

The Ponderings of a Poet:

Architecture as Representative of an Author's Concerns in Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame*

McKenzie Spies

ENGL 403

Dr. Pam Farvolden and Dr. Rob Wiznura

March 18, 2013

McKenzie Spies

ENGL 403

Dr. Pam Farvolden and Dr. Rob Woznura

March 18, 2013

The Ponderings of a Poet: Architecture as Representative of an Author's Concerns in Geoffrey

Chaucer's *House of Fame*

### Introduction

One of Geoffrey Chaucer's most well-known dream visions, *The House of Fame*, abounds with allusions to the concerns that writers must wrestle with at some point during their careers. Throughout the work, Chaucer discusses the purpose of writing, the value of poetry, and the worthiness of fame, but perhaps his biggest concerns lie among the questions of the future: Should he embark on a new trail of topics for his writing rather than traverse the worn road of love from his writing predecessors? How long, if at all, will his works last into the future? What can one do to make his work stand the test of time? Chaucer's pondering of these concerns is evident throughout the entirety of *The House of Fame*, but they are most prevalent in Book III, consisting of his attendance in the houses of Fame and Rumour.<sup>1</sup>

Dream visions were a popular literary genre of the medieval age whose main theme was the psychological experience of love. Dream visions included a narrator, who would begin the tale by recounting that they had experienced a dream, before telling the reader what occurred while they slept. The dream would infer to them something significant about love, or sometimes theology, and they would be compelled to record their sleeping experience with pen and paper upon waking. Chaucer wrote four dream visions, of which *The House of Fame* is the second (St

---

<sup>1</sup> The concepts of fame and the understanding of writings are also touched upon in other works by Chaucer, including *Troilus and Criseyde*.

John 3). *The House of Fame* differs from Chaucer's other dream visions, and the genre as a whole, as it does not focus on the theme of love itself, but rather contemplates a move away from writing about love as so many of his contemporaries and mentors were wont to do. In the beginning of *The House of Fame*, Chaucer's narrator is deposited into a temple of Venus, upon whose walls are painted images of Virgil's *Aeneid*, proof of a story that has gained Fame's blessing and survived the ages. The narrator's description of the temple consumes the majority of book I; after his experience in the temple he is found and collected by a giant eagle who claims to come from Jove. The god has a reward for the narrator, the eagle says, for being such a devoted author of love for himself and his son Cupid. Jove would therefore like to reward the dreamer with new tidings of which to write about, and has instructed the eagle to deliver the narrator to such places as original tidings can be found, namely the House of Fame and the House of Rumour.

In the examination of the architecture of these two houses, Chaucer's authorial concerns are represented within the construction of the buildings. With the help of his animal guide, the eagle, Chaucer is delivered to two very different structures which ultimately represent his concerns as an author. The first building is the House of Fame, which his guide explains as a place between heaven and earth to which all sounds go to be judged. In person, Chaucer finds this palace to be a structure made of beryl and resting on a foundation of ice. The building is covered and filled with the names and figures of those who have been granted fame, including having their names engraved on the very foundation of fame, the ice below the palace. Most notably, the classical sources whom Chaucer relies heavily upon are portrayed as figures inside the great hall where Fame holds court, and their statues support the ceiling; not only do their names support the base, but their beings bear up the building itself. The grandness of the palace,

with everything coated thickly in gold and gems, leaves little doubt that Fame is the creator of history – she determines who and what will gain renown, and her opinion is completely arbitrary; there is no way that one can guarantee the place in history one desires, whether that be notoriety or to fade into the shadows of the past. Chaucer gains at least one answer to his questions in this place, and that is he can do nothing to influence how well his works will be remembered in future years, particularly after his death. The building of Fame is representative of renown's nature itself – the ice of the foundation is slowly melting away, proving the instability of fame, and the fragility of the beryl that constructs the walls is possessed of a magnifying ability, in that inside tidings can be made well known, and everyone on earth can be made aware of them.

