

Hunting for the Hurt in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*

Míceál F. Vaughan
(University of Washington)

Helge Kökeritz, in 1954, was the first to suggest in print that there was a “probable play on *hart* and *heart*” (951) in the concluded “hert-huntyng” that signals the close of the dream in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* (line 1313). Two years later, Paull F. Baum endorsed Kökeritz’s “probable” in what remains the standard discussion of Chaucer’s puns (“Puns” 249). Within eight years, Joseph E. Grennen was sufficiently convinced about the “pun on the word ‘hert’” to lament that it “has received only passing mention in Chaucerian criticism” (131). Nevertheless, in 1987, Colin Wilcockson, in his note for *BD* 344-86 in the *Riverside Chaucer*, remained less than fully convinced, referring only to a “possible word-play on ‘hart/heart’” (969). In critical discussion of the *Book of the Duchess*, however, the pun has become something of a commonplace (e.g., Thibaux 115-27; Leyerle; Shoaf; and Prior),¹⁾ and John Fisher’s note in his edition of Chaucer’s *Works* summarizes the current critical opinion well:

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1) I have found no earlier mention of the word play in Knedlik’s useful summary.

[T]he hunt as an allegory for the pursuit of love, both human and divine, is familiar in iconography and literature, from the unicorn tapestries and *Gawain and the Green Knight* to Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven." The repetition of *hert(e)* throughout *BD* has many overtones: it is the "hart" (the stag; by extension, the lady), the wounded "heart" of the lover, and the verb "hurt." (Fisher 549; note to line 351, first appearance of "hert.")

While the first two of Fisher's "overtones" may indeed have achieved the status of a critical commonplace, his third, "hurt," has been little discussed, and few critics have given much attention to Kökeritz's more assertive notice of the Man in Blak's *rime riche* on *herte* in lines 883-84:

But many oon with hire lok she herte,
And that sat hyr ful lyte at herte.²⁾

This sort of "*tour de force* was widely practiced," he noted, and "Chaucer employs this artifice quite often, but he is not always able to produce such ideal rich rhymes" (Kökeritz 945). Baum again agrees with this assessment, stating, in the context of lines 883-84, that such "[e]cho rime (*rime riche*) is fairly common in Chaucer." (*Verse* 37).

Nevertheless, although Fisher includes "hurt" as one of the "overtones" of *hert(e)*, this meaning of the word has been seldom discussed in accounts of the word-play in *Book of the Duchess*.³⁾ Most commentators limit its relevance to line 883, where the word's

2) Unless otherwise noted, I am citing texts from the *Riverside Chaucer*, which also supplies the base text for Oizumi's *Concordance*.

3) The one sustained discussion of 'hurt' is Prior's, though she tends to reduce it to an adjectival modifier: "The Dreamer is pursuing the hurt heart, embodied in his dream as the Blank Knight (1).

denotation must be “hurt.” So, while the “probable” *hart/heart* pun is now generally accepted by readers, there has been little account taken of what Baum termed the “identical rime”(Verse 37-38) of “hurt” and “heart” about two-thirds of the way through the poem. Further examination of the “hurt” in the poem will give more prominence to the abandoned consideration of the Narrator’s medical condition in the opening frame of this richly layered poem. Looking more closely at the character of the Chaucerian Narrator-Dreamer and his reticence about his own “sorwe,” we will notice his failure, on awakening from his dream, to “seche” the cause of his own “sorwe” (1255) with the intensity he sought the Man in Blak’s. We might well consider this as an emotional, even moral, blind spot akin to those revealed by some later Chaucerian narrators, such as the Pardoner in the *Canterbury Tales*.

There are three separate hearts affected by hurt in this poem and about only two of them can we confidently say at the end of *Book of the Duchess* that the “hert-huntyng” is “doon” (1312-13). Neither the cure nor the cause of the Narrator’s own “sorwe” is ever made. And even though there is only one unambiguous reflex of the verb *hurten* in BD, its rhyming with “heart” gives it considerable prominence in the poem. The Narrator’s concluding plan to “put this sweven in ryme / As I kan best” (1332-33) is, one might argue, revealed in his unique “ryme” of “hurt” and “heart.” If getting the Man in Blak to talk about his Lady White effects his return “homwarde,” the poem’s continuing reticence about its Narrator’s own eight-year “sorwe” deserves further comment.

