

NORMAN SIMMS

CHAUCER AND THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISHMAN'S  
KNOWLEDGE OF WALLACHIA

In the *Book of the Duchess*, a courtly poem probably first written by Geoffrey Chaucer in memory of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, there appears to be the only extant Middle English allusion to the Romanian principality of Wallachia<sup>1</sup>. Though it has been assumed since the sixteenth century that this funerary poem was composed within eight years of Blanche's death (12 September 1369)<sup>2</sup>, the allusion suggests events later in the century, and there is enough circumstantial evidence to indicate that Chaucer was likely to have rewritten at least part of the poem in the mid-1390's, when news of the disastrous defeat of the western crusading army of Sigismund of Hungary by the Turks at Nicopolis was in the air. The formal attitudes of lament and consolation in the *Book of the Duchess* (a title not necessarily that which contemporaries would have known the poem by) were transferable—with no breach of courtly etiquette—to the memory of Anne of Bohemia, the first wife of King Richard II. The circumstances of her death on 7 June 1394 would have recalled those of Blanche, the first wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. Furthermore, Englishmen learning of the disaster on the Bulgarian-Wallachian border and recalling that Richard's second wife, the seven year old daughter of the French Charles VI, had almost involved their country in that crusade<sup>3</sup>, would have noted with satisfaction and relief that Anne of Bohemia, like Blanche of Lancaster before her, was not the sort of capricious lady who would

...sende men into Walakye,  
To Pryse, and into Tartarye,  
To Alysaundre, ne into Turkye,  
And byd hym faste anon that he

1. A passage in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* alludes to Dacia, but this is a vague classical reference.

2. D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Historical Setting of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*" in *Medieval Studies in Honor of Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr.*, eds. John Mahoney and John Esten Keller, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 171-172; also see Derek Brewer, p. 34, *Chaucer in His Time*, (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963).

3. A. R. Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages (1307-1536)*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 18. See Note 16 below.

Go hoodles to the Drye Se  
And come home by the Carrenar...

(*B.D.*, 1024-1029)<sup>4</sup>

Ostensibly, then, in the rhetorical function of this passage concerning the deceased lady—called White in memory of Blanche, but an idealized rather than particularized courtly type—“Walakye”, or Wallachia, is meant to be an absurdly distant place, similar to Patagonia or New Zealand for later English writers.

But though Chaucer’s pose as the simple clerk allows his verse a touch of lightness and seeming casualness, as a poetic craftsman he is never careless with details; and we ought to seek some significance in the allusion that would make a coherent catalogue of places, as well as having a pointed immediacy about it. Precisely those events culminating in the disaster at Nicopolis provide the rationale for Chaucer’s allusion, and allow us to survey the probable awareness 14th century courtiers in England would have of events in that distant part of Europe.

The *Book of the Duchess* was probably first written for a memorial service held on the anniversary of Blanche’s death on September 12, 1374, when John of Gaunt—who maintained these vigils more or less elaborately throughout his life—used St. Paul’s Cathedral as the setting for an extravagant display<sup>5</sup>. Chaucer, in the characteristic mask of the bumbling clerk “Simple Geoffrey”, pretends an absurd grief which prevents him from sleeping for eight years. Then, after reading the Ovidian tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, he falls asleep and dreams himself into a trite romantic setting; but gradually entering a more morose but increasingly sensuous reality, the Dreamer meets the Knight in Black. In a dialogue which both parodies and draws moral perceptions from Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, the clerkish and uncourtly Dreamer leads the grief-stricken courtier into a renewed and deepened awareness of the spiritual continuity of love with the recently deceased Lady named White. It is in one of the Black Knight’s speeches recalling the virtues of the Lady that the allusion to Wallachia occurs. The Knight explains that White was no ordinary aristocratic flirt, but a lady who understood the virtues of courteous love at their most refined level, combining classical friendship and Christian charity into a social benevolence of the highest order.

The passage where the allusion appears may or may not have been in the

4. All quotations are from the standard edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

5. Robertson, “Historical Setting”, p. 172; also D. W. Robertson, Jr., *Chaucer’s London*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968), pp. 30-31.

original version of the poem, and only a late tradition assigns the present text to an early period in Chaucer's literary career. While the Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*—a set-piece posture, even if often sincerely made—speaks of a youthful “book of the Duchess”, in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* the Serjeant at Law claims that a certain Chaucer has already told most of the good stories available: “In youthe he made of Ceys and Alcione”. So that the precise nature of the poem written by Chaucer as a young squire can only be guessed at; but by analogy, at least, we may be correct in assuming that the version now extant in two late manuscripts is a version touched up by the mature court poet. It is interesting in this connection to note that the Man of Law, immediately after he mentions the tale of Ceys and Alcione, refers to the *Legend of Good Women*, a later poem dedicated to Anne of Bohemia.