The second building that Chaucer is delivered to by his eagle guide, after finding disappointment in his search for new tidings at the House of Fame, is the House of Rumour. This structure is located in a valley just below the mountain of ice on which the House of Fame rests, but the House of Rumour is a very different type of structure. The House of Rumour is composed like a giant wicker cage, constructed of yellow, white, red and green twigs that are tangled together in a manner that they could not possibly become unknotted. The wicker cage is described as being sixty miles long, constantly spinning, and much noise comes from the thousands of gaps and holes in the wicker. Tidings and snippets of sound come from all around the world, and enter the House of Rumour, as the narrator learns, and inside become mingled with one another so that there are technically no truths and no lies inside; everything is a strange mixture. After being thoroughly combined, the tidings exit the House of Rumour through the same holes and fly up the mountain to the House of Fame to be judged as to their place in history and how long they will survive. The structure of this building represents another insubstantial element: that of truth. The truth in the House of Rumour cannot maintain its original form; it is

destined to be mixed with lies before it is released to the world. The occurrences inside the House of Rumour address another of Chaucer's concerns, how truthful writings really are, and how the meanings of his works will remain clear to his future readers; it becomes clear to him that he has no power over the interpretation of his writings, and they will inevitably become mixed with truth or lies in the hope of gaining the renown he desires for them. This fear is also represented by the constant movement of the building that the narrator describes; the wicker cage's never-ending spinning signifies the constant shifting in the understanding of writings. Chaucer cannot affect how his audience chooses to interpret his works any more than he can stop the whirling of the sixty-mile long wicker cage.

Through the interpretation of these structures in *The House of Fame*, it becomes clear that the architecture is representative of many of Chaucer's concerns as an author, including the topics on which he should compose (to continue focusing on love, or to find something now and fresh), how his writings will be understood, both now and in the future, and if his work will survive him, or possibly even be considered famous in his own lifetime, and if there is anything within his power that will help achieve said fame.

### **The Question of Authority**

The dream vision is riddled with references to the classical authors to whom Chaucer owes much inspiration: Virgil, Dante and Ovid are the primary predecessors that Chaucer borrows from and speaks of in *The House of Fame*. Ironically, after he adapts pieces of their works into his own, frequently without recognition of the source, including Ovid's and Virgil's accounts of the story of Dido and Aeneas, Virgil's description of Fame, Ovid's house of Rumour (Boitani 61), and Dante's eagle, Chaucer voices a concern about whether he should continue to follow in their footsteps and write on the subject of love. The narrator of the dream vision, also

called Geffrey,<sup>2</sup> is being rewarded by the Roman god Jove for his dedication to the writings of love that he pens:

And therefore Joves, thorgh hys grace  
 Wol that I bere the to a place  
 Which that hight the Hous of Fame,  
 To do the som disport and game,  
 In som recompensacion  
 Of labour and devocion  
 That thou hast had, loo causeless,  
 To Cupido the rechcheles. (*House of Fame* 661-668)

The theme of love is reminiscent of the classical authors, it being the topic that they themselves chose to compose poetry about. The narrator, however, ponders whether he should continue to write anything about love, for he “kan not of that faculte” (*House of Fame* 248). He hints that his previous writings on love have come from a general knowledge and observance of love, for he himself has not experienced the romance of the greats; in that case, why should he bother any longer? If he does not understand it, then genuineness in his writings is impossible, “Hyt wol not be” (*House of Fame* 247). In response to his previous dedication to love however, Jove offers him an opportunity to gather new tidings, despite the fact that he is considering abandoning the theme of love. Or, perhaps, Jove is offering this reward as a way to keep the narrator’s interest in love writings, a thought inspired by A.J. Minnis’ contemplation of what *The House of Fame* would have been about had it been finished; considering that large pieces of the dream vision are already focused on love, it is highly plausible that Jove’s attempt at reigniting the narrator’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Despite the slightly altered spelling of the name, the narrator is clearly a figure for Chaucer himself.

interest in the theme of love would have been successful, and that the overarching theme, had the work been finished, would have ultimately been love:

The eagle says that Jupiter has sent him to reward the poet's service to love, and to provide him with [love's tidings] which he lacks. Once into book iii, however, the problems of lovers are, in general, subsumed under broader categories; but they resurface in Chaucer's account of the sixth company of lovers who appear before Fame. (208-209)

Without an ending to the dream vision, however, Chaucer's intended overarching theme can only be speculated upon, and never truly known.

