Speaking of Sickness and Healing in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*

Chaucer'ın Düşes'in Kitabı adlı Şiirinde Hastalık ve İyileşmeye Dair

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Abstract

Chaucer's dream poems are curative narratives which to a large extent engage with the narrator's problems as an aspiring writer as problems to be remedied by the dream authorities so that the narrator can become a good writer. Indeed, the idea of a disease and possible ways of curing it are central to Chaucer's first dream narrative, the *Book of the Duchess*. The *Book of the Duchess* introduces a narrator who identifies his condition as a sickness of a long time and continues with a search for curative alternatives for his sleeplesness in a story of loss and grief. The narrator's dream narrative presents a story of the death of a beloved and grief of the surviving partner. In its engagement with sickness and frustration caused by lack of healing prospects the *Book of the Duchess* echoes its originary occasion, the Black Death, as it represents a persistent state of sickness similar to the one caused by the Black Death. Although the possibilities of healing are there to be considered, they are problematic and difficult to realize. This paper argues that along with its consolatory dialectics that foregrounds the curative role of the poem, the *Book of the Duchess* develops and centralizes a poetics of sickness that undermines the possibilities of healing in its presentation of characters as unhealthy people facing death because of an illness resistant to existing forms of treatment.

Keywords: Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, dream poetry, sickness and healing, Black Death

Öz

Chaucer'ın rüya şiirleri, yazar olmak isteyen anlatıcının sorunlarının rüya yetkilileri tarafından çözülerek anlatıcının iyi bir yazar olmasına yardımcı olmaya çalışan iyileştirmeye yönelik anlatılardır. Aslında hastalık ve hastalığı iyileştirme yolları Chaucer'ın ilk rüya şiiri Düşes'in Kitabı şiirinin temel konusunu oluşturur. Düşesin Kitabı'nın durumunu uzun süredir devam eden bir hastalık olarak tanımlayan ve okuduğu üzüntülü ve acılı bir hikayede uykusuzluğuna çare arayan bir anlatıcısı vardır. Anlatıcının rüyası bir sevgilinin ölümü ve sağ kalan sevgilinin buna bağlı olarak çektiği acıyı anlatır. Kara Ölüm olarak adlandırılan vebada olduğu gibi sürekli bir hastalık hali sunan Düşes'in Ölümü şiiri hastalık ve hastalığın sebep olduğu çaresizlik durumu açısından yazımında rol alan Kara Ölüm'ü çağrıştırır. Şiir iyileşme ihtimalleri sunmakla birlikte bu ihtimallerin sorunlu ve gerçekleşmesi zor olduğunu da gösterir. Bu makale, Düşes'in Ölümü şiirinin iyileştirici özelliğini vurgulayan teselli edici özelliği yanı sıra, mevcut tedavi yöntemlerine dirençli bir hastalıkları olduğundan sağlıksız ve ölümle yüz yüze olan karakterleri yoluyla tedavi ihtimallerini zayıflatan bir hastalık temasını temel alıp geliştirdiğini savunur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Chaucer, Düşes'in kitabı, Rüya şiir, hastalık ve sağlık, veba

