree, allowing for the ‘dream vision’ to be a branch off of the trunk of courtly love. And, ostensibly, any other narrative that also incorporate courtly love themes and a dream frame, like *A Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe*, *The Temple of Glas*, *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl* and even *House of Fame*, could be further off-shoots. My tracing of the sympathetic guide frame through multiple narratives is an example of how revealing a broader study can be. I began with a ‘dream vision’ and finished with a ‘romance’ with the purpose of demonstrating that by removing genre one can focus instead on how different authors engage with and develop literary techniques. What I found was a frame tied to a courtly love trope (the lover’s complaint) that was developed by its continued use from Chaucer into the fifteenth century to draw attention to emotional intensity. This case, however, is just one example of where a ‘cross-genre’ or ‘genre-blind’ study can contribute to our understanding of medieval texts. Even with the twenty-first-century trend towards skepticism about genre and genre theory, we still must consider the fundamental

differences in texts, including “whether and how works fall into related groups and what the interpretative consequences of such groupings are” (Monte 481). The suggestion of grouping ‘dream visions’ in with ‘romances’, or removing both labels entirely, would of course necessitate a broader conversation about both medieval and modern expectations and uses of genre, but it is a suggestion that nonetheless takes away some of the rigidity in genre definitions.

The *Romance of the Rose* still stands alone as a medieval text that retains its ability to be a representative comparison for any kind of courtly love poem. Scholars have not attempted to classify it to a single genre, and its freedom and flexibility to inform Middle English narratives of both the ‘romance’ and ‘dream vision’ genre is perhaps its greatest feature. I began here by discussing the influence of this text on Middle English writers most notably, for my purposes, on Chaucer. Of course, we cannot know Chaucer’s thoughts on the *Romance*, but it is still “clear that he read it with pleasure and care, and he thought well enough of it” to translate parts of it (Benson 686). The influence of the *Romance* is undeniable in his *Book of the Duchess*, especially in its landscapes and courtly love themes. However, it is felt most significantly in the *Book of the Duchess*’s demonstration of genre: Chaucer’s narrative is a ‘dream vision’ in form and a ‘romance’ in theme, or, in other words, an expression of a ‘romance’ within the structure of a dream frame. This is also true of Lydgate’s ‘dream visions’ studied in Chapter 3: both the *Complaynte of a Lovers Lyfe* and the *Temple of Glas* are similar expressions of theme and form. The examples of ‘romances’ used in Chapter 4 can be considered in a parallel way. *The Knight’s Tale*, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and the *Squire of Low Degree* are all ‘romances’ in form and theme, but also present lover’s complaints within the sympathetic guide frame, which I have argued developed out of Chaucer’s first ‘dream vision’, and so contain expressions of both genres’ conventions. The flexibility in both form and rhetorical efficacy of all these texts recalls the

*Romance of the Rose* and suggests yet again that adhering to genre expectations could have prevented this study from coming to fruition.

I conclude by returning to the act of dreaming, central to the literary examples I present here. The importance of the dream to Middle English courtly writing, I argue, is due to the structure it creates; in the dream frame's ability to draw attention to the action of the story being told and not to the dreaming itself. The clearest examples, such as Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, are suggestive of the author's understanding of the dream frame (paired with the sympathetic guide frame in some of the more nuanced cases) as an efficient rhetorical device, contrary to current scholarship's representation of the dream frame as only a marker of genre. More work can certainly be done to determine if there are examples in Middle English literature where the dream frame is used to encase emotionally intense scenes other than a lover's complaint, particularly with the aid of the sympathetic guide frame. But I caution that this kind of exploration might be derailed if one is following the same trajectory as modern scholarship's consideration of 'dream visions'. Steven Kruger's position on 'dream visions' is similar to that of his fellow contemporary 'dream vision' scholars (as detailed in Chapter 1):

In its self-reflexive movements, dream vision raises not only self-contained formal questions, but also questions about how literature grasps and represents real and true entities existing outside a strictly poetic realm. The dream poem's self-reflexivity, in other words, often leads into questions of epistemology. (*Dreaming* 137)

Dreams in any courtly love text, or really any Middle English text in the fourteenth century written in this framework, are only revealing of the psychological and philosophical implications of medieval dream theory as presented in literature. What is missed in this approach is the literary value of the dream frame, any critical understanding of the narrative contained within a dream, and, finally, the opportunity to read 'dream visions' in the same context as other literary

works. The ability for 'dream visions' to interact on a textual level with other contemporary narratives greatly increases when the generic expectations of the 'dream vision' are relaxed. Looking at a text with a dream frame as more than a literary example of dream theory, and instead (in the case of the stories I use) as one branch of the tree of Middle English courtly love literature, shows modern readers that there is narrative and literary value to these text beyond a constricting hermeneutic. Dreams, as such, can be more than just a dream.

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