As if to complicate his dilemma in regard to his predecessors, the first half of the dream vision is particularly heavy in reference material; the first book alone is dedicated to a story originally told in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the second book is dominated by an animal guide that is reminiscent of Dante's eagle in *The Divine Comedy*. Both of these references to classical authors are proof of success of writers who possess the type of fame that Chaucer desires for his own works, and yet he doubts if he should take the same route of writing that those men did. Therefore, the eagle represents "an obvious poetic success," and as such "Chaucer's attitude to the Eagle is one of great wariness, but not simple submission" (Robinson 12). However, the imagery and references of these authors is so familiar to Chaucer's audience that ignoring it becomes impossible, as Glenn A. Steinberg astutely notes: "To make their mark, young writers must push into the past established figures who have temporarily stopped the clock" (184). It is only by reworking the past they can pave a new future. Chaucer discusses this concern briefly in another work, *Troilus and Criseyde*, when he says:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,  
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,  
 So sende might to make in som comedye!  
 But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,  
 But subgit be to alle poesye;  
 And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace

Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (*Troilus* V.1786-1792)

Many of Chaucer's concerns in the *House of Fame* are addressed in this short verse, including his respect of his classical sources, who he tells his work to revere and be subject to, and he expresses concern that his audience will misunderstand his work, turning his tragedy into a comedy. He also recognizes, however, that he has no control over how his audience will interpret his meaning, as he tells his work to "go," implying that he is sending his completed work out into the world on its own, to make its own way, as a parent must a child.

Chaucer, as an author, directly recognizes the classical poets to whom he owes so much inspiration, and obviously has much respect for; how does one move away from predecessors who have been so successful? Between the two houses that he will visit, the house of Fame and the house of Rumour, this comparison of the past and present will be responded to, as discussed by Sheila Delany: "At Fame's palace Geoffrey was able to observe the process by which the past becomes known to, or hidden from, the present," which is representative of his classical predecessors; "conversely, the House of Rumour reveals the present fast becoming history" (106). Delany's point corresponds to the paving of Chaucer's own, new way and the history he will make of his own accord. If only to make Chaucer's final decision of making new headway as he later does with *The Canterbury Tales*, Delany further points out that the house of Rumour

is clearly the place that Chaucer was meant to visit, and not the house of Fame, as “It has at least—what Fame’s palace had not—the merit of rousing his curiosity” (104-105), and he shows a desire to participate in the action of the room, rather than his standoffishness and disinterest in approaching Fame in the previous building.

Another question for Chaucer, however, is how these authors gained their reputation in the first place. Are his sources reliable, and how can he imbue his works with the same level of trustworthiness? If Fame is as random and fickle as he later portrays her in *The House of Fame*, how can his classical sources truly be considered worthy of reverence? Sheila Delany and A.J. Minnis expound on this notion of doubt, defining it as “skeptical fideism,” a medieval concept that the “truths” of philosophy, history and poetry are not as reliable as they are widely believed to be (Minnis 214). Yet if his own sources, which as Steinbeck noted must be delved into, are unreliable, then his work will be even more so, as being based on an untrue foundation: “Uncertainty about facts, whether historical or scientific, is disturbing to the scholar, but more disturbing to the poet must be uncertainty about his own position. In what ways can the poet use authorities whose authority he doubts?” (Delany 44). A struggle for Chaucer will be to establish himself as a reliable and truth-telling author, which only serves to cast light on yet another concern: How does an author gain authority? The very term “author” is derived from the word authority: a writer who is considered trustworthy and is granted power through the truth. One of the definitions of authority in the Oxford English Dictionary is “The person whose opinion or testimony is accepted; the author of an accepted statement,” and a similar definition of author is found to be “The person on whose authority a statement is made; an authority, an informant.” Because of this word connection, Chaucer implies that “poetic tradition . . . is all but defined by conflict over legitimacy and supremacy, hinging on who are authorized to call themselves

authors as opposed, in this case, to fablers” (Steinberg 184). Regardless of whether their writings hold truth or not, his classical sources have been granted authority over time, and Chaucer can only hope that they prove true so that his works may be proven true, as well.

