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in the *Book of the Duchess*

ADIN ESTHER LEARS

At the opening of Chaucer's early dream vision, the *Book of the Duchess*, the narrator describes his insomnia and his general idle malaise:

I have so many an ydel thocht
Purely for defaute of slep
That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth.
All is ylyche good to me—
Joye or sorowe, wherso hyt be—
For I have felyng in nothyng.

(4–11)¹

The relentless negations in these lines—denials of action, thought, being, and feeling—emphasize the narrator's lack of productive intellectual or social influence and his emotional void. Yet “nothing” takes on an allegorical force as it “cometh or gooth” and as the narrator describes his “felyng in nothyng.” This allegory illogically suggests that the Dreamer finds something—a feeling—in nothing, a paradoxical notion that anticipates a deep

I would like to thank Nicholas Salvato and Samantha Zacher for their input on this article. I am especially grateful to Masha Raskolnikov and Andrew Galloway as well as the anonymous readers from *The Chaucer Review* for their careful readings and invaluable insights.

1. All quotations of Chaucer's works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

preoccupation throughout the poem with a making something from nothing, valuing passive as active, and finding productivity in idleness.²

Idleness is an important though little-studied aspect of medieval culture, as James Simpson has argued.³ Simpson articulates a literary principle of “idling” based on the repeated echoing of prior sources. In doing so, he suggests, a poem “enacts yet somehow resists the possibility of literary waste; it recycles even as it appears to waste.”⁴ In her book on medieval gossip, Susan Phillips takes up the issue of idleness much more extensively, making a case for the productive capacity of idle talk.⁵ Like both of these scholars, I am interested in idleness and its productive potential. I will integrate and expand on their work by approaching the subject of idleness with a particular focus on gender and sexuality. In doing so, I hope to illuminate a queer dimension to the notion of productive idleness by articulating a poetics of idling in Chaucer’s first dream vision.

The apparent passivity of the melancholic narrator has been a focus for many scholarly treatments of the poem influenced by queer theory and gender studies.⁶ Most notably, for my purposes, Steven Kruger argues that the Dreamer’s melancholia at the beginning of the poem works as a queering force, rendering him passive and effeminate. Kruger further suggests that it is through the Dreamer’s homosocial interaction with the Black

2. It has been well established that *BD*, 1–15, are closely modeled on lines 1–12 of Jean Froissart’s poem *Paradys d’amours* (Colin Wilcockson, notes to *BD*, in *Riverside*, 966–76, at 966). Chaucer’s version seems to diverge from Froissart’s opening lines in its emphasis on negation. Froissart’s negations are limited to only three instances of the word “ne” while Chaucer’s nine negations range from “ne” to “nought” to “nothing,” among others. Despite this difference, Froissart’s lines hint at a similar potential productivity to the narrator’s wakeful creative block. After expressing his disbelief that he is still alive despite his melancholic wakefulness, Froissart’s narrator explains, “Car bien sachiés que par vellier/Me viennent souvent travailler/Pensés et merancolies” (For it is well known that, by staying awake, thoughts and melancholy cause me to labor painfully; Jean Froissart, *Le Paradis D’Amour L’Orloge Amoureux*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski [Geneva, 1986], 40 [lines 5–7]). The verb “travaillier” is particularly interesting because of its dual connotations in Middle French. It can convey a tortured endurance, suffering, or a fight to save one’s own life—no doubt the primary meaning here. Yet it was also used to denote the pains of labor in childbirth. These meanings suggest a kind of nascent intellectual productivity to the pain of wakeful melancholy.

3. James Simpson, “The Economy of Involucrum: Idleness in *Reason and Sensuality*,” in Andrew Galloway and R. F. Yeager, eds., *Through a Classical Eye: Transcultural and Transhistorical Visions in Medieval English, Italian, and Latin Literature in Honor of Winthrop Wetherbee* (Toronto, 2009), 390–412.

4. Simpson, “The Economy,” 391.

5. Susan Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pa., 2007), 3.

6. See, for example, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992); and Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer’s Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto, 2006).

Knight within his dream that his melancholic state is corrected.⁷ While such treatments of the poem are valuable, I wonder why we must locate the poem's queer dynamic within a gender inversion, insisting on the equation of a male character's "passivity" with "femininity." I would like to move beyond this correlation by suggesting that neither "femininity" nor "queerness" must be passive. The Dreamer and the Black Knight mobilize their unproductive physical and mental states—their idleness—toward emotional and creative production. Instead of "being idle," they are "idling." This active participial form inscribes a measure of activity into the apparent stagnancy of their idleness.

