Chaucer and Literary Historiography in John Lydgate's
Siege of Thebes

Hisashi Sugito

I. Lydgate's Literary Twist

Modern readers recognize Geoffrey Chaucer as the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, but readers and writers in the later Middle Ages may have had a different image of the "father" of English poetry.[1] As C.S. Lewis says in his foundational book the *Allegory of Love*: "When the men of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries thought of Chaucer, they did not think first of the *Canterbury Tales*. Their Chaucer was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love-romance and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine."[2] Indeed, the fifteenth-century poets mostly imitated Chaucerian dream vision, a genre which Chaucer introduced to English literature from the French courtly poems. While the literature after Chaucer is pervaded by dream visions such as the *King's Quair*, the *Isle of Ladies*, and numerous dream poems by William Dunbar, only a few poets, surprisingly, inherited the poetic structure of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Probably one of the boldest attempts was made by John Lydgate, a Benedictine monk who is counted among the first Chaucerian poets. Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*, written in 1421-22, is a sequel to the unfinished *Canterbury Tales*, set in Canterbury as Lydgate the narrator happens to join the return journey of the Canterbury pilgrims. Despite Chaucer's retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, in Lydgate's version the tale-telling game is still going on, and the Host asks Lydgate to give another "merry" tale, just as Edgar Allan Poe cooks up another tale of *One Thousand and One Nights*. In his adaptation of the *Tales*, however, Lydgate does not blindly follow his literary father. Daniel T. Kline states that while Lydgate conforms to the setting of the *Canterbury Tales*, he skillfully manipulates the images of the pilgrims and Chaucer's language to authorize his position.[3] Also, Scott-Morgan Straker argues that Lydgate's monastic background makes him an original narrator deviating from the Chaucerian conventions and politically more outspoken.[4] But these studies fail to take up Lydgate's appreciation of Chaucer's idea of interpretation in the framed narrative, which culminated in the *Canterbury Tales* and made an enormous contribution to the English literary tradition. In what follows I would like to argue that Lydgate in the *Siege of Thebes* inherits Chaucerian exploration in the nature of interpretation and himself enacts his own

interpretive principle.

II. The *Canterbury Tales* and Chaucerian Interpretation

The *Canterbury Tales* is not simply a collection of numerous and generically diverse stories. It has a frame which allows each tale to be told by a pilgrim, and this frame complicates the notion of textual interpretation in medieval literature to an unprecedented degree. We are tempted to consider, for instance, the Wife of Bath's seemingly promiscuous life and the Pardoner's avarice when we read their tales. Readers are pleasantly puzzled by the iridescent nature of the Canterbury stories, which take on entirely different meanings when they are read in light of the tellers.

Also important is the process of interpretation shown between the tales: the textual meaning is reshaped by how the pilgrims react to each story. The Host, as an organizer, does not hesitate to reveal whether he is pleased or displeased with the tale just told. And when the Miller finishes his tale to ridicule the carpenter, the Reeve, formerly a carpenter, tries to retaliate by telling a story of a cuckolded miller. Likewise, the Friar and the Summoner blame each other through their tales. Thus, our interpretation of the tales is affected when they are told to slander other pilgrims. The Knight's bewildered reaction against the *Monk's Tale* and the Shipman's envious admiration of Griselda after the *Clerk's Tale* may also be taken into consideration. It is obvious from this highly convoluted narrative structure that Chaucer does not seek to produce a single, definitive meaning out of the text. Rather, he wants his text to multiply its meanings by, as Helen Cooper plainly expresses, "letting meaning emerge from setting one story alongside another, or placing a story in a context that re-defines its meaning."[5]

Chaucer's obsession with the idea of interpretation is already visible in his early dream visions. The *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls* all have inter-textual elements; our understanding of the visions is enriched when we refer to the books Chaucer reads before falling asleep, such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Cicero's commentary on Scipio's dream. Dreams by nature require interpretation, and the act of interpretation is highlighted by the presence of old books. Chaucer's metafictional perspective thus marks the start of his career, and culminates in the *Canterbury Tales*. Moreover, Chaucer is not only a writer in these early works, but also represents the function of readers. He tries to interpret the visions and other forms of textual materials in his dream poems, producing new meanings out of adjacent texts. As Judith Ferster states:

Furthermore, since the typical medieval mode of composition was the rewriting of old works,

the power of readers to reshape a work while retelling it would have been clear to educated audiences that knew one or more of a work's ancestors. Writers themselves demonstrated the reader's power to transform a poem and thus showed that reading can be a kind of rewriting.[6]

Chaucer's poetic power is driven by this economy circulating from reading to writing, and from rereading to rewriting. Chaucer ceases to be an active reader in the *Canterbury Tales*, but the textual interrelationship between the pilgrims and the tales offers one of the richest metafictional experiences in Middle English poems. Throughout his career, we find him in search of the wonder of textual interpretation, how new meanings are limitlessly generated.

III. Lydgate's Literary Principle

John Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* takes over the Chaucerian theme of textual interpretation in a different manner. Some readers may think that the *Siege* limits the depth of literary structure cultivated by Chaucer. Indeed, the *Siege* fails to elaborate on the multiple meanings of the text, for Lydgate's use of the frame does not seem to have a crucial effect on our understanding of the framed tale; after all, the teller is only Lydgate himself and the *Siege* ends abruptly when the narrator finishes his story. The tale's reception among the pilgrims is not told.

Nonetheless, Lydgate understands that the idea of interpretation should play a central role in literary texts. Unlike Chaucer, his originality lies in his attempt to formulate the writing principle by referring to the authors and texts in the past. Lydgate, knowing only too well that he came after his great forebears, incorporates the process of fashioning himself into his poems. The Prologue to the *Siege* starts with a due homage to the *Canterbury Tales*, and Lydgate the narrator, in his recapitulation of this magnum opus, stresses Chaucer's ability to record ("registrer")[7] the tales with the power of rhetoric. Whether the tale is fictional or historical, the poet's narration is stable:

> Of eche thyng keping in substaunce
> The sentence hool withoute variance,
> Voyding the chaf sothly for to seyn,
> Enlumynyng the trewe piked greyn
> Be crafty writing of his sawes swete, [...]. (lines 53-57)

Chaucer excelled in keeping the complete meaning ("sentence hool") by throwing away the husk ("chaf") to offer the truly choice kernel ("piked greyn"). The image of husk and chaff was a

commonplace expression in medieval literary theory to stress the spiritual sense under the surface of a text. As D. W. Robertson Jr. explains by referring to St. Augustine, one needs to penetrate the figurative language to understand the grain, or its true meaning.[8] We also know that the antithesis had already been used by Chaucer himself in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*: "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille."[9] Lydgate thus praises Chaucer for retaining the truth in his text while eliminating the insubstantial elements.

It is also worthwhile noting that Lydgate offers an account of this literary principle in another of his major works, *Troy Book*. In the Prologue he repeats the image of grain and chaff together with the idea of historiography. What is appreciated here is the "truth" as he sets out to translate the ancient book of Troy:

Wher was remembrid of auctours us beforn
Of the dede the verreie trewe corn
So as it fil severid from the chaf,
For in her honde they hilde for a staf
The trouthe only, whyche thei han compyled
Unto this fyn — that we wer nat begyled
Of necligence thorugh foryetilnesse.[10]

Thanks to the authors in the past, old stories are recorded with the truth cut apart from the trivial surface. The narrator's theory is that not only the story but also the true knowledge of nature inherent in it is forgotten with the passage of time, and writers contribute to refreshing the reader's memory by searching out and implanting the "substance of truth" ("sothefast pyth") (lines 156-170, at 164). By this written truth, *Troy Book* continues to explain, our history is constructed and passed down by the old books. The prowess of honorable knights is known to us because clerks have written about their deeds with rhetoric (lines 195-205). This is what Lydgate calls the "keye of remembraunce" (line 224), and here the narrator refers to the Theban history, which is of course taken up in the *Siege of Thebes* as the main subject: by reading Statius and other chroniclers, we learn about the story of Thebes involving Oedipus and his two sons (lines 226-249).