### **The House of Fame**

As if Chaucer’s concern over the legitimacy of his classical sources was not enough, their lasting fame is later thrown in his face when he finds them present in Fame’s Palace in Book III of *The House of Fame*. The eagle speaks to the narrator of the house of Fame, and how it resides between heaven, earth and sea, so that every sound that is made across the scope of the world, whether public or private, is sent up to the house of Fame; no bit of sound that is uttered can escape being judged and potentially given a place in history by the goddess. The palace of Fame itself is a special sight for Chaucer, as he has seen nothing like it before; even the mountain on which the building rests is exceptional, for none of the mountains of Spain can even stand next to it (*House of Fame* 1116-1117). After completing the climb, the narrator is faced with a castle of such magnificence that he is not able to fully describe it. Dumbfounded by the size and the beauty, he claims that “So that the grete craft, beaute, / The cast, the curiosite / Ne kan I not to yow devyse; / My wit ne may me not suffise” (*House of Fame* 1178-1180). Upon entering the castle, he further attempts to describe the half-a-foot thick layer of gold coating everything in sight, and the rich gems that cover the walls. Niches containing minstrels are frequent, and figures of fame stand on pillars in the great hall, including those of the poets of old of whom Chaucer debates, and their renown is substantial even in Fame’s court, as their figures stand on pillars and support the ceiling of the palace:

Tho saugh I stoned on eyther syde,  
Streight down to the dores wide,

Fro the dees, many a peler  
 Of metal that shoon not ful cler;  
 But thought they nere of no rychesse,  
 Yet they were mad for great noblesse,  
 And in hem hy and gret sentence;  
 And folk of digne reverence,  
 Of which I wil yow telle fonde,  
 Upon the piler saugh I stonde.” (*House of Fame* 1419-1428)

Supporting the ceiling of the palace where they gained their renown only serves to add to the reverence of the authors as being part of, in Chaucer’s opinion, the greatest tradition, that of writing: “By propping up Fame’s ceiling with columns of poets, Chaucer indicates that poetry, as embodied in its various traditions, is the very basis for all renown . . . Without poetic tradition, Chaucer implies, Fame’s palace would soon come crashing down” (Steinberg 182). Not only do the poets of old support the roof of the structure, but in a way they also support the base; the foundation of the house of Fame is carved with the names of authors who have received the goddess’ blessing, although they are in several stages of decay. It is the foundation of the palace, however, that proves to Chaucer that although he may gain fame, his fortune may not last forever: several names on the base of the palace are wearing away, for the foundation is formed of ice. Those names that rest in the path of the sun are slowly melting off, “That of the lettres oon or two / Was molte away of every name, / So unfamous was woxe hir fame” (*House of Fame* 1144-1146). The names of the classical authors, however, are lasting well on the foundation, for they rest in the shade of the castle and will not erode:

How hit was writen ful of names

Of folkes that hadden grete fames  
 Of olde tyme, and yet they were  
 As fressh as men had writen hem here  
 The selve day right, or that houre  
 That I upon hem gan to poure. (*House of Fame* 1153-1158)

The differentiation of the names on the foundation of ice on which Fame's palace rests speaks loudly to Chaucer as the nature of fame. As fickle and random as the goddess is in the granting of her blessing, even those whom she chooses as worthy of her gift will not receive renown for the remainder of humanity. Even ignoring the names carved into the base, the foundation is simply made of ice, and as mentioned, some of it is in direct sunlight; the ice is melting away along with the names, and the foundation cannot last forever. This fact does not escape Chaucer's knowledge either, for his narrator comments that "This were a feble fundament, / To bilden on a place hye" (1132-1133). For Larry D. Benson, the ice that composes the base of Fame's palace "denotes insubstantiality" (Fyler 979); the foundation is representative of the nature of fame itself.

The structure of the palace itself is intended to depict fame as a glorified object to obtain; everything about the architecture of the building is steeped with beauty and extravagance. The primary material used in the construction is a special type of gem, a mineral composite called beryl: "As was of ston of beryle, / Both the castel and tour, / And eke the halle and every bour, / Wythouten peces or joynnynges" (*House of Fame* 1184-1187). This solid piece of beryl, if coloured by green imperfection, would be emerald; the entirety of the castle is built of a single precious gem. Chaucer never makes a choice without special care, however, and as beryl "has a magnifying power," Chaucer's choice of building material could be a play on "'magnificare' (to

glorify)” (Fyler 986). This could be a significant choice in two ways: the first, that if the beryl is meant to “glorify,” then it is a wise choice to match the grandness of the palace everywhere else. Fame receives many petitioners before her throne, all with the intent of glorifying her in order to be blessed with renown by her. Secondly, there is a play on beryl’s ability to magnify, in that Fame’s whimsies result in the spreading of tidings across the world and over many years; the magnifying aspect of the building represents the magnifying of various tidings inside, such that the world will know of them. The inside of the structure is no less grand: “. . . every wal / Of hit, and flor, and roof, and al / Was plated half a foote thikke / Of gold” (*House of Fame* 1343-1345), with niches “Ful of the fynest stones faire . . . As grasses growen in a mede” (*House of Fame* 1351-1353).