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As a poem of diagnostic and curative import, the *Book of the Duchess* has been traditionally read as a poem of consolatory poetics.[1] Accordingly, it is considered in relation to the plague as an elegy written by Chaucer to contribute to memorial activities organized to commemorate the Duchess of Lancaster who died of the plague in 1368 and to console her husband, the Duke of Lancaster (Foster 185).[2] Readers have identified the Black Knight's condition as a form of melancholy, and have read the *Book of the Duchess* as a poem that allows the main character, the Black Knight, to speak of his sorrow and come to terms with the traumatic experience of losing his beloved wife due to the medieval medical treatments offered for such cases. The poem as a result is also identified as a talking poem, offering the only remedy available in the face of death, by talking about the deceased and allowing a discharge of the extreme emotions in a structured way (Buckler 7-8). Particularly because of the poem's historical connection with the plague and the plague's role in the loss of loved ones, it, in fact, is suggested to offer a consolatory dialectics of a collective nature to "comfort and lighten the spirits of all who suffered such terrible losses during the plague years" (Buckler 7). Consolatory readings, thus, have focused on the curative effect of the poem as an elegy,[3] written "for all deceased loved ones" and offering "consolation for all bereaved survivors" (Buckler 7). Thus, the *Book of the Duchess* offers a special therapy of grief through its commemoration of a collective suffering (Chaucer 330). Butterfield argues that the dream narrative of the dreamer in the *Book of the Duchess* presents an attitude "consistent with contemporary responses to the pandemic" in that the dream world of spring and joyous nature of the narrator provide "a means of enabling the sorrowing narrator to withdraw from sights and sounds of the plague and its attendant afflictions" ("Pastoral" 23). Fumo, too, argues that the characters in the *Book of the Duchess* are "out of sorts" because of the despair inflicted probably by the plague (65). In this context, the *Book of the Duchess* represents "a totality of response to plague, not just as the end of one woman's life-story but as a fluid, ongoing, collective narrative to be negotiated by characters, author and audience alike" (Fumo 67) and takes as its subject matter "the world we share as a people" (Middleton 98). The correlation between the plague and the curative role of the poem suggests that the poem therefore presents a successful attempt for the treatment of the melancholy suffered by the plague survivors. According to Fumo, the *Book of the Duchess* offers poetry as a cure, and poetry in this case proves to be therapeutic and restores the narrator to health so that he can now write his dream as a book and can advance the well-being of others through poetry. In other words, the *Book of Duchess* presents an "exploration of

[1] See Fumo (7-48), *The Making of the Book of the Duchess*, "Chapter I: Critical History: An Overview," for an up to date review of the critical tradition concerning the *Book of the Duchess* as an elegy; also Patricia Prandini Buckler 17.

[2] Foster, "The Personal and Social Context of the Book of the Duchess" provides a review of the studies concerning the date of the poem. See also Horowitz, "An Aesthetic of Permeability: Three Transcapes of the Book of the Duchess" for a comment on the certanity of the occasion of the poem (259).

[3] See Butterfield, "Lyric and Elegy in the *Book of the Duchess*" (38).

illness and therapy in relation to literacy" (Fumo 66) with satisfactory restoration of health in the end.

This paper argues that along with its consolatory dialectics that foregrounds the curative role of the poem, the *Book of the Duchess* develops and centralizes a poetics of sickness that undermines the possibilities of healing in its presentation of characters as unhealthy people facing death because of an illness resistant to existing forms of treatment. Although, as will be explained, the possibilities of healing are there to be considered, they are problematic and difficult to realize. It is in its engagement with sickness and frustration caused by lack of healing prospects that the *Book of the Duchess* echoes its originary occasion, the Black Death. It is suggested in this article, therefore, that the *Book of the Duchess* is a poem about states of unhealth and the lack or loss of potential cure, the impossibility of total recovery or attaining good health as it represents a persistent state of sickness similar to the one caused by the Black Death.

The Black Death marked a historical division between the preplague and post plague world. [4] It was an incurable disease. As Byrne observes, "[n]o one really knew how to prevent or treat the disease" (33). Since "at the time of the Black Death, medical science was essentially where it had been a millennium and a half earlier, with some additional overlays from Arabic medicine, such as astrology, and some new instruments and techniques," medicine offered no efficient treatment and could not deal with the huge scale death that came "with the plague… [and] rolled across the countryside from one place to another" (13, 24). Physicians were equally helpless in the face of death caused by the plague although they seem to have a relatively developed medical knowledge in other areas.[5] There were other attempts to understand the cause of the disease and find remedy for it. Preventive and curative attempts, in this context, included some theological and sociological explanations and measures. Praying and moving away from the plague infected areas were some of the common solutions adopted. Moreover, recreational activities such as reading or writing to divert the mind and to reestablish the humoral balance were considered as healing alternatives (Byrne 17).[6]