The *Book of the Duchess* emphasizes idleness at three levels. First, Chaucer thematizes it by highlighting how the Dreamer's *melancholia* prevents him from writing poetry, rendering his languor akin to a particularly humanist brand of melancholy: *acedia*, or intellectual and creative torpor. Yet at the end of the poem, as the Dreamer returns to his pen, prompted by his marvelous dream, the melancholic state that has produced his dream is reinscribed as productive. In the figure of the Black Knight, the Dreamer's idleness is extended and magnified, as the Knight's despair at the loss of his wife approaches a kind of spiritual sloth, or *acedia*. The Dreamer's intervention into the Black Knight's melancholy introduces another idle mode in the poem—one that emerges at the level of narrative and discourse. As R. A. Shoaf has demonstrated, the Dreamer acts as a kind of secular confessor to the Black Knight, probing him about his dead lover in a strategy that resembles the questions of a priest taking confession.⁸ However, several scholars have pointed out that the intimate personal detail required for confession renders it dangerously close to that most maligned form of "idle talk"—gossip.⁹ At the same time that the Dreamer acts as a secular confessor to the Black Knight, their conversation also resembles gossip. Yet their idle talk is not passive or unproductive. The confessional, gabby, discursive resonances of the men's verbal exchange elevate the intimacy between the Dreamer and the Black Knight, allowing for the partial consolation of an intimate or queer friendship. This dynamic undermines Kruger's point that their homosocial interaction acts

7. Steven Kruger, "Medical and Moral Authority in the Late Medieval Dream," in Peter Brown, ed., *Reading Dreams: Interpreting Dreams From Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1999), 51–83.

8. R. A. Shoaf, "'Mutatio Amoris': 'Penitentia' and the Form of *The Book of the Duchess*," *Genre* 14 (1981): 163–89.

9. Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia, 1999). See also Phillips, *Transforming Talk*.

as a corrective force.¹⁰ Finally, Chaucer's poetics of idling emerges at the level of poetic form, as the poem ends by rearticulating its own origin. Despite this regressive movement, which imitates an idle mechanism in its deceptive lack of progression or movement forward, the poem gestures outward to Chaucer's future poetic corpus in a way that renders the poem's idle circular structure an active force.

The *Book of the Duchess* offers an early example in an English literary tradition of texts that depict men being idle in an intimate or homoerotic way.¹¹ Such an association highlights the lack of social productivity—and biological reproductivity—in queer relationships, a point that has recently become the focus of a particular strand of queer theory espoused by Lee Edelman and others, known as the “antisocial thesis.”¹² Edelman points to the violence of “reproductive futurism,” that is, the social and political emphasis on reproduction, the child, and the future.¹³ In making this important claim, Edelman nihilistically identifies the “death drive” as a queer imperative. In contrast, I would like to show how the queer

10. By invoking “queer friendship” here, I do not mean to imply a sexual relationship between the Dreamer and the Black Knight, nor do I wish to place them within the kind of lineage of gay history undertaken by scholars such as John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, 1980). Rather, I mean here to emphasize the erotic, and even more the intimate, as separate from the sexual, but nevertheless still distinct from a strictly platonic relationship between men. In other words, on a continuum of sexuality, “queer friendship” lies somewhere in between same-sex friendship and same-sex romantic love that is consummated physically. In making this distinction, I am guided by the work of Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, 2007). For more on the homosocial and the homoerotic between men in the Middle Ages, see Richard Zeikowitz, *Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century* (New York, 2003).

11. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this claim in depth, it is worth pointing out how idle dialogue and the homoerotic go hand in hand in later English literature. Consider, for example, the languid and intimate conversation between men in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins's short story “The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices,” or Oscar Wilde's “remarks upon the importance of doing nothing” and “remarks upon the importance of discussing everything” in his critical dialogue “The Critic as Artist,” in which two men discuss the nature of art and beauty with seductive and sensual language. See Charles Dickens, *Reprinted Pieces and The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (New York, 1896), 309–408; and Richard Ellmann, ed., *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York, 1968), 341–408. For more on queer idling in a modern context, see Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London, 2003). I am indebted to Nicholas Salvato for pointing to the homosocial tenor of idling in later literature.

12. For more on the importance of the “antisocial thesis” to queer theory, see Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, “Introduction,” in Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, eds., *After Sex: On Writing Since Queer Theory* (Durham, N.C., 2011) 1–14, at 9–11.

13. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, N.C., 2004), 3 and passim.

friendship in the *Book of the Duchess* is invested, in its emotional and poetic productivity, in the future. My reading renders queer idleness an active, productive force, and so aligns with queer theorists like Eve Sedgwick, who sees *queer* as “a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*.”¹⁴ The *Book of the Duchess* is doubly queer as the intimacy cultivated between men is heightened and as the poem renders idleness into idling—an irrepressible cycle of production.

