



## Discuss the relationship between form and meaning in the works of TWO writers you have studied this semester.

Katy Neal

The works of both Geoffrey Chaucer and William Dunbar contain an enlightening connection between form and meaning whereby the formal features of the texts combine with their subject matter to produce the opportunity for additional significance and interpretation. The question of the writer's position as a poet and the function of his poetry is one addressed by both Chaucer and Dunbar in their roles as writers who were aware of their inheritance of a literary legacy. This exploration of poetry and its potential limitations is aided by the form of the poems themselves as the authors critique the usefulness of poetry through the manipulation of genre, language and register. In Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and Dunbar's *The Goldyn Targe* there are interesting examples of the utilisation and treatment of the dream-vision form which allow for an introspective examination of poetry itself, along with the meanings produced by the more explicit themes derived from the subjects of the texts. As *The Book of the Duchess* functions ostensibly as a poem observing the death of John of Gaunt's wife, the nature of the poem's sentiments makes the form integral in its necessary production of a balance between the combination of the themes of death and love with meta-language issues. Similarly, *The Goldyn Targe* appears to unite the subject matter of a battle between Reason and Love and a self-reflexive assessment of the value of Dunbar's own approach.

The courtly language and style of contemporaneous French poetry, such as the *dits amoureux* by Froissart and Machaut, is influential on the form of Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, which engages in a dialogue with this fashionable type of writing. Its use of the conventions of the love-vision mode, which was 'the dominant genre of courtly verse narrative'<sup>1</sup> occur in the generic motifs of allegorical figures and idealised May setting. Dunbar's *The Goldyn Targe* also contains these elements in its superlative description of the springtime garden and nature, and excess of personifications and Gods. They both follow the tripartite structure of episodes combined with a framed narrative form constructed by the narrator, which recalls the composition of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, an influential French dream-vision. However, Chaucer immediately breaks the courtly love expectations of this genre and form through the 'technical innovation'<sup>2</sup> of inserting the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, therefore providing a new dimension to the customary narrative. The narrator reads to 'drive the night away' (49)<sup>3</sup>, allowing the introduction of literary ideas through the presentation of the narrator as a reader, and the rendering of literature as a recreational activity that also informs the following dream. Chaucer's integration of the narrative involves the use of

<sup>1</sup> Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988), p.685

<sup>2</sup> J.A. Burrow, *Ricardian poetry : Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' poet*, (London: Routledge, 1971) p.63

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1988)p.330-346, all subsequent references to the poem from this version

material taken directly from the source of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but the tale is provided with a new formulation, including omitting the ending of the lovers' transformation into birds; the part of the story most obviously conducive for consoling the loss of a loved one. This conclusion evokes a Christian metaphor for the passage of the soul to heaven and the possibility of being reunited in the afterlife, which is abandoned by Chaucer to avoid a trite, conventionally didactic lesson and allow for a complexity of meaning in his consolation for the bereaved. This exclusion of consolation is integral to the last episode of the narrative as it avoids contradicting the bold statement that emerges in the dialogue between the narrator and the sorrowful 'man in blak' (445), the mourning Knight of the poem. The expectations of a poem about ideal love are already being countered with this unconventional reworking of traditional content and form. However the framework's use of parallels and mirroring; the Ceyx and Alcyone tale's introduction of the themes of love and loss, and the dream within the tale, all create distance and subjectivity between the narrator persona's suffering 'Deafaute of slep and hevynesse' (25) and that of the Knight within the dream. Chaucer further distances the narrator through humour; 'I wil yive hym a fether-bed' (251) to express his plea to the deities of the story. This presentation of the narrator as 'anxiously concerned not with the significance of Alcyone's vision, but with the powers that brought it about'<sup>4</sup>, may firstly preface the Knight's sorrow with comedy in an attempt to offer consolation through establishing the narrator's suffering as lesser than the Knight, but it also introduces the narrator as less knowledgeable, a strategy developed in the following dialogue between the two.

