Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at the University of Leicester

by

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University of Leicester

January 1998

UMI Number: U105139

UMI

Dissertation Publishing

ProQuest

Abstract

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This thesis presents a reading of Chaucer's dream visions in their philosophical, religious and secular contexts. It traces the poet's discussion of individual subjectivity, *vis-à-vis* the conventions of courtliness, in the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the *Legend of Good Women*.

Unlike the 'playful,' and elliptical poet of many recent studies, this thesis presents a Chaucer who was fully engaged with the important moral and philosophical issues of his age. By drawing upon Aristotelian psychology, derived from his reading of Boethius, Dante and the poets of the French court, Chaucer was able to articulate precisely which aspects of the courtly identity are determined by language and empirical experience, and which parts are transcendent of this determinism. Engagement with the dream visions thus enabled the reader to recognise those aspects of courtliness which assist his or her ethically informed autonomy, and those which compromise it. A detailed engagement with the literature, language, and behaviour of the court then takes place in the dream visions, which are a genuine exploration of individual subjectivity yet still remain socially aware. The motivation for this exploration is shown to be a product of both the author's Christian beliefs and his identity as a courtly poet. Religious sensibility and the demands of courtly society are shown not to be mutually exclusive but rather the source of urgent and productive dialogue.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Warm thanks are due to Greg Walker whose friendship and supervision
helped to make this research a delight. Thanks are also due to the rest of the
staff and research students in the English Department for their help and
support along the way, especially Bill Myers. Most of all thank you to Maire,
Emma, and Clare, for your most important part in all of this.

Short Titles

Delany   Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago and London, 1972).

Map   Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium*, trans., M. R. James (Oxford, 1983).

Minnis   Alastair J. Minnis, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995).

Pearsall   Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Oxford, 1992).

Spearing   A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976).

Windeatt   B. A. Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Woodbridge, 1982).

INTRODUCTION

The title of this thesis is *Chaucer's Dream Visions: Courtliness and Individual Identity*. In it I consider Chaucer's description of the courtly subject. This phrase 'courtly subject' raises questions of its own. The present significance of the phrase in literary studies is quite different to its meaning in Chaucer's time, when it would have denoted an autonomous individual who consented to his place and duty as a servant of the king. Today the phrase implies various theoretical presuppositions that relate to the issue of determinism. It could be taken to suggest that the individual is conditioned by courtly traditions and social practices, so that a limitation upon the potential for autonomy reduces, or even denies, the possibility of truly independent thought and action. In the context of a powerful social institution such as a medieval court, where rank, deference and the necessity of suiting one's words and actions to preconceived modes of expression and behaviour was the norm, this might be expected to be so.

The issue of determinism was of great significance to Chaucer and all the major contributors to medieval philosophical debates, although it was conceived of in different ways. Fatalism, free will, and the influence of appetites and desires upon rationally informed actions were the main concepts that pertained to such debates about autonomy.[1] The idea that language, as the source of the conceptual basis of

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[1] See for example St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans., Henry Bettenson (London, 1972), Bk. V, Chapters 8 to 10, pp. 188-196, and Bk. XIV, Ch. 24, p. 587.

thought, is a major factor in determining the parameters of a subject's capacity to think and act, coupled with a secular dismissal of an essential self, or spirit that is beyond the influence of language and convention, is a modern one.[2] But Chaucer's dream visions, I shall argue, encourage conventions and traditions, especially those that are transmitted through literature, to be reflected upon in a critical manner, so that the individual, who comprises of an a priori essence transcendent of language, can question the nature of their relation to received ideological forms and social practices.

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[2]The following is a useful summary of the influence of structuralism as a theoretical perspective, and how it has challenged the idea of autonomy: 'In structuralist thought...language is seen as neither humanly-centred nor unproblematic. It is a structure with its own internal rules which governs its operation and it is considered theoretically distinct from the uses to which it is put in any given case. In extreme and extended versions (as for instance in some Marxist or psychoanalytical adaptations of structuralism) it is seen as a socially-constructed system which coerces language users and imposes pre-established patterns of understanding upon them.' Rick Rylance, *Debating Texts* (Milton Keynes, 1987), p. 68. This idea that language 'coerces language users' leads Julia M. Penn to reject any idea of a historical movement towards the increased autonomy of individuals: 'It is usual to regard the progress of Western thought as toward more freedom from received truths, away from the acceptance of ideas on the authority of others. This seems to characterise the trend of thought in Western culture since the Middle Ages in the realms of religion, ethics and government. It is, however, not often considered that we might still be accepting ideas on authority. It is the purpose of this study to describe a progression from acceptance of an idea on authority to rejection of the idea because the empirical evidence does not support it The idea is that the language we speak influences the way we think and act.' Julia M. Penn, *Linguistic Relativity Versus Innate Ideas* (Paris, 1972), p. 9. Such views would assign little autonomy to the courtly subject because he would have lacked the ability to reflect upon his subjection to

The individual is then free to give their consent to those conventions that give expression to an ethically informed autonomy, and reject those that compromise it.