The *Book of the Duchess*'s focus on illness and grief highlights both the Dreamer's and the Black Knight's idle or unproductive conditions and enables their conversation to function as recuperative idle talk. The Dreamer's complicated gender is evident from the outset of the poem, as are the physical and spiritual conditions that inform his dream. Chaucer's narrator emphasizes the Dreamer's physical and psychological infirmity, telling us, “I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;/I have so many an ydel thoght” (3–4). He stresses his overactive imagination, asserting that his dazed languor is a result of “sorwful ymagynacioun” (14) and specifying that he suffers from “melancolye” (23). Moreover, the narrator's illness renders him “a mased thyng” (12), passive and impotent. The narrator tells us that his sickness and insomnia are “agaynes kynde” (16), a phrase that, as Kruger points out, would strongly resonate with moralizing rhetoric focused on sexual behavior *contra naturam*.¹⁵

The nuance contained in the notion of the “ydel thoughts” that the Dreamer identifies in line 4 is worth examining in greater detail. The word *idel* and its variants in Middle English carry associations of laziness, worthlessness, emptiness, and lack of productivity.¹⁶ The Dreamer's idle thoughts underscore his overactive imagination. This emphasis on idleness hints at the nature of the Dreamer's melancholic condition. The word suggests that the Dreamer has no outlet for his lively fantasies. His transgression is not the medieval sin of *acedia*, a temptation that incites flight from spiritual exercises and ultimately produces alienation from God and despair. This spiritual condition emerges later when the Black Knight's malady begins to resemble religious despondency. Instead, the Dreamer's melancholy bears a likeness to the more broadly philosophical Petrarchan concept of *accidia*: the melancholic inhibition of creative production

14. Eve Sedgwick, “Foreword,” in her *Tendencies* (New York, 1994) xi–xvi, at xii.

15. Kruger, “Medical and Moral Authority,” 77.

16. *MED*, s.v. *idel* (adj.).

brought on by despair in the human condition.¹⁷ Furthermore, Middle English notions of idleness shifted semantically between intellectual production and biological reproduction. In his *Confessio Amantis*, for example, John Gower uses the word to refer to fallow land: “And ek the lond is so honeste/That it is plenteuous and plein,/Ther is non ydel ground in vein” (7930–32).¹⁸ Though many of the references to idleness denoting physical reproduction refer to land, the word’s association with stopped or blocked fertility gives us greater insight into the nature of the Dreamer’s ailment. Combining with his melancholic physicality, the Dreamer’s idleness separates him from the imperative norm of production.¹⁹

The Black Knight’s depleted vitality echoes that of the Dreamer. Reflecting the narrator’s assertion that he is “Alway in poynt to falle a-doun” (13), the Black Knight feels “Hys sorwful hert gan faste faynte” (488). Chaucer zeroes in with minute precision on the physiology of the Knight’s swoon:

The blood was fled for pure drede
 Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm—
 For wel hyt feled the herte had harm—
 To wite eke why hyt was adrad
 By kynde, and for to make hyt glad,
 For hyt ys membre principal
 Of the body; and that made al
 Hys hewe chaunge and wexe grene
 And pale, for ther noo blood ys sene
 In no maner lym of hys.

(490–99)

17. Medieval understandings of sloth are numerous and varied. Sigfried Wenzel traces the transformation in attitudes toward sloth or melancholy from a deadly sin in the Middle Ages to a more valorized “noble vice” in the early modern and romantic periods, noting Petrarch’s crucial position as a transitional figure between the two attitudes. See Siegfried Wenzel, “Petrarch’s *Accidia*,” *Studies in the Renaissance* 8 (1961): 36–48. He articulates this transition more fully in his book *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Durham, N.C., 1967). Though I risk generalizing about the difference between *accidia* and *acedia* here, it is not my aim to locate *BD* within Wenzel’s genealogy. By invoking the two different forms here, I mean to emphasize the different but related positions of the Dreamer and the Black Knight, and to suggest an impetus for the Dreamer’s later adoption of the role of confessor for the Black Knight.

18. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, 2003–6), 3:285.

19. Chaucer’s descriptions of Alcyone, the lovesick and mournful female figure in the Dreamer’s book, draw parallels with the Dreamer, underscoring his troublesome gender identity. Alcyone’s swoons, for example, recall the narrator’s assertion that he is “Alway in poynt to falle a-doun” (13). More pointedly, she too is a figure with reproductive potential that is wasted by her grief and lovesickness. Alcyone is, according to the narrator, “The beste that mighte bere lyf” (64), an odd allusion to her place within a reproductive economy that seems unrelated to the rest of her story. This unexpected momentary stress on her wasted (re)productivity highlights her parallelism with the Dreamer. Alcyone and the Dreamer both hold great capacity for generation—his intellectual, hers physical—yet the *melancholia* that the two share renders each sterile.