Chaucer's use of the popular French octosyllabic couplet within his own seven line rhyme royal form enforces the courtly and elaborate style that emerges in the discourse between the Knight and the narrator. The Knight's portrayal as an exemplum of the courtly lover is emphasized by the narrator's perspective of the figure, where he is established as a social superior through the use of the plural second personal pronoun 'yow' (524) as a term for formal address, and the placement of key descriptive terms in the end-rhyme position; 'tretable' (533), 'resonable' (534), or front-shifted; 'Debonayrly' (518) to accentuate these qualities of ideal aristocratic conduct. With a courtly register introduced and the Knight inducted as the embodiment of conventional courtesy, the mode is continued through language as the perspective shifts from the narrator to the Knight's own speech. The ostensible themes, of love sickness, bereavement and the extolment of the Lady's virtuous nature, are rendered in an extremely ornate style, which is noticeably more elaborate than Chaucer's generally median approach. The speech has a profusion of words of Latinate and, most notably, French origin; 'She had so stedfast countenance, / So noble port and meyntenance' (833-34), 'To have steadfast perseveraunce / And esy, atempre governaunce' (1007-08), which are highlighted by their rhyming position to emphasize the establishment of a high register. This is further supported by the employment of a *rime riche* scheme through the coupling of homographs as with 'werre' in lines 615 and 616, 'halt' in lines 621 and 622, and of homophones such as 'floures' (629) and 'flour ys' (630). The extended personification of death; 'I wolde have hym, hyt nyl nat me' is joined by the metaphor of the Knight as the incarnation of grief, 'For y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y' in line 597, which is expressed through the sophisticated technique of chiasmus, illustrating the highly stylised rhetoric that the Knight uses to convey his grief. Chaucer's skilful stylisation of the dialogue may be considered by D.S. Brewer to be 'A fuller effect' of Chaucer's writing, which is 'holding the promise of that 'aureation' which was to mesmerise Chaucer's fifteenth-century admirers'<sup>5</sup>, implying that such an elaborate style was a desirable practice in poetry, but ignoring the

<sup>4</sup> D.S. Brewer ed., *Chaucer and Chaucerians: critical studies in Middle English literature*, (London: Nelson, 1966) p.43

<sup>5</sup> D.S. Brewer, *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, p.59

obfuscating elements of these effects. Allowing the Knight to report his own feelings in the dream-vision avoids both the artifice of the narrator recounting the attributes of his wife, and the claim to emotional authority that would occur with a narratorial retelling of his loss, while also drawing attention to the inability of this application of an elevated style to provide meaning for the narrator. Chaucer's narrator persona consistently misunderstands the knight, whose mastery of the language allows him to wallow in his despair until the narrator's obtuse questioning; "“Sir,” quod I, “where is she now?”” (1298), leads to the Knight's acknowledgement of the simply stated fact; ““She ys ded!” “Nay!” “Yis, be my trouthe!”” (1309). While this cathartic resolution for the Knight, marked by his decision to ‘Gan homewarde’ (1315) as an expression of metaphorical progression from his state in the forest, relates to the themes of love in its consideration of the appropriate behaviour for the grieving Knight, its formal expression highlights the possible inadequacies of poetry. As the highly intricate courtly style is unable to sufficiently represent an individual's emotions, it becomes a cipher for Chaucer's interrogation of this form's conceits and failures and allows an additional layer of meaning to be created through the more explicitly expressed meaning of the subject matter; to not be overwhelmed and overemotional in grief, and to accept that it was the form this emotion took that besieged the senses and would not allow meaning and resolution to occur.

The examination of form is a practice evident in Dunbar's poem, *The Goldyn Targe*, which uses the conventions of a dream-vision through its idealised depictions of nature and high style. The first five stanzas of the poem develop an elevated Latinate and French register that Dunbar adopts for much of the section, along with an exotic register recalling the ‘orient’ (38)<sup>6</sup>, which is exposed through a plethora of semantic fields. The register of precious metals and stones; ‘goldyn’ (4), ‘silvir’ (14), ‘ruby’ (24), ‘sapher’ (37), ‘emerant’ (39), and a register of terms recalling artistic and manufacturing processes; ‘Apparalit’ (12) ‘Anamalit’ (13), ‘ourgilt’ (27), are alongside numerous references to light and reflection; ‘cristallyne’ (5), ‘sperkis’ (24), ‘glemis’ (31), ‘reflex’, ‘brycht’ (33), creating a sensuous and rich description of the scenery. This adoption of words derived from the unnatural world of human endeavour for the creation of art highlights the prominent position given to the poem's own textuality. The continuation of these terms; ‘anamalit’ (257), ‘illumynit’ (258) in the praise of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate in stanzas 29 and 30 enhances the connection between Dunbar's form, and his reflection on poetry itself. Dunbar's practice of aureation, a splendid rhetorical style, as evidenced in his descriptions of nature, is attributed by Denton Fox to the Scottish Chaucerians ‘utilitarian interest in their predecessors’, expressed in an attempt to ‘steal from them anything that seemed useful’. This negative opinion assuming a Chaucerian influence pronounces that Dunbar was part of a group of Middle Scots poets who praised to show ‘that they too are modern, sophisticated and technically skilful poets’<sup>7</sup>, suggesting Dunbar's praise reflects his desire to merely imitate these poets. However, the dream vision form emphasises a change in style that could render this opinion as a reductive view of Dunbar's aims within *The Goldyn Targe*, as Dunbar contrasts his use of an aureate style with a passage that could propose the narrator's satisfaction with a more moderate approach. Lines 244 to 252 mark the narrator's awakening in the landscape so richly described in the opening of the poem. However, the registers of precious stones and reflected light are notably absent, with more basic terms used to describe colour; ‘In quhite and rede’ (250), and a gentler representation of light with the terms ‘tender’ (246), ‘swete’ and ‘soft’ (247), combined with the repetition of the stressed ‘s’ in the stanza producing sibilance for a soothing effect. The sense of a move