The figures of his predecessors, the gold-plated walls, and the beryl structure all seem to pale in comparison to one thing for Chaucer: the throne on which Fame sits. Her throne is grand, glorious and unforgettable:

But al on hye, above a dees  
 Sitte in a see imperiall,  
 That made was of a rubee all,  
 Which that a carbuncle ys ycalled,  
 Y saugh, perpetually ystalled,  
 A femynyne creature. (*House of Fame* 1360-1365)

If Fame is something that all men desire to attain, then the palace of the goddess who grants it can be no less desirable. Her castle is filled with the riches that a man can earn if Fame is granted in his lifetime, and the figures present in her house show the place in history that it is possible for men to attain.

Because of the presence in the building and its base of all Chaucer's revered sources, the palace of Fame is essentially an embodiment of his art, "a space of literary preservation, a treasury of authors and their stories," which ultimately "presents a seamless web of construction that enshrines poetry" (Edwards 114). In fact, the indoor architecture of the palace of Fame has a precedent among medieval authors, as a "memory house," which came to represent for authors a metaphor for artistic creation: "The pillars which extend from Fame's throne to the doorway support capitals representing the epic and historical writers. The chief authors writing about Troy and Rome . . . flank the hall of the palace" (Edwards 116). Attributing this discovery in the *House of Fame* to Beryl Rowland, Edwards says that the memory house was used by classical rhetoricians as a system for memory recollection, using tokens to mentally mark sections of a speech. Medieval authors, including Chaucer, used the memory house as a symbol of "artistic composition" (Edwards 116).

The contrast between the exterior and the interior of the palace of Fame creates a complexity; the grandness of the castle proper would lead one to believe that fame is the ultimate achievement; the extravagance is surely the next step down from heaven. The base on which the castle stands, however, is slowly wasting away, again showing that fame is impermanent, a waning entity that will not survive forever. This understanding makes Chaucer want to avoid meeting Fame, for he tells a man in the palace that he is not there to ask for renown, and in his dream he may avoid her. It is due to this conversation that he is taken to the House of Rumour, for he admits to the man that his search for tidings in the House of Fame has been disappointed, despite the interesting happenings going on around him. In reality, however, he will either gain fame in the course of time or be rejected by history, and he has no power to avoid the matter; one is either remembered or he is not, as Sheila Delany contemplates: "Whether it will be good or

bad fame he can neither know nor control. To write well will not guarantee him good fame, so that all he can consciously do is strive for truth in his work—a hazardous job, as we have already seen, and not lightly undertaken” (103-104). At best, a man can only speak the truth while he has people to listen, as Chaucer determines to do until he either becomes a revered author himself, like the classical authors that he copiously borrows from, or becomes lost to history.

Chaucer, of course has been delivered to the House of Fame by Jove’s eagle, but how the petitioners that come before Fame arrived at the palace is a point of interest. As the eagle explained to the narrator, Fame’s palace is located between heaven and earth and sea, so that every bit of sound that is uttered between the three will fly to the House of Fame for judgment in the course of history. The sounds, of course, are later revealed to be sent to the House of Rumour first and foremost, to be mingled with other tidings before they are sent on to the House of Fame for judgment. But if the sounds comes from those who are living and speaking, and sounds enter the House of Rumour and fly up the mountain to approach Fame, then how is it that people petition Fame? The easiest way for Chaucer to describe this scenario would be, simply, to personify the sounds that kneel before Fame’s throne. The sounds are still sounds, mixed with each other and awaiting judgment, but they take the form of the person who originally spoke them in order to petition Fame, before they are again sent back out into the world.

