

*Essays in Medieval Studies 8*

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**Glossing as a Mode of Literary Production: Post-Modernism in the Middle Ages****William Watts**

If, as the friar in Chaucer's Summoner's Tale suggests, "Glosynge is a glorious thyng" (III.1793),<sup>1</sup> then part of the glory of glossing lies in the very complexity of the concept. The word "gloss" in Chaucer's Middle English encompasses the same extremes of meaning that are still present in modern English; it can either mean to explain something or it can mean to resort to circumlocution, as in "to gloss over."<sup>2</sup> In the former sense, Chaucer sometimes distinguishes between a text and an interpretive account of the text, as in the God of Love's accusation of Geoffrey: "Thou maist yt nat denye, / For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose, / Thou has translated the Romaunce of the Rose" (LGW F. 227-9). More often than not, however, Chaucer's use of the word "gloss" carries the second meaning of "to gloss over." Thus, Chaucer's Merchant claims that he is unable to supply a polite euphemism to describe the tryst of May and Damyan, saying, "I kan nat glose, I am a rude man" (IV. 235 1). In addition to these two contradictory meanings, Middle English "glosen" carries several denotations and connotations that have been lost to Modern English, including "to flatter," "to deceive" and "to cajole"; one or more of these meanings is present in Troilus's warning to Criseyde on her way out of Troy that "Ye shal ek sen, youre fader shal yow glose / To ben a wif" (IV. 1471-2). But one of the most intriguing resonances in Chaucer's treatment of glossing--and one which has received little attention--lies in his association of glossing with poetry itself. It is this association between glossing and literature and the implications of this association for Chaucer's attitudes toward the nature and authority of the text that I wish to take up in this paper.

Chaucer's most graphic representation of the relationship between glossing and poetry occurs in the *Book of the Duchess*. In the dreamy contemplation of literary tradition which precedes the main dream-vision of the grieving Black Knight, Geoffrey sees two texts represented visually. First, in the glasswork of the windows to his room, Geoffrey sees depicted "hooly al the story of Troye" (326). Geoffrey apparently has in mind the version of the story of Troy told by Benoit de Sainte Maure or by Guido della Colonne, and his vision includes such figures as Hector, Achilles, Medea, Paris and Helen. The second work that Geoffrey envisions is presented in less precise but more comprehensive

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terms: "And alle the walles with colours fyne / Were peynted, bothe text and glose, / Of al the *Romaunce of the Rose*" (III. 333-4). Before shifting to the knight who will occupy the rest of his dream vision, Geoffrey does not elaborate on his vision of the *Roman*. He does not name characters from the work, as he does with the story of Troy, nor does he give us any idea of the nature of the image he sees on painted on the walls. We are instead left to wonder what it means to see the Roman in this fashion. Most importantly, we are left to wonder what it means to see both the text and the gloss of a poem in a painting. There has been some speculation that when Geoffrey speaks of a gloss he has in mind the rich tradition of manuscript illumination that accompanies the *Roman*.<sup>3</sup> However, there seems to be no other instance of glose taking on this meaning, so it seems more reasonable to assume that Geoffrey has in mind the physical page of a manuscript, with the text on one part of the page and the glosses in the margin or between the lines.

The conjunction of both text and gloss in Geoffrey's vision of the *Roman* carries with it two important implications, one concerning the nature of texts in general and the other with the nature of the *Roman de la Rose* in particular. First, this vision can be seen as an assertion of a basic continuity in form and meaning between text and gloss. Elsewhere in his poetry, Chaucer suggests an easy separation of gloss from text. Chaucer's Parson, for example, asserts that he "wol nat glose" as he turns to plain prose text of Christian penitence for his sermon (X. 45). In this scene from the *Book of the Duchess*, on the other hand, Chaucer allows that the gloss and text cannot be so readily separated; the gloss informs both the shape and the meaning of the text and thereby becomes an inextricable part of what the text is. But there is a second reason which accounts for Chaucer's association of glossing with the *Roman de la Rose* rather than with the story of Troy or some other text; this reason goes beyond the fact that "Rose" rhymes with "glose" and thus gives the

poet the means to fill out his couplet.<sup>4</sup> For glossing is an important feature of the *Roman de la Rose* itself. As Gerard Pare has shown, Jean de Meun's continuation of the *Roman* was profoundly influenced by both the language and the practices of the the school. Glossing is one of the more prominent of the scholastic elements of the *Roman*.<sup>5</sup>