According to Oizumi’s *Concordance*, various forms of ME *hurt(en)* appear twenty-three times in Chaucer’s works. In addition to *herte* at

BD 883, they are:

hurt(e): *Troilus* I.1087, II.199, V. 350, 1045; *LGW* 434 (G 424), 1353; *KtT* 1096, 1114, 1116, 2617; *MLT* 459; *WBT* 1132; *FrT* 1370; *MerchT* 1777, 1840; *SqT* 163, 637; *Mel* 1669; *ParsT* 577, and *Scogan* 28
hurteth: *KtT* 2616
hurtynge: *ParsT* 801.

There are, in addition, eight instances in the ME Romaunt of the Rose:

hurt: 967, 1733, 1964, 6521, and 6524;
hurteth: 953 and 3785;
hurtith: 2122.

In none of these appearances does the word appear in rhyme, and indeed *hurt* (in any of its reflexes) seldom appears in rhyme in Middle English.⁴⁾ Nevertheless, although the word “hurt” appears nowhere else in *BD* and the rhyme of “hurt” and “heart” occurs nowhere else in Chaucer, the two words do appear in close proximity at some important moments in his works.⁵⁾ Few readers will be much surprised, then, by the pairing of these words in *BD*. Heartache is a nearly

4) A few examples appear among the citations in the *Middle English Dictionary* (s.v. *hurten*). *Of Arthour and Merlin* (discussed below) shows a number of rhyming forms, in /e/ rather than its more normal /i/ spelling. The one other instance of a *herte/herte* rhyme I have found is in William of Shoreham’s discussion of Envy (“Onde”) in “De septem mortalibus peccatibus, lines 321-24: EETS, ES 86, 110: “Onde hys a senne of herte / And bouute schewe hy / To harmy and to herte / Wanne hy de bacbyty....”

5) For example, at *Troilus* V.344-50; *Troilus* V. 1044-50; *LGW* 1349-54; and *KtT* 1095-97 (and cf. 1114-16);

constant feature in literary accounts of love during the later European Middle Ages—and most other times and places for that matter—and this is made abundantly clear by Chaucer, whose most common rhyme with *herte* is “smerte,” which appears in more than half the instances noted in the *Concordance*.⁶) In view of the common thematic connection of *herte* to various words for “hurt”—*smerte*, *sorwe*, *wo*, *et al.*—the unique appearance of the *herte/herte* rhyme may deserve comment. Why, for instance, does it not appear more frequently? And does its unusualness have any particular meaning in the case of the *Book of the Duchess*? The claim that this is an instance of *rime riche*, pairing exact homonyms, may not survive closer examination. If the words were indeed truly identical, is it likely that the rhyme would be as infrequent as it is? If this is an instance of near-rhyme rather than *rime riche*, a different set of questions may require answers.

In most of its appearances in Middle English, the verb *hurten* (and the noun *hurt*) are spelled with a ‘u’ and there is a clear phonological distinction between /u/ and /e/ in most dialects of ME. While *hert(e)* (meaning “hart”) and *hert(e)* (meaning “heart”) are apparently exact homonyms in ME (as in ModE), the same is not the case for *hert(e)*

6) It so rhymes on four of the five occasions (besides *herte/herte*) in BD. According to the figures in the *Concordance* (based on the *Riverside* and including the *Romaunt of the Rose* [hereafter, *RR*] and other poems not ascribed to Chaucer in the manuscripts, such as *Complaint D'Amours*), *herte* appears in rhyme 125 times: X.281-82 and XII.1211.

Of the 68 times *smerte* appears in Chaucer (which is *never* except in rhyme position), it rhymes with *herte* 64 times; three times it rhymes with *sterete* and once (in *RR*) with *sherte*: *Concordance* X.537-38 and XII.1252. There are 8 instances of the noun *smert* in non-rhyming positions in Chaucer, and two appearances of *smerteth*. In addition, *smert* rhymes with *hert* three times in *RR*, and appears two other times in non-rhyming positions. To complete the inventory: *smerten* appears once in *RR* (7057) .

