

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

David Scott-Macnab, 'Polysemy in Middle English embosen and the Hart of The Book of the Duchess', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 36 (2005), 175-94

Permanent URL:

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Polysemy in Middle English *embosen* and the Hart of *The Book of the Duchess*

David Scott-Macnab

Many scholars have drawn attention to those narrative features in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*—particularly at the start and close of the dream sequence—that seem intended to evoke the fluidity, the strange transitions and the uncertainties of an authentic dream experience.¹ These are now widely accepted as important characteristics of the poem, yet dream-like fluidity is not the same as vagueness, either of purpose or of style, and imprecision of that sort is assuredly not a quality of *The Book of the Duchess*. In one area, in particular, we may be confident that Chaucer could not possibly afford any hint of laxity or imprecision to affect his narrative: namely, in his use of specialised hunting terms to introduce and describe the action of Octovyen's hunt. In a poem intended for a cynegetically knowledgeable court audience, and with a nobleman, John of Gaunt, appearing (thinly disguised) as a major character, it is unthinkable that the young poet would have chosen his words from the hunting lexicon with anything less than a clear sense of their contemporary currency, and an equally clear sense of their relevance to his overall purpose. To do otherwise would surely have been to risk losing credibility, both for himself and his poem, among the very people he most needed to impress.

It therefore makes sense to strive for accuracy in our understanding of Chaucer's hunting terminology, not only for what it reveals about events themselves, but also for its possible structural, thematic or metaphorical implications in the poem as a whole. I have explored such ideas in an earlier article focussing on the main events of Octovyen's hunt;² in this study I wish to examine a hunting expression that was overlooked in my earlier article, but which continues to give rise to confusion.

When the mournful narrator of *The Book of the Duchess* 'wakes' in his dream, he lies for a while in bed marvelling in turn at the melodious sounds of birdsong and the magnificently glazed windows and painted walls of his chamber, which depict, among other things, 'al the story of Troye' and 'the Romaunce of the Rose' (ll. 291-334).³ Finally he becomes aware of the splendour of the day without, before suddenly hearing a group of hunters busily preparing for a day's sport and discussing it in such detail that he gives up trying to recall everything they said:

And as I lay thus, wonder lowde
Me thought I herde an hunte blowe
T'assay hys horn and for to knowe
Whether hyt were clere or hors of soun.
And I herde goynge bothe up and down
Men, hors, houndes, and other thyng;
And al men speken of huntyng,
How they wolde slee the hert with strengthe,
And how the hert had upon lengthe
So moche embosed—y not now what. (ll. 344-53)

The arrival of the hunters quickens the narrator's consciousness, drawing him away from his drowsy contemplations of literary lovers and into a world of purposeful masculine action. With a renewed blitheness, he grabs his horse and joins the hunters, who he learns are servants of the emperor Octovyen (ll. 354-68). The action moves on with extraordinary swiftness, enhanced by a terseness of style that seems intended to evoke the 'fot-hot' nature of the chase itself; and then, all too soon, the hunt is over, or at least suspended for the time being when the hart manages to escape from its pursuers (ll. 370-86).

To return to the beginning, however, what is it that the narrator first learns from the hunters' animated chatter outside his chamber window, and how is it relevant to the unfolding events of the narrative? In fact, only two salient details emerge, both couched in the specialised language of the hunt: first, that the hunters intend to 'slee the hert with strengthe' and, secondly, that 'the hert had upon lengthe / So moche embosed' (ll. 351-3). The first of these is not problematic; described most simply, the hunt with strength—from French *à force*, sometimes *par force de chiens*—was a hunt conducted with horse and hounds.⁴ Not nearly so straightforward is Chaucer's disclosure that the hart (a male red deer aged six years or more) 'had [. . .] embosed'; this apparently simple statement has

been the subject of considerable disagreement and continues to be glossed in a way that, as I shall show, misses Chaucer's point entirely.

Commentators and editors have generally adopted one of two rival interpretations. On the one hand are those, such as Walter Skeat, Norman Davis and J. H. Fisher, who believe that the hunters are saying that the stag has secluded itself deeply in a wood;⁵ on the other are equally influential voices, such as those of O. F. Emerson and F. N. Robinson, who claim that the statement reveals instead that the hart has been exhausted and is foaming at the mouth as a consequence of hard running.⁶ To complicate matters further, there is divergence between the two most authoritative sources on English language, with the first reading being endorsed by *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, s.v. *emboss*, v.² 1), and the second by the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*, s.v. *embosen*, v.).⁷ Regrettably, there is no authoritative verdict to be found in *The Riverside Chaucer*, which merely reiterates both interpretations, though apparently favouring the *MED*.⁸ This is unfortunate, since the first reading—that the stag is sequestered in the depths of the forest—is in all respects the better of the two, as A. C. Baugh has convincingly shown.⁹ The present study attempts to settle the dispute finally in favour of the *OED* by offering corroborating evidence that has not previously been considered. But it also goes further, in reconsidering the overall treatment of *emboss* by both the *MED* and the *OED*, and then suggesting a fresh explanation for the development of the various senses associated with this word.

