

'Song withoute song': Lyric Ritual and Commemorative Performance in the *Book of the Duchess*



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This article argues that, in Chaucer's fourteenth-century dream vision, the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer's narrative framing of the elegiac lyric, in which a mysterious 'man in blak' divulges the death of his beloved, suggests that the best — and possibly the only — way to reflect on and record another person's experience of loss is, in fact, to meditate on another kind of loss: the ephemeral, original performance of lyric. The Chaucerian dreamer, by classifying the lyric as a 'song [...] withoute song', performs a sort of mourning in language for the lyric's original performance, which he recalls and 'rehearses' for us. In doing so, he reflects on the lyric's absences (particularly, song and color, and both of which are figured in material and also temporal terms) and prepares us for what will be missing from the lyric when it is turned into a textual record; these absences in turn reflect the absence around which the entire Book is built: the deceased lady White. In proffering what, to modern readers, may seem like a radical vision of sound and sight as having material properties (but which, I show, has a basis in medieval color theory, the medieval science of perspectiva [optics], and philosophical conceptions of vox), Chaucer pushes us to think carefully about the material conditions of textuality as closely allied with the physical experience and bodily expressions of grief — both visual and oral/aural. Urging us to contemplate loss in this material, corporeal way — as an experience of different forms of sound and sight, presence and absence, time and tense — he forges a sense of the conduciveness of lyric record in matters of private consolation and ritualized public commemoration, theorizing the elegiac lyric as a space able to be filled — quite literally — by anyone.

Early in Chaucer's fourteenth-century dream vision, the *Book of the Duchess*, the Chaucerian narrator pauses in his narration to 'rehearse' (rehearse) a short poem whose utterance he overhears in a wood. But before this rehearsal, the narrator provides a

perplexing prefatory description of the text we are about to hear (or read). Speaking of the mysterious man in black, whose spontaneous performance we have stumbled upon, Chaucer explains how

[...] with a deedly sorweful soune,
He made of ryme ten vers or twelve
Of a compleynt to himselve,
The most pite, the moste rowthe,
That ever I herde; for, by my trowthe,
It was gret wonder that nature
Might suffre any creature
To have swich sorwe and be nat deed.
Ful pitous, pale, and nothing reed,
He seyde a lay, a maner song,
Withoute note, withoute song.¹

As a formal account, these lines do distressingly little to communicate with any certainty what kind of text we are about to encounter. Its designation as a ‘ryme’ tells us something of its composition, or at the very least, identifies it as poetry. The term ‘compleynt’ describes the content or subject matter of this ‘ryme’ with somewhat greater specificity, and it also introduces a possible generic label, one which would align the *Book of the Duchess* with the form and structure of its textual predecessors:

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Book of the Duchess’ in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 330–48 (ll. 462–72).

French love *dits* like Guillaume Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* and Jean Froissart's *Fontaine Amoureuse*.² The *dits* follow a blueprint wherein a narrator, venturing into a dream landscape, comes upon a private performance of amatory complaint, which he then records, turning it into the poem we are reading.³ While the identification of his inset poem as a 'compleynt' generically would seem to align Chaucer's poem with the *dits*, the brevity of this embedded 'ryme' — 'ten vers or twelve' versus the *dits*' long, poem-length complaints — signals an important structural difference. The narrator's ambivalence when it comes to estimating his text's length (is it ten lines or twelve?) further extends to questions of genre and classification. The line, 'He seyde a lay, a maner song', proposes two additional rubrics under which we might read the 'ryme' or 'compleynt' — a 'lay' and a 'song'. But those options are quickly complicated by the line that completes the couplet, while simultaneously leaving the genre question even more unresolved: 'He seyde a lay, a maner song | *Withoute note, withoute song*' (my emphasis).

² Ardis Butterfield makes a direct comparison between the black knight's second spoken lyric in the *Book of the Duchess* and Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*. See 'Lyric and Elegy in *The Book of the Duchess*,' *Medium Ævum*, 60 (1991), 33–60. Susan Bianco discusses the French *dits* in 'A Black Monk in the Rose Garden: Lydgate and the *Dit Amoureux* Tradition,' *Chaucer Review*, 34 (1999), 60–8.

³ The poem survives in only three manuscript witnesses: Oxford, Bodleian Library MSS Bodley 638, Fairfax 16, and Tanner 346. These comprise the so-called 'Oxford group' of manuscripts which all also contain John Lydgate's *Complaint of the Black Knight*, a poem that heavily draws on the *Book of the Duchess*. The unfailing proximity of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *Complaint of the Black Knight* in the manuscript record urges a concurrent reading of these two poems, which also appeared in close quarters in the first printed edition of Chaucer's poem. In this edition — William Thynne's 1532 edition of Chaucer's *Workes* — 'The dreame of Chaucer' (as the *Book* is titled there) is followed just seven texts later by Lydgate's *Complaint*. The relative positioning of the *Book* and the *Complaint* within these print and manuscript contexts sheds light on the complaint-oriented formal and generic framework in which they were read.

Why does Chaucer worry so much about genre in this prefatory moment? How can we account for this fumbling description, which presents so many options without offering any final pronouncement on what, exactly, we are looking at — or listening to — when we read the text that follows? And what does Chaucer mean by that obscure, paradox-laden phrase: ‘song [...] withoute song’? What does it mean to utter a song without song?

In this article, I seek to answer these questions by examining the black knight’s ‘song [...] withoute song’ (or lyric, as I’ll call it) in relation to the *Book of the Duchess*’ overarching poetic concerns with the articulation of loss and the potential of poetry in matters of consolation and ritual commemoration. In particular, I am interested in what is missing from this lyric and its setting, framing, and performance. I will show how what the lyric lacks according to the narrator’s prefatory account — song — becomes a shorthand for other kinds of absence, in addition to being a literal description of the formal absence of musicality. The absence of song, for Chaucer, extends to mean the absence of both musical and visual colour. I will contend that the lyric, in its musical and visual absences and in what remains, encourages us to read it alongside medieval theories of sound, including grammatical and philosophical theories of *vox* and Deschamps’ ‘natural music’, as well as the science of optics, or *perspectiva*, as it was known in the Middle Ages. These theories prove germane to the overarching poetic project of the *Book of the Duchess*, which tries throughout to resolve the discrepancies between individual perception, linguistic quantification, and — especially—original performance and material records in order to account for the

experience of loss most accurately in language. In the end, it is Chaucer's transformation of the lyric into a powerful mnemonic repository which contains within itself plenitude and lack, presence, and absence, colour and colourlessness, sound and silence, that narrows the gap between grieving lyric subject, narrator, and reader. The lyric's refusal to commit to a single form or genre in both its textual and material history, its enigmatic status as a 'song without song', I will show, is precisely what makes it a form which can facilitate both private consolation and ritual public commemoration. What starts off as a private meditation on loss, in Chaucer's hands, turns the space originally occupied by the black knight into one able to be filled — quite literally — by anyone.

