Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* as Course Review

How does the narrator establish his authority at the beginning? What does it mean begin a work of literature?

The classical beginning is to affirm the subject matter (*Arma virumque cano*).
- Luke: grammatical control and named addressee
- Augustine: Scriptural quotation and personal experience
- Boethius: poetic lament and review of career
- Guillaume de Lorris: appeal to both personal experience and textual authority
- Dante: memory as a form of reading, mind as a book, vernacular expression

Chaucer: establishment of a literary persona: the bookish narrator of little experience;
- the consistency of that persona throughout the poem
- the persona as ill (compare Boethius’ in CP) and in need of guidance
- the persona as a dreamer (compare R of R)
- the persona as a reader (compare Dante, R of R, and Augustine)
- the persona as offering a gift to Morpheus (displacement of invocation to a divinity or muse for inspiration)
The opening of the poem as an issue in sleep/dream/writing

Dreams and fictions as forms of symbolic, allegorical, or enigmatic personal narrative
Both are in need of interpretation

Chaucer sets up the act of reading BEFORE the act of Dreaming

The story of Ceyx and Alcyone is a story in need of interpretation
BUT it is also a story about dreaming: about experience of truth or revelation in a vision

Compare: Romance of the Rose: all the action of the poem is within the dream
Embedded mythological narratives (Narcissus, Pygmalion) are told within the framework of the dream by the dreaming narrator
Thus, the Romance of the Rose makes the entirety of literary experience within the imagination of the dream

CHAUCER, BY CONTRAST, makes the opening literary experience within the social world of his own time:

THAT IS: reading in bed is a social habit; the book is a physical object;
Ceyx and Alcyone

In Ovid’s version of the story, which would have been known to EVERYONE, the gods take pity on Ceyx and Alcyone and turn them into sea birds (kingfishers) who spend eternity flying and loving together.

Chaucer retells this story but he cuts it off before he gets to the metamorphosis at the end.

But what she sayde more in that swowe
I may not telle you as nowe;
It were to longe for to dwelle (215-217)

Chaucer deliberately omits the conclusion of the story.

Here, there is no metamorphosis; ALCYONE must accept the death of her husband; she dies.

In the classical world, we can imagine a life after death: metamorphosis, apotheosis. In the Christian world, the dead will only rise at the day of Judgment; only Jesus can bring back the dead (literature cannot).

THUS, in a Christian world (Chaucer is saying) we must accept death with the recognition that we will not see the dead again in our lifetime AND that the old classical metamorphosis idea is denied to us.
What replaces the metamorphosis?

What is the goal of literary production?

What is the VALUE of the imagination?

Chaucer offers Morpheus expensive gifts if he will enable him to get to sleep:
What will Chaucer give the god of sleep?
A feather bed of pure white down
Striped with gold
Clad in black satin ‘doutremer’ – French for “from beyond or across the sea”
Pillows
Cloth from Reynes: that is, linen from Rennes, the city in France famous for its cloth

What does it mean to have an imagination in a world of commerce?
What is the relationship between commodities and literature?
WHAT PRICE DO WE PUT ON LITERATURE AND THE IMAGINATION?
HOW VALUABLE ARE THE HUMANITIES?

KEY POINT: Chaucer is a poet with a noble patron (John of Gaunt); poetry writing is commissioned; it is part of a process of exchange; Chaucer hopes to GET SOMETHING FOR THIS POEM. SO HE EMBEDS A STORY OF PAYMENT IN HIS POEM AS A SUGGESTION FOR HIS PATRON

CHAUCER: MORPHEUS :: JOHN OF GAUNT: CHAUCER

THIS IS NEW; the idea of patronized literature in English; Compare, now Virgil’s relationship to Augustus: the idea of writing for a political patron.
The man in black and the white queen

Chaucer meets the mourning man who has lost his ‘fers’ (The Middle English word for the chess piece queen)

NOW, the man in black becomes the Boethian figure:

Lines 598-601:

Allas and I wol tel the why:
My song ys turned to pleynynge
And al my laughtre to wepynge,
My glade thoughts to hevynesse:

Compare the opening poem of the Consolation of Philosophy:
Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi

The man in black invokes “fals Fortune” who has played a game of chess
Fortune, from the Consolation of Philosophy, now becomes a figure of
COURTLY GAME AND PASTIME
CHESS BECOMES A METAPHOR FOR LOVE AND DESIRE
THE CHESS GAME IS ANOTHER KIND OF JOURNEY!!!!
The Wheel of Fortune has, at this point in Western Culture, become a commonplace. The man in black laments that he has lost his ‘fers’ (lines 652-719). The narrator thinks this is only a chess game. The man in black says it’s more than that (lines 720-757).

The man in black tells his story (lines 758-1041). Key points:
- He presents himself as an idle youth (797-798)
- He sees the love of his life (818-19)
- He consistently describes her using the blazon technique from the Romance of the Rose
- He names her for the first time at 948-49

We never see White EXCEPT THROUGH THE MEMORY OF THE MAN IN BLACK. WHITE EXISTS AS A LITERARY, VERBAL CONSTRUCT. CHAUCER SHOWS US HOW LITERARY LANGUAGE CAN ONLY TRY TO BRING BACK THE DEAD BUT REALLY CAN’T. CHAUCER SHOWS US HOW THE MEMORY OF THE MAN IN BLACK KEEPS MOVING BETWEEN THE MORAL AND THE EROTIC. IS WHITE JUST A CREATURE OF SURFACES OR IS SHE A TRUE WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE?
DIDO, MARTHA, MARY, MONICA, PHILOSOPHY, REASON, ROSE, BEATRICE, WHITE

EACH OF THESE WOMEN, IN THEIR OWN WAYS, ARE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTS

THAT MEANS THAT WE, AS READERS, ONLY SEE THEM THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OR THROUGH THE EYES OR THE MEMORY OF SOMEONE ELSE

KEY QUESTION: CAN WOMEN BE PRESENTED IN A STRAIGHTFORWARD UNMEDIATED WAY? OR IS PART OF THE CHALLENGE OF OUR LITERARY TRADITION THE CHALLENGE OF DESCRIBING WOMEN?

THE WOMAN LIVES IN THE WORDS OF THE MAN

SO: IF THE MAN IN BLACK IS A KIND OF BOETHIAN PRISONER FIGURE, WHO IS HIS LADY PHILOSOPHY?

IS WHITE A KIND OF LADY PHILOSOPHY?

NOT REALLY, AS SHE IS AN OBJECT OF DESIRE AND LOSS, NOT A TEACHER

THE TRICK OF THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS: MAKE THE DOPEY CHAUCER A KIND OF LADY PHILOSOPHY FIGURE
THAT MEANS THAT CHAUCER FUNCTIONS AS THE INTERLOCUTOR WITH THE MAN IN BLACK

THE POINT OF THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS IS TO SHOW THAT REAL LEARNING, REAL GROWTH, AND REAL INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL COMING TO TERMS IS A PROCESS THAT MUST GO ON IN YOUR OWN HEAD

YOU MUST BE BOTH THE PRISONER AND PHILOSOPHY

THE JOB OF THE POEM IS TWOFOLD:
    TO CONSOLE IN A PUBLIC WAY JOHN OF GAUNT
    TO INSPIRE IN A PRIVATE WAY CHAUCER

CONSOLATION: WE RESOLVE THE LOSS OF WHITE
    WE RESOLVE THE LOSS OF SLEEP
    WE RESOLVE THE LOSS OF INSPIRATION
WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF ALLEGORY IN THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS?