First, however, it is necessary to dismiss the ingenious, but maverick, interpretation of E. T. Donaldson, who paraphrases the lines 'how the hert had upon lengthe / So moche embosed' as meaning 'how much in length [the stag's] antlers had grown'.¹⁰ Although Donaldson supplies no supportive etymology, it seems most likely that he has read Chaucer's verb as a form of ME *embocen* (var. *embossen* < OF *embocer*), which is glossed by the *MED* as meaning 'to bulge or be bloated', 'to cause to bulge', even 'to be hunchbacked'.¹¹ Donaldson's paraphrase implicitly postulates an unattested transferred sense of the word, which goes beyond the main notions of bulging, swelling or protruding, to signify the considerable growth that takes place in a red deer's antlers. But this is to stretch the meaning of the word beyond anything that the available evidence will support. Although it is just conceivable that ME *embocen* could describe the budding of a new set of antlers, no citation in the *MED* shows that it was ever used that way, let alone for the burgeoning of a head of ten or more tines ('points') such as a 'chaseable' hart was expected to possess.¹²

Equally problematic, for other reasons, is O. F. Emerson's proposal that Octovyen's hunters are discussing a previous day's hunt in which a stag was hunted to exhaustion and therefore foaming at the mouth. According to Emerson's paraphrase, the hunters are saying that '[. . .] the hart had, after a long run [*upon lengthe*], so much exhausted himself [*so moche embosed*] [. . .] that he had at last succumbed to their long continued efforts'.¹³ The suggestion may seem appealing and plausible, were it not for the fact that it casts the hunters' animated conversation as boastful reminiscence, which is totally out of place here. According to Chaucer's account, the narrator hears the hunters talking about 'How they wolde slee the hert with strengthe' (ll. 350-1): that is, anticipating the hunt to come. Emerson's notion that they should then immediately start talking about another hart, which had been successfully slain on a previous occasion, subverts the logic both of Chaucer's syntax and of the situation he describes. For it is important to see that everything in Chaucer's account at this point revolves around the hart-hunt that is about to take place, with the narrative moving inexorably, and with ever-intensifying concentration, towards that event.

*Middle English embosen and Early Modern English emboss:
origins and evolution*

Turning to the *MED*, we find the verb *embosen* defined as follows: 'Of game: to become exhausted from being hunted'. An enigmatic etymological note posits a derivation from OF *bos*, *bois* 'woods, chace' without any indication of how this could have produced the specified sense. No other grammatical information is supplied, nor any subdivisions of senses or uses to which the verb was put. Only two examples are cited for the one definition: *The Book of the Duchess* l. 353 and a passage from the fifteenth-century verse romance *Generydes*, which tells of the magical appearance of a stag before Auferius, the king of India, as he stands in the bed-chamber of a beautiful seductress (the faery Sereyne). The event is narrated thus:

Anone vppon as she these wordis saide,
Ther come an hert in att the chaunber dore
All embosed; the kyng was sore dismayede,
Semyng to hym, as it passid in the flore,
It was the same he chased in the more [. . .] (ll. 78-82)¹⁴

Here it is clear that the main distinguishing feature of the stag is that it is 'embosed' (l. 80), which dismays the king and prompts him to think that this must be the same stag he had hunted earlier that day. The narrative point is that Auferius now realises that the stag has somehow been responsible for leading him to his current predicament; for our purposes, the passage reveals a sequence of ideas that makes the poet's intended meaning easy to construe: the king recognises the stag by certain characteristics, and chiefly by the fact that the animal is 'all embosed', which identifies it as having been involved in a lengthy chase.

If to be 'embosed' is to show the signs of a long chase, the stag would be panting heavily, rolling its eyes, sweating freely and foaming at the mouth, some of which we learn from the verse *Boke of Huntyng* (Rawlinson text), when it describes how, 'whan þe hert negh is dede / Then castes he þe froth al blode rede'.¹⁵ This is confirmed by a somewhat later source—George Gascoigne's treatise, *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575)—which states, 'When he [the hart] is foamy at the mouth, we saye he is *embost*'.¹⁶ But is Gascoigne's sense what is intended in *Generydes*? Is Auferius' hart one that is generally harried and exhausted? Or is it, more specifically, one that has reached the extremity of exhaustion and is therefore foaming at the mouth (and perhaps casting flecks of that foam as it runs)? Unfortunately, we cannot be absolutely sure in this context, yet the distinction is important as it concerns our understanding of the several meanings that attach to this word, and the chronology of their development.

In spite of this uncertainty, we can nevertheless accept that the way in which *embosed* is used in *Generydes* fits reasonably well with the gloss supplied by the *MED*, even if the supposed origins of the word in OF *bois* remain obscure.¹⁷ We now need to ask if the same can be said of the relevant passage in *The Book of the Duchess*, which differs from *Generydes* in two important respects. In the first place, the stag in *Generydes* is one that has already been chased for much of the day, whereas in *The Book of the Duchess* the hunt has not yet started. Secondly, the grammatical characteristics of *embosed* diverge in the two texts. In *Generydes*, the word is an adjectival past participle (that is, a past participle in form, an adjective in function) describing the condition of the stag ('an hert [. . .] all embosed'), whereas in *The Book of the Duchess* it is an active, intransitive verb indicating something that the stag has accomplished itself (the hunters discuss 'how the hert had [. . .] so moche embosed'). This distinction is vital because it marks two very different senses of the word, both of which relate to hunting, but whose relation to each other is less than clear.

Before analysing the evidence further, we may reflect that one of the main difficulties with our current understanding of ME *embosen* (var. *enbosen*) is that it has so few recorded occurrences. Only *The Book of the Duchess* and *Generydes* are cited by the *MED*, and in both of these the word's meaning has to be teased from the context. Furthermore, unlike many other ME hunting terms, *embosen* is not recorded in any English hunting treatise of the period, which means that we lack the considerable clarifying potential of such texts, and are forced to rely on the evidence of later witnesses to make sense of the word in earlier ones. Another thorny matter is that the Chaucerian usage—where the verb is active and intransitive—appears to be exceedingly rare, with no other attestation in the *OED* until the late seventeenth century.¹⁸

Unlike the *MED*, the *OED* distinguishes Chaucer's use of *emboss* from the sense discernible in *Generydes*, defining it as the original and principal signification of the verb (s.v. *emboss*, v.²):

†1. *intr[ansitive]*. Of a hunted animal: To take shelter in, plunge into, a wood or thicket. *Obs[olete]*.

