The Book of Hope¹ (ca. 1429)

Alain Chartier
Contributed by Julie Singer

Introduction

Alain Chartier was a Norman, probably born in Bayeux between 1385 and 1395. He is twice mentioned as an officer in the household of Yolande d'Anjou in account books covering the period from 1409 to 1414. It is to these years that Chartier’s earliest surviving lyrics date: these are mostly occasional ballades (fixed-form poems with a refrain), verse debates, and the Lay de plaisance (a longer and more complex fixed-form poem). Chartier entered the service of the dauphin, the future Charles VII, by 1418. He served primarily as a secretary, writing letters and royal acts, and accompanying ambassadors on several diplomatic missions. He first gained prominence with his courtly poetry, mostly composed from about 1414 to 1425. This period of his work culminates in 1424’s Belle Dame sans mercy (a verse dialogue between an ardent suitor and an uninterested woman, culminating in the lover’s reported death, which became a succès de scandale) and the literary quarrel that followed. He is also known for his long political poems, mostly composed during the 1420s, and for his Latin speeches and epistles. Chartier died in 1430, leaving his final work, the Livre de l’Espérance (Book of Hope), incomplete.²

The Book of Hope begins with an unusual portrayal of what we would now identify as mental illness. This unfinished prosimetrum consists of sixteen poems alternating with sixteen prose passages. In the prose sections, the suicidal Acteur (first-person author—narrator), beset by Lady Melancholy and her helpers (Defiance, Indignation, and Despair), becomes separated from his lethargic personified Entendement (Intellect). Entendement finally finds the wherewithal to open the rusted-shut door of the Acteur’s memory, whence the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity) come forth. The divided Acteur’s impaired faculties, both sensory and intellectual, are then repaired by Faith and Hope (and, presumably, Charity, though the unfinished book neither provides her dialogue nor reveals the identity of a young lady who accompanies the three theological virtues). The metric sections are less straightforward, as the speaker of the verses, that is, the voice through which they are expressed, is not typically specified.³ Whereas the prose expresses the melancholic sufferer’s point of view, poetry appears to be the chosen vehicle of expression for the already healed voice, the one that, as Sylvia Huot puts it, “speaks from a point beyond that of the mental breakdown that he chronicles in prose.”⁴ The healing unrolls in suitably Boethian fashion—indeed, this rewriting of the Consolation of Philosophy is identified in several manuscripts as the Consolation des trois vertus.

The significance of this text for the history of literary discourses of disability lies in its merging of courtly literary traditions with medicalized notions of mental illness and an unusually frank and vivid account of suicidal ideation: Chartier uses the conventional devices of first-person narration, a frame narrative, and personification in order both to describe and to illustrate the plight of a seriously depressed melancholic. The Book’s vision of mental illness as stemming from impediments to normal brain function is
consistent with late medieval scientific writings; in the excerpt below he explicitly cites “Aristotle,” referring to the pseudo-Aristotelian Problemata XXX.1 which contains the famous declaration that gifted artists typically have a melancholic complexion. Throughout the text, Chartier insists on the physiological origins of mental illness as a disease of the brain: the internal senses are “corporeal and organic,” and the Acteur’s suicidal thoughts come about as a direct result of Melancholy’s disruption of one particular part of the brain, “the part that sits in the middle of the head in the region of the imaginative, which some call the fantasy.” Moreover, the entire narrative appears to take place within an organic mental space, as Entendement releases the Theological Virtues by moving to the far end of the room in which the action unfolds and opening a door situated “back toward [the Acteur’s] memory.” While the personifications struggling over the Acteur’s soul inscribe the Book of Hope firmly within a well-established medieval psychomachic tradition, the situation of this discourse on mental health within a mental space is extraordinary. The Acteur’s overt identification of the personifications as “simulacra in feminine form” lends the prose sections a two-dimensional, surreal flavor, which is only enhanced by the uncertain point(s) of view expressed in disembodied metric sections. The text’s prosimetric form offers a means of simultaneously illustrating the same character in states of sickness and of health, and its startling juxtaposition of allegorical personification and medicalized language situates it at the intersection of courtly, scientific, and devotional discourses. As a healing narrative, the book offers today’s scholars of medieval disability an important opportunity to interrogate medical and religious models of disability.

While it is not widely read today, the Book of Hope enjoyed considerable success in the fifteenth century: it survives in more than thirty-five manuscripts, in numerous printed editions, and in two Middle English translations. This is the first translation of an excerpt into modern English.