Chaucer's detailed attention to the internal flux of the Black Knight's body reinforces the moist humoral associations accompanying melancholia and ties his experience to the Dreamer's.²⁰ His interior currents seem to feed into his flood of words, as if his "complaynte" (487) were merely another form of fluid in his body's fungible economy of humors.²¹ The precise description of anatomy recalls Chaucer's account of the death of Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*, positioning the Black Knight almost at the point of death. Chaucer's assertion that the Black Knight's face is "Ful pitous pale and nothyng red" (470) anticipates an earlier description of the dead body of Seys "That lyeth ful pale and nothyng rody" (143), increasing the urgency of his predicament. The Dreamer's physical infirmity pales—so to speak—in comparison to the Black Knight's sickness.

It soon becomes clear that in spiritual terms, too, the Black Knight is in peril. As we recall Chaucer's characterization of the Dreamer's malady as non-creative humanist melancholia, we may begin to read the Black Knight's illness as another form of melancholia—one spiritual rather than intellectual in nature. While the Dreamer's melancholia is Petrarchan, the Black Knight's malady is more elusive. To be sure, it is easily characterized as lovesickness, yet other clues provide a more nuanced reading. Though the "compleynt" the Black Knight utters just before he meets the Dreamer is short and uninspired, its existence suggests that he does not suffer from stunted creativity in the way the Dreamer does. Instead, the Black Knight's grief has reached the point of despair: he fails to imagine solace from anyone or anything. Without hope, the Black Knight laments,

"No man may my sorwe glade,
That maketh my hewe to falle and fade,
And hath myn understondynge lorn
That me ys wo that I was born!
May noght make my sorwes slyde,
Nought al the remedyes of Ovide,
Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,

20. For more on the links among sloth, melancholy, and the humors, see Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth*, 191–94 (the appendix "Acedia and the Humors"). These pages document instances throughout medieval literature where sloth is associated with humors—in particular phlegm, the cold wet humor. This association is helpful in making the connection between sloth and *melancholia* and between *melancholia* and femininity, which was associated with the cold and wet pole of the humoral continuum.

21. Thomas Lacqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). Lacqueur uses the term "fungibility" in describing medieval medical theories of humoral flux.

Ne Dedalus with his playes slye;
 Ne hele me may no phisicien,
 Noght Ypocras ne Galyen;
 Me ys wo that I lyve houres twelve.”

(563–73)

Reflecting the Dreamer's negating lament at the poem's start, the Black Knight's list of failed sources for consolation includes ancient authors, mythical figures, and physicians. Nowhere does he imagine spiritual comfort from God or pastoral care from a priest through the sacrament of confession. In this, the Black Knight is guilty of *acedia*. The Dreamer's cryptic remark to the Black Knight later in the poem, "Me thynketh ye have such a chaunce/As shryfte wythoute repentaunce" (1113–14), reflects the latter's failure to understand the gravity of his spiritual circumstances. His inability to imagine comfort from God suggests a refusal of orthodox religiosity. Physically and spiritually, the Black Knight is in worse condition than the Dreamer. This imbalance requires the Dreamer to adopt the role of intercessory caretaker, spiritual physician, and confessor for the Black Knight.²²

By introducing confession as a discursive mode, Chaucer engages with one of the central spiritual concerns of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the practice of confession rose in influence in the late Middle Ages, beginning in 1215 with the Fourth Lateran Council's Canon twenty-one, *Omnis utriusque sexus*. By the late fourteenth century, the courtly culture of which Chaucer was a part stressed the fundamental importance of personal confession.²³ Further, the practice and discourse of confession powerfully influenced both the structure and content of late medieval vernacular literature in works by Chaucer and his contemporaries.²⁴

As Shoaf has demonstrated, the Dreamer's questioning of the Black Knight illustrates the *circumstantiae peccati* model of confessional questioning. This model is concerned with eliciting a broad picture of the circumstances surrounding a sin so that the penitent might achieve a more thorough confession. The seven interrogatives designed to promote the more perfect confession

22. In *BD* Chaucer primarily deploys confession as a mode of speech between the Dreamer and the Black Knight. In doing so, he endows an unlikely figure—the Dreamer—with unauthorized power. This reading complicates the widespread scholarly tendency to dismiss Chaucer's Dreamer as dull-witted and almost willfully obtuse with respect to the Black Knight's delicate discussion of his dead lady. See Shoaf, "Mutatio Amoris," 176; and Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 86.

23. Jeremy Catto, "Religion and the English Nobility in the Later Fourteenth Century," in Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden, eds., *History and Imagination: Essays in Honor of H. R. Trevor-Roper* (New York, 1982), 43–55.

24. Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (Rutherford, N.J., 1983).

were “*Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando*” (who, what, where, with whose help, why, in what manner, when). After the Black Knight’s diatribe against Fortune, the Dreamer probes him for more information, saying,

“Good sir, telle me al hooly
In what wyse, how, why, and wherfore
That ye have thus youre blysse lore.”