Here at last is a definition that can be reconciled with borrowing from OF *bois* (specifically, *em* (= *en*) + *bois*), making sense of the unexplained etymology in the *MED*. The word's other main meanings—literal, figurative and transferred—relating to, and deriving from, the exhausting or exhaustion of a hunted animal are set out by the *OED* as follows:

†2. To drive (a hunted animal) to extremity. *Obs[olete]*.

†3. In *pass[ive]* of a hunted animal: To be exhausted by running; *hence*, to foam at the mouth (as a result of exhaustion in running). Also *transf[erred]* of persons: (a) To be exhausted, at the last extremity of fatigue; (b) to foam at the mouth (from rage, etc.). *Obs[olete]*.

4. *trans[itive]*. To cover with foam (the mouth, the body of an animal). *arch[aic]*.

Summarising the evidence, we find that examples of *emboss* are rare in Middle English, but numerous in the Early Modern period; indeed, from the early sixteenth century onwards, there is no shortage of witnesses for a cluster of related senses to do with exhaustion—being exhausted, or being made exhausted—and only two (from Milton and Samuel Butler) exemplifying the

original, Chaucerian sense of the word.¹⁹ Without duplicating the precise semantic divisions made by the *OED*, we can see from these later witnesses that *emboss* can indicate: (i) the action of hunting an animal hard so as to exhaust it; (ii) the condition of being harried, frenzied or exhausted by being so hunted, or by the act of hunting itself; or (iii) the foaming at the mouth caused by the frenzy or exhaustion brought about by the chase. In transferred or figurative uses, exhaustion of any kind can be intended, and the foaming or frenzy can come from rage, distemper or any other violent emotion. The word was clearly popular and widely used in richly varied contexts, even if all its senses are now considered obsolete or archaic.

For our purposes, what is significant is that the senses relating to exhaustion and its consequences (specifically, foaming at the mouth) appear at an early stage and very quickly predominate—at least as far as surviving evidence shows. And although these several senses all indicate a genesis in the hunt, even early examples may be divorced from hunting contexts. Indeed, as early as 1523, Skelton uses *emboss* without any reference to the hunt. In his poem *Howe the Douty Duke of Albany*, Skelton rails against Henry VIII's detractors in the following terms: 'Than ye be a knappishe sorte / [. . .] With your enbosed jawes / To rayle on hym lyke dawes'.²⁰ From the context, we may deduce that persons with 'enbosed' jaws are frothing at the mouth from some cause other than by being hunted or chased: in this case, a condition of lunacy or idiocy is implied. Such an early use of this transferred sense of the verb, with no reference to the hunting field, is particularly noteworthy.²¹

In another poem, also from 1523, Skelton uses the past participial form of *emboss* more conventionally to denote the frenzy of an animal pursued by hounds. In the *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell*, Skelton depicts himself '[. . .] in the frytty forest of Galtres, / [. . .] Where hartis belluyng, embosyd with distres, / Ran on the raunge so longe, that I suppose / Few men can tell where the hynde calfe gose'.²² Skelton's 'embosyd' is here traditionally glossed as meaning 'exhausted with running', in spite of the awkwardness that this imposes on the line; 'frenzied' or 'maddened' (by being pursued) would suit both the context and the syntax far better.²³ And that is precisely how the word is used when Shakespeare's Cleopatra calls out, 'Help me, my women! O, he's more mad / Than Telamon for his shield; the boar of Thessaly / Was never so emboss'd' (i.e. frenzied).²⁴

Yet it is important to see that both quotations from Skelton exemplify shifts away from the supposed prototypical senses derived from venery, 'to be exhausted through being hunted', and 'to exhaust in pursuit'. Ironically, in order to

find incontrovertible examples of these senses, we need to look later in time (by at least half a century), not earlier. The notion of being exhausted through being hunted is expressed by *emboss* unambiguously for the first time in Gascoigne's *Noble Arte of Venery* (1575), where the author explains how a huntsman needs to judge any deer that runs past him, in case it is being mistakenly pursued by hounds that have gone astray:

and if peradventure it happen that the pricker on horsebacke being at his relaye, should see an Hart of tenne passe by him, and yet heare not the other huntsmen, nor their hornes, then let him looke wel whether the Hart be embost or not, and what houndes they were that came with him. And if he perceiue that they were choyse hounds and such as will not hunt chaunge [the wrong quarry], then ought he to blowe as loude as he can for other hounds, and to call in helpe.²⁵

As in *Generydes*, Gascoigne's *embost* must mean that the hart is showing signs of having been pursued for a long time, which would distinguish it from an animal that has been mistakenly taken up by some of the less reliable hounds. And Gascoigne's use of the adjectival past participle is also noteworthy because this is the form in which the word is cast in the great majority of recorded cases.