In what follows, I will first dwell on some of the ways that the lyric's prefatory account and the provocative descriptor 'song without song' foreshadow the questions of perception, perspective, quantification, and poetic mediation treated by the lyric and resurfacing throughout the *Book of the Duchess*. I will then turn to the lyric itself and examine how Chaucer uses temporal effects to develop a phenomenology of loss that revolves around both sonic and visual absence, responding to Suzanne Akbari's earlier claim that Chaucer's incorporation of the medieval science of *perspectiva* remains limited to visual phenomena until later poems like the *House of Fame*.⁴ I will suggest some of the ways that a more capacious understanding of how Chaucer incorporates medieval theories of optics and sound in the *Book of the Duchess* can

⁴ Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 178ff.

complicate our reading of the poem as a meditation not only on loss, but also on poetry itself. As I mean to show, the black knight's lyric in the *Book of the Duchess* is for Chaucer as much a reflection on the ephemerality of lyric performance and the precarious nature of lyric transmission as on the fleeting nature of human life and the power of poetry to give lasting voice—without song—to the reality of grief.

Before proceeding, it's worth quickly recounting the historical circumstances for the composition of the larger poem within which the black knight's lyric is contained. It is now widely assumed that Chaucer composed the *Book of the Duchess* for his patron and noble contemporary, John of Gaunt, whose wife, Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, is thought to have died of the plague in September of 1368. John of Gaunt conducted extravagant annual commemorative activities in response to Blanche's death for the rest of his life, beginning with an elaborate funeral cortege, followed, in 1374, by the building of a joint tomb and funeral monument in St. Pauls' Cathedral, and culminating in a joint chantry foundation upon his death in 1399. Historically, scholars have attempted to date and lend occasional significance to the *Book of the Duchess* on the basis of John of Gaunt's commemorative activities and extant Chaucerian life records, which identify the poet as the recipient of an annuity from John of Gaunt starting in 1374 — the same year Blanche's funeral monument was commissioned.

The coincidence of the life annuity and the construction of Blanche's tomb, as some have pointed out, is not strong enough evidence in itself to confirm the poem's dating (on the occasion of Blanche's death or at the time of the tomb's construction—

or at some earlier, unrelated time), or whether John of Gaunt specifically commissioned Chaucer for a commemorative work. However, we do know that some early readers of Chaucer's poetry identified the poem and its composition with that historical couple. In the fifteenth-century Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16, a note in the hand of the early sixteenth-century antiquary John Stow appears next to the poem's title (folio 130r): 'made by Geffrey | Chawcyer at pe request of pe duke of lancaster: pitously | complaynyng the deathe of pe sayde dowchesse | blanche'. What's more, in two manuscript versions of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Book of the Duchess* is included among lists of Chaucer's works as 'the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse'.⁵

Whether or not Chaucer meant for us to read the black knight in the *Book of the Duchess* as a poetic avatar for John of Gaunt and the Lady White as Blanche, the premise of the poem remains the same: Chaucer is attempting a project of putting into words — of linguistically quantifying — someone else's loss. It comes as no surprise, then, that throughout the poem he should remain preoccupied with the issue of discrepancies in perspective. How can you possibly describe another person's

⁵ Scholars have sought internal evidence for biographical allusion within the poem on this basis, but, as Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards have shown, '[t]here are no forms of external evidence concerning [the poem's] date or occasion of composition, and much weight has to had to be placed on cryptic internal allusions in order to reconstruct a plausible occasional significance: the death from the plague of John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche'. The poem, they go on to say, 'makes no explicit allusion to her death, and only the line 'And good faire White she het' (948), and a cluster of final gestures (1318–19) to Lancaster ('long castel'), 'St John', and 'Richmond' ('ryche hil': John of Gaunt was earl of Richmond in Yorkshire until 1372) suggest its connections with the death of the duchess'. See: 'Codicology, Text, and the Book of the Duchess', in *Chaucer's Book of the Duchess: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. by Jamie C. Fumo (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 11–27.

experience of loss if you have not felt that same loss yourself? How can language possibly hope to overcome what is, essentially, an insurmountable gap in experience?

Read with these considerations in mind, Chaucer's worrying over the form and genre of the black knight's lyric betrays itself as only partly focused on the lyric itself. Instead, his prefatory description is more a reflective foreshadowing of the interconnected issues of perception, perspectival difference, and the possibility of linguistic quantification. Chaucer, in proposing multiple labels or categories for the text he plans to rehearse, shows us multiple angles from which to perceive the lyric, thereby underscoring the instability and subjectivity inherent in textual interpretation, while also modelling description and classification as a trial-by-error thought process performed in language. In addition to presenting this range of generic perspectives (how to *interpret* the lyric) and linguistic possibilities (what to *call* the lyric), he draws attention to our own perspective — and his narrator's — by foregrounding the hypermediated nature of our reading of the lyric: this a textual performance occurring within a dream and now supposedly recited from the narrator's memory. The text's present transmission, he emphasizes, has little to do with that original performance. '*I can | rehearse it*', the narrator asserts immediately after the formal account; '*right thus it began*' (473–74, my emphases). Here, Chaucer knowingly skirts around actually letting the reader hear the voice of the man in black in real time. Our own perspective in approaching the text — now only a 'rehearsal', a repetition, a record, a medium somehow at a remove from the original — is

complicated by the presence of Chaucer's narrator, the absence of the man in black, the passage of time, and the mediation of whatever physical copy we're reading from.

Chaucer's choosing to neither definitively categorize the lyric, nor make claims for it as original performance, casts upon it an aura of instability and elusiveness that resonates with the poem's textual and material history.⁶ According to the narrator's equivocal estimate, we should expect to find, in manuscripts of the *Book of the Duchess*, a short 'ryme' comprised of 'ten vers or twelve'. But turning to its three extant manuscript copies — all fifteenth-century productions posthumous to Chaucer — we encounter neither the promised 'ten' nor 'twelve' lines. Instead, we find an eleven-line textual object whose uneven edges and unusual rhyme scheme generate friction with the surrounding verse narrative. Whereas the narrative portions of the *Book of the Duchess* adhere to a strict template of rhyming octosyllabic couplets, these eleven lines deviate from the norm with their *aabbaccddcd* rhyme scheme; they further disrupt the poem's formal progression with the addition of a stray odd line. One figure in the poem's material history, the sixteenth-century editor William Thynne, found himself unable to countenance such structural deviance; in his 1532 edition of the *Book of the Duchess* — the poem's only other witness — he assimilated the lyric to the surrounding verse by incorporating an additional line in the first 'stanza' and reordering the lines of the second so as to maintain a pattern of rhyming couplets.⁷

⁶ Boffey and Edwards offer a comprehensive account of the textual-critical problems of the *Book of the Duchess* which includes a detailed analysis of the textual variants of the black knight's first lyric. See 'Codicology', pp. 21, 24.