(746–48)

Though the Black Knight’s monologues dominate the interaction between the two men, the Dreamer subtly prods the Black Knight for more detail. After the Black Knight has waxed on for over three hundred lines about his first encounter with Lady Whyte, the Dreamer gently urges him to continue with his story, adding more pointed and probing questions in order to achieve a more complete confession:

“Ye han wel told me herebefore;
Hyt ys no need to reherse it more,
How ye sawe hir first, and where.
But wolde ye tel me *the manere*
To hire which was your firste speche—
Therof I wolde yow beseche—
And *how* she knewe first your thoght,
Whether ye loved hir or noght?”

(1127–34; emphasis added)

The Dreamer’s command to the Black Knight—“telle me alle” (1143)—demonstrates one facet of a confessional rhetorical model underlying the discourse between them.

Extending this confessional model, the Dreamer fashions himself a healer of the Black Knight’s bruised soul. The concept of confession as psycho-somatic “cure” for sin was commonplace after the Fourth Lateran Council, and certainly was known by Chaucer’s contemporaries.²⁵ As spiritual

25. Henry of Lancaster, the first duke of Lancaster as well as prominent diplomat and army leader during the Hundred Years’ War, wrote a small volume on confession called the *Livre de seyntz medecines* (*The Book of Holy Medicine*). The *Livre* consists of a series of confessions in the form of a prayer. Fashioned meticulously around the symbol indicated by the title, the *Livre* describes the penitent whose sins are like mortal wounds, and his quest for the help of the divine Physician through the “cure” of confession. Lancaster, who died of the plague in March 1361, was the father of Blanche of Lancaster, whose death *BD* ostensibly commemorates. The *Livre* would have been a fitting influence for a poem in honor of Blanche. See Henry of Lancaster, *Le Livre de seyntz medecines: The Unpublished Devotional Treatise*, ed. Emile-Jules-François Arnould (Oxford, 1940).

physician, the confessor's responsibility was to heal the sinner's soul rather than expose the sickness and punish the sinner.²⁶ The *Book of the Duchess* invokes the confessor-physician in a suggestive manner. After apologizing for interrupting the Black Knight's solitude, the Dreamer invites the Knight to speak at greater length about his sorrows, saying,

“Me thynketh in gret sorowe I yow see;
 But certes, sire, yif that yee
 Wolde ought discure me youre woo,
 I wolde, as wys God helpe me soo,
 Amende hyt, yif I kan or may.
 Ye mowe preve hyt be assay;
 For, by my trouthe, to make yow hool
 I wol do al my power hool.”

(547–54)

Chaucer's *rime riche* with the word *hool* in variant modes—adjectivally as “healthy” to describe the Black Knight in recovery, adverbially as “wholly” to describe the strength of the Dreamer's intended action—links the two men from the outset in intimate association with each other.

The confessional undertones between the Dreamer and the Black Knight underscore the intimacy of their bond. Although systems of private penance existed throughout most of Europe from the sixth century onward, in Karma Lochrie's words, the Fourth Lateran Council “constellate[d] the act [of confession] around the notion of secrecy.”²⁷ This secrecy reinforced the intimacy forged between confessor and sinner. Indeed, as Michel Foucault argues, the “*scientia sexualis*” created in modern technologies of confession was a form of *ars erotica*. In his words:

We have . . . invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.²⁸

26. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 26.

27. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 27.

28. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (New York, 1990), 71.

Foucault's definition has the effect of characterizing the Middle Ages as a time of free and natural sexual expression, "before confessional discourse had its way with sex."²⁹ Yet as we have seen, confession was a well-established practice in Chaucer's time. Foucault's observations on the pleasures of confession are equally applicable to the confessional discourse in the *Book of the Duchess*.

Indeed, the poem invites us to extend Foucault's point as it reminds us of the continuity between the roles of confessor and lover as two kinds of metaphorical healer. The trope of the beloved lady as physician for the lovesick lover was fairly commonplace in the medieval rhetoric of courtly love, as the Black Knight demonstrates when he refers to Whyte as "my lyves leche" (920). The slippage between tropes—pastoral-physician and beloved-physician—points to a conflation of the two roles, adding a distinctly erotic hint to the Dreamer's position as confessor. By characterizing himself as a healer, the Dreamer attempts to erase the Black Knight's perception of his mistress and love as physician, and to deposit himself in her place, inhabiting a position charged with erotic undercurrents. This reading reinforces the queer valences of his friendship with the Black Knight, complicating Kruger's argument that the Dreamer undergoes a physical and moral correction as a result of his dream vision. The confessional associations in the men's conversation highlight and deepen the intimacy forged between them.