(meaning “hurt”). We remain, it appears, not altogether certain of the etymology of *hurt(en)*, and the *MED*’s hesitant suggestion indicates the state of our current understanding:

?OF *hurter*, from Gmc (cp OI *hrútr* a ram). The earliest instances in English are roughly contemporary with the earliest in French. The ME forms could be reflexes of an OE **hýrtan*. (4: 1047-48)⁷⁾

Nevertheless, its citations of usage clearly show a marked preference for the root vowel ‘u’ in ME *hurt(en)*, with other vowels, such as ‘i,’ ‘y,’ or ‘o,’ in less frequent evidence. In a very few instances, the vowel is ‘e.’ We should note, of course, that these citations for the most part reflect editorial, rather than scribal, orthography. Nevertheless, there is clearly some uncertainty about the exact quality of the root vowel as its various representations do not easily conform to our present understanding of either the dialectal distinctions or historical changes in ME phonology. The exact quality of ME ‘y’ is often unclear, and the influence of French vowels and spelling practices confuses what may have been a clearer system in English. It is not my purpose here, however, to address these larger linguistic matters, but they do suggest that this single rhyme of “hurt” with “heart” in Chaucer is unlikely to be an unquestionable instance of *rime riche*.

Examples of the ‘e’ spelling of *hurten* contemporary with Chaucer can also be found in *Piers Plowman C* (19.153; 22.317)⁸⁾ and

7) Determining its etymological source has, of course, significant bearing on how we understand the root vowel in the word’s various reflexes in OF (*hurt/heurt[er]*) and ME (*hurt/hort/hirt/hyrt/hert[en]*). A fuller linguistic study of *hurt* would be useful.

Cleanness (1195). And we might take particular note of the variant spellings (in 'i' and 'e' for the most part, but with a few in 'u') which appear in various works in the Auchinleck MS, a product of a London workshop and perhaps known to Chaucer (Loomis; Shonk).⁹⁾ As Macrae-Gibson suggested in his edition of *Of Arthour and of Merlin*, some of its variant spellings occur "in rhyme, where the form appears to be distinctively so used" (Vol. 2, 162). Among the examples of this are forms of *hirt* (which Macrae-Gibson offers as the head-form for "hurt"); in rhymes, however, the scribe favored forms in 'e': e.g., 7272, 8860, 9154, 9365, 9717, and 9749.¹⁰⁾ Since *hert* is also the spelling for "heart" and "hart" in this romance (as is the case in two other Auchinleck poems, the couplet *Guy of Warwick* and *The Seven Sages of Rome*), the parallels with Chaucer may corroborate the argument that the spelling *herte* at *BD* 883 is available to be used by London scribes in cases of rhyme. If it is not, however, the ordinary spelling of "hurt," its spelling is occasioned by a desire to reinforce the rhyme and it is not, therefore, very likely to be a genuine instance of *rime riche*. These examples, however, do not go very far toward

8) The equivalent lines in B have the /u/ form; in this the *MED*'s citation is misleading. Russell-Kane's note to C 19.153 indicates that in one MS (their Q) the word is corrected to "hurt"; and in C 22.317 five MSS (MQWDN) have the variant "ihurt."

9) A few examples: *Sir Degarre* has *herte* in a non-rhyming position (463), but *ihirt* in rhyme (454); the Couplet *Guy of Warwick* has *yhert* (3207, 3949) in rhyme, and *hirt* (6882) in non-rhyme; *The Seven Sages of Rome* has *herte* (253) and *ihert* (758) in rhymes, and *hirt* in non-rhyming position (2539). I have taken these readings and line numbers from the texts available in the late David Burnley's Auchinleck Manuscript Project.

10) He also rhymes "hirt" with "girt" (5013-14) and with "stirt" (9081-82). We might note, too, the rhyme of "girt" with "hert" ("heart") in lines 9588-89 and 9602-03. There is a single instance of a 'u' spelling: *hurtinge* (7275).

explaining the etymology of ME *hurten*, but they do make clear how unstable the quality of the root vowel is among ME scribes, and how flexible their orthographic practices are, particularly in rhymed verse.

BD 883, nevertheless, provides the singular instance of the ‘e’ spelling of *hurten* in modern editions of Chaucer, and its unusualness may be further confirmed by the fact that MS Tanner 346, one of the three manuscript witnesses to *Book of the Duchess*, has the spelling “hyrte.”¹¹⁾ The other two MSS, and subsequent printed editions, moved no doubt by the dictates of rhyme, have provided the word with this unusual (for Chaucer) “herte” spelling, and this identical spelling may have effectively transformed an instance of “imperfect or approximate” rhyme—which Baum claimed Chaucer “had recourse to when none better occurred to him” (*Verse* 38)—into a “*rime riche*.” This unique linking of “heart” and “hurt” in rhyme should attract our notice, since more common alternative rhymes (like *smerte*) were available. A hypothetical line like “With hire lok she many oon did smerte” might have filled the need. Why did Chaucer have “recourse to” a near-rhyme here, when he could easily have produced a more exact one?