Review of Allegory

Saying one thing and meaning another
Both the literal and the figurative narrative make sense
It is a relationship among the author, the reader, and the subject matter of the story

You read allegorically when
  the literal makes no sense
  the literal makes dangerous sense
  the literal doesn’t make the sense you want

You write allegorically when
  you want to say something that is difficult, you want the reader to work at it
  you want to say something that is offensive, you want the reader to recognize it
  you want to say something that is secret, hidden, or from a special knowledge
  and you want only the BEST readers to understand it

PERSONIFICATION ALLEGORY: characters have the names of
  concepts or ideas; they are not representative of real people; they are
  embodiments of social values, virtues, vices, or sins
Review of Allegory in the course:

Personification Allegory in Virgil: the figure of Rumor is a personified, vivified character representing a concept or social vice

Understanding Virgil allegorically: medieval Christian readers understood Book VI of the Aeneid as an allegory of education, with the Sibyl as a teacher/guide and Anchises as a teacher figure; they understood Aeneas’s passage through the gate of horn at the end of the book as a passage through dream; thus Book VI was understood as a kind of dream vision, not as a literal hell descent

Through a glass darkly: St. Paul, 1 Corinthians, makes the point (originally in Greek) that the experience of living in this world is an experience of enigmas and puzzles to be interpreted; that life in this world is a kind of allegory, where we look for spiritual meanings behind literal, everyday experiences

The trees in Augustine: St. Augustine, Confessions: important things happen in gardens with trees and fruit; Augustine uses the old image of the tree of knowledge and original sin to frame moments of humiliation (pear stealing) or growth (conversion) as moments of powerful, transcendent meaning
Lady Philosophy as an allegorical figure: the PI and THETA on her robe represent the practical and theoretical lines to knowledge; she embodies learning.

Allegorical figures drawn from mythology: Orpheus, Ulysses, and Hercules become allegorical representations of how to (or not to) understand the relationship of the soul to the body and the true home in the heavens.

Allegory in the R of R: social and erotic allegory; dream vision as way of presenting a narrative of challenging eroticism.

Allegory in Dante: numerology (the number 9); the bringing together of absolute literal, realistic surfaces with deeply spiritual inner meanings; compare the visual art of Giotto.
Allegory in the *Book of the Duchess*;
Chaucer uses an allegorical structure to avoid a breach in social decorum

He is a social inferior charged with consoling a social superior

He is an aspiring poet/courtier in a world where value is traditionally conferred by birth

But Chaucer also uses the techniques of scholarly education to structure the argument of the poem

Yes and no: the *sic et non*

The rise of scholasticism meant that students were expected to debate everything
You could take a yes or a no position on anything

The conclusion of the *Book of the Duchess* involves the narrator saying no
And the man in black saying yes lines 1298-end
What does it mean to say YES?

It means an affirmation of life itself

It means an acceptance of the way things are

But it can also mean sometimes making a mistake

Yes only means yes in relationship to no

Aeneas says no to Dido but says yes to Mercury and his destiny
Jesus says no to Pilate, but the Gospel reader is expected to say yes to Jesus
Augustine says yes and no throughout his life, finally ending with a deep spiritual yes
Boethius begins in a world of no, and ends in a world of yes
The dreamer in the Romance of the Rose faces characters who are always saying no to him; finally, he gets the yes
Dante struggles between yes and no, finally affirming his spiritual commitment to Beatrice, but saying that he will write no more of her until he is ready
But remember Dante defines vernacular languages by their words for YES:

*langue d’oc*  *lingua del si*

Chaucer seeks the world of external approval in a patronage system of literature
Say yes TO ME
YES: the final affirmation of the journey of desire and belonging

Dido and Aeneas meet
Giotto: the kiss of Judas
St Augustine opens the book and reads.
Lady Philosophy offers Boethius wings so that his spirit can fly
Romance of the Rose
The lover enters the garden
Pygmalion and his beloved come alive
And so I won my bright red rose. Then it was day and I awoke.

-- Romance of the Rose

I hope to compose concerning her what has never been written in rhyme of any woman.

-- Vita Nuova.

This was my sweven; now hit ys doon.

-- Book of the Duchess