⁷ According to Boffey and Edwards, '[a]lthough none of the manuscripts leaves a gap here for the missing line, Thynne inserted one after 479 to complete the couplet: 'And thus in sorowe lefte me alone'

The lyric thus refuses to commit to a single form or genre both textually and materially. Its variable appearance as a textual artefact, the discrepancy between what we are told to expect and what we actually receive, and the multiple classificatory possibilities the narrator offers collectively point to the lyric as a locus of textual, material, and generic instability; these instabilities, in turn, trouble both how we encounter the lyric and how Chaucer attempts to describe it. Most, if not all, of these instabilities, I would argue, can be traced back to and explained by that mystifying and unwieldy formulation in the narrator's formal account: 'song [...] withoute song'.

Chaucer is not one, except in very rare cases, to commit the poetic taboo of rhyming the same word with itself; and as this is not an example of *rime riche* (which allows the rhyming of the same word with itself, if used as different parts of speech), it should hint to us that Chaucer is up to something. Language in this formulation grinds to a halt and skips back on itself like a broken record, the rhyming of 'song' with 'song' playing out sonically the implicit classificatory conundrum—what *do* you call a 'song [...] withoute song'? Is a song still a song without music?⁸

In one sense, for Chaucer to call the black knight's lyric a song without song is in fact to acknowledge how readers would have encountered the lyric as a material artefact in their reading of the *Book of the Duchess*. Even had the original performance

(fol. CC.lxxiii^{rb}). See 'Codicology', p. 24. The deviation in the rhyme scheme presented by the second stanza [*aabccb*] provoked Thynne's intervention. His solution, they observe, 'was a logical extension of his insertion of the extra line: he ordered the six lines to produce orderly couplets.'

⁸ Yolanda Plumley would suggest an affirmative answer to this. She shows precisely how 'even [medieval] lyrics composed without music in mind may carry a musical charge,' possessing what she terms a "'virtual' musicality.' See *The Art of Grafted Song: Citation and Allusion in the Age of Machaut* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 11.

been sung (and the narrator stresses it was *not*), in manuscript, the lyric would have been just what it says on the box: *without song*. Any form of music notation that hypothetically might have accompanied it in manuscript would have been, at best, an approximation at quantifying and recording that performance (like the narrator's own faltering attempts to give a name to the performance he overhears). Chaucer's formal account of the lyric is thus more complicated than it seems, for not only does it reflect on the when, where, and how of lyric performance, its perception and processing, it is also highly attentive to what the turning of lyric into material record does to lyric itself. The mysterious, ephemeral event of lyric performance, its visual and sonic qualities, through the process of record-making and reproduction, somehow get transformed into black and white graphemes on a page which, Chaucer suggests, will only ever be a partial, imperfect representation. That the black knight's lyric is, from the start, stripped of the possibility of song I think reveals Chaucer to be avoiding the chance of lyric diminishment by material record; if you take away song entirely from the original performance, what remains — text — is the part of performance that *can* translate more readily from aural to written medium, its memory less altered by the act of physical preservation than the rendering of songful song onto parchment.

I will return to this question of the materiality of lyric and the nature of lyric performance later in this article, but now I would like to turn to the lyric itself to see how Chaucer uses its space to develop a phenomenology of loss around precisely these questions of visual and auditory presence and absence. The sonic absence implied by the narrator's description of the lyric as a 'song without song' echoes

throughout the lyric in other song-related forms of absence. To fully experience the lyric's absences, however, we must retrace the narrator's steps through the woods.

Waking with the narrator, we open our eyes and ears to an environment filled with light, colour, and sound. Birds are singing, the horns of the hunt blowing, the sun bouncing off the luxe appointments of the bedchamber. Through the glazed glass windows of the room the 'bright bemes' and 'many glade gilde stremes' of the sun filter through; the sky is a brilliant blue ('Blew, bright, clere was the air'), the walls of the chamber '[f]ul wel depynted' 'with colours fine' and 'both the text and glose | Of al the Romaunce of the Rose' alongside 'holy all the story of Troye [...] in the glasinge y-wrought' (321–43). Despite this visual splendor, the narrator's most effusive descriptions are devoted to the dream's soundscape: 'I was waked', he tells us, 'With smale foules a grete hepe | That had affrayed me out of my slepe | Thurgh noyse and swetnesse of hir songe' (294–97). He pictures these birds sitting together in a great crowd 'Upon [his] chamber-roof', 'songen everich in his wyse', and describes, at some length, the untellable sweetness, musicality, and variety of their song (298–319).

The dulcet, otherworldly harmonies of the birdsong compel the narrator up and out of his chamber, desirous of fresh air and participation in the hunt he assumes to be on because of the aural clues of 'men, hors, houndes, and other thinge' (349). Leaving his chamber, briefly coming in contact with the hunt (led by Octavian), and finally following a pup down a pathway into a wood, he passes through an environs bursting with colourful flora and fauna, with 'grene greves' and 'trees so ful of leves', with 'founes, sowres, bukkes, does [...] And many squirrels' (417–18, 429–31). There

are so many flowers, animals, and growing things stimulating the senses, he tells us, that the most adept mathematician in the world could not reckon them:

Shortly, it was so ful of bestes
That though Argus, the noble countour,
Sete to rekene with his fingures ten—
For by tho figures mowe al ken,
If they be crafty, rekene and noumbre,
And telle of every thing the noumbre—
Yet shulde he fail to reken even
The wondres me mette in my sweven (434–42).

This arithmetical musing on the forest's visual and sonic plenitude concludes the opening of the dream, and, abruptly, the narrative shifts, suddenly evacuated of colour and sound as soon as the narrator becomes 'war of a man in blak | That sat and had y-turned his bak | To an oke, an huge tree' (445–47). Wary of startling this solitary figure, the narrator silently 'stalke[s]' up behind him (the language of the hunt still firmly impressed in his mind) and 'ther [stondes] as stille as ought' (458–59). The sudden stillness that descends on the narrator as he tries not to disturb the mysterious man, a 'wonder wel-faring knight', sharpens the disparity between the quietude of the present scene and the dream's boisterous opening (452).

As the narrator draws closer, he again remarks upon the man's black clothes: 'And he was clothed al in blak' (457). The man's black garments cast a sobering,

spectral pall over what has been, until now, a joyous vernal setting composed of light, colour, sound, and activity. The colour black, in clothing a symbol of mourning and suffering, enervates the poetic energy associated with the dream's early stimuli, literally stopping us, along with the narrator, in our tracks. A study in contrasts, the knight's pale appearance is set against the darkness of his garments. His face, 'pale' and 'nothing reed', is later explained as resulting from his blood rushing down to his heart during the lyric's utterance (470). The colourlessness of the knight's attire and complexion then seeps into the lyric itself, which goes like this:

I have of sorwe so grete woon
That joye gete I never noon,
Now that I see my lady bright,
Which I have loved with al my might,
Is fro me deed and is agoon,
[And thus in sorwe lefte me aloon.]⁹
Allas, Deeth, what aileth thee
That thou noldest have taken me
Whan thou took my lady swete
That was so fair, so fresh, so free,
So good that men may well y-see
Of all goodnesse she had no mete (475–89).