As in Chaucer's Middle English, glossing in Jean's Old French can convey contradictory meanings. The instance of glossing that is perhaps most familiar to readers of the *Roman* occurs in the lover's dialogue with Reason. In the course of her instruction on the topic of true love, Reason speaks of the proper use of the "coilles" (testicles) for the propagation of man. The lover takes offense at this frank diction, and accuses his interlocuter of being uncourteous. Amant goes on to charge Reason with failing to do what any honest woman would do in speaking about such things; Amant says Reason "le mot ne glosates Par quelques cortoise

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parole" (6933-34)<sup>6</sup>--that is, she has not glossed the word with some courteous utterance. Reason for her part responds that it is not necessary to resort to euphemism when speaking of good things that have been created by God; in Reason's words, it is appropriate that "je nomme les nobles choses / Par plain texte, sanz metre gloses" ("I name noble things through plain texts, without resorting to glosses," 6957-58). Like Chaucer's Parson, Jean's Raison prefers the plain text of God's creation, unencumbered by the circumlocutions of glossing .

Glossing in the *Roman* does not always carry the negative connotations suggested in Reason's rebuke of the lover. Earlier in her discourse, Reason describes Phania's interpretation of the dream of Croesus, her father, as a kind of glossing. Thus, in explaining the significance of the tree that is inhabited by both Jupiter and Apollo in Croesus's dream, Phania says, "L'arbre par le gibet vous glose / Je n'i puis entendre autre glose" ("The tree I gloss for you as a gallows; I cannot understand in it any other gloss," 6547-48). Phania's gloss on the dream accurately foretells Croesus's fall on Fortune's wheel. As is frequently the case in the Middle Ages, this discussion of dream interpretation serves as a vehicle for raising wider issues of hermeneutics. Phania's practical exercise in glossing is consistent with Reason's instruction on the nature and purpose of glossing. In contradistinction to the euphemistic form of glossing recommended by the lover, Reason suggests that in its proper form glossing can clarify what is obscure in stories and strip away the integuments with which the poets clothe the truth in their works. The result of this process, according to Reason, brings to the reader both delight and knowledge of the secrets of philosophy (7153-7181). In its positive form, then, glossing serves as an interpretive tool for revealing truth rather than as an impediment to honest inquiry.

The interpretive value of glossing carries wider significance for the *Roman* as a whole. John Fleming has suggested that we can view the *Roman* as an extended exercise in glossing. In Fleming's reading, "The chief glossator or exegete in the *Roman* is Lady Reason, who explains at some length the principles of poetic fiction and moral allegory (ll. 7153ff.).<sup>7</sup> Other characters in the *Roman*, including Ami, La Veille, and Nature, can also be seen as glossators insofar as they attach their own extended commentaries to the rather thin narrative thread that holds the poem together. In fact, the narrator himself presents glossing as an organizing principle of the *Roman* in his self-reflexive commentary on the purpose and process of composing the poem. In an address to his audience, Amant says that the amorous lords ("seignor amorus," 15159 will know something about the art of love once they have heard his (Amant) gloss the text ("Quant le texte m'orres gloser," 14150). This passage represents the *Roman* as a poem which provides both a text, which I take to be the story of the lover's pursuit of the Rose, and a gloss,

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which I take to be the on-going commentary on the significance of this story. And in the narrator's view, both the text and the gloss are essential to the audience's understanding of the poem.