The *Book of the Duchess* is noticeably silent about the plague itself but as a poem occasioned by the plague, it suggests several identifiable connections with it, especially in its presentation of unwell characters despairing of a cure for their prolonged state of unhealth. Fumo suggests that the narrator's initial environment is "implicitly a plague-time setting" (68). The Black Death, that is, informs the poem, in an almost contagious way, through its themes of sickness and lack of potential recovery. Contrary to the *Book of the Duchess,* where the poetics of sickness suggests an implicit correlation between the historical event of the plague, there are direct references to the plague and clear identifications

[4] See Horrox, *The Black Death*, "The Wakebridge Family" (258) for an example of the sudden destructiveness of the plague.
[5] See Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (8-9) for the achievements of medieval medicine.
[6] See Horrox, *The Black Death*, for a through account of the attitudes towards the plague and the treatment offered, particularly in terms of prayers.

of the effects of the plague in contemporary literature that correlate with the unhealthy state in the *Book of the Duchess*. Machaut's *Jugement du Roy de Navarre*, the poem most analogous to the *Book of the Duchess*, is quite vocal about the actual consequences of the Black Death and offers a graphic description of the everyday experience of death and melancholy caused by the plague. [7] Machaut's long preface to the poem identifies the plague as a disease causing great fear and provides clear information about the way people got infected and how the public reacted to it. Machaut focuses particularly on the mortality caused by the plague and presents dead bodies lying around and the mass graves these bodies were buried in as evidence:

> And, in short, he undid so many,
> Struck down and devoured so great a multitude
> That every day could be found
> Huge heaps of women, youths,
> Boys, old people, those of all degrees,
> Lying dead inside the churches;
> And they were thrown together
> In great trenches, all dead from the buboes. (367-74)

The description of the landscape and the ever presence of death lend the world a dystopic quality that certainly demoralizes and frustrates the witnesses. The plague leaves behind a waste land. Because of the plague**,** "Only nine survived of every hundred" (407), and consequently, many estates were left unattended and the cattle and sheep untended:

> Many a fine, noble estate
> Lay idle without those to work it.
> …
> Because so many had died; and thus it happened
> The cattle lay about
> The fields completely abandoned,
> Grazing in the corn and among the grapes,
> Anywhere at all they liked,
> And they had no master, no cowherd. (409-10, 415-20)

Machaut's representation of the visible consequences of the plague suggests a world maimed and ruined by disease. There are many references to the destructive side of the plague, especially the effect of the plague on the landscape and the traditional life style, in the *Decameron,* too (53, 56-57). Bowsky provides historical accounts of deserted lands and estates where there was no one to take care of the sheep or cattle (20). This destruction has direct effects on the psychology of the people. As Ardis Butterfield notes, the devastation caused by the plague damaged the psychology of the survivors so badly that "[t]hose that survived were like persons distraught and almost without feeling" ("Pastoral"

[7] Chaucer's indebtedness to Machaut, and the difference in the representation of the plague, is now well established. See Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (100-101); Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets 27*; Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (235-36).

22). It seems that the plague's destructiveness was doubled by the symbolic reminders of the plague so that ceremonies and funerals would demoralize people and destroy their will to live ("Pastoral" 23).