In the House of Fame, a man will either gain a place in history or be forgotten, and he has no power to influence her whimsical nature, and she does not alter her decisions, as can be seen by the petitions that come before the goddess. The narrator portrays several different single or sets of petitions, asking for a variety of futures for various reasons: a request for good fame for having done good works, a petition to be forgotten in history although they had earned good fame through their deeds, a desire for good fame despite having done nothing to earn it, a desire

for infamy. Chaucer watches all these different interactions with Fame and pities the petitioners, “For of this folk ful wel y wiste / They hadde good fame ech deserved, / Although they were dyversly served” (*House of Fame* 1543-1545). Fame is arbitrary in her responses, granting a place in history or banishment from the books regardless of what the petitioners have done to deserve it.

### **The House of Rumour**

Upon finding disappointment at the house of Fame, Chaucer’s aviary guide delivers him unto a second destination: the House of Rumour. This house is a far cry from Fame’s palace, although it sits in the valley just below the ice mountain, and the building rests in the shade of the castle. In physical comparison, Rumour’s abode is simple, shabby, and has a “distinct suggestion of the primitive” (Bennett 65). The purpose of this building is to create tales, either true or false, before sending them onto the palace above to be granted or denied remembrance from the goddess Fame. The house of Rumour is filled to bursting with varying kinds of men, of different occupations, of different origins, and, most importantly, of different opinions. Tales enter into the house from “A thousand holes” (*House of Fame* 1949) and are shared around the large space until their form is altered, before finding one of the many holes in the walls and flying out again. There is no limit to the amount or to the type of stories that enter and later exit, for “Ne porter ther is noon to lette / No maner tydynges in to pace” (*House of Fame* 1954-1955). Also unlimited is the number of variations that are released of a single original tale, for the narrator speaks of seeing two tidings of different natures fighting to exit the same hole, one being a truth and one being a falsehood, and finally agreeing to be released together and return to man’s ear as a single rumour: “We wil medle us ech with other, / That no man, by they never so

wrothe, / Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe / At ones” (*House of Fame* 2102-2105). And thus are rumours born, in the House of Rumour.

As it stands, Fame and Rumour have never been separated in literature; they have been understood as being the same entity, and by separating them Chaucer makes use of two meanings of fame: “In Latin as in Middle English, ‘fame’ can mean either ‘reputation’ and ‘renown,’ or ‘rumor’; and Chaucer conflates its meanings . . . Chaucer has not confused, but harmonized the two senses of the word, since the ‘substance or material’ or fame or reputation ‘is nothing but rumors”” (Fyler 977). In one sense of the narrative, Chaucer brings the definitions together by creating two entities that are reliant on one another in order for their work to proceed, but he describes them as to appear a far cry from having anything to do with each other. Indeed, separating the entities was beneficial for Chaucer’s work, for although the work of the two goddesses depends on each other’s, they are two very different kinds of work: one works to mingle tidings into new beings, and the other judges what will happen to the newly created tidings. The difference between the goddesses’ work is represented by their homes: one is grand and modern, fit for royalty, and the other is primitive and wild: “The more marvellous Fame’s castle is, the more striking will be the contrast with the suburban, not to say plebeian, abode of Rumour, her Cinderella sister” (Bennett 115). The structure of the house of Rumour certainly does pose a vast contrast to the palace of Fame; Rumour’s residence is cage-shaped mass of twigs of multiple colours: “falwe, rede, / And grene eke, and somme weren white” (*House of Fame* 1936-1937). Chaucer actually describes the building as being the great labyrinth of Daedalus, constructed to trap the Minotaur of classical legend, for the twigs that compose the structure are tangled beyond any understandable construction: “In [Boccaccio], the house [of the Minotaur] is described as *so woven and so entrelaced that it is unable to ben unlaced* . . .

Chaucer may have supposed the Labyrinth to have had ‘an interwoven structure rather than an intricate ground-plan’ (Fyler 989), and both possibilities do maintain the general understanding of the Minotaur’s story. The interwoven exterior of the building is certainly relevant to what occurs inside the structure; the outside is just as twisted and mingled as the tidings inside becomes entwined with one another until you can tell where one sound begins and another ends.