It is this notion of the *Roman* as a text which provides its own gloss, I believe, that underlies Geoffrey's vision of both the text and the gloss painted on the wall in *The Book of the Duchess*. Moreover, I think that we can identify ways in which this mingling of text and gloss informs Chaucer's own poetic practice. After all, Chaucer translates the *Roman* into English early in his career, and he frequently imitates elements of Jean's French romance in his own poetry. In addition, Chaucer was himself a practicing glossator. We have every reason to believe that the glosses in *Boece* are Chaucer's own, although he clearly consulted Latin glosses of Boethius and he may have worked with a collaborator on the glosses.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, in the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, "the glosses are written in as large and as careful a hand as the actual text, which is placed off-centre to make room for the glosses."<sup>9</sup> The prominence of

these glosses has led some critics to argue that Chaucer was responsible for their production.<sup>10</sup> But most importantly, for our purposes, Chaucer frequently incorporates glosses within the text of his poems. In some cases, these glosses are prefaced by the words "that is to seyn," and serve to explain a word or phrase that would otherwise be obscure. Thus, for example, when Chaucer's monk introduces the series of exempla that make up his tale as "tragedies," he immediately provides a definition of the word "tragedy":

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
As olde bookes maken us memories  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.  
VII. 1973-77

Chaucer was the first writer to use the word "tragedye" in English, and he apparently felt it necessary to define this foreign term for his audience.<sup>11</sup> This definition corresponds closely to Chaucer's gloss of Boethius's use of the word "tragedye" in the *Consolation*: "Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse" (II, pr. 2, 70-72). Thus, we see Chaucer appropriate a gloss from his prose translation of the *Consolation* to the Monk's poetic exercise in tragedy. Similarly, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Pandarus's refers to the possible indiscretions he has committed in bringing together the two lovers, he says:

That is to seye, for that I am bicomen,  
Bitwixen game and earnest, swich a meene  
As maken wommen unto men to comen;

Al sey I nought, thow wost wel what I meene.  
III. 253-9

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There is an element of irony in Pandarus's definition of himself as a pimp, and I think that we can imagine him winking as he delivers these lines to Troilus. Nevertheless, his definition retains the form of a gloss, beginning with the signal phrase "that is to seye," and in this way provides an indication of the innovation Chaucer brings to the project of glossing.

Many of Chaucer's exercises in glossing are more extensive and further removed from the immediate business of the text than these local definitions. I am thinking here in particular of the extended philosophical discussions that the poet sometimes appends to his narratives. For example, in the course of his flight through the heavens, the eagle in the *House of Fame* gives Geoffrey a lengthy lecture on Aristotelian physics and the nature of sound. This lecture has little to do with the immediate progress of the plot (729-886). Likewise, in *Troilus* Chaucer grafts several extended passages from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* onto a love story which is largely borrowed from Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. In the central book of the poem, the long anticipated and elaborately detailed union of Troilus and Criseyde is framed by two speeches drawn directly from the *Consolation*, one delivered by Criseyde on false felicity (111. 813-833) and the other by Troilus on the divine love of the universe (III. 1744-71). Later in the poem, Troilus delivers a 125-line monologue on free will (IV. 958-1078) when he learns of the impending departure of Criseyde from Troy. In each of these speeches, Chaucer moves abruptly from the lover's "allas" to rather abstract metaphysical problems. These shifts in subject matter also create striking shifts in the tone, texture and character development of the poem. Here and elsewhere, I think that we can see Chaucer following the precedent of Jean de Meun in writing poetry that contains its own textual glosses.

Accounting for the relationship between of these philosophical passages and the love story has long been a major concern in the criticism of *Troilus*. Critics have proposed at least three different approaches to this problem. Some have seen the ill-fated love story as a straightforward illustration of the Boethian ideas contained in the poem. Others, including D. W. Robertson, have argued just the opposite--that the Boethian material in the poem serves as an ironic commentary on the depraved love of Troilus and Criseyde.<sup>12</sup> And still others have argued that there is little or no relationship between the philosophical matter and the events related in the poem; C. S. Lewis, for example, calls the Boethian interpolations in *Troilus* "an excrescence ... in which Chaucer departs from his original for the sake of giving

his readers interesting general knowledge or philosophical doctrine."[13](#)