Among the twenty-four other forms of *hurt(en)* in Chaucer,¹²⁾ one

11) The *MED* notes some variant spellings at other points in Chaucer, with ‘e,’ ‘i,’ or ‘o’ appearing in some MSS: e.g., at *KtT* 1096, *SqT* 637 and *TC* 5.350. While none of these are, unfortunately, reported in the *Riverside Chaucer*, Manly-Rickert, or Windeatt editions, I have been able to confirm a few of these from published facsimiles and Chaucer Society transcriptions: the Petworth MS, for example, has *hirt* at *KtT* 1096 (and elsewhere: e.g., *WBT* 1132, *FrT* 1370, *MerT* 1840; and it has *hirte* at *MLT* 459); Lansdowne 851 supplies the instance of *hert* at *SqT* 637 (as well as *hirte* at *WBT* 1132); CUL Gg 4.27 has *hirt* at *TC* 5.350 (and *hirte* at *TC* 2.199); and Harley 2280 has *hirte* at 5.1045 (where Gg reads *gert*).

instance may be worth brief consideration. This is the confused manuscript witness to line 1370 of the *Friar's Tale*. This is, arguably, the result of a confused understanding of the line, and may derive directly from interpretative, or simply orthographic, difficulties with the adjective hurt. In the *Riverside* edition, FrT 1369-72 read:

For in this world nys dogge for the bowe
 That kan an hurt deer from an hool yknowe
 Bet than this somnour knew a sly lecchour,
 Or an avowtier, or a paramour.

The variants given in Manly-Rickert attest to serious difficulties some scribes had with this line, not all of which can, I think, be attributed to their lack of familiarity with the abilities of hunting dogs, proverbial or otherwise. Manly-Rickert reports the following in their textual note to line 1370 (VI. 141):

1370 That] Than Gg li Ph²; om. Gl Ra³ Tc1 | kan] knew Bw Cp Gl Ph³
 Ra³ Ry¹ Se To; knoweth Fi Mm Nl Pw Ra²; knowe En² Ha² La
 Ld¹ Sl¹ Sl² Tc¹ coude Mg | an] bettir a. Ln; and Pw | hurt deer
 from an hool knowe] h. d. f. a. h. yknowe Ha⁴; h. d. f. a. h. bet k.
 Dd Ha² (hurte and hole better knowe over eras.); h. d. f. the h. k.
 Bo¹ Ht; h. f. the h. k. Si; hool d. f. the hurte k. En³; hert d. f.
 another k. Mg; hert or a d. f. a fole bet k. Hk Ry² (foile Ld²); h.
 d. f. a. old bite kowe Cp; herte d. f. a. old bete kowe Bw En² Ld1

12) As listed in the *Concordance* they are: *Troilus* I.1087, II.199, V. 350, 1045; *LGW* 434 (= G 424), 1353; *KiT* 1096, 1114, 1116, 2616 (*hurteth*), 2617, 2709 (*yhurt*); *MLT* 459; *WBT* 1132; *FrT* 1370; *MerchT* 1777, 1840; *SqT* 163, 471 (*hurtes*), 637; *Mel* 1669; *ParsT* 577, 801 (*hurtynge*); and *Scogan* 28. There are, in addition, eight instances in *RR*: 953 (*hurteth*), 967, 1733, 1964, 2122 (*hurtith*), 3785 (*hurteth*), 6521, 6524 (*hurten*).

Mm Pw Ry¹, Sl²; h. d. f. an olde cowe Ra² Se; herte d. f. a. old kowe Ry¹; h. d. f. a nold beten kowe Fi; h. d. f. a. holde bet cowe La; h. d. with a bow NI; hert d. f. a new bent bowe Sl¹; h. d. f. a. olde bete owe To; h. d. f. a. olde ewe Ph³; horne if he herde it blowe Gl Ra³ Tc1. Out Cn