Similarly, Petrarch's letters concerning the plague of 1348 give an account of the despair, melancholy and helplessness suffered by the plague survivors. Petrarch's letters show that plague survivors suffer from frustration and melancholy and describe a future already claimed by death, and find consolation only in the imminent death awaiting them. Moreover, there is a strong sense of loss of faith in life. The speaker voices great despair that seems to have driven away the will to live in his description of the preplague healthy life as a treasure stolen from them, especially because they have lost their friends:

> What are we to do now brother? Now that we have lost everything and found no rest. When can we expect it? Where shall we look for it? Time, as they say, has slipped through our fingers. Our former hopes are buried with our friends. The year 1348 has left us lonely and bereft, for it took from us wealth which could not be restored by the Indian, Caspian or Carpathian Sea. (248)

Significantly, the speaker focuses on the plague as a cause of their loss and despairs of recovery and cure for the damage incurred: "Last losses are beyond recovery and death's wound beyond cure" (248). Moreover, there is a strong conviction, and a sense of relief in that conviction, that they will be the next to die: "There is just one comfort: That we shall follow those who went before. I do not know how long we shall have to wait, but I know that it cannot be very long- although however short the time is it will feel very long" (248).

An important consequence of the loss of one's loved ones is, as Petrarch states, a terrible transformation that took place rapidly and unexpectedly. For the speaker in *Letter from Parma,* the losses suffered as a result of the plague create a strong sense of a difference between the past and the present. The catastrophic plague seems to have happened very quickly and the world they inhabit now is a dramatically changed world. Accordingly, the speaker's lament of the devastating changes caused by the plague includes the radical difference between "what we were, and what we are" (248). Moreover, the change that the speaker laments is effected by the loss of the loved ones. There is a strong sense of longing for the loved ones, longing for a life shared and enjoyed together with them: "Where are our dear friends now? Where are the beloved faces? Where are the affectionate words, the relaxed and enjoyable conversations?" Their sudden and quick disappearance together with peace and happiness people enjoyed is likened to a "lightning bolt" that "devoured them" or an "earthquake" that "toppled them" or a "tempest" that "drowned them" (248).

The focus in Petrarch's letter, as in Machaut's account of the plague, is on the difference between the time before the plague and after and the decline in population caused by the plague: "There was a crowd of us, now we are almost alone" (249). Clearly life must go on, but it appears to be impossible because "the human race is almost wiped out; and the end of the World is at hand." According

to this account, the reasonable attitude would be to accept that "we are alone indeed" and the only certainty is the certainty of death itself as "one minute one hears that another has gone, the next he is following in his footsteps" (249).

This strong sense of frustration accompanied by an equally strong sense of mortality from eye-witness accounts renders the experience of the plague as disabling and destructive specifically for the survivors. In this context, the change effected by the plague is such that surviving people seem to be situated indefinitely between life and death marked by the plague, and they are helplessly subject to its course.

Similarly, in the *Book of the Duchess*, there is a preoccupation with how time has changed the lives of the people from health to unhealth.[8] The Knight's song, overheard by the narrator, includes a great deal of pain relevant to the kind of loss caused by the plague. In his song, the Knight introduces himself as an ever-grieving subject because of the loss of his lady and explains how this loss changed his life. In his song, there is also a strong death wish. The Knight regrets the fact that he did not die with his lady when death took her away:

> I have of sorwe so gret won
> That joye gete 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.
> Allas, deth, what ayleth the,
> That thou noldest have taken me,
> Whan thou toke my lady swete,
> That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,
> So good that men may wel se
> Of al goodnesse she had no mete!" (475-86)[9]

The song sung by the Knight, like the other verbalizations of sorrow in the poem, in this context, suggests that there was a time when a state of wellness prevailed but which no longer exists. The poem's foregrounding of the temporality of wellness and unwellness and the discrepancy between the health of the past and the unhealth of the present demand attention so that a necessary restoration of wellness should follow. The poem, thus, as stated, engages with sickness and remedy and describes sickness as an unnatural state, something that is "agaynes kynde" (16). Yet the normal state of health, free of the symptoms the characters present now, proves to be difficult to restore, making the poem's primary interest the difficulty of curing the illness/sickness that developed as a result of unhealthy conditions.

Indeed, the poem is framed by an engagement with health and its temporality. The narrator's opening remarks about his own state of health provide the

[8] Horowitz (267-70) identifies in the poem a certain degree of permeability, based on its relationship with antecedent texts.