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Rather than settle the relationship between the philosophical discourse and the plot of *Troilus* one way or another, I would like to suggest that we can see Chaucer's glossing as a way in which the poet foregrounds the problem of textual authority. Here, it is useful to consider briefly the posture of Chaucer's most famous glossator, the Wife of Bath. Dame Alisoun begins her challenge to patriarchal authority with a direct attack on glossing: "Men may devyne and glosen, up and doun, / But wel I woot, expres, withoute lye" (111. 26-7). The attitude the wife expresses here and elsewhere in her prologue is consistent with other late-medieval complaints against the abuses of glossing. We are reminded, for example, of Master Robert of Melun's heated condemnation of excessive glossing and of the incident related by Beryl Smalley in which "A long-suffering correspondent of (a student of Anselm) complains of the return of his own letter, so thickly glossed as to be unintelligible."[14](#)

In her assessment of the tradition under attack in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, Carolyn Dinshaw writes that "Glossing is a gesture of appropriation; the *glossa* undertakes to speak the text, to assert authority over it, to provide an interpretation, finally to limit or close it to the possibility of heterodox or unlimited significance."[15](#) Ironically, however, as has been noted by more than one commentator,[16](#) the Wife resorts to glossing in her attack on the practices of the glossators. She provides texts in support of her claims and then proceeds to gloss these texts in a way that is favorable to her cause. The countervailing gestures of establishing and undermining authority in the Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale correspond roughly to the two antithetical senses of the word "gloss." Glossing can both conceal and reveal and it can both open and close a text.

Like the Wife of Bath, Chaucer the poet frequently employs glossing to probe the limit and authority of the text.[17](#) As A. J. Minnis has demonstrated, the scholastic distinction between an auctor and a *compiler* is of particular use in illuminating the stance of Chaucer's narrators.[18](#) For Chaucer's narrators typically present themselves not as authorities in their own right but as compilers of the authoritative utterances of others; hence, the narrator of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* asks that he not be blamed for the more scurrilous aspects of his compilation because he is merely reporting what others have said and done (I. 725-46). The resulting compilations of Chaucer's narrators cannot, however, be regarded as seamless wholes in which one authoritative utterance naturally gives rise to the next. Robert Jordan's assessment of the aesthetic properties of Chaucer's poems applies equally well to the poet's treatment of authority: "the exposed joints and seams, the unresolved contradictions, [and] the clashes of perspective" prevail over any integrating principle.[19](#) In Chaucer's most spectacular exercise in glossing, the erotic and philosophical materials in *Troilus* contribute to what

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Bakhtin calls a "dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents."[20](#) In this way, Chaucer's glossing brings very different voices into contact with one another and serves to make the authority of the text a pervasive subtext of his poems.

## Notes

1. All quotations from and references to works by Chaucer in this paper are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987).
2. See Lawrence Besserman's discussion of the various meanings of the word "gloss" in Chaucer's Middle English in "Glosynge is a Glorious Thyng: Chaucer's Biblical Exegesis" in *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Univ. of Ottawa Press, 1984), 67.
3. See the note on these lines in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 969.
4. Chaucer also rhymes "glose" and "rose" in the passage from the *Legend of Good Women* quoted above.
5. *Les Idges et les Lettres au XIIIIE Siècle: Le Roman de la Rose* (Montreal: Edition le Centre de Psychologie et de Pedagogie, 1947), 15.
6. All references to and quotations from Jean's portion of the *Roman* are from *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Plammarion, 1974).
7. *The Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton University Press, 1969), 6.
8. See H. A. Kelly's discussion in "Chaucer and Shakespeare on Tragedy," *Leeds Studies in English* 20 (1989), 11.
9. Graham D. Caie, "The Significance of the Early Chaucer Manuscript Glosses (With Special Reference to the Wife of Bath s Prologue,)" *The Chaucer Review* 10 (1976), 350.
10. Ibid. 357-58.
11. Kelly, 3.
12. *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton University Press, 1962), 472-77.
13. *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, reprint of 1938 ed.), 22-23.

14. *The Study of the Bible in the Late Middle Ages* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 52.
15. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 122.
16. Besserman, 68.
17. See Jesse M. Gellrich's discussion of scholastic attitudes toward textual authority in relation to Chaucer's poetry in *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages* (Cornell University Press, 1986), 202-47.
18. *Medieval Theory of Authorship* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 190-204.
19. *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (Harvard University Press, 1967), 8.

20. *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emmerson and Michael I4olquist (University of Texas Press, 1981), 276.