This confusion could have arisen from an unusual *hert(e)* spelling of “hurt” in this line. Since this may be the only time Chaucer uses “hurt” as a simple adjective, this unusual usage as much as an unusual spelling may have caused the scribes difficulties. But if in any exemplar the spelling was “herte,” then many scribes would have read it, in the context of “deer,” as the noun *hert* (“hart”), used adjectivally, or treated the two words as a compound noun (as do those, like Ry¹, Bw, et al., who turned the contrast into one between a “hart deer” and an “old kowe.” An alternative would be for the scribe to insert “or a” to link the words as two separate nouns (as in Hk Ry²). What is not clear from Manly-Rickert’s citations is whether any of those that spell the word *hert(e)* are clearly intending it to mean “hurt.” But the evidence strongly suggests that somewhere along the transmission line, probably quite early, the spelling *hert(e)* may have appeared and caused a textual short-circuit whose effects we observe in the manuscript variants. While this may indicate that there was a clear orthographic distinction (for most scribes, but not all) between *hurte* and *herte*, it may also provide some slight justification for the unusual spelling that occurs in Chaucer’s rhyme in two of the three MSS witnesses to *BD* 883-84.

In the *MED*’s inventory of citations for ME *hurt(en)*, we can detect a more likely explanation for what occurred at this point in *Book of*

the Duchess. In addition to variant forms in ‘o,’ ‘i,’ ‘y,’ and ‘e,’ the citations from a number of ME texts suggests that some scribes did not, apparently, require orthographical identity in cases of spelling rhymed words.¹³⁾ While editors regularly note (and frequently will “correct”) such orthographical variance, concluding (rightly or wrongly) that it is evidence of scribal interference with auctorial usage, it is clear (as we saw in Baum’s comment above) that Chaucer’s rhymes are not all exact. In the case of rhymed verse, both scribal variation and editorial correction may operate according to different “rules” than those being followed by the poet, and insisting on exact orthographical equivalence in rhymes may be a form of hypercorrection that obscures established authorial practice. This may be another argument for more careful consideration of scribal orthography as a guide to the rules being followed by the poet.

On the basis of this single *herte/herte* rhyme it would be unreasonable to claim that the proper Chaucerian spelling of *hurt(e)* should be *hert(e)* or that this is an incontestable instance of rime riche. It is altogether more likely that Chaucer is not here invoking such “identical rhyme,” and the unique occurrence signals the greater likelihood that it is, instead, an opportunist near-rhyme. If “hurt” did rhyme with “heart” for Chaucer, it would be odd, given how often he rhymes *herte* with *smerte*, that it would appear only a single time in his poems. The semantic distance between *smerte* and *hurte* is not wide. If, instead, this is a case of near-rhyme, then *hurt* is clearly close enough in sound to heart to be available as an “overtone” for *herte*

13) E.g., *Vindicta Salvatoris* (the Pepys MS 2014 version of *Titus and Vespasian*) has “hyrte” rhyming with “smerte” in lines 1273-74 (*Archiv* 112: 27).

elsewhere in this poem.

A poem that has, in addition to its five *herte/smerte* rhymes, as many appearances of “sorwe” as “herte” does not depend on a single “heart/hurt” rhyme to validate this theme.¹⁴⁾ But the rhyme at lines 883-84 does indicate that the association of “heart” and “hurt” deserves some of the attention that has been devoted to the pun on “heart”/“hart” by so many critics. Hunting for the *hurt* could redirect our critical attention from details of hunting for the *hart*, and allow us to give greater prominence to the many medical terms in the poem, particularly those in the poem’s opening movement. The narrator’s “hurt” is, after all, never fully diagnosed, nor its cure clearly accomplished.

Though the poem frequently invokes medical terms and practices, even those who have (like Grennen, Shoaf, and Prior) examined the imagery of the physician in the poem and the narrator’s use of the techniques of physical and spiritual “medicine,” have primarily focused on the Narrator’s interactions with the Man in Blak. The poem invokes medical terms, however, in all three of its levels,¹⁵⁾ each of which provides accounts of emotional and physical pain. In two cases, at least, the pain is explicitly occasioned by the death of loved ones. Alcyone comes to know of the death of her spouse, and dies in despair. The Man in Blak publicly acknowledges that his “goode faire White ... ys ded” (948; 1309) and (if we properly identify him with “this kyng” [1314]) he returns the short distance homeward in what may be a consoled, or at least positive, mood. Only in the case of the

14) Against the 41 appearances of *hert(e)*, *hertes*, and *hertely*, there are 30 instances of *sor(o)we*, 7 of *sorwes*, 6 variants of *sorwful*, and one *sorwyng*.

15) See, for example, lines 1-40, 488-99, 529-35, 553-57, 571, 920, 1039, and 1104.