Likewise, the active, transitive form of the verb (meaning 'to exhaust in pursuit') is not recorded until 1602-3, when Shakespeare has a conspiratorial Frenchman say of his intended victim, 'But we have almost emboss'd him, you shall see his / fall to-night; for indeed, he is not for your lordship's / respect'.²⁶

Further, peripheral developments will not be discussed here, such as the emergence of the variant forms *imbost* and *imbosted*, and the parallel formation *imbosk* (< Italian *imboscare*), during the late sixteenth century. It remains only to observe that the brief survey sketched out above agrees broadly with the *OED* in most respects, but differs over certain details of interpretation, and especially over shades of meaning that are not acknowledged by that dictionary: most especially, my suggestion that *embossed* can mean 'harried', 'stressed', 'hard-pressed' or 'frenzied', as well as 'exhausted'. And another point that the *OED* fails to make is that *embossed* was not restricted to the quarry of a chase, but could apply to the pursuers as well, as we learn from an unnamed lord in *The Taming of the Shrew*, who commands his huntsman to 'tender well my hounds. /

Breathe [Folio: *Brach*] Merriman, the poor cur is emboss'd, / And couple Clowder with the deep-mouth'd brach'.²⁷

Yet one fundamental issue remains, namely, how *embooss* came to develop its several senses pertaining to exhaustion and foaming at the mouth, when its roots clearly relate to the action of entering a forest (*en + bois*).²⁸ The *OED* admits to considerable uncertainty over this matter, observing in its prefatory comments, 'The development of senses [. . .] is strange, but appears to be in accordance with the existing evidence'. Under sense 2, 'To drive (a hunted animal) to extremity', we find the further admission, 'The sense "drive to a thicket", required by the etymology above suggested, is not clearly evidenced'; and sense 3 (b), 'to foam at the mouth', is accompanied by the comment, 'The sense "to foam at the mouth" is prob. influenced by *EMBOSS* v.¹, as if an "embossed stag" were one "studded" with bubbles of foam'.²⁹ This final suggestion must be admired for its ingenuity but it seems unsatisfactory, desperate even, with not so much as a hint of support from the available evidence. Even so, there may well be a kernel of truth in the idea that *embooss* v.¹ influenced the development of polysemy in *embooss* v.².

The principal meanings of *embooss* v.¹, evident as early as the fifteenth century, are 'to bulge, swell' or 'to cause to bulge', as in Lydgate's advice to a youth concerning table-manners: 'To enboce thy Iowis withe mete is nat diewe'.³⁰ And from the mid-sixteenth century we find that verb is used figuratively, to indicate the inflating of oneself or one's demeanour; hence, pomposity, tumidity of style.³¹ Could it be that such general notions of swelling or inflating could have been carried over to *embooss* v.², when applied to an animal that was seen to be panting, hyperventilating, sweating, lolling out its tongue, rolling its eyes and frothing at the mouth? There is no recorded evidence that makes such an association explicit, but it seems rather more plausible than thinking of a stag as being 'studded' with bubbles of foam.

Leaving the realms of speculation, there is other, more concrete evidence that does indeed show why an exhausted stag might be called 'embossed'. Once again, the sources are not medieval, but what they describe is just as relevant to the medieval hunt as to their own period, namely, the appearance and behaviour of a stag when it is nearing the end of its strength. First, from Michael Drayton's *Legend of Matilda* (1594), comes an extended simile which reveals that a weary deer starts looking for places to hide itself:

When, like a Deere, before the Hounds imbost,
When him his strength beginneth to forsake,
Leaves the smooth Launds to which he trusted most,
And to the Covert doth himselfe betake
Doubling, and creepes from Brake againe to Brake,
Thus still I shift me from the Princes Face,
Who had me then continually in Chace.³²

The verisimilitude of this image is confirmed by Gervase Markham, who observes that, '[. . .] when a Stagge is wearie [. . .] he will tappish oft, that is, hee wil euer and anon be lying downe and lurking in darke holes and corners [. . .]'.³³ And a very similar description occurs in William Warner's allegorical hunt of Cupid:

Sweet Cynthea, rate the eger Curre, and so my foe preuent,
For, loe, a farre, my chased Heart imboste and almost spent.
Thankes, gentle Goddesses, now the Lad pursues a bootles chace:
My Heart recouers Couerte wheare the Hound cannot hold pace.
Now tappas closely, silly Heart, vnrowse not and so liue.³⁴

In other words, an exhausted stag will try to hide from pursuing hounds by re-entering covert, which is precisely the action denoted by the component parts of *emboss*: 'into + woods'. We may plausibly infer that a deer came to be described as 'embossed' ('exhausted') when it had reached such a level of fatigue that it would start looking for a woodland refuge—a brake, thicket or other area of dense undergrowth—in which to hide from its tormentors or, in the last resort, to confront them by turning and standing 'at (a) bay'.³⁵

Chaucer's hart reconsidered

So much for *embossed* in its widely attested denotations of exhaustion or exhausting (through hunting or being hunted), and the attendant physical manifestations of that condition. Returning to the hart that 'had upon lengthe / So moche embosed' in *The Book of the Duchess*, we can see more clearly how different is Chaucer's verb from those examples discussed above, and consequently how inappropriate is the *MED*'s gloss of this passage. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the agent of the action is the hart itself, which must indicate that

the animal cannot be 'embossed' in the same way as one that has been pursued by hounds. Furthermore, as I have already observed, the hunt is an event that has yet to occur in the poem, so it makes little sense that the hunters should be discussing how the animal had been driven to exhaustion. If that had occurred, the hart would almost certainly be dead, not reappearing to be hunted another day.