⁹ The bracketed line is the one Thynne adds in his 1532 edition of the *Book of the Duchess*.

For all of the delays that Chaucer builds into the narrative leading up to the lyric (the outer frame with its account of the narrator's insomnia, the retelling of the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, the thickets of description in the forest scene, and the prefatory remarks on the black knight and his lyric), we might expect the lyric to be a highly artful, beautifully crafted, virtuosic performance. But when we finally hear (or read) the black knight's lyric, we encounter eleven barebones, fairly literal lines, stylistically muted but for one rhetorical flourish (an apostrophe to Death in the second stanza). Read one way, the language and sentiment feel overly simple and formulaic; of the eighty-one words that make up the lyric, all but eight are a single syllable long (and those eight are only two syllables). The lyric's totalizing colourlessness — its lack of musicality, of song, of linguistic or metrical colour — is as deafening as the deadening tolling of 'song...song' right before its rehearsal.

The lyric thus enters the world of the poem as a black and white space of words without song, in stark contrast to the narrative sequence, rich with colour and sound, with which it is prefaced. In a similar way to how, in his formal description of the lyric, the narrator manages to say both too much and too little, here, Chaucer plays with opposing concepts of excess and lack. By filling the space around the lyric with visual and sonic colour, he spotlights how very devoid of those same features, how very *empty*, the lyric is. This is a rather subtle structural means of helping readers conceptualize loss: to lose a loved one, Chaucer suggests, is as sudden and enervating an experience as the totalizing effect of sensory evacuation we experience in this scene

in the shift from vibrant forest-life to private, songless mourning.¹⁰ The muted quality of the black knight's lyric, in this reading, poignantly reflects the psychological shock of grief; it is shock which stills, deadens, numbs. And its effects are not only psychological, but somatic, as reflected in the lyric's diction. The overwhelming predominance of single-syllable words is not so much a marker of how good or bad a poet the black knight is as it is a formal reflection on the extremity of grief and its bodily affects. The choppy, disjointed sound of so many single-syllable, stressed words mimics the lyric subject choking up, only able to vocalize a single sound at a time in between sobs, or maybe speaking with great restraint, so as to avoid bursting into tears. In either case, the resulting rhythm is both uncomplicated and (importantly) reproducible. To read the black knight's lyric aloud, or to 'rehearse' it as the narrator finds himself doing, is to fall into the same patterns of breath and breathlessness as the black knight in his original performance; reading the lyric is to experience — in one's own body — the rhythm of grief.¹¹

In these ways, Chaucer uses the lyric to figure a phenomenology of loss that relies on structural as well as somatic effects. He further develops that phenomenology via one more subtle lyric operation: the embedding of a barely-there optical illusion in the lyric itself which suggests that we conceptualize the experience

¹⁰ As Louise O. Fradenburg reflects, '[a]ll writers on mourning remind us of how grief impoverishes the subject's world'. See "'Voice Memorial': Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry', *Exemplaria* 2:1 (1990), 169–202 (p. 185). My thanks to my second anonymous reviewer, who recommended this article.

¹¹ For another account of a songless medieval song that uses the reader's body to communicate affect and grief, see Anna Zayaruznaya, "'Sanz Note' & Sanz Measure': Toward a Premodern Aesthetics of the Dirge,' in *Voice and Voicelessness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Irit Ruth Kleiman (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 155–75.

of loss in visual and temporal terms. The lyric begins conventionally enough in the manner of an amatory complaint ('I have of sorwe so grete woon | That joye gete I never noon'), but the third line sets up the illusion by apparently situating us in the present tense: '*Now* that I *see* my lady bright' (my emphases). As those familiar with late medieval theories of falling in love will recall, the medieval science of optics, or *perspectiva*, provided a visually-based, biological explanation for the development of romantic emotional attachment. The optical theory of extramission, relying on a vector-based concept of 'eye beams', hypothesized that looking at the beloved entailed the entrance of a ray emanating from her eye into one's own.¹² That pleasurable, embodied experience of being pierced by his beloved's look, it turns out, is precisely what the knight lacks, but he withholds this knowledge (and herein lies the trick) until the fifth line of the lyric ('Is fro me deed and is agoon'). Until this point, we are meant to think that he is looking at and admiring his lady in the present moment of lyric performance, but the fifth line dissolves the illusion, revealing that it is not *seeing* his lady in the present which causes him pain (as the third line would have us suppose), but that he *cannot* see her anymore, because she is dead. Instead of physically seeing his lady, he can only 'see' figuratively to comprehend the fact of her absence.

¹² As A.C. Spearing explains, '[b]ehind the idea of the looker wounded by a look may lie scientific theories, going back to Plato's Timaeus and Theaetetus, that understood sight itself as taking place through a combined extramission of rays or streams of light'. See *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 10. For an in-depth history of optical theory which traces the emergence and re-emergence of extramission as a scientific concept, see Robert Crone, *A History of Color: The Evolution of Theories of Lights and Color* (Dordrecht: Springer Academic, 1999), especially Chapter II, 'The Middle Ages', pp. 17–34.

For the black knight, what grieves him the most in the present moment of lyric composition — what causes him to fall into a swoon as soon as he finishes his performance — thus seems to be the gaps (visual, temporal, and linguistic) that pervade his lyric present, all of which remind him of White's absence and of the discrepancies in time and tense between when she was alive and now. He imagines himself, for half a breath, beholding his beloved as he used to in the third line of the lyric, but by the fifth line realizes that she — and that earlier time of love-looking and present-tense amatory lyric composition — is 'agoon'. The sixth line of the first stanza, added by Thynne (and so potentially not original to Chaucer), circles back to focus on what remains in White's absence: the black knight 'in sorwe' and 'aloon', composing elegiac lyric in a deserted wood in the present.

The lyric thus constructs the experience of loss as a sonic and visual, but also temporal and linguistic phenomenon. Losing White, for the knight, primarily means losing sight of her, but with that loss comes others, which the lyric reflects upon. He loses the subject position or perspective in time and space that would have enabled him to say, 'Now that I see my lady bright', and mean an immediate reality, rather than a memory or imagination of past love. He loses the very possibility of language that can talk about White in the present tense, and in the simplicity of his diction, seems resigned to the fact that language is barely sufficient in describing either love or loss. And his grief is renewed — as in the lyric — each time he reflects on these losses and on the discrepancies between that earlier time of love-looking and possibilities for present-tense lyric composition, and the new reality where the

beloved is gone and all that is good (song, colour, present tense verbs) has gone with her. The lyric registers these losses in its sounds, silences, and sights, in what it stumbles to say and in what it leaves unspoken and unseeable.