Narrator-Dreamer, then, are we left in uncertainty about whether the “hert-huntyng” is finally over—or only “[f]or that tyme” (1313). The cure for his “melancolye / And drede” that “[h]ath sleyn [his] spirit of quyknesse” (23-24, 26) is not clearly accomplished, unless his feeling “routhe” for another’s “los” indicates such a cure (1310). But we cannot, in his case, even be fully certain about the cause of his “sicknesse / That [he hath] suffred this eight yeer” (35-6). Is it necessarily the death of his beloved, as with the other two? When he described his own condition at the poem’s beginning, he was less specific and spoke in general terms about his “sorwful ymagynacioun ... agaynes kynde” (14, 16). This vagueness continued until, just before leaving the subject, he announced that there was “phisicien but oon” (39) who could “hele” (40) his “hevynesse” (25).

The language of the opening frame of the poem suggests perhaps—for all its indefiniteness—that the Narrator’s own “hurt” is not so minor that it can be cured entirely by a single night’s sleep, or by his feeling “routhe” for another’s greater sorrow. An eight years’ sickness probably requires more direct intervention, yet he, almost off-handedly, puts it aside “untill eft” (41). This may not be, psychologically speaking, the healthiest option, and we may be expected to notice it in our reading of the poem. Although he describes the symptoms of his “sicknesse,” the Narrator never identifies its source, nor is his “heart” even mentioned in the discussion (Prior 13-14). Neither does he (as he forces the Man in Blak to) openly acknowledge the cause at the end of the poem. Instead, like Alcyone, he evidences signs of despair: “yet my boote is never the ner / For there is phisicien but oon / That may me hele” (38-40). While critics disagree whether this “phisicien” is his lady, Christ, or Death (Riverside 967 [note to lines 30-43]; Prior 17),

his allusiveness about the source of healing reinforces the indefiniteness about the nature and source of the sickness itself. Furthermore, he never explicitly returns to any consideration of his own troubles, and critics have consequently spilled much critical ink in trying to decide what those troubles are. Perhaps we should reflect more deeply about why the puzzle is there to be solved in the first place.

In the “romance” of Alcyone, and in the “sweven” of the Man in Blak, on the other hand, there is no such uncertainty about causes or cures. We will quickly conclude, more quickly than our narrator certainly, that the cure of their sorrows lies in fully acknowledging the reality of the death of their loved ones. Does this suggest that a similar “boote” may be required for our Narrator, that his sorrow and melancholy are the result of a similar loss? Although we may infer some improvement in his condition at the end of the poem, we remain in ignorance about the source of his eight-year sorwe. But the point of all this uncertainty, which Chaucer could have easily resolved, may not be that we should set out to define the undefined, but rather to underline the fact that the situation of this Narrator is one that we should examine more carefully. Though “Physician, heal thyself” may be a commonplace retort, it is not always the case that we can properly diagnose or cure our own ills.

It is usual for readers, focussing on the Man in Blak (and John of Gaunt), to see the Narrator (and Poet) as playing the role of a fourteenth-century psychiatrist (or confessor), probing the mind and heart of the Man in Blak to discover the causes of his physical and emotional condition and to effect a talking cure. Critics do not always agree about the Narrator’s intentions, of course. Some see him as an unwitting analyst, trying to discover for himself what is to him the

mysterious reason for the Man in Blak's problem; others see his slow-wittedness as a façade erected to involve the Man in Blak actively in talking about and examining his own heart; yet others see the Narrator's style as required by the social inequality inherent in having the poet Chaucer attempting to reconcile his patron John of Gaunt to the loss of his wife.

The role the Narrator plays in *Book of the Duchess* is one we might associate with a "phisicien," like Chaucer's Canterbury Doctour of Physik, whose professional training and experience would call for various skills in diagnosing physiological ills: "þe office of a good phisician stondiþ in inquisicioun and serching of causes and circumstaunces of euel, for he serchiþ and sechiþ the cause by siȝte, by hondlinge and groping, by vreyne and by powuce."¹⁶) But the process of diagnosis is not limited to urinalysis and checking the pulse; it also included, as Nancy Siraisi has reminded us, "taking visual note of the patient's external appearance" and "listening to the patient's own narrative of the illness"(124).¹⁷) John Alford, in his useful short study of medieval medicine, called attention to the "psycho-physical interaction" (390) that marked medieval, as much as modern, medical practice.¹⁸) The Narrator of *Book of the Duchess* is clearly engaged in such investigations, as is the kind of penitential "physician" Shoaf

16) *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomæus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum: A Critical Text*, gen. ed., M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I: 436 (Book 7, Ch. 69).