[9] All references to Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson, Gen. Ed., 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

context for the poem's presentation of sickness and healing as conflicting categories. The opening in fact presents a state of unhealth that persists for a long time without any obvious sign of improvement. The narrator is like the plague survivors in that he has lost all taste and interest in life. Among the specific symptoms are the lack of sleep and melancholy, which he reveals to be the cause of his disinterest in life, and his state of extreme unhealth: "I take no kep/Of nothing, how hyt cometh or goth/Ne me nys nothing leef nor looth/…For I have felynge in nothyng,/But, as yt were, a mased thyng, /Alway in poynt to falle a-doun" (6-8, 11-13).

The self-presentation of the narrator reveals thus the effects of long-time sleeplessness, but the narrator is far from understanding or knowing what causes his sleeplessness or how to stop it. Like the plague itself, his unhealthy state defies diagnosis and cure. Accordingly, his sleeplessness is a disease of a particular duration and its treatment does not seem to be readily available: "But men myght axe me why soo/I may not slepe and what me is/…Myselven can not telle why" (30-31; 34). On the one hand, the narrator is well aware of the chronicity of his case and that it is a sickness; on the other hand, the only specific information about his case suggests that as a sickness of a considerable time, his case cannot be clearly explained except that it is a sickness: "I holde hit be a sicknesse/That I have suffred this eight yeer" (36-37). Significantly, the narrator, from the beginning of his account, identifies himself as a patient. His immediate revelation is something that suggests an unhealthy situation. His self-examination shows that his body is coping with a difficult situation: "I have gret wonder…/How that I lyve…/I may nat slepe wel nygh noght" (1-3).

The narrator, in fact, provides us with a health history, a kind of anamnesis, that introduces him as a patient knowledgeable about the symptoms of his disease but not clear about the disease itself (Condren 197). His health history also suggests that despite his dream narrative that recounts his encounter with a fellow patient, he is still a patient with sleeplessness and sadness. He appears to be an inhabitant of a world dominated by disease without a definitive cure. The narrator as a patient also voices fears related to his condition and expresses an awareness of the danger his case involves. His account emphasizes the fact that this pathological state poses a threat to his life. Accordingly, the only certainty he has about his illness is that it is likely to kill him soon, for to survive under such circumstances is not humanly possible:

> And wel ye woot, agaynes kynde
> Hyt were to lyven in thys wyse;
> For nature wolde nat suffyse
> To noon erthly creature
> Nat longe tyme to endure
> Withoute slep and be in sorwe.
> …
> And drede I have for to dye. (16-21; 24)

The narrator's eventual sleep is curative in the sense that it in a way saves him from dying; it also allows him to play a significant role in helping the Black

Knight communicate his sickness as a fellow patient.[10] The Black Knight discovered by the narrator and easily diagnosed as a figure of despair shows visible symptoms of an unhealthy situation, too. As he does with his own case, it is the narrator who diagnoses the Knight's problem as great emotional turmoil. There are many indicators in the Knight's appearance to support that he is grieving: "And he was clothed al in blakke" (456); he is totally oblivious to the world "That, sooth to saye, he saw me nought,/For-why he heng his heed adoune" (460-61). Moreover, similar to his own condition, the narrator identifies in the Knight's case a potential threat to his life. He reflects that "Hit was gret wonder that nature/Might suffren any creature/To have swich sorwe, and be not deed" (467-68).

The Knight is further described in terms of physical symptoms that he displays as a patient. He is pale and changing color frequently (496-99). He seems to have symptoms that are explained in medical terms: "And his spirites wexen dede;/ The blood was fled for pure drede/Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm-/For wel hyt feled the herte had harm" (489-492). According to the narrator, the knight seems to have lost his mind for grief: "For he had wel nygh lost hys mynde" (511). According to Grennen, the Knight's situation indicates an incurable case, too (134). The narrator's diagnosis, in fact, is based on his observation of the Knight, but there is also the Knight's song which functions as a kind of self-presentation: Indeed, the Knight's song clearly states that life has become unbearable for the Knight because of the death of his lady. Like the narrator, he seems to have lost all interest in the world, does not show any interest for the hunt or for the beautiful spring weather and nature around him (445-511).

