

CHAUCERIAN ROOTS: LYDGATE'S DANSE MACABRE AND ENGLISH NATIONALISM

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Abstract: Few would contest an assertion that Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most influential writers in the history of the English language. Chaucer's work, though, was profoundly influential even in his own time – as well as in the early 15th century shortly following his death. John Lydgate lived from 1371–1449, and was one of the most prolific poets then writing in the English language.

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Few would contest an assertion that Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most influential writers in the history of the English language. Chaucer's work, though, was profoundly influential even in his own time – as well as in the early 15th century shortly following his death. John Lydgate lived from 1371–1449, and was one of the most prolific poets then writing in the English language. Much of Lydgate's work is recognized as having been heavily influenced by Chaucer (Pearsall, 1999, p. 343). While it has been noted by critics such as David Carlson (2004) that nearly all of Lydgate's works after 1422 contain some reference to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* specifically, it is particularly worthwhile to consider why exactly this may have been the case (Carlson, 2004, p. 246). In this essay, I argue that Chaucer's influence as one of the first widely read, and consequently one of the first well-known authors writing in the English language led Lydgate to emulate him, particularly in his poem *Danse Macabre*. Written during the peak of the Hundred Years' War – and derived from an antecedent

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French work— Lydgate’s adaptation into English employs several aspects of Chaucerian form in order to create a distance from its French roots, and connect it more meaningfully with the English literary tradition as it was then emerging.

While English as a language is strongly influenced by the French language (even a more dominant influence than now in the Middle English of Chaucer’s time), a rising sense of nationalism began a push back against the French and French culture in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. This resulted in an increasing prestige and prominence for English as a spoken language in England, and to its own literary tradition (Mastin, 2011). A major cause of this increased profile was the advent of the Hundred Years’ War. Luke Mastin (2011) argues that “The Hundred-Year War against France (1337 – 1453) had the effect of branding French as the language of the enemy and the status of English rose as a consequence”. Mastin continues, pointing out Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* was one of the first texts to give legitimacy to vernacular Middle English in an artistic form (Mastin, 2011).

Much of Lydgate’s poetry was written under the patronage of Prince Henry (later, King Henry V), so he would have been under great pressure to further the English nationalist pushback against French literature and culture. As such, Lydgate had to connect his own work, even his adaptations and translations from French, to the burgeoning English literary tradition.

Danse Macabre was one such work of Lydgate’s which derived from a French source. He reworked the piece after translation into one of his most important English poems. Originating from the wall of a charnel-house in Paris which Lydgate would have seen on one of his visits to France, *Danse Macabre* maintains elements of its original French form such as an eight-line “ballade” stanzaic form, but has many additions which appear to come directly from the Chaucerian

tradition (Pearsall, 1999, p. 354). Lydgate makes no attempt to hide *Danse Macabre*'s French origins, instead proclaiming them in the opening "Verba Translatoris" section. By foregrounding the text's foreignness, Lydgate defends himself from potential critiques of it, stating within the poem it is merely "a playn translacioun / In Englissh tonge" (Pearsall, 1999, pp. 28-29). Chaucer was also known to use similar techniques in his own work, such as his consistent assertion of having read Tullius Cicero, for example near the beginning of *The Parliament of Fowls* (31). Chaucer takes care to make evident that the words that follow flow directly out of a tradition outside of his own; this serves to increase the legitimacy of his own work while also offering a convenient escape clause, should it be not well-received. By using this same rhetorical device at the beginning of *Danse Macabre*, Lydgate performs the double duty of tying his work to the English tradition, while also defending the fact that it is connected to the French.

As *Danse Macabre* belongs to the tradition of mortality literature (Pearsall, 1999, p. 354), highlighting the foreignness of the text also serves to highlight its universality. By describing his work as a plain translation, Lydgate implies that he has made no changes from the source material, which is simply untrue. Positioning his text in this way allows Lydgate to better drive home the main point of the mortality poem: nobody can escape death, no matter their social class or position. *Danse Macabre* asserts this point repeatedly through its invocation of the estates satire genre, which is exemplified by Chaucer's *General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*.

Chaucer's *General Prologue* serves to introduce the many travellers on the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and in so doing gives a brief description of each of them. These descriptions vary in their degree of detail, but always allude to the pilgrim's social class and frequently to their appearance and manner of dress – often positioning portraits of characters who would not normally be regarded

next to one another or in the same social class (Pearsall, 1999, p. 80). By mingling clergy, nobility, and the common folk among each other and by giving equal importance to each and every one of them, Chaucer satirizes social stratification and levels the playing field between the three estates. Lydgate manages a similar dissolution of social class through his formal mimicking of *The General Prologue*. Much like Chaucer does, Lydgate introduces figures of differing social status alongside each other, in contrast to any clear deference to a social or socioeconomic hierarchy. Whereas Chaucer's pilgrims all share a common goal, however, Lydgate's characters simply share a common fate: death. As R.D. Perry (2015) notes, "Death's capacity for social leveling diminishes the differences between occupations and ranks, thereby fitting the entire social world under one organizing rubric" (Perry, 2015, p. 330). In appropriating Chaucer's form of repeated introductions and combining it with the mortality literature tradition frankly portraying death, Lydgate strengthens *Danse Macabre's* message of death's inevitability.