17) Attention to patients' narratives in diagnosis was insisted on in some of the earliest writings on medicine that we have: e.g., Rufus of Ephesus, who directed physicians to pay attention not just to what the patient says about the illness and its history, but also to how he says it (195ff.).

18) See also Ussery and Skerpan on Chaucer's Physician and his contemporaries.

brought to our attention, and whose varied examples we can find among the spiritual “physicians” on the Canterbury pilgrimage, such as the Friar, Parson, and Pardoner.¹⁹⁾

But the Narrator does not need to grope unseen depths of the Man in Blak’s heart, or hurt. He had announced at the outset the cause of his sorrow, and became not a little frustrated by the Narrator’s inability to hear his “maner song” (471) as an accurate, literal account of his grief. Unlike the Narrator, then, not all readers may be surprised by the ‘fact’ that is stated so flatly by the Man in Blak at the poem’s end. It is the Dreamer’s literary-mindedness—his inability to hear the literal statement in the song that the “lady bryght ... [i]s ... ded and ... agoon”(477-79)—that dominates the dialogue that follows it. So perhaps its *is* ‘deth’ that the Narrator is unable to accept. His willfully metaphorical understanding of the language of this “complaynte” (487), nevertheless, contrasts quite markedly with the Narrator’s more literal-minded (and self-regarding) reaction, in reading the romance of Seys and Alcyone, to the notion of “goddes of slepyng” (230)—and to the “fers” in the Man in Blak’s chess figure. What he reads in the story of Seys and Alcyone, or hears in conversation with the grieving knight, he takes literally, but what he hears in the “lay” of the Man in Blak, on the other hand, he assumes to be disguised by poetic indirection. The dialogue with the Man in Blak—and the dream—

19) The Friar in the *Summoner’s Tale* also invokes the medical image, declaring himself “a parfit leche” (1956) and engages in a rather different sort of groping at the end (2140-51). This conjunction of physical and spiritual medicine is not, of course, unique to Chaucer, but something of a commonplace: see, for example, the endings of the B and C Versions of *Piers Plowman* (lines 304ff in B 20 and C 22), with their emphasis on “leche,” “surgien,” and “ficsien” (and related terminology) in the discussion of the sacrament of Penance.

concludes when the Narrator finally learns, and accepts, that what he has been hearing as metaphor was intended literally. This reader of romances, who will now try to put his own “sweven in ryme” (1332), has displayed a recurrent problem with discriminating denotation from connotation, letter from spirit. These misjudgments of linguistic register are perhaps caused by his lack of sleep, but they may have another source.

If his literary (or linguistic) judgment is impaired, the dreamer's attempt to treat his own sickness by reading romances may aggravate his condition rather than restore him to health. His reactions, in any case, reveal a continuing inability to discriminate between literal and metaphoric uses of language, an inability equivalent to that he displays in distinguishing what is “leef” from what is “looth,” or “joye” from “sorowe” (8, 10). If everything is “ylyche good” (9) to him, we ought not be surprised that he cannot properly connect others' literary performances to their authors' actual intentions and references. While this adds a comic feature to Chaucer's depiction of the Narrator, it also may point to darker undercurrents, as it does in his later creation, the *Canterbury Tales* Pardoner (who, we should recall, is paired with the Physician in Fragment VI). Like the Pardoner, the Narrator in *Book of the Duchess* may prove “suffisant” to “warice” (VI.932, 906) others, while he remains unable to cure—or even perhaps fully admit—his own characteristic illness. These two “phisiciens” can describe and acknowledge symptoms of their “sicknesses,” even if they do not admit their “causes and circumstaunces” (Trevisa I: 437). As the Pardoner offers release from the same vice he preaches against (*CT* VI.424ff.), the Narrator in *Book of the Duchess* may provide for the Man in Blak what he cannot, or will not, do for himself. He commits himself “by

processe of tyme ... to put this sweven into ryme / As I kan best, and that anoon" (1331-33), but for someone who seems incapable, for the present at least, of dealing with distinctions between the literal and the metaphoric, such an enterprise may be an inadequate response to his own "sicknesses." He is left waiting for a physician to heal his "sorwe" and we are left to wonder at how little we have learned about his *herte*. We have diagnosed and seen cured the "sorwes" of Alcyone and the Man in Blak, but the Narrator's own condition is little improved by his night's sleep. As the poem ends, we continue to wait for the expected "eft" when he, and we, will turn to examining his own "herte" and discovering its "boote."