At the same time, the level of intimate emotional detail achieved in the Black Knight's confession is suggestive of another mechanism of communication, one that also works to fortify their queer friendship: namely, gossip. As I am suggesting here, along with several scholars, confession and gossip are related. Both modes of discourse are irrepressible, spilling outward and spreading, even as they insist on containment and secrecy.³⁰ A fine line exists between authorized and unauthorized speech; each may slip easily and dangerously into the other. As Phillips demonstrates, the detailed penitential narratives demanded of parishioners in their confessions are remarkably similar to idle talk. Like the confessor and the lover, the gossip or "sibling in God" was figured as a healer capable of spiritual and emotional solace.³¹ But there was a key difference. Confession was a practice sanctioned by all manner of social and political authorities in the Middle Ages. Gossip was not.

29. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 23.

30. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*.

31. See Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, 139, for a discussion of this figure in fifteenth-century Scots poet William Dunbar's *Tretis of the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*. Phillips points to the correlation between the role of gossip and the role of confessor, but does not note how the notion of "medicinal" benefit extends to the role of lover as well. This threefold correlation points to a provocative gap that suggests the potential for homoerotic bonds between gossips.

At a crucial moment near the end of his lament for Whyte, the Black Knight seems to express self-consciousness about the idle and unproductive nature of his speech. Asserting his undying love for his lost wife, he says to the narrator, “Nay, trewly, I gabbe now” (1075). The verb *gabben* in Middle English often meant to speak foolishly, deceitfully, or nonsensically, much like the medieval verbs denoting gossip: *janglen*, *bakbitten*, and *clateren*.³² The Black Knight’s use of “gabbe” in this context suggests that it is futile to talk of loving his lady forever because she dead. But the word additionally points to a latent anxiety on his part that his prolonged monologues and interaction with the Dreamer is unmasculine or unorthodox in other ways. Despite this anxiety, the Black Knight continues talking for over two hundred more lines. The prolongation of his speech suggests that the Black Knight discounts his anxiety and embraces idle talk.

The sociolinguistic particulars of their interaction reinforce the intimacy and queer valence of the dialogue between the Dreamer and the Black Knight. Their conversation resonates with the gossipy modes of “bitching” and “chatting,” according to the categories delineated by Deborah Jones.³³ Jones defines *bitching* as cathartic complaint about any dissatisfaction in a woman’s life. Prompted by the Dreamer’s concern and probing questions, the Black Knight’s long monologues praising Whyte and railing against Fortune are cathartic, helping him to overcome his grief. To be sure, the Black Knight bitches about Fortune, condemning her insidious treachery and duplicity, sputtering, “She ys fals, and ever laughynge/With oon eye, and that other wepynge” (633–34). He goes on to liken her to a “scorpioun,” that “fals, flaterynge beste” (636–37). Yet his discourse also diverges from bitching, adopting a more positive resonance that reinforces the Dreamer’s affective response. Many of the associations surrounding gossip—both in the Middle Ages and today—emphasize its tendency toward malicious cruelty. The Middle English verb *bakbitten*, like its modern English equivalent, highlights this connotation. Still, the Black Knight’s laudatory descriptions of Whyte are far from cruel; he spends the majority of his time praising his lady. In undergirding his discourse with positive, if melancholy, emotions in addition to his malicious feelings toward Fortune, the Black Knight strengthens the cathartic effect of his speech and the intimacy of the bond he forms with the Dreamer.

32. Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 68. Lochrie’s discussion of the Middle English verbs for gossip does not include *gabben*, but it is helpful for comparison.

33. Deborah Jones, “Gossip: Notes on Women’s Oral Culture,” in Deborah Cameron, ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (New York, 1990), 242–50 (reprinted from *Women’s Studies International Quarterly* 3 [1980]: 193–98).

Like bitching, “chatting” is a highly intimate form of gossip. According to Jones, it involves mutual self-disclosure about issues or concerns in a woman’s life. Although the Dreamer never reveals any of his own troubles at length, there is an element of cooperation and exchange in the Dreamer’s consistent and engaged responses, rendering the conversation between the two men close to the chatting that Jones describes. Jennifer Coates emphasizes this idea of reciprocal exchange, paying particular attention to “simultaneous speech” in conversations among women. Such chatting occurs when a main speaker is telling a story, and a second speaker interjects with a question or comment related to the first speaker’s story. Coates stresses that, far from being a competitive drive to acquire control, as other linguists have suggested, women’s interruptions can be characterized as an “overlap-as-enthusiasm” strategy.³⁴ When these enthusiastic verbal interventions take place in private, outside of public domains where interruption is a strategy for gaining control of the audience’s attention, this form of simultaneous speech is cooperative: “the way in which women speakers work together to produce shared meanings.”³⁵ As I have shown, following Shoaf, the Dreamer often interjects comments and questions into the Black Knight’s speech, aiming to draw him out and promote a more thorough confession of his thoughts and emotions. These interruptions fit Coates’s characterization of cooperative female speech and serve to underscore the intimacy of the discourse between the Dreamer and the Black Knight.