<sup>6</sup> William Dunbar, *The Goldyn Targe*, in *The Makars: the poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas*, ed. J.A. Tasioulas, (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999), p.517-530, all subsequent references from this version

<sup>7</sup> Denton Fox, *Chaucer and Chaucerians: critical studies in Middle English literature*, ed. D.S. Brewer, (London: Nelson, 1966), p.170

away from the prior depiction of nature is further highlighted by the inclusion of the Anglo-Saxon word 'Halesum' (248) over a French or Latin vocabulary. This wholesome sobriety of the world the poet wakes up in provides a sense of moderation; 'The air attemperit, sober and amene' (249) replacing the earlier descriptive excess.

The shift from an otherworldly nature to one based on the natural reality reflects Dunbar's awareness of the way the form of the text may enforce the meaning. The early reference to 'Bacus' (124), the God of indulgence, is an image confirmed by the form of the stanzas, with stanza 14 a glut of repetition of Gods and the anaphora of 'Thare was'. This excess of the conventions of the love vision creates the feeling of immoderation, in stark contrast to the sober description Dunbar demonstrates he can achieve. If Dunbar was truly using 'previous literary tradition' in a 'parasitic manner'<sup>8</sup> then this suggests that Dunbar wrote *The Goldyn Targe* as an exercise in poetry that slavishly followed form. Just as Chaucer's use of the courtly form provided a critique of both the poem's presentation of grief, and the conventions used to express it, Dunbar's complexity of style in stanza 28 also provides a critical edge to his application of an aureate style. The restrained approach is joined by a change in the established pathetic fallacy, from overwhelming artificial brightness to the 'vapouris' (247) that precedes his praise of the poets. This change in landscape from the wilderness of the dream's ending to the beautiful landscape of reality is seen by Spearing as a manifestation of Dunbar '[retreating] gladly from the pain of love to the comforting artifice of literature', after comparing his work to Chaucer and finding it as 'bare and rent' (278) as the landscape<sup>9</sup>. Although the idea of Dunbar retreating certainly seems relevant to the following stanzas, the retreat seems to be one away from the conscious effect of elaborating on the form of great writers towards a new approach to poetry, not a welcoming of artifice. This suggests his is not simply 'a poetry of surfaces'<sup>10</sup>, but an example of how the inspiration of nature, as an almost spiritual experience, is a central theme of the poem, although this is highlighted through its expression in a change of form. While it may be considered that 'Dunbar is not just following the poetic tradition inherited from Chaucer and Lydgate, he is pushing it to the utmost extreme, so that, in effect, it becomes its own subject'<sup>11</sup>, it ignores the added implications that can be gained from combining this form and the main subject of the poem. The narrator shows the tensions between being inspired by love; 'Describe I wald, bot quho could wele endyte' (66) and losing reason in the appreciation of love's perceived traits; 'Than was I woundit to the deth wele nere / And yoldyn as a wofull prisonnere / To lady Beautee in a moment space. / Me thought scho semyt lustier of chere' (208-11). The painful and temporary feelings of love are emphasised through the personification of 'Dangere' (223) and 'Departing' (226) however, a paradox is created through leaving the narrator in an equally dispiriting wilderness after the women have gone (Lines 226 – 234). This seems directly relevant to the considerations of form that Dunbar has raised. The narrator's abandonment suggests a lack of inspiration, which is followed by a passage of sobering imagery and style, then a praise of the poets whose traditions he has inherited. As Reason was overwhelmed by Love, so Dunbar was besieged by his examination of the form and aureate style he considers his predecessors to be the masters of. This parallel between love's concerns and the poet's concerns suggests that the helplessness the narrator felt when overwhelmed in battle with love is a reflection of the overwhelming style with which he has assailed the reader. Dunbar's calls for moderation in love may not imply simply a condemnation of the courtly style, although like Chaucer he certainly questions its effectiveness, but emphasise the importance for the audience to read correctly, and to go