Here, however, is where Chaucer’s use of classical sources for Rumour’s house comes to an end; the exterior of the house would cause quite a sensation, for not only is it a tangled mass of coloured twigs, but it is “sixty myle of lengthe” (*House of Fame* 1979), and is constantly spinning: “And ever mo, as swyft as thought, / This queynte hous about wente, / That never mo hyt stille stente” (*House of Fame* 1924-1926). Larry D. Benson notes this move away from the classical sources, following an exposition on the influence of Ovid’s account of Fame’s house in Chaucer’s description of Rumour’s dwelling: “There is, however, no classical precedent for a whirling house made of twigs. Whirling houses are fairly common in romance and entrance to them is often gained by the aid of a guide, sometimes a helpful animal” (Fyler 989).<sup>3</sup>

One of Chaucer’s concerns as a writer is brought up again by using this structure; the narrator’s concern about following in the footsteps of his classical predecessors is addressed in Chaucer’s revamping of the house of Rumour, adding significant traits like the coloured wicker and the constant motion to add something of his own imagination instead of constantly innovating on the concepts of the classical authors. The fragility of the structure that comes from being made of twigs responds to a similar concern symbolized by the ice foundation of the palace of Fame: renown is insubstantial, and it will not last. This insubstantiality expands to include the rumours bred within the wicker cage, for not only will rumours generally burn out

---

<sup>3</sup> Fyler also observes that there is no precedent for buildings of wicker and notes that Chaucer “drew on his own observation or on reports of such actual houses among the Irish and Welsh” (989).

faster than the historical remembrance granted by Fame, but their composition of the rumours is weaker, having had their nature churned and twisted by numerous lips. The truth is a fragile thing, and it mutates within the house of Rumour, and the structure of the building represents that fragile truth, the twigs being died to be colourful, becoming more attractive and aesthetically pleasing, and tangled into a weave beyond unknotting.

A new concern for Chaucer is represented in the spinning of the wicker cage that is the residence of Rumour; what an author wishes to express is the purpose of his writing in the first place, but he has no control over how his audience will interpret or twist his work to mean or represent something else. This concern even applies simply to the current audience that he writes for, not even considering the audience of the future, in which his writings could apply to completely different situations. The spinning house represents the conflicting ideas of an author's purpose or meaning in a text, the shifting understanding of writings, representative of the mingling of truth and lies inside the House of Rumour, in that Chaucer sees no way of proving whether something is actually true or false; he has no power over how his works will be interpreted. The authorial concern of the shifting understanding in writing is not a new thought for Chaucer, either; he discusses the same problem in another work, again *Troilus and Criseyde*, and does so bluntly and honestly rather than metaphorically:

And for ther is so gret diversite  
 In Englissh and in wrytyng of oure tonge,  
 So prey I God that non miswrite the,  
 Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge;  
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche!

But yet to purpos of my rather speche. (*Troilus* V.1793-1799)

Outside of speculation, this passage provides concrete evidence of Chaucer's concern that his works would be misunderstood or misrepresented; his interest lies in his purpose for writing rather than how his audience would like to interpret his work based on personal circumstances.

### **Fame and Rumour as Interconnected**

As has been briefly touched on above, the tidings that are taken in by Rumour's residence are twisted and mingled until they fly out again, in a different form than the one they arrived in, and are delivered from the whirling wicker unto the house of Fame in order to receive judgment on how long they will survive, if they do at all. The two houses, therefore, are completely reliant on one another for their work and cannot be separated; Fame will have no tidings to judge without Rumour, and Rumour's stories will not spread without Fame's blessing. The goddess residing over each structure is as fickle and random as the other: Rumour does not seem to care what type of stories come in and out of her residence, and does not even feel the need to supervise, as she makes no appearance in the dream vision. Fame, on the other hand, is required to be present, but her choices are arbitrary and final. The personified sounds who come to petition her may have the most honourable intentions and satisfying reasons for their requests, and yet the goddess chooses to bestow recognition on them or not on a whim. Delany defines the processes of each structure as either experience or tradition; the new tidings of experience are delivered to Rumour, which are then banished to oblivion or blessed to become tradition by Fame: "Experience, mediated through art, generates tradition; tradition helps us to evaluate experience. Neither locus is absolute; not only are the two related, but both are subject to contingency or chance" (110-111). Ultimately, neither experience nor tradition serves as a strong authority, as tradition is limited for a new author, and recorded experience will be altered in the

House of Rumour regardless. And so, neither Rumour or Fame can be separated from other, and as Delany points out, both are ruled by chance.