Given the context in which it occurs, there is every reason to suppose that Chaucer's *embosed* is a technical hunting term that in some way derives from French, though it is not borrowed from any immediate source of *The Book of the Duchess* itself. For Joseph Mersand, it is simply one of '[. . .] several words pertaining to the chase and to hunting that probably were used too frequently in the conversation of the polite society of the time to have necessitated borrowing from a French original'.³⁶ Middle English forms of the word—*embosed*, *enbosed*, *enbosid*—all indicate a derivation from OF *bois*, resulting in a term cognate with OF *embuschier* (var. *embo(s)chier*, *embuissier*, *embuiser*), which had a variety of meanings, among them, 'to ambush', 'to send into a forest' (as with pigs for the purpose of feeding), and '(of game) to withdraw into covert'.³⁷ The last of these is a specifically hunting sense, which usually, though not always, requires the verb to be used reflexively. In the thirteenth-century instructional poem *La chace dou cerf*, for example, the huntsman, accompanied by his tracking hound, or limer, is advised to be extremely cautious when stalking the hart to its lair—literally, the place where it is 'enbochiez' ('embossed'):

Et quant tu ceras aprochiés
De lou li cers ert enbochiez,
Fai tenir ton chien et descent,
Et puis si sui tot belement.

[And when you have drawn near / to the place where the hart is
embossed, / let your hound be held and dismount, / and then
follow very carefully.]³⁸

The prose manual *Les livres du roy Modus et de la royne Ratio* (c. 1354-76) gives much the same advice to hunters setting out on their morning quest for a suitable quarry: 'Et les veneurs doivent aler entour le buisson atout leurs limiers et prendre garde se il s'enboche [var. *s'embusche*, *s'embosque*] gueres de bestes u buisson de la nuit' [And the hunters should go around the thicket with their limers and take note whether any animals are (still) embossed in the thicket from the night (before)].³⁹ Likewise in the *Livre de chasse* (1387-c.1391) by Gaston Phébus,

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Comte de Foix: 'Et, si il voit cerf chassable, si regarde quel part il s'enbuschera ne entrera la ou il ne le puisse plus veoir, si aille fere une brisee' [And if he (the tracker) sees a huntable stag, let him note where he embossed himself, and not enter where he cannot see him any more, but rather let him break a twig (as a marker)].⁴⁰

In Old French and Anglo-Norman there is also the related noun *embuschement* (*emboschement*, *embouschement*), which denotes 'an ambush' or 'a hiding-place' (usually in a forest); in hunting contexts, it also indicates the place where an animal (often a deer, commonly a hart) enters the woods to seclude itself in its lair, to hide or rest after feeding.⁴¹ In *Modus et Ratio*, for example, the huntsman who sets out to track the hart in the morning is advised: 'Trai donques tout l'embouchement entre les champs et le bois, et met ton limier devant toi' [Then investigate the whole 'embushment' between the fields and the wood, and let your limer go ahead of you].⁴² And Gaston Phébus has similar counsel for a tracker looking for a potential quarry in woodlands with tall trees ('hauz boys'): 'Et, quant il en encontrera aux champs de chose qui li plaise, il doit trere l'embuschement pour le mettre au fort entre les champs et le bois' [And when he (the tracker) finds anything encouraging in the fields (indicating a huntable stag), he should investigate the 'embushment' between the fields and the wood in order to follow (the stag) to its thicket].⁴³

The circumstances in which *embuschier* and *embuschement* occur in French hunting texts are highly informative and fit the Chaucerian context well. They reveal that a well-secluded hart was precisely what one would expect to find, and to hear discussed, before the start of a hunt with strength. These texts also show that a hart known to be so sequestered in its lair (its *giste* or *fort*)⁴⁴ would be one that had been properly 'harboured' by a limerer (a tracker) early in the morning, which seems to be precisely what Chaucer's narrator hears being recounted.⁴⁵ Some background information may be useful here.

Harbouring involved the selection of a suitable quarry for a day's sport, and was an operation of vital significance to the hunt with strength. It was the first stage in the elaborate ritual of choosing, separating, and pursuing a specific hart, which is how the hunt with strength was conducted. Edward Plantagenet describes the finer details of harbouring the quarry in ten chapters of his hunting treatise, *The Master of Game* (c. 1406-13), emphasising throughout what care the harbourer must take to ensure that he knows precisely which is the best stag, and where that animal has hidden itself in the woods (caps 23-32).⁴⁶ Having made his observations, the harbourer has to return to the 'assembly', where his master is waiting, report his findings, and offer such evidence as he has been able to gather,

including, for example, some of the stag's 'fumes' (its droppings; *Master of Game*, caps 26, 33). There are many passages that could be usefully quoted, but one is conspicuously relevant. Closely following his source, the *Livre de chasse*, Edward describes the often lengthy process required for discovering the hart's lair, allowing it to settle there, and ensuring that it stays put. The harbourer, says Edward:

shuld also clymbe vp on tree bi cause þat þe hert shuld wynde no
þing of hym [. . .] And if he se an hert stondyng stably he must
loke wel what contre he shal goo to his leire [Gaston: *quel part il
s'enbuschera*]; [. . .] but he must abide a grete while for sumtyme
an hert wil stalle and loke about a greet while or he wil go to his
leire, [. . .] or ellis sumtyme he comeþ out agayn for to loke about
and for to herken, [. . .] and þefore he shal abide longe þat he
affray hym not.⁴⁷

Even then the harbourer could not make his report: he still had to make a circuit of the covert to confirm that the hart had not left from the opposite side.⁴⁸

It is clear, then, that a successful harbouring could take a long time, and that it was most confidently reported when the hart was securely sequestered in its lair; two conditions that usefully explain Chaucer's adverbial phrases 'upon lengthe' and 'so moche'. Emerson, who took these phrases as sure indicators of a lengthy pursuit, paraphrased them as saying, 'the hart had, after a long run, so much exhausted itself',⁴⁹ but in fact they make much better sense if understood in the context of a harbourer's report. As *The Master of Game* reveals, a hart might take a considerable time to settle securely in its lair (cf. *upon lengthe*), and the deeper it secluded itself in the wood (cf. *so moche embosed*) the more likely it was to remain there. Such facts are precisely what a harbourer would want to establish and report before the start of a hunt. They would indicate that the hart was safely secluded deep in the woods, from where it was unlikely to move, and that its position was exactly known: details that would certainly merit animated discussion amongst expectant huntsmen.