If we examine the passage in question closely, the syntax reveals two distinct sections, the second an incremental variation on the first. The first depends upon the verb “sende” and the second upon “byd”. The Lady called White does not send men off without a head covering into the wastes of the Gobi Desert only to return via the rank Kara-Nr, or Black Lake, east of it<sup>6</sup>. She also does not send men into such impossible places as Wallachia, Prussia, Tartary (perhaps not, as some have suggested, all of Outer Mongolia), Alexandria, and Turkey. These last place names recall the list of countries the worthy Knight of the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* has visited in his ostensibly archetypal fourteenth century crusading experience: Alexandria, Prussia, Lithuania, Russia, Grenada, Algeciras, Benmarin, Ayas, Attalia, Tremessen (Tlemcen), and

This ilke worthy Knyght hadde ben also  
Sometyme with the Lord of palatye  
Agayn another hethen in Turkey.

(GP, 64-66)

Usually Palatye is taken as the Middle English equivalent of Palathia, the Turkish Balat. In the 1360's the Lord of Palatye was allied to Pater of Cyprus, the colourful and chivalric figure who visited England in 1362/3<sup>7</sup>.

The overlapping of the places the Knight did go to and the places the Lady

6. John Livingstone Lowes, “Illustrations of Chaucer. Drawn Chiefly from Deschamps”, *Romanic Review* 2 (1911) 121.

7. Aziz S. Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: 1934), p. 1 gives a summary of 14th century crusades; also see the notes in Robinson, *Works*, to the Knight of the General Prologue, p. 652.

would not send her knights is revealing. Prussia, Alexandria, and Turkey were sites of crusading expeditions. They were generally pagan, as was of course Tartary, which Chaucer himself notes in the opening lines to the *Squire's Tale* on King Cambuskan. But Wallachia was Christian, albeit of a variety not generally approved of in the west. Nevertheless, the common denominator of the Knight's and the Lady's catalogues is scenes of crusades, with perhaps a derogatory hint at Wallachia as a pagan land too.

Chaucer may have heard of Wallachia early in his career. Venice and Genoa had colonial settlements in the area and were consequently involved in local events. The Italian trade wars of the mid-century over access to the Black Sea would have reached some ears in London, especially among the merchant communities<sup>8</sup>. Chaucer's middle class connections would have perhaps made him interested in such events, if his courtly duties as emissary for the king and his service with John of Gaunt did not. But more likely than not, even the foundation of the Wallachia principality by Basarab I, and the early adventurous careers of Vladislav and Mircea the Old, would not have seemed very interesting until the arrival of Anne of Bohemia in England.

The arrangements for Anne's marriage by proxy to Richard II began as early as 1380, with Sir Michael de la Pole acting as negotiator<sup>9</sup>. Her father was Charles IV of Bohemia, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the marriage was promoted by the pope to win support for an alliance of Urbanists against Clementists during the papal schism<sup>10</sup>. At first, the English chroniclers expressed grave doubts about the mooted wedding, considering this plain-looking, unknown seventeen year old bride a high price to pay for English co-operation with the Angevin Hungarians<sup>11</sup>. Anne's brother, Sigismund of Luxembourg, who ruled Hungary and had overt expansionist aims in Bulgaria and Wallachia, was later to organize the ill-fated crusade against the Ottoman ruler Bayezid I which ended in Nicopolis.

Despite initial misgivings, the marriage between Richard and Anne on 14 January 1382 proved a remarkable success both publically and personally.

8. Anthony Luttrell, "The Crusade in the Fourteenth Century", in *Europe in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. J. E. Hale, J. R. L. Highfeld, and B. Smalley, (London: Faber and Faber), pp. 128, 143, 148, etc.

9. May McKissack, *The Fourteenth Century (1307-1399)*, (The Oxford History of England, V.), (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 427.

10. McKissack, *Fourteenth Century*, p. 427; Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968), pp.16-17. The whole situation is reviewed in Oscar Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe*, (New York: The Ronald Press, 1952), pp.270-271; and see Chapter 7, "The New Forces of the Fourteenth Century", pp. 92-114.