Despite the importance of visual absence to Chaucer's project in the *Book of the Duchess*, few literary studies (apart from Suzanne Akbari's notable work in *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory*) have taken into account the *Book of the Duchess*' resonances with medieval optical theory, nor has optics played a major role in studies of the poem's richly suggestive colour semantics.¹³ The medieval science of optics, or *perspectiva*, flourished in thirteenth-century England via the writings of scientist-theologians Robert Grosseteste, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, and John Pecham. Their works were based on Latin translations of the optical treatises of Greek and Arabic philosophers and mathematicians, and largely grounded in both geometry and natural philosophy. As a science, optics boasted two primary areas of inquiry: perspective, based in geometry, and light, based in natural philosophy; as it does for modern scientists since Newton, the study of light

¹³ Examples of studies that have thought about Chaucer's poetry, optics, and/or colour do exist. Linda Tarte Holley, for instance, explores optical theory vis-à-vis *Troilus and Criseyde* in 'Medieval Optics and the Framed Narrative in Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"', *The Chaucer Review*, 21.1 (1986), 26–44. Investigations of colour semantics of the *Book of the Duchess* and Chaucer's other works have been fairly numerous, but I have yet to find an account which studies colour theory in the *Book of the Duchess* in relation to medieval optical science, which provided some of the most influential theories of colour in Chaucer's day. For examples of how colour theory has featured in extant readings, see, for instance: Stephen Manning, 'Chaucer's Good Fair White: Woman and Symbol,' *Comparative Literature*, 10.2 (1958), 97–105; Carolyn Merlo, 'Chaucer's "Broun" and Medieval Color Symbolism', *CLA Journal*, 25.2 (1981), 225–26. Also deserving mention: a relatively comprehensive account of Chaucer's colour lexicon by C. P. Biggam, 'Aspects of Chaucer's Adjectives of Hue,' *The Chaucer Review*, 28.1 (1993), 41–53.

encompassed the study of colour.¹⁴ Medieval colour theory drew heavily on optical discourse in its own understanding of what colour was, and how it might be measured, described, and quantified; in turn, colour theory had a bearing on a wide range of learned and craft-oriented areas of knowledge, making it a particularly fertile field for Chaucer's poem to access, however obliquely.¹⁵ These included: period colour semantics (both religious and secular, going back to antiquity); theories of complexion and physiognomy (with roots in humoral theory and Galenic medicine);¹⁶ heraldic colour theory and principles of *blazon* (which, like optics, grounds itself in natural philosophy);¹⁷ book-making (particularly, illumination, illustration, and ink production), cloth-making, and the arts; rhetorical theory (specifically, the *colores rhetorici*); alchemical treatises; and lapidaries. Interestingly, most if not all of these

¹⁴ See David C. Lindberg, *Studies in the History of Medieval Optics* (London: Variorum, 1983) and David C. Lindberg, *Roger Bacon and the Origins of Perspectiva in the Middle Ages: A Critical Edition and English Translation of Bacon's Perspectiva with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Crone also offers a good overview of the history of optics in his *History of Color*.

¹⁵ Art historians unsurprisingly have brought the most to the table when it comes to offering histories of colour and colour semantics. Particularly notable recent accounts include those by John Gage (*Color and Meaning Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999]) and Michel Pastoureau, who has written book-length, illustrated histories of individual colours; particularly relevant to the present study is his volume, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Pastoureau's colour histories devote considerable space to the Middle Ages and its colour semantics, touching on everything from the liturgy to the arts. A shorter, but still ambitious theoretical account of medieval colour is Heather Pulliam, 'Color,' *Studies in Iconography*, 33 (2012), 3–14. Finally, the materiality of colour receives especial emphasis in Diana Young, 'The Colours of Things,' in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. by Christopher Tilley, Michael Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer (London: SAGE, 2006), pp. 173–85.

¹⁶ For an application of complexion theory to Chaucer's poetry, see Elspeth Whitney, 'What's Wrong with the Pardoner?: Complexion Theory, the Phlegmatic Man, and Effeminacy,' *The Chaucer Review*, 45.4 (2011), 357–89.

¹⁷ For an account of medieval *blazon* and its significance in medieval literature, see Michael J. Huxtable, 'Aspects of Armorial Colours and Their Perception in Medieval Literature,' in *New Directions in Color Studies*, ed. by Carole P. Biggam (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), pp. 191–203.

areas of knowledge upheld a conception of colour as intrinsically material.¹⁸ Colour was less a matter of hue for medieval people than it is for modern societies, and more a matter of brightness, luminosity, and depth.¹⁹ This included what we sometimes think of as non-colours, white and black, those same colours that dominate the black knight's lyric and its setting and performance.

Returning to medieval optics, in *Seeing Through the Veil*, Akbari argues that it is not until later works like the *House of Fame* that Chaucer complicates his incorporation of *perspectiva* into his poetics to include the science of sound as well as sight; the *Book of the Duchess*, she suggests, remains limited to offering sight as a metaphor for knowing, whereas later on, Chaucer comes to experiment with sound as an epistemological tool.²⁰ While I agree with Akbari that sound has far greater stakes in

¹⁸ Pulliam suggests that the medieval 'materialistic conceptualization of color' is supported by the wide range of medieval writings and fields of knowledge which touched on colour. For example, '[e]xegetical tracts that refer to color are usually bound to biblical descriptions of precious gems and metals and so describe color in terms of brightness, hardness, purity, dappled effects, and intensity. Unsurprisingly, in scientific texts, such as Pliny's *Natural History* and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, color is also discussed in relation to material objects such as gemstones, metals, and medicinal plants. Recipes for color, which are dated to the ninth and centuries but draw upon earlier sources [...] demonstrate the visceral materiality of medieval color as does the better known, twelfth-century *De Diversis Artibus* by Theophilus'. See 'Color', p. 4. Going on to explain some implications of the materiality of medieval colour, Pulliam describes how 'the materials of medieval art are diverse and were often considered the sole component of a color. Blank vellum and areas of unpainted ivory, for instance, may represent flesh, whiteness, or teeth, while gold might portray a king's crown or the sun. Because of the absence of a transformative layer of pigment, in such cases the border between illusion and reality is permeable and porous'. See 'Color', pp. 4–5.

¹⁹ *COLOUR: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts*. Accessed 4 April 2020. <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/14>. See especially subsections 'The Illuminator's Palette' and 'Colour Theory, Optics and Manuscript Illumination'.