This interpretation also helps to explain a novel aspect of Octovyen's hunt in *The Book of the Duchess*, which is that it begins with a *mayster-hunte* blowing three notes ('blasts') on his hunting horn, at which the running hounds are released at the stag (*The Book of the Duchess*, ll. 372-7). This is noteworthy because it was more usual in the hunt with strength for the chosen hart to be first

'unharboured'—i.e. driven from its lair—by the limerer who had discovered it there, and only then for the running dogs to be released, or 'uncoupled', after it. It is clear, however, that the formal unharbouring of a stag did not always occur. Edward Plantagenet explains, for example, that hunters were sometimes too impatient (a situation he deplores), the quarry too restless, or the day too far advanced to risk further delays:

this trewly no skylful hunter oweþ to do but if [. . .] þe deer be
steryng in þe quarter and haþ not abyde þe meving of the lymer,
or ellis þat it be so fer forþ daies þat þe sonne haþ dried vp þe
fues, and þat þei haue lytel day inowe to renne to hym and hunt
hym wiþ strength.⁵⁰

We may also infer that the unharbouring was unnecessary in certain situations: for example, if no specific, individual stag was being sought, or if a specific stag's position was so well known and so isolated that the running hounds (specifically the 'finders') could be released directly at it.⁵¹

There is a tradition that Edward III was the first English monarch to forgo the unharbouring, which raises the interesting possibility that Chaucer is deliberately alluding to the contemporary practices of the English court.⁵² But it is also evident that the hunters' discussion about how the hart had 'so moche embosed'—in the sense 'gone deep into the forest'—would provide excellent grounds for waiving the unharbouring. For if the hart was known to be deeply secluded in a location that had been clearly marked by the habourer,⁵³ it could quite feasibly be 'run to' without being first unharboured. In other words, the omission of the unharbouring and the detail that the hart had 'moche embosed' support and inform one another. In so doing, they lend further support to the view that the hunters, whose garbled chatter the newly awakened narrator first hears, are not boasting about a hart already hunted to exhaustion, but are planning, in the meticulous way appropriate to the hunt with strength, the pursuit of a particular hart—indeed, we must assume, the very one that later 'yfounde ys' (*The Book of the Duchess*, l. 378).

In conclusion, there are many good reasons for construing the 'embossed' hart of *The Book of the Duchess* as one that has secluded itself deep in the woods. Not only does this reading of Chaucer's verb make the best possible sense in the context, it also helps to explain an unusual aspect of the hunt that ensues, and it matches Chaucer's usage with analogous French expressions which, in several

respects, readily show the most likely origin and meaning of Chaucer's locution. If Mersand is right, Chaucer may not have actually coined *emboss* as an intransitive English verb, though his is certainly the first recorded use of it. We may speculate that if *emboss* had contemporary currency in Chaucer's England on the model of OF *embuschier*, it too would have been generally reflexive, which would mean that Chaucer is using the verb in an 'absolute' way—i.e. omitting the expected reflexive pronoun.

Finally, to close the case with one further observation, this reading makes sense thematically too, for it draws attention to an important premonitory image. Even before the hunt begins, Chaucer's reference to the hart that has hidden (embossed) itself in a remote recess of the forest can be seen to anticipate the Man in Black whom the narrator presently discovers grieving in his own secluded covert—or, to borrow the appropriate term from Old French, 'embuschement'—into which he has withdrawn, beset by cares, to meditate on his recent bereavement.⁵⁴ We may also then contrast the violent dislodging of the hart by Octovyen's hunters with the narrator's naively gentle inquisition of the Man in Black, leading to his eventual, cathartic disclosure of the matter bearing down on his heart: 'She ys ded [. . .] be my trouthe!' (l. 1309). But such ideas lie beyond the scope of this enquiry.

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Georgia R. Crampton, 'Transitions and meaning in *The Book of the Duchess*', *JEGP*, 62 (1963), 486-500 (p. 492); James Winny, *Chaucer's Dream-Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p. 55; Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Dutton, 1987), pp. 153-4; Derek Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer*, 2nd edn (London: Longman, 1998), p. 84.

² 'A re-examination of Octovyen's hunt in *The Book of the Duchess*', *Medium Ævum*, 56 (1987), 183-99.

³ All references to the works of Chaucer are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁴ The hunt with strength is described in detail by John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), pp. 32-46; also Marcelle Thiébaux, 'The medieval chase', *Speculum*, 42 (1967), 265-74.

⁵ *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by W. W. Skeat, 2nd edn, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894-1900), I 472; Norman Davis *et al.*, *A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), s.v. *embosed*; *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by J. H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 549, n. 353.

⁶ Oliver Farrar Emerson, 'Chaucer and medieval hunting', in *Chaucer: Essays and Studies* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1929), pp. 320-77 (esp. pp. 323-30); *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), Glossary, s.v. *embosed*.

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 20 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Hans Kurath, S. M. Kuhn *et al.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954-2001). All citations have been checked against the current online editions of both dictionaries.