11. McKissack, *Fourteenth Century*, p. 147.

The queen brought with her a gifted entourage of artists and craftsmen and proved to be an enthusiastic friend to poets, and during her lifetime the English court blossomed as a centre of cosmopolitan culture. "Her father had been a patron of Petrarch; her grandfather a patron of Guillaume Machault; her great-grandfather was the rather negligent patron of Dante"<sup>12</sup>. Anne herself was the patron of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Richard fell romantically in love with his new queen. Like her, he was seventeen at their wedding, and it is reported that throughout their marriage he found it difficult to leave her side<sup>13</sup>. He built the beautiful lodgings, La Neyt, at Sheen for her; and one of Chaucer's official court positions was to oversee the construction and furnishing of the royal residence of the queen. Anne's death in 1394 deeply affected the king, and in despair he commanded John Gedney, his Clerk of the Works, to demolish her quarters at Sheen<sup>14</sup>. When the Earl of Arundel arrived late at the funeral service in Westminster Abbey and begged permission to leave early, Richard struck him down<sup>15</sup>. In such conditions, Chaucer and other older courtiers may well have recalled the Duke of Lancaster's profound grief when Blanche died; and, while political negotiations began for a second queen for Richard, may have felt that the king needed some of the genteel and oblique consolation offered in Chaucer's book on "the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse".

One of the conditions for a truce in the Hundred Years' War included a marriage between Richard and the seven year old daughter of Charles VI<sup>16</sup>. Just as John of Gaunt's marriage to the daughter of the deposed King of Castille had not interfered with his pious devotion to Blanche, so it may have been felt no discourtesy to eulogize Anne in a revised version of the early poem. Philippe de Mézières, the French propagandist of crusades and organizer of courtly spectacles, advised the French king in these matters, and probably was responsible for the recommendation that France and Engand join together in aiding Sigismund of Hungary in his war against the Turks in the Balkans<sup>17</sup>. Although Richard avoided the issue in his replies, it is most likely that the court was aware that a crusade to a little known region of Europe was being discussed along with arrangements for the marriage. Even Eustache Deschamps,

12. Mathew, *Court of Richard II*, p. 17.

13. McKissack, *Fourteenth Century*, p. 427.

14. Mathew, *Court of Richard II*, pp. 64, 65, 148.

15. Mathew, *Court of Richard II*, pp. 17-18, 34, 63; Brewer, *Chaucer*, p. 15.

16. Myers, *Late Middle Ages*, p. 94; Atiya, *Nicopolis*, pp. 9, 32; Steven Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. III, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 455-456.

17. Atiya, *Nicopolis*, p. 171, n. 63; also Aziz S. Atiya, *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed., (London: Butler and Tanner, 1938; reprinted by Kraus, New York, 1965), pp. 435-436.

the French poet most popular at the English court and one of the main contemporary influences on Chaucer's courtly style, had urged in a ballad written in 1395 that England undertake a crusade in the East<sup>18</sup>. After the wedding, when news of the disaster at Nicopolis began to reach England—whether by official dispatch or by way of such poetic lamentations as Deschamps' "Pour les Français Morts A Nicopolis"—the idea of going to Wallachia must have seemed not only a rhetorical extreme, but the height of political and romantic folly.

But Deschamps does not mention Wallachia in his ballads about the crusade, referring only to "Hongrie" and Nicopolis. In the poetic models for the hyperbolic set-piece, French poets like Robert de Rains and Jean de Conde mention Germany, England and Scotland as their impossibly distant regions<sup>19</sup>. Chaucer chooses places in the East, as well as "Pruyse"; and he probably would not speak of Hungary out of respect for Anne's family connections. But Wallachia at this time, if known at all by the English court, would have had connotations. These Romanians had, by all contemporary accounts, disgraced themselves by deserting from the field of battle when the French stupidly opened themselves to the Turkish forces<sup>20</sup>. Someone may even have been able to speak of the time, not many years before, when Sigismund had been shot at with poison arrows by the Wallachians while returning home from his victory over the Turks at Nicopolis Minor<sup>21</sup>.

Hindsight shows today that Mircea the Old's policy of alternative alliances with the Hungarians, Greeks, and Turks was the only possible course for maintaining the autonomy of the newly founded and relatively weak Țara Romaneasca, or country of the Romanians in Wallachia<sup>22</sup>. The decadence of the Byzantine Empire made it an untrustworthy ally, while the Hungarians with their fierce policy of territorial aggrandizement and their even fiercer

18. The relevant ballads and fragments are collected in Atiya, *Nicopolis*, "Appendix A".

19. Lowes, "Illustrations", p. 122.

20. Herbert Adams Gibbons, *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire: A History of the Osmanlis up to the Death of Bayezid I 1300-1403*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916; reprinted by Frank Cass, London 1968, p. 211; for a full list of chronicles mentioning the crusade, see p. 213).