Coates also broadens Jones’s assertion that the topic of women’s discussion centers on their relations to men as wives, girlfriends, and mothers, arguing that all-female groups tend to discuss “people and feelings,” in contrast to a male inclination to talk about “things.” The catalyst for the Black Knight’s speech and his initial reason for talking to the Dreamer is his *sorwe*. Indeed, the word and its variants emerge nine times in the space of the first thirty-seven lines spoken by the Black Knight to the Dreamer. Other words such as *wo* and *pitee* also occur, adding to our understanding of the Knight’s preoccupation with feeling. The word *sorwe* increases in frequency in this speech, occurring six times within the last seven lines and culminating with the Black Knight’s assertion that “y am sorwe and sorwe ys y” (597). Here, the Black Knight is so preoccupied with his *sorwe* that, to quote Richard Rambuss, he

34. Jennifer Coates, “Gossip Revisited: Language in all Female Groups,” in Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron, eds., *Women in Their Speech Communities: New Perspectives on Language and Sex* (New York, 1988), 108.

35. Coates, “Gossip Revisited,” 113.

has reduced his own identity to “a chiastic personification of it.”³⁶ The Black Knight’s emphasis on his sorrow, and later on exhaustively describing his lady Whyte, points toward a gossip-adjacent form of discourse that is consistent with the elegiac mode of the poem.

Though both Jones and Coates provide helpful accounts of gossip, their gender-essentialism introduces a red herring—the incomplete notion that gossip is “women’s talk.” The fact that the Dreamer and the Black Knight are engaging in gossip or a discourse that resembles gossip does not feminize them or contribute to their queerness by rendering them “like women.” Despite the trend of scholarship that has identified gossip as a discourse of resistance that thrives among marginalized groups, gossip was ubiquitous in the Middle Ages, flourishing among men and women alike.³⁷ Yet to claim that, because of this ubiquity, it is not a form of marginalized discourse is mistaken. Gossip was *unauthorized* speech, considered dangerous and unproductive by clerical authorities. Rather than marginalizing the Dreamer and the Black Knight by figuring them as effeminate, gossip does its queer work through its transgressive associations with idleness and through the intimacy it promotes between the two men. Despite their idleness, this intimacy suggests the productive potential of idle talk. It points to the way that their queer friendship simultaneously redeems them and resists consolation or correction for their melancholic states. Confession is, after all, never final. Because error is built into the human condition, confession is forever necessary. The Dreamer’s reference to the Knight’s “shryfte wythoute repentaunce” (1114; emphasis added) ensures his return to confession. Gossip, too, is self-sustaining and eternal.³⁸ While their friendship is redemptive, these mechanisms of circular and self-perpetuating speech serve to confirm the infinite continuation of idleness and unorthodox sexuality in the Black Knight and the Dreamer.

36. Richard Rambuss, “‘Processe of Tyme’: History, Consolation, and Apocalypse in the *Book of the Duchess*,” *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 659–83, at 675.

37. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York, 1985). Spacks’s work initiates a tradition of scholarship that emphasizes gossip as a discourse of resistance. In response to this strand of scholarship, Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, attempts to recover gossip from its status as a marginalized discourse, showing how utterly commonplace it was as a discursive and literary mode.

38. Chaucer gestures toward the endless productive machinery of gossip in *HF*, where he likens the mechanism of speech to the appearance of water disturbed by a stone: “Throwe on water now a stoon,/Wel wost thou hyt wol make anon/A litel roundell as a sercle,/Paraunter brod as a covercle;/And ryght anon thou shalt see wel/That whel wol cause another whel,/And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,/Every sercle causynge other/ . . . /And ryght thus every word, ywys,/ That lowd or pryvee spoken ys,/Moveth first an ayr aboute,/And of thys movynge, out of doute,/ Another ayr anon ys meved” (789–96, 809–13). With a similar rippling effect, sound refracts and multiplies endlessly through the House of Fame and the hum of rumor “encres[es] ever moo” (2077).

The end of the poem extends this paradoxical condition as it offers an ambiguous partial consolation for the Black Knight. Abandoning the elevated language he has used throughout the poem to address his love for Whyte, the Black Knight concludes starkly, “She ys ded” (1309), to which the Dreamer offers feebly, “Be God, hyt ys routhe” (1310). This barren exchange marks the end of the Knight’s conversation with the Dreamer. He rides away toward his “long castel with walles white” (1318). The phrase also shifts the Black Knight’s rhetoric from a high courtly style to a more direct vernacular idiom. In Shoaf’s view, this bald statement constitutes the Black Knight’s consolation, as if his confession—and gossip—had completed its job. Yet it is difficult to imagine how the Dreamer’s response might offer any solace to the Black Knight. This apparent absence of consolation for the Knight suggests an idle lack of progress in the poem as a whole.