²⁰ As Akbari argues, 'there is a distinct progression in Chaucer's use of faculty psychology, particularly in his use of vision as a metaphor for knowing'. See *Seeing through the Veil*, p. 178. 'In several of his early works,' she goes on to say, 'especially the *Book of the Duchess* [...] Chaucer represents vision as the highest of the senses, one which accurately conveys reality, seamlessly mediating between the seer and the object.' However, '[i]n his subsequent allegories [...] the *Parlement of Fowls* and the *House of Fame*, Chaucer abandons vision as a potential mediator between subject and object, and instead turns to the role of hearing.'

Chaucer's poetic project in the *House of Fame*, I hope to show that the absence of sound — particularly, the absence of *song* — in the *Book of the Duchess* is just as important — and indeed intertwined with — the visual as an epistemological tool which helps Chaucer meditate not only on loss, but also on poetry; that importance obtains at the nexus of medieval optics, geometry, colour theory, grammatical and philosophical accounts of *vox*, and modern theories of musical performance.

In one of the early moments in the narrator's conversation with the black knight, the latter describes losing White as losing his queen in a metaphorical game of chess with Fortune. Strangely, he laments his ignorance of geometry as the reason for his misstep: 'By God', he tells the narrator, 'wolde I had ones or twyes | Y-coud and knowe the jeopardyses | That coude the Greke Pictagores, | I shulde have pleyd the bet at ches | And kept my fers the bet therby' (665–69). The knight clearly thinks that being well-versed in Pythagorean geometry (one of the foundations of *perspectiva*) would have made him a more competitive opponent against Fortune; he would have known to keep his queen, the lady White, close by, preventing her capture and keeping her within sight.

If the knight is bad at one branch of mathematical reckoning in a metaphorical chess game, is it reasonable for him to expect to be any better when it comes to linguistic forms of quantification, especially those that attempt something so difficult as quantifying his lost beloved, a lady who becomes overwritten as the colour white? It's unlikely that he would succeed, especially knowing what we do of the complex visuality and materiality of medieval colour. That understanding of colour tells us

that when the black knight mourns White, it's very much not 'white' in the abstract, despite the layers of language and metaphor through which he attempts to express his grief. White's loss, as we have seen, is both a structural and a somatic, embodied experience; her luminosity and intensity make her exceed both linguistic representation and mathematical quantification. Lyric can only attempt and self-consciously, deliberately fail at both in order to say anything about White's whiteness, the black knight's love for her, and the profundity of his grief. Hence the knight's hyperbolic, yet underwhelming description of White's surpassing qualities at the lyric's conclusion: she was 'so fair, so fresh, so free | So good'. That is to say, his 'lady bright' shone with such a brightness that even now, at the present temporal remove, it can only be articulated with blundering, insistent repetition.

The black knight's mathematical metaphor for losing his lady thus also becomes a way of talking about the impossibilities of converting the memory of the beloved into language. This movement from internal perception to external representation, from the immaterial medium of memory to the material mediums of words and sound, reflects the complexities of sound as it was understood in the Middle Ages. In the black knight's emphasis on the mathematical side of such remediations we find a ready link to these theories which return us once again to the question of what it means not only to utter, but also to attempt to record, as Chaucer does, a 'song without song' — to reckon or account for, that is, music and memory in material record.

Music, from Plato onwards, was conceived of primarily in mathematical terms. The movements of the heavenly bodies or planets, for medieval philosophers and cosmologists, exemplified the perfect mathematical ordering of the universe, and it was through calculations and models that attempted to apprehend the so-called ‘music of the spheres’ that they sought to understand music and the cosmos. But in theorizing earthly music, medieval philosophers and grammarians alike repeatedly turned to the question of *vox*, or voice. Referring to medieval conceptions of *vox* thus promises to add another dimension to our reading of the different forms of remediation at play throughout the *Book of the Duchess*: in the previous example, the black knight’s conversion of visual memory into *verba* and sound (which, in turn, create his ‘song without song’; and Chaucer’s conversion of that vocalized ‘song’ into a written record we can read.

Medieval grammarians articulated two distinct categories of *vox*, distinctions made on the basis of whether the vocal production was capable of being transposed in writing (*vox discreta*) or not (*vox confusa*). The idea that voice may or may not be able to be recorded in a physical form, in words, may or may not be helpful to our understanding of how Chaucer goes about recording the black knight’s lyric, for he does technically succeed in writing it down and enclosing it within his poem. This would suggest that the lyric’s original performance belongs to the category of *vox discreta* in terms of its vocal production. Yet the ambiguities in the dreamer’s confusing and possibly confused description of the lyric (the fact that he cannot reckon its length, or decide on its form, or even make clear what he means by ‘song without song’)—as

well as in the lyric's variant forms in its material history, suggest that this categorization may not be so ready. There is something about the *vox* behind the black knight's lyric which makes its transcription difficult, but not impossible.

Indeed, the *vox discreta/confusa* paradigm was only one of several ways medieval grammarians and philosophers theorized *vox*. As Andrew Hicks elucidates, medieval authorities on *vox* rarely agreed as to what, exactly it was, how it was produced, and whether it was a material or immaterial phenomenon (or both). William of Conches devotes a considerable portion of his *Philosophia Mundi* discussing *vox*, which he sees as entailing both material and immaterial processes. As Hicks explains, for William,

the imagined journey of the human *uox* is [...] cyclical, from the natural interiority of the corporeal life-process (physiology), through the medial conduit of the exterior world (physics), and back into the body via the ear (physiology again) and onward to the soul (psychology). The *uox*, however, is not merely an objective, material entity that conforms to natural law. It is also a subjective, meaning-bearing entity that connects the intention of the speaker (*uoluntas loquentis*) to the perception of the perceiving soul. That perception, however, is grounded in a relationship of *similitudo* (similarity) between the form of the air thus struck and the form assumed by the airy substance (*aeria substantia*) that the soul deputizes as its external *medium*, the point of transition between the *external* material *res* (thing) and the *internal* immaterial perception, on the part of the soul, of a will or intention. The movement from external to internal is guaranteed not just by the similarity of form

(*similis forma*) but by the similarity of *media* involved: the *similis forma* is transferred from the external *aer* to the internal *aeria substantia*.²¹

Hicks' gloss on William's *vox* projects an understanding of voice as a multimedia phenomenon — physiological, physical, and psychological — that traverses territory both corporeal and incorporeal, substantial and insubstantial, material and immaterial. 'Sense-perceptible' conceptions of *vox* and *musica* like William's, Hicks shows, coexisted with those that saw music and sound as numerical, 'incorporeal', and 'bodiless' phenomena.²²

The ambiguous status of medieval *vox*, which, as Hicks contends, fluidly traverses these corporeal/incorporeal and material/immaterial binaries, mirrors the uncertain status of the black knight's lyric but also offers one explanation as to why we can in fact have a 'song without song' in the first place, and how it makes its way into material record. Applying William's understanding of *vox* to the lyric gives us a picture of the lyric's performance as a kind of exchange and transfer of sound and sense from immaterial, internal perception (the black knight's memory of White) to external *materia* or *res* (the lyric's sounding, through *verba*) and its immaterial, internal apprehension by the dreamer. The airy medium of sound undergoes a process of conversion and remediation at each of these stages; no wonder, then, that Chaucer

²¹ Andrew Hicks, *Composing World: Harmony in the Medieval Platonic Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 153).