⁸ *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 969, n. 353. The editors' citation of the *OED* is erroneous at this point; there is no headword *emboss* in that dictionary.

⁹ A. C. Baugh, 'Two Middle English lexical notes', *Language*, 37 (1961), 539-43 (pp. 539-42).

¹⁰ *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*, ed. by E. T. Donaldson, 2nd edn (New York: Ronald Press, 1975), p. 595, n. 352-3.

¹¹ *MED*, s.v. *embocen* v. 1; see also *OED*, s.v. *emboss* v.¹ 1.

¹² For the sake of analogy, see *MED* for the related noun *boce*, sense 3: 'a bulge, swelling' etc. (cf. *OED*, s.v. *boss* sb.¹ 1.a). The term 'chaseable' is used by Edward Plantagenet in his treatise *The Master of Game*: 'þe vi yere [he is] an hert of x. And þan [. . .] is he schaceable for

always before he shall be called but rascaille or foly'. *The Master of Game by Edward of Norwich, Second Duke of York*, ed. by W. A. and F. Baillie-Grohman (London: Ballantyne, Hanson, 1904), p. 18 (punctuation mine).

¹³ Emerson, 'Chaucer and medieval hunting', p. 324 (interpolations in italics mine).

¹⁴ *Generydes: A Romance in Seven-Line Stanzas*, ed. by W. A. Wright, EETS o.s. 55 and 70 (London: Trübner, 1878).

¹⁵ Rachel Hands, *English Hawking and Hunting in 'The Boke of St. Albans'* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 184, ll. 539-40.

¹⁶ Facsimile edition published as *Turbervile's Booke of Hunting 1576 [sic]* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), p. 244. See also Gervase Markham, *Countrey Contentments* (1615; facsimile edn, Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1973), I 31 (sig. E4r): 'To know when a Stagge is wearie, you shall see him imboist, that is, foaming and slauering about the mouth with a thicke white froth, his haire will looke blacke, shining and fowle with sweat [. . .]'.
¹⁷ The *MED*'s gloss for *Generydes* would be improved if it read, '[. . .] to be, or to become, exhausted from being hunted' (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ The *OED* cites the satiric poem, 'The Elephant in the Moon', by Samuel Butler (d. 1680): 'An Elephant from one of those / Two mighty Armies is broke loose, / [. . .] Look quickly, lest the Sight of us / Should cause the startled Beast t'imboist': *The Genuine Remains in Prose and Verse of Mr. Samuel Butler [. . .] with Notes by R. Thyer*, 2 vols (London, 1759), I 8 (ll. 125-30).

¹⁹ Unlike Butler (see preceding note), Milton uses the word as an adjectival (past) participle: 'Like that self-begott'n bird / In the Arabian woods embost': *Samson Agonistes* (1671), ll. 1699-1700, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. by Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). Flannagan's note (p. 843, n. 315) is erroneous in claiming that 'the *OED* does not record Milton's usage'; see *OED*, *emboss*, v.² 1. b.

²⁰ John Skelton, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. by John Scattergood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 370, ll. 475-8.

²¹ Compare Thomas Elyot, *The Book Named The Governor* (1531), facsimile edn, ed. by R. C. Alston (Menston: Scholar Press, 1970), II. vi: 'For who, beholdynge a man in estimation of nobilitie and wisdom, by furie chaunged in to an horrible figure, his face infarced with rancour, his mouthe foule and imboist [. . .] wyll nat haue suche a passion in extreme detestation?' (punctuation mine).

²² Ed. by Scattergood, p. 312, ll. 22-6.

²³ See *ibid.*, Glossary, p. 537, s.v. *embosyd*; *OED*, s.v. *emboss*, v.² 3; 'exhausted with distress' does not make sense, whereas 'frenzied with distress' does.

²⁴ *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xiii. 1-3. Except where otherwise indicated, all references to the works of Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans *et al.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

²⁵ *Noble Arte of Venery*, pp. 103-4; see also p. 118, where Gascoigne explains why a hart hates running into northerly or southerly winds: 'And if he should runne into any of those two windes, it would quickly enter his throte when he *is embost and beginneth to be spent*, and would drie his throte and his tongue sore [. . .]' (emphasis mine).

²⁶ *All's Well that Ends Well*, III. vi. 99-101. The French lord is speaking to Count Bertram about the parasitical Parolles. The *OED* (s.v. *emboss* v.² 2) cites Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, III. i. 22-3 as an earlier example: 'Like dastard Curres, that hauing at a bay / The saluage beast embost in wearie chace [. . .]'; ed. by A. C. Hamilton (London: Longman, 1977). But it is questionable whether the verb *emboss* is transitive in this instance; it makes better sense to read the required transitive verb as *have* ('hauing'), rather than 'hauing [. . .] embost'; i.e. the dogs are described as having (the beast) at bay, with the adjectival phrase 'embost in wearie chace' supplying supplementary, parenthetical information about the 'saluage beast'.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. by Brian Morris, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1981), Ind. i. 14-16.

²⁸ There is no connection with the modern American expressions 'to bush' and 'to be bushed', meaning 'to (be) exhaust(ed)', which are first recorded as slang expressions in 1862 and 1870: *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, ed. by J. E. Lighter (New York: Random House, 1994-).

²⁹ *OED*, s.v. *emboss*, v.², 2-3.

³⁰ *Stans puer ad mensam*, l. 31, in *The Babees Book etc.*, ed. by F. J. Furnivall, EETS o.s. 32 (London: Trübner, 1868, repr. 1997), p. 28. See also *MED*, s.v. *embocen* v.

