

# Historical context: the black knight



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Most of Chaucer's works contain references to famous historical, classical, and mythical figures. This trend holds true in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. Most strikingly, *The Black Knight* plays a hefty role in the story. Because of the character's emotional state as well as his personal connection with Chaucer, *The Black Knight* proves an intriguing character in Chaucerian studies. By examining the historical context of *The Black Knight*, the reader better understands Chaucer's purpose for writing the story, while also allowing for close analysis of allusions made within the text. In order to examine the historical context of the *Black Knight*, one must know to whom Chaucer refers in that allusion. It is widely asserted that Chaucer intends the audience to know that *The Black Knight* is John of Gaunt, "the third son of King Edward III and King Philippa" (Rossignol 192). During his lifetime, which spanned 1340 through 1399, John of Gaunt was Earl of Richmond and the Duke of Lancaster (Dictionary of the Middle Ages 7: 134). Due to his high social status, it is evident that John of Gaunt was a well-known figure during Chaucer's time. According to the Dictionary of the Middle Ages, John of Gaunt was "England's leading Magnate," after his marriage to Blanche of Lancaster (7: 135). Likewise, "in the 1370s John played a major role in the affairs of England," though he lost popularity later in his life due to his support of John Wyclif (7: 135). After Blanche's death, John eventually remarried twice more, finally marrying his mistress, Katherine Swynford, which made John the brother-in-law of Geoffrey Chaucer (7: 135). It is clear that John of Gaunt was not only a well-known figure to Chaucer's readers, but also to Chaucer himself. Though it is evident that Chaucer was aware of basic facts (and possibly more) of John's life, it is pertinent to examine how and why Chaucer includes the *Black Knight* in his *Book of the Duchess*.

Chaucer includes John of Gaunt as The Black Knight in an effort to turn the tables on the traditional dream vision. The dreamer encounters The Black Knight in his dream. During his dream, he becomes “war of a man in blak” who is extremely lovesick (lines 445-470). Whereas a typical dream vision would include the dreamer seeking guidance from a guide he encounters on his journey, Chaucer uses the lovesick Black Knight character as a twist on the guide who, in *The Book of the Duchess*, receives counseling from the dreamer himself. Throughout the work, the Black Knight speaks of his lady Blanche, who most scholars assume to be Blanche of Lancaster, John’s first wife. Because the whole story revolves around the knight’s lovesickness caused by the loss of Blanche, most acknowledge that Chaucer wrote the story for John in honor of Blanche of Lancaster “who died in September of 1368” (*Dictionary of Middle Ages 3*: 281). Many people also assert that Chaucer did not write the story immediately following the death of the duchess, but instead wrote the work “for one of the later and highly elaborate annual commemoration services” created by John in memoriam of his first wife (Benson 329). By allowing The Black Knight to tell of his love for Blanche, Chaucer commemorates not just Blanche’s life but also the love between Blanche and John. Because Chaucer wrote the work with John of Gaunt as the intended audience, an extremely influential man during Chaucer’s life, it is a possibility that Chaucer also wrote this first major work in an effort to get his foot into the door of the literary world of the time. In *Chaucer A to Z*, Rosalyn Rossignol asserts that “*The Book of the Duchess* is generally acknowledged to be the earliest of Chaucer’s major poems” (48). Additionally, others have cited the creation of the work as the force behind John’s encouragement of Chaucer: “Though the duke was not...a man of...

great sensitivity, his subsequent benefactions to Geoffrey and Philippa Chaucer suggest that he approved of the poem honoring his late wife" (Dictionary of the Middle Ages 3: 282). Clearly Chaucer's career benefited from the creation and popularity of this early work. Though lines can be drawn between John of Gaunt and Chaucer (as well as Chaucer's success), it is pertinent to also acknowledge the consequences of these assertions. How do these assertions affect the manner in which readers encounter the work? For some, the argument that the story is strictly a eulogy of Blanche for John prompts individuals to read the text at an even closer level in an attempt to prove the fallacy of this assertion. For example, in his article "Chaucer's Black Knight," Samuel Schoenbaum argues that the death of Blanche served simply as a "inspiration" for a story about a "profoundly human experience," rather viewing the Black Knight as a direct characterization of John of Gaunt. He bases his argument on a discrepancy between the age of Chaucer's Black Knight and the actual age of the John of Gaunt at the time of Blanche's death (121-122). Sparked by the comparisons made between The Black Knight and John of Gaunt, Schoenbaum reads the text in an effort to disprove the argument. Additionally, the knowledge that the Black Knight was a real person and that the intended audience of the poem was John of Gaunt affects the reader in that it raises more questions and leads to a deeper analysis of Chaucer's methods. For example, because John of Gaunt would have been a beneficial individual to have as a fan of one's work, readers can examine how Chaucer uses the work to demonstrate his various abilities. This explains why Chaucer plays around with the conventional dream vision, alludes to many classical and biblical figures, and exhibits skill in using traditional romantic techniques such the blason while also adding

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his own flare, which is evident in his description of Blanche (lines 848-1043). It is not mere coincidence that Chaucer's first major work focuses on the romance of John of Gaunt, one of the most influential English men of Chaucer's time. Chaucer ingeniously employs The Black Knight character to portray John of Gaunt in the Book of the Duchess and to show his abilities as a writer. This strategic work eventually led to his popularity and John's benefaction to Chaucer.