Indeed, the poem’s apparent failure to move forward is shown at the formal level of language in the last few lines. Seamlessly moving from the dream narrative back into the waking world, the Dreamer comments on his marvelous dream:

Thoghte I, “Thys ys so queynt a sweven
 That I wol, be processe of tyme,
 Fonde to putte this sweven in ryme
 As I kan best, and that anoon.”
 This was my sweven; now hit ys doon.

(1330–34)

These final lines circle back to the beginning, rearticulating the origin of the poem. Chaucer’s use of “wol”—a word that was semiotically unstable around the late fourteenth century as it shifted from an expression of “wish” or “desire” (from the Old English *willan*) to the simple future “will”—is telling. It points to a deliberate manipulation of syntax so that Chaucer might include three separate verb tenses in the final few lines: future (*wol*), past (*was*), and present (*ys*). The Dreamer’s characterization of his dream as “queynt” reinforces the circular movement conveyed in these shifting tenses. The Middle English word *queint* could mean “strange, unusual, marvelous, or peculiar”—undoubtedly the primary meaning of the word in this context. Yet the word also carried connotations of craft or skill. The expression *queinte of gin* could mean “ingenious” or “skillful and able.” *Queinte wordes* often meant “ingeniously made or skillfully wrought language.”³⁹ Chaucer himself uses the

39. *MED*, s.v. *queint* (adj.).

word several times in his corpus to emphasize artificiality and craftsmanship. The house of Rumor is “queyntelych ywrought” (1923); its elaborate gyrations, too, are “queynte” (1925). In the *Miller’s Tale*, the word underscores ingenuity of argument “As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte” (I 3275). And in the *Squire’s Tale* “queynte” refers to the optical illusions described by Aristotle (V 234). To characterize his dream as “queynte,” then, combines with Chaucer’s strange manipulation of tenses to suggest that the dream he has just reported has already been written down. The circular formation at the end of the poem seems to go nowhere, condemning the Black Knight, the Dreamer, and the reader to an endless reiteration of this tale of melancholy and grief.

Despite its regressive, idling structure, the poem imagines a future, suggesting the productive potential of queer affinities. As his dream inspires his poetry, the Dreamer’s idle melancholia is reassigned productive value. Without the dream produced by the Dreamer’s melancholic state of mind, the poem would not have come into being. In this metapoetic gesture of self-authorization, the poem anticipates Chaucer’s future literary production, positioning the *Book of the Duchess* in a foundational place within his body of work. Except for his translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Book of the Duchess* was Chaucer’s first major work in English. To some, the poem may appear highly derivative of earlier French work by French courtly writers, such as the *Rose* authors Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, as well as Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart. Yet Chaucer made elaborations and innovations in the *Book of the Duchess* that mark the beginning of his prolific and creative poetic career—one of the first to elevate the English language to an equivalent level of prestige as French, heretofore the dominant written language at court.⁴⁰ Despite its circularity, the poem gestures outward toward unremitting invention in a way that resonates with Sedgwick’s notion of queerness as “inextinguishable.”⁴¹ In their generative circularity, the last few lines of Chaucer’s early poem complete and set off his poetics of idling: his preoccupation with making something from nothing and with the productive potential of idleness.

The role of idleness—in particular, idle talk—in shaping Chaucer’s literary production in the *Book of the Duchess* anticipates the poet’s interest in spoken discourse in his next major dream poem, the *House of Fame*. This work, in which the poet’s dreamer-avatar travels to the houses of Fame and Rumor, might be said to be chiefly concerned with making something from

40. Pearsall, *The Life*, 64–68.

41. Sedgwick, “Foreword,” xii.

nothing, as it stresses the physical materiality of sound, constructs auditory architectures, and explains the phenomenon in terms of “lyghted smoke” and “air ybroke” (769–70). Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the influence of oral/aural modes on Chaucer’s literary production without acknowledging the place of Chaucer’s first vernacular poem in relation to these mechanisms.⁴² The *Book of the Duchess* shows that Chaucer’s preoccupation with speaking and listening extends further back than scholars have previously acknowledged, and it reinforces the foundational role of gossip and other idle “noise” in Chaucer’s poetic canon. While this emphasis on the value of apparently worthless speech seems contradictory, even perverse, the paradoxical figures that make up Chaucer’s poetics of idling marvelously render passive into active, idle into creative, and, finally, suggest a queer way to make something from nothing.

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42. In addition to Phillips, *Transforming Talk*, see Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer’s Talking Birds* (New York, 2011).