<sup>8</sup> Denton Fox, 'Dunbar's the golden targe', *English Literary History*, 26, (1959), p.334

<sup>9</sup> A.C. Spearing, *Medieval dream-poetry*, (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.197

<sup>10</sup> Denton Fox, *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, p.186

<sup>11</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The medieval poet as voyeur: looking and listening in medieval love-narratives*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.245

beyond the obviously satisfying – either love’s attributes, or the glittering surface of the style – to produce the underlying meaning of the poem. The moral message of temperance in love may then be applied to temperance in reading, and to the veneration of nature above style. Chaucer in the *Prologue to The Legend of Good Women* examines this effect of the perverse reader, in his use of the palinode to contemplate the results of readers who may not be sensitive to the poet’s intentions. The narrator uses the form of the tales to demonstrate the necessity of clear meaning for readers in ‘The Legend of Cleopatra’, where his elaborate description of the fight at sea (635-40)<sup>12</sup> ‘undoubtedly overloads this particular tale of Cleopatra’s martyrdom in love’s cause’<sup>13</sup>. This seems indicative of Chaucer’s demonstration of his own martyrdom to meaning at the expense of subtle form, similar to Dunbar’s bearing of form on meaning.

While it may be possible to view Dunbar’s preoccupation with form in *The Goldyn Targe* as a reason to ‘not attribute to this short and graceful poem a psychological complexity or ethical profundity that it does not possess’<sup>14</sup>, it is this very exploration of form and style that leads to the inextricable connection between the content’s message to love in reason, and the implicit suggestion to write and read with reason. The imagery of light in *The Goldyn Targe* suggests the shining brilliance of the literary tradition Dunbar praises, with the line ‘Wele aucht thoe be aferit of the licht’ (279) acknowledging the rhetorical mastery of Chaucer, while allowing the form to draw attention to a quieter way of describing. Dunbar’s *The Headache*, which compares his inability to write with illness, suggests the narrator can not look to the light of his predecessors; ‘That scant I luik may on the licht’ (5), for creative inspiration, indicating the need to look beyond legacy for a new form of stimulation. At the beginning of *The Goldyn Targe* Dunbar acted as the ‘makar’, a craftsman jeweller or illuminator who raised awareness of his own authorial control, but one who was capable of allowing the inherent value of nature, or the inherent value of writing simply, to shine through. The register of reflected light and the impressionistic evocation of jewelled colours demonstrate Dunbar’s own reflection on his position as a poet who must mirror the Chaucerians’ light, but the dream vision form allows him to awake from a nightmarish battle with overpowering qualities of love and form with a new, less contrived, idea for poetry. As Chaucer’s connection between the dream form and a metaphor for writing created indeterminacy in *The Book of the Duchess*’ ability to console or sympathise through courtly language, so too Dunbar’s *The Goldyn Targe* uses form to express the difficulty of poetry in expressing meaning adequately. Dunbar and Chaucer use form to unpick the effects of literary texts and their relation to real experience, with both employing their inherited literary traditions as the backdrop to their poem’s discussions.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.604

<sup>13</sup> J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' poet*, p.78

<sup>14</sup> Priscilla J. Bawcutt, *Dunbar the maker*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.312

**Bibliography:**

- Bawcutt, Priscilla, J: *Dunbar the maker*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992
- Benson, Larry D: *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988
- Brewer, D.S. ed: *Chaucer and Chaucerians: critical studies in Middle English literature*, London: Nelson, 1966
- Burrow, J.A: *Ricardian poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' poet*, London: Routledge, 1971
- Chaucer, Geoffrey: *The Book of the Duchess* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988
- Chaucer, Geoffrey: *The Legend of Good Women* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988
- Dunbar, William: *The Goldyn Targe*, in *The Makars: the poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas*, ed. J.A. Tasioulas, (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999
- Fox, Denton: *Chaucer and Chaucerians: critical studies in Middle English literature*, ed. D.S. Brewer, London: Nelson, 1966
- Fox, Denton: 'Dunbar's the golden targe', *English Literary History*, 26, 1959
- Spearing, A.C: *Medieval dream-poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1976
- Spearing, A.C: *The medieval poet as voyeur: looking and listening in medieval love-narratives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993