Examining the narrator's haste in setting aside any further consideration of his own condition might lead us to consider more carefully the language drawn from medieval medical practice of "searching the wounds" and to put more emphasis on the kinds of verbal investigation a physician must carry out in order to assess a patient's illness. It is only after such investigation and weighing of evidence that any cure can be effected. The poem's hunting imagery is important, but it may not be quite as germane as the medical language, and the "hurt" may be more relevant, finally, than the "hunt." Both have features in common but their worlds, and the force of their images, are substantially different. Hart-hunting seeks an external quarry for pursuit and capture; hunting for the hurt seeks, on the other hand, to identify the root causes and particular circumstances of an individual's "psycho-physical" imbalance so as to restore it to its "kind" condition. The one seeks to inflict death; the other, to restore to life.²⁰ We may not explicitly witness the slaying of the hart in this dream, but the restoration of the Man in Blak from his "hurt" is

strongly suggested by his return “homwarde” to his “long castel with walles white” (1315, 1318). The Narrator has, unwittingly or not, achieved success in his hunt for the previously identified heart of the Man in Blak’s sorwe and this conclusion to “hert-huntyng” permits him to wake and turn to writing his “sweven in ryme ... anoon” (1332-33).

Since hunters for the h(e)art know (and indeed know ahead of time) what they are after, success in their enterprise is readily defined. But for physicians, hunters for the hurt, determining success is less certain, and this Narrator allows his search into the Man in Blak’s herte to provide yet another distraction from the hunt for the source of his own “sorwe.” Others’ stories can function like the fawning “whelp” that, after the hart had “rused and staal away” and the “houndes were on a defaute yfalle” (381-84), led the dreaming Narrator to the Man in Blak “[d]oun by a floury green wente / Ful thikke of gras, ful softe and swete, / With floures fele, faire under fete, / And litel used” (397-401). He allows the Man in Blak’s “maner song” to become another seduction, like that low-creeping whelp that “koude no good” (390). As attractive as such distractions from hunts already underway may be, we can reasonably ask again whether he—or we—should be satisfied that all the “hert-huntyng” is satisfactorily concluded when this poem ends. We should undertake further examination to determine whether this afflicted Narrator has himself, for all his “pitee” and “routhe” at the losses of others, fallen “on a defaute” from which others must recall him. Without further examination, our diagnosis

20) Prior insists that not all hunts are intent on killing the quarry, but in the case of this hunt, the goal is explicit: ‘to slee the hert with strengthe’ (351).

must remain provisional, and only after we consult the opinions of other specialists can a final cure be confidently initiated. A more sustained hunt for the “hurt” in Book of the Duchess may take us down another attractive “wente” that has been “litel used.”

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Abstract

The word play on *h(e)art-hunting* has become a virtual commonplace in criticism of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. Less widely discussed is the third

meaning of ME *herte*, “hurt.” The “hart”/ “heart” pun is, however, only implicit in the poem, while the rhyme of “heart” and “hurt” in lines 883-84 makes clear the close association of the terms for Chaucer. Earlier commentators insisted that this was in fact an instance of *rime riche* or “identical rhyme,” but if it is so it is striking that it is the unique instance of the rhyme in Chaucer, whose works are full of occasions for hurt hearts. The essay argues that this is, instead, an instance of near-rhyme and that the confusion in scribal spellings of ME *hurten* (with ‘u,’ ‘o,’ ‘i,’ ‘y,’ and ‘e’) suggests uncertainties about its root vowel that modern linguistic study has not clarified completely.

If the rhyme of *herte* (“hurt”) with *herte* (“heart”) is, however, established by these lines in *BD*, then it is probably reasonable to ask about all the occasions where characters in the poem are hurt by emotional or physical distress. In the cases of Alcyone and the Man in Blak, the hurt is revealed plainly as the death of a loved one, and Alcyone’s death and the Man in Blak’s return “homwarde” offer contrasting responses to the realization and acknowledgement of their loss. In the case of the Narrator, however, the exact nature of his “hurt” is nowhere made clear and the questions this lack of clarity raises for the reader remain unanswered when the poem declares its “hert-huntyng” done. Further examination of the Narrator’s character and his role in the poem may reveal him to be a physician himself in need of healing, and this reading of his character may identify him as an ancestor as much of Chaucer’s Pardoner as of the Pilgrim Narrator of *Canterbury Tales*.