Significantly, a self-diagnosis is provided by the Knight, too. He is aware of the unhealthy state he is in, and describes his case as a disease. Indeed, the Knight identifies his case as a loss of health caused by the loss of his beloved--possibly as a result of the plague. The change in his health is clearly verbalized. He complains that "[m]yn hele is turned into seeknesse,/In drede is al my sikerness" (607-8). In his recognition of a total transformation that cost him his former healthy state, the Knight emphasizes a change from good to bad, from normal to abnormal. His state is further described as one of uncertainty. Moreover, he is deprived of his source of life by death itself: "Y wrecche, that deth hat mad al naked" (577). His case presents a clear echo of the Black Death's destructive power and the frustration it caused in terms of recovery and restoration of normalcy.

Indeed, in the *Book of the Duchess* sickness itself is presented in terms of loss in that it causes or threatens to cause loss of life. As the first character that appears in the poem, the narrator, for instance, describes his unhealthy state caused by loss of sleep, which in turn is caused by some sickness that is not identified clearly but is a threat to his wellbeing. The book that the narrator reads as a potential healing device also offers a story of loss, as a result of which the main

[10] Buckler (9-10) treats the dream as an opportunity for the dreamer to come to terms with the actuality of death.

character Alcione loses her life. The Knight that the narrator comes across in his dream describes his state as loss of his will to live caused by the loss of his beloved wife. In the case of the Knight, the unwellness experienced as a result is more clearly defined as a loss (599-619). Indeed, the Knight likens the loss of his lady, therefore his health, to a chess game he lost (618; 652-58). Loss, therefore, of particularly loved ones leads to the loss of health of the characters. Their unhealthy state suggests death as a strong possibility while it defies recovery. It is the collective nature of the loss experienced by the characters of the poem, which, as Butterfield suggests, somewhat levels the class differences between them ("Pastoral" 25) and relates the experience of the characters to the experience of the plague survivors. As the Black Death threatened life and made an indiscriminate slaughter of people, so it seems the grief caused by the loss of the loved ones and a constant presence of death threaten the survivors indiscriminately in the *Book of the Duchess*.

While the cases of the narrator and the knight are presented as life threatening loss of health without much hope for recovery, the poem is engaged with the possibility of healing, too.[11] However, healing possibilities, it seems, are frequently undermined and challenged. The poem seems to foreground the cure as unavailable or inapplicable, for instance. It is observed that both the narrator and the Knight are engaged in speaking about their symptoms and hurtful conditions respectively in detail but are relatively brief or dismissive about the potential treatment. The narrator, for instance, is willing to offer a lenghty explanation as to the nature of his disease, and is rather elaborate on its symptoms, but he appears to be rather brief about the treatment options. He speaks not of the possibility of cure but of one physician who will not be available: "And yet my boote is never the ner,/For there is phisicien but oon/That may me hele, but that is don" (38-40). Moreover, it can be said that he somewhat mocks the idea of a cure when he uses the Ceyx and Alcione story as a means of recovery from his sleeplessness. As a patient with an apparently incurable disease like many plague patients the narrator prays to the powers above only because they might have the curative power he needs. Moreover, he is prepared to pay, to bribe if necessary, for the miraculous cure to "make me slepe and have som reste" (245). Hence, "in my game I sayde anoon/(And yet me list right evel to pleye) –/Rather then that y shulde deye/Thorgh defaute of slepynge thus" (238-241) he tries his chance at praying and gifting the gods Morpheus and Juno, "Or som wight elles, I ne roghte who" (244). Clearly, he is either confused about the power of the authorities or he is prepared to take any help out of desperation for a cure. It is significant, in this context, that the narrator has no other means of recovery and is himself entirely helpless about his situation. He seems to behave like any other plague patient of the time. The general medical conditions of the time, as stated above, created frustration and hope at the same time and led many people to buy the slightest hope offered by the healing authorities. Similarly, the narrator, too, plays around with the idea