²² Hicks, *Composing World*, p. 154.

should find a means of converting the lyric, internally perceived, into a fourth form: writing.

Thus, the black knight's lyric both is and is not 'songful' because of the way the black knight's *vox* negotiates between sounding, songful, material mediums and the insubstantial internal media of memory and perception. In calling the lyric a 'song without song', then, I would argue that Chaucer is suggesting that the black knight's *materia* — his memory of White as converted into song — is *not* ephemeral, even though the lyric's performance might seem to suggest otherwise. It persists and never diminishes precisely because of the intrinsic materiality of *vox* and its ability to move and reside in various locales: within one or more souls or within in the world and its words — as a lingering sonic materiality in the mind of the dreamer or as a physical text on the manuscript page.

Sarah Elliott Novacich, like William of Conches, writes about musical performance in a manner that emphasizes the vibrant interactions between sound, instrument, and body, but she stresses the impossibility of mediating those complex interactions in written record, and here we have another means of understanding why, or in what ways, Chaucer scripts the black knight's lyric as songless. Novacich uses performance theory to think through absent song in a medieval literary work which precedes the *Book of the Duchess* by a century or so: the Ovidian-derived romance, *Sir Orfeo*.²³ Zeroing in on Orfeo's harping and song (which is mentioned but

²³ Sarah Elliott Novacich, 'Inaudible Music,' in *The Medieval Literary: Beyond Form*, ed. by Robert J. Meyer-Lee and Catherine Sanok (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), pp. 141–58.

neither disclosed nor described), she notes that '[f]requently [...] records of music — or performance records in general — invite discussion of that which *fails* to be retained. Sound might be imprinted upon the memory but inscribed upon the page it is thought to undergo a measure of diminishment'.²⁴ In a similar vein, another performance theorist, Peggy Phelan, observes that 'recording always threatens the ontology of performance: once performance is recorded, it loses its status as performance. It becomes something else'.²⁵

In such views, records of performance — particularly sonic performance — always operate in a mode of negative capability. Applied to the black knight's lyric and its poetic record, Novacich's theory of the radical absences implicit to records of performance elucidates Chaucer's songless song as offering a poignant, performance-centric, and notably material conception of poetry. This is a poetics which acknowledges the gaps — temporal and medial — between lyric performance and its record precisely by refusing to have song (i.e., music) rendered in an imperfect medium (language, manuscript, musical notation), even if that means eliminating music and tone colour entirely. It is also a poetics that reminds us once more of the temporariness of people as well as lyric performance. And if, as Novacich argues, the performance record most often gestures not to performance, but rather to the lost status of that performance, then we can understand the knight's 'song without song' as a self-referential memorial record which reminds us what has really been lost: not

²⁴ Novacich, 'Inaudible Music,' p. 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the performance of the lyric as heard by the narrator (which, I have shown, is not quite so completely irrecoverable as we might think, if we consult medieval theories of *vox*), but rather, the time when the lyric subject could sing and be heard by his beloved rather than some interloping narrator; we know that time to have existed from the knight's later account of his origins as an amateur maker of song.

The songlessness of the knight's lyric thus mourns the foreclosed possibility of the performance of amatory lyric with the beloved as an audience, with her body the one which internalizes the *vox* of her lover and converts the perception of lyric into an understanding of love. The lyric's commemoration of this type of loss, as I will show next, Chaucer manages to put to broader commemorative purposes, thus ensuring that the memory of White — or rather, her real-life counterpart — lasts long after the lyric has finished sounding.

In addition to the grammatical, philosophical, and musical considerations outlined above, Chaucer's choice of a songless song reflects a wider, concurrent historical shift in the making and performance of lyric in late-medieval England, and the specific (perhaps aspirational) poet-patron interactions suggested by the *Book of the Duchess*. As Richard Firth Greene details, by the time Chaucer was writing and active in the English royal court (though not as a professional poet there), the nature of poetry and poetic performance, and their social valence, had undergone a significant transition. Formerly the purvey mainly of minstrels (a quasi-professional class of musically-skilled composers and performers), poetic making by Chaucer's time was becoming a hobby of the nobility — those who passed through the *camera*

regis and contributed to the king's entertainment. This new class of amateur poets displaced the song-singing, instrument-playing minstrel. Poetic composition became a class-specific, skillful, learned (albeit largely nonmusical) pastime for both the nobility and aspiring members of the gentry. In such contexts, poetry was something being made not, at least initially, for material reward (like the earlier minstrels), but rather for other forms of social gain and recognition. Simultaneously, it was becoming an art form much less readily tied to musical accompaniment or sung performance; that is, poetry began looking and sounding more like the logocentric lyric of modernity.²⁶

The fact that Chaucer writes the *Book of the Duchess* on the coattails of a time when the culture surrounding the production of courtly literature was undergoing such changes suggests some compelling evidence for how to interpret the narrator's engagement with the black knight and his lyric. Taking into account these contexts,

²⁶ By Green's account, 'The minstrel of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries differs in many respects from the amateur court poet of the fourteenth and fifteenth', but 'both filled a similar niche in the social life of the [royal] household, and it is no coincidence that the early fourteenth century witnessed at once the demise of one (at least as a literary exponent) and the emergence of the other; obviously they found themselves in some degree of competition'. See *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 103. Green goes on to describe how, by the end of the fourteenth century, 'the minstrel had virtually lost whatever claim he had once had to share in the literary life of the court. As a musician, however, he remained in great demand, and he appears frequently in household records throughout our period' (p. 105). At the same time, the nobleman, or the gentleman aspiring to noble status, took greater ownership of the literary culture of the court. 'Almost certainly,' Green writes, 'a degree of literary expertise became recognized as one of the marks of a gentleman, and practice in handling the forms of light, social poetry, came to be included within the scope of a genteel education' (p. 109). For historians of literature, the shift from the literary eminence of the minstrel to that of the genteel amateur 'had a marked effect upon the kind of literature produced for courtly entertainment' (p. 110). Not only was the new literature less likely to be set to music and performed by author as in the minstrel days of old, but it also resulted in what Firth calls 'a radical change in the relationship between the author and his audience.' As he puts it, '[i]f the old minstrel literature was a literature of performance, the new courtly verse might be characterized as a literature of participation' (p. 111).

it becomes clear that, at this time, Chaucer's poetic ability might well have been in nominal competition with that of his powerful noble contemporary. Accordingly — whether or not John of Gaunt actually dabbled in poetic composition — within the dream-world of the *Book*, the Gauntian black knight comes to model a version of poetic making and performance distinct from that of the Chaucerian narrator. Where the narrator's language and persona are curious, exuberant, and well-suited to the noisy, colourful space of the dream's opening, the black knight, quietly seated beneath his tree, offers a far more restrained poetic sensibility characterized by simplicity, reticence, and precision. This sensibility extends to the songless performance of his lyric; were we to classify the knight and the narrator as belonging to either the outmoded, songful minstrels or the rising class of amateur courtly poets, it's clear to which group the knight would belong.