The truth, however, can be distorted sometimes when the stories have come down to us without being faithfully told. Homer's story contains "veyn fables" (line 263) and "false transumpcioun (transferring materials) / To hyde trouthe falsely under cloude" (lines 264-65). This is because in Homer's version of history, gods help Greeks in the Trojan war; he writes in favor of the Greeks, but this attitude disappoints those who wish to make a correct judgment of the past

(lines 272-83). The narrator delivers a similar critique of Ovid, who wrapped truth within falsehood, and Virgil, who at least in part followed Homer's style (lines 299-308). This type of criticism was commonly seen in the Middles Ages; Joseph of Exeter and Guido delle Colonne together attacked Homer for incorporating fictitious elements, although fictional writings were generally accepted as long as there were moral lessons inherent in the texts.[11]

Lydgate's critical attitude in passing down the records of history is well put into practice in the *Siege of Thebes*. In his respect to past authorities, he tries to adjust what was written by them. The *Siege*, for instance, tells how a son of King Lycurgus was killed by a serpent and the king showed mercy to a lady looking after the son. Lydgate points out that Boccaccio wrote a different version of this episode, saying: "Thogh John Bochas the contrarie telle" (line 3510). Also, the narrator refers to several books when he describes how Greeks behaved when they approached Thebes: "Though some bookes the contrarye seyn, / But myn autour is platly therageyn (opposed)" (lines 3971-72).[12] For Lydgate, literature necessarily involves the idea of historiography; to compose a work of art is to reread and reinterpret the old materials and make them into a truer version of history.

IV. Interpreting Truth in the *Siege of Thebes*

The main text of the *Siege of Thebes* accords well with Lydgate's literary principle described above. He demonstrates that the Theban history is constructed from a series of interpretations in search of truth. For instance, the truth about Oedipus's birth is revealed partly by his act of interpretation. Oedipus is told that he is not truly a son to King Polibon as he was actually found in the woods as a baby; then he tries to interpret the story very closely:

> Wherwith Edippus gan to wexe pale,
> And chaunge also cheer and contenaunce,
> And gan appoint in his remembraunce
> Word be word and feyned right nought,
> And felly mused in his owne thought,
> And cast he wold withoute more tarying
> The trouth enquere of Poliboun the kyng. (lines 496-502)

The process chimes with Lydgate's idea of literature. The story is told for the remembrance of the past, and through his interpretation, the truth is keenly pursued. Even after Polibon hides the fact, Oedipus persistently inquires, "conjuring (beseeching) be the goddess alle / To telle trouth and

nothyng to hide" (lines 518-19). Another example is Sphinx's riddle, which again shows that Oedipus' s interpretive power drives history. Oedipus fully uses his heart, wit, and reason to decipher the riddle. And through this interpretation, what Oedipus is required to do is to "telle trouth or ellys to be dede" (line 686). When Sphinx is depicted by Oedipus as "false and fraudulent" (line 689), again we learn that Oedipus's conception of truth is something to be found beneath the trivial textual surface.

Lydgate's notion of truth and interpretation even forms the core part of the themes we can see in the *Siege of Thebes*. The story of the *Siege* centers on the feud between the two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices, and in Lydgate's version, the destruction of Thebes primarily derives from Eteocles's "doubleness," or false oath. Throughout the poem, truth is praised as the highest virtue pertaining to a king, while untruth is thought of as a sign of mutability. If we go back to the image of grain and chaff, Eteocles's perjury corresponds to the chaff, a deceitful text to be cut apart from the truth.