Chance, in this circumstance, is closely related to another goddess of medieval literature, Fortune. Fortune is generally depicted as blind, either by nature or simply blindfolded, as she spins her wheel upon which all men sit. Fortune plays no favourites, as she monotonously turns her wheel and takes the riding men through a full circle of fortune; at times they are low, at times they are high, and at most times their fortunes are either rising or falling. The same will happen with the tidings about such men: some will remain true, others will become twisted, some will be remembered and others will be forgotten in time. Both buildings are also ruled by Chance, for the fragility in each structure is not meant to last forever, as ice melts and twigs are brittle, and Chance can destroy either or both residences whenever she wishes:

Chance, mother of the tidings that circulate in the House of Rumour, can choose when she pleases to destroy the House of Rumour; she is as whimsical as Fame. Chaucer seems to be saying of the world of experience that its survival is not absolutely reliable. When we recall further that true and false tidings fly together from the windows of the House of Rumor, we must acknowledge that the House of Rumor, with its wealth of worldly experience, is no more reliable—in the absolute sense—a source of information than the palace of Fame . . . Experience is no substitute for tradition for it is subject to the same weakness: neither can be relied on for truth. (Delany 111)

Delany's speculations bring the debate back around to two of Chaucer's authorial concerns: experience versus tradition is reminiscent of the choice between writing on new tidings or following in the steps of his classical sources, and through the birth and twisting of tidings in the house of Rumour before they are granted fame, he can never know if his sources have been based on truth and are genuinely reliable. This concern extends to all literature, and not just his predecessors who he copiously borrows from; if so much that takes the journey through the House of Rumour and the House of Fame is insubstantial and unreliable, then is anything really valid? If nothing can be considered true, then is there a point to writing at all? No matter which direction he chooses to take, he will face the same problem with the works of his own: how will they be twisted in what is represented as a whirling wicker cage? Will his meaning stay clear or will it be widely misunderstood and the meaning twisted? When his words are taken to the palace of Fame, will she bless him with being remembered, and if so, for how long? Chaucer remains non-committal when it comes to answers to these questions, for indeed they are unanswerable.

Geoffrey Chaucer uses his dream vision, *The House of Fame*, as a springboard for expressing many of his concerns as an author. His main tool in the work to metaphorically discuss these fears is through the architecture of the House of Fame and the House of Rumour, two unique and unearthly structures. Chaucer uses fragile and insubstantial elements such as ice and twigs to discuss the fragility of the truth, fame and reputation, and uses the constant motion of a building to emphasize the shifting nature involved in understanding a piece of writing. Chaucer is perpetually aware of these concerns, as they can be seen mentioned in some of his other works, most notably *Troilus and Criseyde*. One of his primary and most internally debated concerns, the only one of which he really has any control over, is whether to follow in the path of

writing on love as his successful classical predecessors have, from whom he takes much inspiration, primarily Virgil, Dante and Ovid. Both the real author and the narrator of the dream vision must wrestle with this concern, for his writing will either have to follow in their well-trod footsteps, for which he is being rewarded in the dream, or it will have to be something completely new, an unexplored subject. His concern regarding the topic for his writings is considered several times throughout the dream visions, as famous works by the classical authors are repeatedly shown to the narrator, such as inside the Temple of Venus and through the eagle of Dante; the figures of the authors themselves are set before Geoffrey in the House of Fame, and their names are engraved in the everlasting shadow on the ice foundation. Through his journeys to the House of Fame and the House of Rumour, Chaucer has thoroughly explored various concerns as a writer and come up with answers to very few of them, and unsatisfactory answers at that. Needless to say, by the good fame they have found, and the thorough exploration that his works still enjoy at the hands of scholars, he should not have feared so much for the wellbeing of his writings – they have become everlasting structures of their own.

## Works Cited

- Boitani, Piero. "Old Book Brought to Life in Dreams: the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*." *Cambridge Companion to Chaucer, The*. Ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 58-77. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "The House of Fame." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987. 347-373. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. "Troilus and Criseyde." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987. 471-585. Print.
- Delany, Sheila. *Chaucer's House of Fame*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Print.
- Edwards, Robert R. *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989. Print.
- Fyler, John M. "Explanatory Notes on *The House of Fame*." *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987. 977-990. Print.
- Minnis, A.J. *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Print.
- Robinson, Ian. *Chaucer and the English Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- St John, Michael. *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2000. Print.
- Steinberg, Glenn A. "Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the 'House of Fame'." *The Chaucer Review* 35.2 (2000): 182-203. *JSTOR*.