Bibliography

Prose I.
The Author/Narrator

In this doleful and sad train of thought, which always presents itself to my heart and accompanies me as I wake and as I fall asleep, which causes my nights to be long and my life disagreeable, I long overworked and crushed my little understanding; it is so overcome and surrounded by unpleasant frenzies that I cannot use it for anything that might bring me happiness or comfort. Not long ago the memory of things past, the frightfulness of present circumstances and the horror of the dangers to come had awakened all of my sad regrets, my pained fantasies and my insecure fear, and so I remained like a man lost, my face pale, my sense troubled, and my blood roiled.

And at this point there came toward me an old lady, all disarrayed and as if indifferent to her dress, skinny, dry and withered, with a pale, dull and colorless complexion, downcast gaze, an afflicted voice, and a drooping lip. Her head was capped with a dirty kerchief filthy with ashes, her body wrapped in a brown mantle. Upon her approach, without saying a word, she suddenly enveloped me in her arms and covered my face and body with that woeful mantle; but she squeezed me so tightly in her arms that I felt my heart crushed inside me as if in a press; and with her hands she held my head and my eyes covered and blocked, so that I was not at liberty to see or to hear. And thus like a faint swooning man she brought me to the infirmary, and threw me on the bed of anguish and malady. She brewed such strange and marvelous beverages prepared in madness and in ignorance, that even Understanding, the young and discerning bachelor who had followed me, sometimes from afar, sometimes up close, as God gave me his company—even this good and wise one, who had conducted me as far as the bed in my hour of need, remained next to me dazed, stunned, as if in a lethargy.

Later I found out that this old woman is named Melancholy, who troubles thoughts, dries the body, corrupts the humors, weakens the sensitive spirits, and leads man to lassitude and death. According to Aristotle's doctrine, the high intellect and elevated understanding of profound and excellent men have often been troubled and darkened by her, when they have dwelt on overly deep and varied thoughts. For the four internal senses of man, which we call the sensitive, imaginative, estimative, and memory, are corporeal and organic, and they can be damaged with excessively frequent or rough use, just as among the five bodily senses the eye is perturbed by looking at overly bright light, or by reading too often, or by fixing one's gaze on tiny, delicate, distinct things.

Poem II.
Puny human nature,
Born to travail and to pain,
Clothed in a fragile body,
You are so feeble, you are so vain,
Tender, vulnerable, uncertain,
And easily struck down!

You are of such poor extraction
That if you are not sustained by the heavens,
You cannot live in good health.

Prose II.
The Author/Narrator

And then, so intensely unsound of body and mind, I was lain out on that disagreeable bed, where for many days I remained with a listless mouth and no appetite. And after great weakness, long fasting, bitter pain and shock in my brain, which Lady Melancholy tormented with her hard hands, I felt her open, shake, and remove the part that sits in the middle of the head in the region of the
imaginative, which some call the fantasy.
And at that time three terrible simulacra in feminine form, frightening to see, presented themselves to the forefront of my thought, toward the darker left-hand side of my bed.

[The three “simulacra in feminine form” are De-
fiance, Indignation and Despair. Each, in turn, chastises the Acteur and exhorts him to take his own life. When the Acteur seems ready to succumb, Nature intervenes to save her creature, awakening Entendement (Intellect), who then admits the Theological Virtues to the bedchamber. The remainder of the book consists of Faith’s and Hope’s remedial speeches to the Acteur.]
Endnotes

1 The translation is based on the Middle French text from *Le Livre de l’Espérance*, ed. François Rouy (Champion, 1989). Translation, footnotes, and endnotes have been provided by Julie Singer.  
3 Certain metric sections are attributable to various characters in the prose narrative: meter 1 is composed in a voice that suggests the Acteur, though it is not explicitly attributed to him; proses 5 and 6 both suggest that meter 6 is voiced by Entendement; and meter 11 seems to be in Espérance’s voice. The other meters, on the other hand, remain more troubling; if we accept Sylvia Huot’s convincing argument that the poetic passages are spoken through the voice of the authorial persona, then we can see that they represent the end result of the pedagogical process that the three virtues undertake from Prose 5 onward. Sylvia Huot, “Re-Fashioning Boethius: Prose and Poetry in Chartier’s *Livre de l’Espérance,*” *Medium Aevum,* vol. 76, no. 2, 2007, pp. 268–84.  