³¹ See, for example, Shakespeare, *1 Henry IV*, III. iii. 156-7, when Prince Hal reprimands Falstaff for accusing Mistress Quickly of picking his pocket: 'Why, thou whoreson, impudent, emboss'd rascall [. . .]'. This postdates the *OED*'s earliest citation, which is from 1564: s.v. *emboss* v.¹ 1. b; see also *embossed*, ppl. a.¹ 4.

³² *The Legend of Matilda*, ll. 386-92, in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. by J. William Hebel, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), II 422.

³³ Markham, *Countrie Contentments* (1615), p. 31 (sig. E4r).

³⁴ William Warner, *Albions England* (London, 1602), STC 25083, p. 175.

³⁵ See the quotation from Spenser already cited: 'Like dastard Curres, that hauing at a bay / The saluage beast embost in wearie chace, / Dare not aduenture on the stubborne pray [. . .]' (*Faerie Queene*, III. i. 22).

³⁶ Joseph Mersand, *Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary* (New York: Comet Press, 1937), p. 63 (see also p. 64).

³⁷ F. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue Française de IXe au XVe siècle*, 10 vols (Paris: Vieweg, 1881-1902), III, IX, s.v. *embuschier*, verbe. Tobler-Lommatzsch, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1925-), s.v. *embuschier*, *embuissier* vb., esp. col. 80: 'Jagd: vom Wild: sich in den Busch schlagen'. It is clear that ME *embosen* cannot, for phonological reasons, have descended directly from OF *embuschier*; it must be a parallel formation, either independently coined from *bois*, or perhaps modelled on Late Latin **inboscare* (unattested) from which also derives Italian *imboscare*, whence, in turn, EMnE *imbosk* (see *OED*, s.v. *imbosk*, v.).

³⁸ *La chace dou cerf*, ed. by Gunnar Tilander, *Cynegetica* 7 (Stockholm: Offset-Lito, 1960), ll. 205-8; all translations mine. Cf. ll. 130-1, where a slightly different expression is used: 'li sers [. . .] va ramboschier' (lit. 'the hart [. . .] goes to re-emboss'—i.e., it 'returns to covert').

³⁹ *Les livres du roy Modus et de la royne Ratio*, ed. by Gunnar Tilander, 2 vols (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1932), I, cap. 60. 60-2; see also cap. 60. 74-85.

⁴⁰ Gaston Phébus, *Livre de chasse*, ed. by Gunnar Tilander, *Cynegetica* 18 (Karlshamn: Johanssons, 1971), cap. 31. 7.

⁴¹ See Tobler-Lommatzsch, s.v. *embuschement*, *embuisement* s. m., esp. col. 77: 'Jagd: Ort, wo das Wild nach dem Äsen auf den Feldern in den Wald zurückkehrt'. *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, ed. by William Rothwell, Louise W. Stone et al. (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 1992), s.v. *embuschement*.

⁴² *Modus et Ratio*, I, cap. 14. 70-71. Cf. *ibid.*, ll. 75-6, 'et se il encontre de l'embouchier, c'est comme il entre ou bois, gete une brisiee [. . .]' [and if he (the tracker) sees (signs of) 'embushing', that is, going into the wood, let him make a marker]; and see also *Livre de chasse*, cap. 1. 91.

⁴³ *Livre de chasse*, cap. 35. 15. Middle English had no cognate noun, as can be seen from Edward Plantagenet's choice of words when translating this passage: 'And whan he shal mete in þe feeldis eny þinge þat hym likeþ he shal drawe hym to his couert [*l'embuschement*], for to make hym drawe the sonner to his strength [*au fort*]: *Master of Game*, p. 90 (here, as elsewhere, I have expanded printed *þ'* to *þat*).

⁴⁴ See *Livre de chasse*, caps 31. 8; 33. 2; 34. 5; 35. 15, 24-5.

⁴⁵ Credit must go to A. C. Baugh for first suggesting that the narrator overhears a general discussion of a harbourer's report: 'Two lexical notes', pp. 540-41.

⁴⁶ Of these ten chapters, nine are largely translations of Gaston de Foix's *Livre de chasse*, while one (cap. 26) is Edward's own work; cf. *Livre de chasse*, caps 28-36.

⁴⁷ *Master of Game*, p. 86; cf. *Livre de chasse*, cap. 31. 7.

⁴⁸ *Master of Game*, pp. 83-4, 86.

⁴⁹ 'Chaucer and medieval hunting', p. 324; but the idea that a hart fleeing from hunters should be said to 'exhaust *itself*' seems incongruous.

⁵⁰ *Master of Game*, p. 95 (punctuation mine); see also p. 18: 'An olde deer [. . .] is vncoupled to, as þe lymer meneþ [r. meueþ] hym or oþere houndes fynden hym wiþout limere [. . .]'.¹

⁵¹ See also *Master of Game*, p. 92, which describes how the unharbouring is not advisable when stags are in rut. Cf. *The Tretyse off Huntyng*, ed. by Anne Rooney (Brussels: Omirel, 1987), which devotes an entire section to hunting the hart with strength without having it first unharboured (ll. 72-117).

⁵² See G. K. Whitehead, *Hunting and Stalking Deer in Britain through the Ages* (London: Batsford, 1980), p. 16.

⁵³ Described in *Master of Game*, p. 86 ff.

⁵⁴ For *embuschement* as a 'hideaway', 'den' or 'refuge', see *Guillaume de Palerne*, ed. by Alexandre Micha (Geneva: Droz, 1990), ll. 3249, 3293, 6105.