21. Atiya, *Nicopolis*, p. 70.

22. For a general survey from the Wallachian point of view, which corrects errors in Atiya's studies, see R. Rosetti, "Notes on the Battle of Nicopolis (1396)", *Slavonic Review* 15 (1936) 629-638; also R. W. Seton-Watson, *A History of the Roumanians: From Roman Times to the Completion of Unity*, (Cambridge University Press, 1934; reprinted by Archon Books, 1963), pp. 24-26. For a broad survey of the origins of the Romanian states see Ferdinand Schevill, *A History of the Balkan Peninsula: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1922; reprinted by Frederick Ungar, New York, 1966), esp. pp. 204-206.

army of zealous friars were not a welcome protector to Wallachians. The Turks, though tolerant in religion, were a military threat, and had to be fought against when strong and placated when weak. But while modern opinion may admire Mircea's adept diplomatic antics, Christian monarchs would have nothing but scorn for his pragmatic policies; even though, like Chaucer's worthy Knight, each western nation had dealt with heathens and been anything but worthy to each other. Certainly the farce of two Catholic popes was no religious example to the world.

In England, at least, the zeal for crusades was minimal, the influence of Philippe de Mézières being felt much less than in France. In the *Merchant's Tale*, it has been suggested<sup>23</sup> Chaucer is mocking a spectacle at the Paris court put on by Philippe to enlist support for a crusade: the reference is ambiguously to the illusions as stage-devices and the tricksters who deceive the courtiers with such allusions. Though about twenty-five Englishmen—from the Duke of Lancaster down to Richard Chelmesnick, esquire—showed interest in the *Militia Passionis Jhesus Christi*<sup>24</sup>, a puritanical order of knights to fight against the infidel with pure hearts and bodies established by Philippe de Mézières, there was no official English participation in the last great crusade of the Middle Ages<sup>25</sup>. A negligible contingent of English Knights Templar joined the French, Hungarians, and Wallachians in the last stages of the adventure. Generally, public spirit in England was against the very idea of crusades, as not only Chaucer's contemporary poets Gower and Langland make clear in their statements that the Sarasin (a general name for the heathen of the East) was a man with a soul to be saved, rather than as a devil to be slaughtered; but also as John Wycliffe, expressing feelings of English anti-clericalism, says when he calls the crusade an excuse for murder organized by the illegal popes<sup>26</sup>.

England, of course, would not have gloated over the defeat at Nicopolis; a Christian Jerusalem was a fine ideal. But the danger of an Ottoman invasion was a real and present danger. The stupidity of the French knights would not have blinded men at the court to the need to resist, with modern weapons and strategy, the forces of this new Islamic enemy. Fear among the common people was great in Slavic and Teutonic lands; the flagellants, who had roamed the countryside during the plague years at mid-century, now again took to

23. Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Secular Dramatics in the Royal Palace. Paris, 1378, 1389, and Chaucer's 'Tregetoires'", *Speculum* 33 (1958) 242-255.

24. Atiya, *Nicopolis*, pp. 26-28.

25. Charles L. Tipton, "The English at Nicopolis", *Speculum* 37 (1962) 528-540.

26. Atiya, *Nicopolis*, p. 123.

the roads, proclaiming with the voice of mass hysteria an imminent Turkish threat<sup>27</sup>.

The news was bad enough by the time it reached England to allow Richard to use the defeat at Nicopolis as an excuse for wriggling out of a promise to aid the French in a war against the Visconti<sup>28</sup>. In Hungary, Sigismund returned sapped of men, funds, and prestige, and faced a struggle for the succession<sup>29</sup>. With his attention turned towards Bohemia, the Greeks at Constantinople felt deserted; they attempted to enlist English aid. News of events in the East, perhaps even of Wallachia, might thus have still been arriving in England until 1400, the year Manuel Paleologus arrived in England to plead for support<sup>30</sup> and the year Chaucer died.

Thus, though the *Book of the Duchess* was first written for and performed at one of the early September 12th memorial services for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, the allusion to Wallachia strongly suggests that Chaucer re-wrote part or all of the poem in memory of an equally imposing lady, Anne of Bohemia, whose death in the 1390's made Englishmen acutely aware of how lucky they had been to have in two women the archetypal figure of White who would not "sende men into Walakye".

*University of Waikato  
Hamilton, New Zealand*

27. Gibbons, *Ottoman Empire*, p. 224.

28. Tipton, "The English at Nicopolis", p. 538; also McKissack, *Fourteenth Century*, p. 476.

29. Seton-Watson, *Roumanians*. pp. 32-33.

30. Atiya, *Nicopolis*, p. 120; Mathew, *Court of Richard II*, p. 18.