[11] The similarity between the case of the narrator and the Knight is challenged by Condren (199) who argues that their time of grief is not comparable, as the narrator and the Knight differ in terms of age and the duration of their suffering.

of a cure Morpheus can give him, although he reveals a certain degree of lack of confidence in Morpheus's power to save his life. In other words, that he finally falls asleep to dream the dream he writes as a book saves him from his life-threatening condition, albeit temporarily. But the narrator's interest in curing his sleeplessness does little towards curing his sickness. The readily available cure he finds in Alcione's story provides temporary relief.[12] Although the narrator's cause of illness is not certain and the exact nature of his illness is not known, either, the cure, if his temporary sleep is accepted as cure, accords with medieval treatment of insomnia. As Grennen argues, especially recreational activities that distract the patient are among the popular medieval cures for insomnia (134). In the context of medieval medical theory, too, a long-time inability to sleep is a serious symptom as the narrator's case exemplifies and the best treatment is to induce sleep and make the patient sleep or he will die, as the narrator fears for himself (Hill 40).

The poem's concern with the difficulty of healing can be observed in the Knight's case, too. The Black Knight experiences a state of "always dying but not dead" situation like the narrator mainly because he seems to be despairing of treatment and paradoxically considers death as the only remedy. As stated, the narrator considers his situation as hopeless and frustrating and clearly fears that he will soon die because the treatment eludes him somehow. The narrator's fear of death because of lack of treatment seems to be similar to the kind of fear generated by the untreatability of the plague. As Olson states, fear and imagination were, in fact, the feared consequences of the plague (170). The patients and the survivors were tried to be protected from any representation of the plague that would lead to loss of hope and psychological weakness of the people.

However, the Black Knight's case seems to be worse than the narrator's, as his case is so difficult to treat that death seems to be the only way to help his dejection. Indeed, he is almost suicidal, which itself was a case during the plague that the authorities tried to prevent by shielding the survivors from the actuality of death caused by the plague (Olson 170, 192). For the Knight, remaining alive after experiencing the death of his beloved wife appears to be against kind, unnatural, something not in the capacity of humans. Accordingly, the Knight presents himself as in love with death which escapes him (somewhat suggesting a parallel between his love and pursuit of his lady and his pursuit of death): "The pure deth ys so ful my foo/That I wolde deye, hyt wolde not soo;/For whan I folwe hyt, hit wol flee;/I wolde have hym, hyt nyl nat me" (583-86). Death is his enemy not because it claims his life but rather because it refuses to take his life. The prognosis he describes consequently is frustrating: "This ys my peyne wythoute red,/Al way deynge and be not ded" (587-8). Like the narrator, the continuation of his situation brings him to being always at the point of death but somewhat continuing to live "a sorrowful life" (202) that proves to be life threatening itself. As the narrator rightly suggests, longing for death after the death of the loved ones because of the plague is itself a serious disease that needs

[12] For the symptoms and cure of melancholy, see Buckler 8.

treatment. According to the narrator, talking about the cause of his emotional state may help the Knight and ease his heart:

> Me thynketh, in gret sorowe I yow see;
> But certes, good sir, yif that yee
> Wolde ought discure me youre woo
> I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
> Amende hyt, yif I kan or may (547-551)

The narrator, accordingly, poses as a healer when he identifies the Black Knight's health problems. Moreover, he is confident that talking is an effective means of diminishing sadness and he has a treatment that can heal the Knight:

> You mowe preve hyt be assay
> For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool,
> I wol do al my power hool.
> And telleth me of your sorwes smerte;
> Paraunter hyt may ese your herte,
> That semeth ful sek under your syde. (552-57)