While critic Amanda Leff (2012) focusses on Lydgate's other works – such as *The Siege of Thebes* and *The Legend of Don Joos* as rewritings of *The General Prologue* (Leff, 2012, p. 479) – the comparisons suggest that *Danse Macabre* might also be read in this manner. Aside from the general form of a series of introductions having been borrowed from Chaucer, some of the introductions also directly mimic specific descriptions from *The General Prologue*. One such stanza is that of the death of the Squire: Lydgate's first squire is described in terms directly alluding to Chaucer's. Both are well-dressed bachelors who impress women (Chaucer 88; Lydgate 228). Lydgate also borrows numerous other archetypes from Chaucer. Both authors feature a parson, a merchant, and man of law, an abbess or prioress, a physician, and a monk, to name a few. Further parallels could be drawn between characters such as Lydgate's Gentlewoman Amorous and Chaucer's Wife of Bath. It is easy to imagine these characters as being a sort

of continuation of Chaucer's own creations, though Chaucer's work is expansive and Lydgate's is comparatively brief. Still, mimicking Chaucer's construction in this way further connects *Danse Macabre* to English tradition and makes it more palatable to a broad English audience, allowing it to exist in the midst of the concurrent French-English conflict.

The stanzaic structure of *Danse Macabre* is interesting to note as it does not derive explicitly from Chaucer, yet still adds to its Chaucerian ties. *Danse Macabre* is written in a French "ballade" form, which consists of eight-line stanzas. The original text from which Lydgate is translating was written in this same meter, so Lydgate's stanza form might be easy to dismiss as merely a consequence of translation; however, at this point, it's interesting to note that Chaucer was also known for being one of the first poets to employ the *ballade* form in English writing (Benson, 1992, p. 632). Neither author used the ballade in its strictest sense, and both were open to experimentation with it. The traditional ballade consists of three eight-line stanzas with a common rhyme scheme and ending in a refrain (Benson, 1992, p. 632). Chaucer used this form for some of his earlier poems, but would frequently play with omission of the refrain, occasionally changing the number of stanzas, or combining the ballade with his signature rime royal. (Benson, 1992, p. 632).

In *Danse Macabre*, Lydgate also treats *ballade* as a loose rather than fixed form in his stanzaic structure. Instead of sets of three stanzas, Lydgate generally utilizes sets of two in a call-and-response format. One poetic voice is ascribed to Death, who addresses a figure from a larger set of characters, and one poetic voice is given to that figure's response, exemplified by the Squire in lines 217-232 (Lydgate 217-232). Lydgate forgoes the refrain, instead ending each of the character-response stanzas with two lines addressing Death which continue the

established rhyme scheme. These lines invariably show how each of the poem's characters accepts their fate (Pearsall, 1999, p. 354). These stanzaic alterations serve a double purpose: not only do they once again distance Lydgate from his French source while positioning him closer to Chaucer's literary legacy, they also allow him to further advance the text's promotion of the "Art of Dying Well" (Pearsall, 1999, p. 354). Notably, as noted by R.D. Perry (2015), the stanzas also give Lydgate's reading or listening audience the writer's apprehension of the tragedy, death and destruction created by the Hundred Years' War, (Perry, 2015, p. 327).

To say that Lydgate borrowed from Chaucer is not to say that he did not make his own important contributions to literature. As Derek Pearsall (1999) notes, Lydgate allows us to understand late medieval sentiment and writing through his connections to then-recent literary history (Pearsall, 1999, p. 354). The fact that Lydgate's entire life also took place during the Hundred Years' War and the subsequent French backlash that ensued as a result of it also explains some of his uses of poetic form. By capitalizing on the cultural vortex created by medieval English nationalism, Lydgate was able to make significant contributions to the burgeoning genre of English literature and, like Chaucer, whom he was so quick to emulate, cement his place among literate English society. *Danse Macabre's* formal variations on its French source material and intertextual references to Chaucer allow it to further assert the universality of its themes. Rather than undermining his work, Lydgate's reliance on his predecessor Chaucer bolstered him in the creation of a poem which embodied popular anxieties of the time, and advanced both the genre of mortality literature and as well, the burgeoning English literary culture.

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