The French poet Eustache Deschamps' (1346–1406) theory of natural music in his 1392 *Art de dictier* seems to be alluded to in this emphasis on the nobility implied by the knight's performance of lyric. For Deschamps, as James Wimsatt explains, poetry was classified under the rubric of 'music'. More specifically, verse was conceived of as 'natural music' (*paroules metrifées*), while musical notation was 'the mark of "artificial music"'.²⁷ Connected to these distinctions was the wider medieval sense of the relationship between nobility, the experience of love, and the ability to

²⁷ James Wimsatt, 'Chaucer and Deschamps' "Natural Music"', in *The Union of Words and Music in Medieval Poetry*, ed. by Rebecca A. Baltzer, Thomas Cable, and James I. Wimsatt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), pp. 132–50 (p. 132). See also Philip Jeserich, *Musica Naturlis: Speculative Music Theory and Poetics, from Saint Augustine to the Late Middle Ages in France*, trans. by Michael J. Curley and Steven Rendall (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 14–30.

compose music in the former sense. As Wimsatt writes, the 'medieval way' of understanding poetry as music was related to an

idea [...] that only the noble heart was capable of truly loving. Love being the subject of poetry, clearly only the gentle few – like Deschamps' patron – would be capable of understanding or composing genuine love poetry. At the same time, knowledge of music probably would have been understood as a mastery of abstract rules rather than an ability to perform. The basic rules could be seen as accessible to all. By this view, the essence of poetry was instinctive, music learned; poetry natural to the few, music a matter of artifice.²⁸

Taking Wimsatt's sketch of medieval attitudes to poetry and music into account, we can read the songless, black-and-white setting of the black knight's performance as a marker of his nobility, and by extension, his sophisticated ability to love truly and to compose verse or song in the 'natural music' sense. Accordingly, we can conclude that the narrator's emphasis on the knight 'saying' rather than 'singing' his lyric represents a clever, class-conscious, deferential move on Chaucer's part. Not only does he indirectly acknowledge his eventual patron's nobility and superior social status, but he also affirms his excellence and skill as both lover and as a modern courtly poet, while denying the possibility of artifice in the making of the lyric. By not singing, John of Gaunt's avatar remains separate and distinct from the narrator,

²⁸ Wimsatt, 'Chaucer and Deschamps' "Natural Music"', p. 133.

cordoned off socially and maybe, to a degree, emotionally; but that the emotion contained within the lyric, and which inspires the lyric's production in the first place is genuine and true is something not left to doubt.²⁹

And yet, these very qualities which make him distinct is also, I would suggest, something which draws the black knight closer not only to the narrator, but to any reader of his lyric. For the historical shift from the minstrel to the amateur courtly poet suggested by the black knight's songless lyric also denotes a transition from a literature of performance to a literature of participation. Lyric, crafted by amateurs and unsung, is something to participate and be involved with, something to pass around in physical booklets, to copy, edit, and share (as opposed to a sung performance one must listen to in silence).³⁰ In this world, lyric is delimited from a class of performers and made available to a much wider community, a community like John of Gaunt's social milieu — friends, relatives, colleagues, and underlings who would have found themselves participating in his actual, ritual-like commemorative activities for Blanche — or the broader literary-historical community, which included the likes of John Lydgate, Chaucer's self-styled, fifteenth-century literary successor.

²⁹ As Wimsatt observes, it was in fact 'only in the Renaissance that music generally was seen as directly representing ideas and embodying emotion'. See 'Chaucer and Deschamps' "Natural Music"', p. 134. That 'mimetic and expressive properties were not commonly attributed to music,' he explains, was an 'important consequence of [the] mathematical conception of music' (discussed earlier in this article).

³⁰ Boffey and Edwards in fact offer the provocative suggestion that the *Book of the Duchess* may once have circulated in its earliest appearance in fragile booklet form (likely lost due to the fragility of that unbound, unprotected medium). They point out that the *Book's* '1334 lines would probably have fitted, if a little snugly, into two eight-leaf quires or gatherings, constituting a short pamphlet of leaves. If it were bound it would have been likely to have only a vellum wrapper rather than boards, and its chances of long survival would have been limited'. See 'Codicology', p. 14. They follow this suggestion with the observation that Chaucer possibly 'circulated a number of his earlier works in this relatively fragile form, but none now survives outside the more protective form of a larger anthology.'

While I haven't the space to expand here on how Lydgate steps into the communal commemorative space opened by Chaucer's lyric, it's worth noting that in his imitative dream vision, *The Complaint of the Black Knight*, Lydgate's titular mourner performs his elegiac complaint annually; in his hands, that is, lyric performance and the associated acts of mourning and commemoration literally become ritualized — within the space of a single poem and across the broad sweep of literary history.

And so, in its songlessness, in its lack of colour, the lyric becomes a feeling, fertile vehicle for Chaucer's musing on not only on lyric and loss, but also on communal, participatory commemoration, and for his reflections on what it means to experience, reexperience, and record loss in lyric. Commemoration, like lyric, disrupts temporality in order to articulate simultaneous, overlapping presence and absence not permitted by a strictly linear concept of time. Acts of commemoration — particularly those with material instantiations, like medieval funeral monuments or legal provisions like chantry endowments — remind us of the former presence of departed loved ones in the process of acknowledging their present unavailability. Lyric, as we have seen, works in a similar way, disrupting both narrative and historical time in order to allow the grieving lyric subject imaginative space in which to re-member the lost beloved. The commemorative lyric, however, with its incorporation of a temporally-grounded, performance-centric, songless, perspectival material poetics, opens the lyric for occupation by multiple lyric subjects. The lyric's perspective becomes a perspective made to be shared.

It is perhaps for all of these reasons that the narrator struggles, early in the poem, to find the right words to categorize the black knight’s lyric. Because Chaucer means, with the lyric, to say something complicated and genuine about loss and to have it resonate — with readers, with John of Gaunt — the lyric must become the locus of sensory, sonic, temporal, and linguistic complications I have described. Just one of those complications is the sonic paradox encapsulated in the phrase ‘song [...] withoute song’ where this article began. It is with each new reading, with the making of each new record of its performance, that Chaucer’s ‘song...withoute song’ continues to resonate — in time and text, in manuscript and memory — and this is how, to this day, the *Book of the Duchess* persists in the commemorative project it first undertook some seven centuries ago.



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