The *Siege* clearly explains that one's truth is connected to the spoken word. Eteocles and Polynices together agreed that they would take turns in governing Thebes; each year a king hands over the scepter to the other. But Eteocles, becoming the first ruler, refuses to step down from the throne and begins to be afraid of being attacked by his brother Polynices, who became an exile. When Etiocles asks for a counsel, the first advisor refers to "trouthe":

> The firste seide, aboven alle thyng,
> Trouthe shulde longe to a kyng,
> Of his word not be variable
> But pleyn and hool as a centre stable. (lines 1721-24)

The quality a king is required to have above all is truth, which is identical with keeping one's word. If a king is untrue to his oath, it is condemned as a sign of instability. The first advisor, whose voice gradually becomes indistinguishable from that of the narrator, continues to warn that "change of word" leads to the destruction of the kingdom:

> Allas, therfor that eny doublenesse,
> Variaunce, or unsicrenesse,
> Chaunge of word or mutabilité,
> Fraude or deceyte or unstabileté
> Shuld in a kyng han domynacioun

    To causen after his destruccioun.（lines 1747-52）

The interrelationship between truth and word gives us an idea that Lydgate's "truth" is intrinsically a textual construct. Whether it refers to historicity or morality, truth requires textual stability, which Lydgate also tries to retain in his own poems.

    Later in the *Siege* we can see that the dyad of truth and interpretation is also at work in the destruction of the Greek host who, led by Adrastus and Polynices, attacked Thebes. The narrator refers to the episode of Amphiorax, an old authority whose prophecy predicted the fatal end of the Greeks. The old man, with his "trewe prophecye," could "opynly dyvyne"（plainly interpret）the forthcoming events, and he came to know that the Greeks will be killed in the war, himself included （lines 2810-31, at 2810, 11）. But the other Greeks did not agree with this interpretation, considering Amphiorax as "untrewe"（lines 2924-28, at 2925）. Again, the act of interpretation drives the story, and it is the Greek's interpretive failure to read the truth that ruined them in the war.

    The *Siege of Thebes*, focusing on the idea of interpretation, develops one of the most important Chaucerian themes. The poem shows that Lydgate's literary principle of reading the truth and untruth in the texts is exactly what Theban and Greek characters do to build up their history. Although the *Siege* may not describe the process in which stories are accepted and interpreted among the pilgrims, it contains the interpretive process in the main text, and Lydgate himself enacts the idea of interpretation in his creation. Moreover, the Theban story virtually becomes a prequel to the story of Theseus and two knights described in the *Knight's Tale*, thus making the *Siege* and the *Canterbury Tales* structurally circular and showing how literary texts limitlessly invite reinterpretation and rewriting. Thematically, the poem well deserves to be added to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Notes

1. Chaucer was first given this paternal position in the *Regiment of Princes*, written in 1412 by one of his earliest disciples, Thomas Hoccleve.
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*（Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936）, p. 162.
3. Daniel T. Kline, "Father Chaucer and the *Siege of Thebes*: Literary Paternity, Aggressive Deference, and the Prologue to Lydgate's Oedipal Canterbury Tale," *Chaucer Review* 34（1999）: 217-35.
4. Scott-Morgan Straker, "Deference and Difference: Lydgate, Chaucer, and the *Siege of Thebes*," *Review of English Studies* 52（2001）: 1-21. For other readings of the *Siege*, see also: Robert W. Ayers, "Medieval History, Moral Purpose, and the Structure of Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*,"

PMLA 73（1958）: 463-74; Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 151-59; A. C. Spearing, "Lydgate's Canterbury Tale: The *Siege of Thebes* and Fifteenth-Century Chaucerianism," in *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays,* ed., Robert F. Yeager (Hamden: Archon, 1984), pp. 333-64.

5.　Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983), p. 41.

6.　Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 10.

7.　Robert R. Edwards, ed., *The Siege of Thebes* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), line 48. All the citations of the *Siege* are hereafter taken from this edition, given in the text by line number.

8.　D. W. Robertson Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 58.

9.　Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), line 3443.

10.　Robert R. Edwards, ed., *Troy Book: Selections* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), lines 149-55. The following citations from *Troy Book* are taken from this edition.

11.　A. J. Minnis, A. B. Scott and David Wallace, eds., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100 – c. 1375* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 114-16.

12.　Lydgate's prime source for the *Siege* is believed to be the *Roman de Edipus*, and "myn autour" refers to its anonymous author. See the Introduction to Edwards's edition, p. 3.

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