In this part where the narrator is willing to offer talking about the knight's disease as perhaps the only available medicine, there is a recourse to medical terminology. The narrator is entirely methodological about the treatment he offers. He first diagnoses the Knight's "gret sorwe" and then foregrounds treatment to "amende" it. The treatment is offered to the knight to try, "assay" it, to test in a way its efficacy and see if/how it heals, makes the patient "hool." As the Knight is identified as a patient, there is a direct appeal to medicine to restore his health. It is significant that the narrator's medicine is good for helping the heart, the psychology of the Knight, as it appears that it is the heart that is "ful sek." Accordingly, as Buckler suggests, the best medical cure offered by the poem is that the narrator offers himself as "a *confabulator,* a conversationalist whose function is to tell stories and lead discussions to distract a person of importance usually before bed to induce comfort and sleep and such physiological and psychological benefits" (12).[13] Still, it is clear that, as in the case of the narrator, the treatment offered targets the symptoms rather than the sickness itself.

Moreover, the Knight does not consider medical treatment as an option for his case. His attitude to treatment is marked by a great deal of doubt and disbelief. The Knight, in a way, seems to acknowledge the helplessness of medicine against the plague and its consequent afflictions. He suggests that as medicine has failed to save his queen/duchess so it will fail to cure him of the pain that his heart feels. Thus, furthering the poem's ambivalence about and lack of confidence in treatment of the sickness caused by the Black Death, the Black Knight introduces himself as someone who is not only sick but also someone who has no confidence in the curative alternatives. That is, according to the Knight, no remedy developed by the well-known medical authorities of the Middle Ages will help his case where "my heal is turned to sickness" because experience

[13] Olson tells the details of medieval medical cure methodology in *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages*, Chapter 2, "The Hygenic Justification" (82-85).

shows that medicine fails the patients. What the Knight rules out as ineffective treatment includes almost all of the medieval medical theories and remedies. Among the remedies the Knight dismisses are the remedies of Ovid, Orpheus's pleasant melodies, Dedalus's plays as medications for sorrow. The medical authorities Hypocrates and Galen, the physicians whose treatment methods were used in the Middle Ages, are declared to be of no use, either. According to the Knight, they

> May noght make my sorwes slyde,
> Nought al the remedyes of Ovyde;
> Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,
> Ne Dedalus, with his playes slye;
> Ne hele me may no phisicien,
> Noght Ypocras, ne Galien. (567-72)

In this description of medieval medicine as totally powerless in the face of pain caused by the loss of loved ones, the frustration of attempts for the treatment of the plague is clearly underlined. The narrator and the Black Knight thus seem to be members of a community trying to continue a life pathologized by pain and despair caused by unstoppable death. They are, in a way, both psychologically and physically disabled by the plague. Accordingly, they voice a familiar response of helplessness and frustration in relation to their respective cases of loss and bereavement. It is through their sadness causing their loss of health that they become subject to the deadly blow of the Black Death. As survivors of the plague, they are "lonely and bereft" (Petrarch 248) and the only certain prospect appears to be death itself. As the poem suggests, physicians do exist, but the attempt to turn to them is abortive and futile.

The *Book of the Duchess,* therefore, suggests that sickness caused by the plague is not possible to cure although its diagnostic symptoms are clear to identify. The Black Death that occasions the poem destroys life and leaves behind a world marked by a strong presence of death and embodied mourning as a result. The *Book of the Duchess* accordingly foregrounds sickness caused by the Black Death as a condition that maims the survivors for life with temporal relief and partial recovery to experience a life in death. Hence, the Knight's self-portrayal "For y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y" (597) and the narrator's elusive "phisicien" (39). The survivors have to survive and "made hool/healed" on the conditions set by the Black Death. The remedy offered in talking of the cause of grief so that the suffering subject can be healed is there, too, albeit deferred and with limited effect.

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