This may seem at first sight to be an overly sophisticated reading of the dream visions which emphasises philosophical and ethical concerns at the expense of the text's role in providing polite diversion for a courtly audience.[3] But there are important sources that Chaucer draws upon in these poems that provide him with both aesthetic inspiration, and a method for addressing this ethical agenda. Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* suggests such a process of releasing the individual from subjection to literary traditions. We initially encounter the despairing Boethius 'constreyned to bygynen vers of sorwful matere'.[4] He intends to express his grief in a poetic form that is determined by the muses: 'lo, rendynge muses of poetes enditen to me thynges to ben writen, and drery vers of wretchidnesse weten my face with verray teres.'[5] When lady Philosophy appears, however, she opposes the muses and is highly critical of their relationship to the poet: 'And whan she saugh thise poetical muses

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language, but I hope to show that Chaucer's dream visions encourage a sophisticated appreciation of certain forms of language that is a counter to its deterministic potential.

[3]In the *Canterbury Tales* the Host's words at the beginning of the pilgrimage demonstrate that the tales themselves, which begin with a courtly narrative, are to be told in order to ease the passing of time upon the journey: 'And wel I woot, as ye goon by the weye, / Ye shapen yow to talen and to pleye; / For trewely, confort ne myrthe is noon / To ride by the weye doumb as a stoon' (771-74), 'ech of yow, to shorte with oure weye, / In this viage shal telle tales tweye' (791-92). All quotations from Chaucer's work are taken from the *Riverside Chaucer*, General Editor Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 1987).

[4]*Boece*, 1-2.

[5]Ibid., 4-6.

aprochen aboute my bed and enditynge wordes to my wepynges, sche was a litel amoeved, and glowede with cruel eighen.'[6] Philosophy rebukes the muses for dictating ('enditynge') words to Boethius that serve to objectify and confirm the sentiment that he is feeling; dismissing them as 'comune strompettis'.[7] The reason for the vehemence of her reaction is that she champions rational thought, and it is this which the muses prevent, by confirming the sentiments of their subject and emphasising his emotional state. The muses are those 'The whiche nat oonly ne asswagen noght his sorwes with none remedies, but thei wolden fedyn and noryssen hym with sweete venym.' This is because 'thise ben tho that with thornes and prikkynges of talentz or affeccions, whiche that ne bien nothyng fructifyenge nor profitable, destroyen the corn plentyvous of fruytes of resoun.'[8] In other words, Philosophy opposes the influence of the muses in this instance because they are preventing Boethius from thinking critically about his situation. Instead of this he is being overcome by sentiment that is then cast into the form of poetic language, and thereby strengthened. He is therefore being denied autonomy because he is not able to think, except in forms determined by sentiment and the muses. It is in a similar condition to this that the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* finds the Black Knight (as Chapter One will discuss). His grief is cast in the form of certain French courtly

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[6]Ibid., 44-47.

[7]Ibid., 49.

[8]Ibid., 50-57.

poems so that he is unable to reason, or recognise the self-destructive consequences of his subjection to the ideology of courtly love.[9]

That Chaucer decided to translate the sort of dilemma that Boethius faces, in the form of a medieval nobleman's grief, suggests that the poet's concerns may have been grounded in real circumstances. The extent to which the language of *fin amor* reflects actual social practice is a matter of some debate. It is an important issue because of the need to determine whether Chaucer's scrutiny of convention in the dream visions is a purely literary activity, or whether it is part of a moral appraisal of aspects of real courtly practice. Is it possible, for example that a great nobleman like Gaunt (who is generally held to be the real figure represented by the Black Knight) would conceptualise feelings according to literary forms? Richard Firth Green argues that in the late middle ages what had previously been purely literary convention had in time become social practice. He claims that, since the practice of *fin amor* pertained exclusively to the aristocracy in literature, they came to adopt its literary ideals in order to signify their nobility. The idea of dying of love was one of the conventions thus adopted:

What seems to have happened is that by the end of the fourteenth century the notion of a man's dying of love had become a social fiction

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[9]The concept of courtly love is of course an anachronism, and refers to a variety of traditions pertaining to the treatment of love, chiefly in courtly literature. I shall therefore use the term with care, identifying specifically the particular traditions that are relevant to the poems and my argument.

as well as a literary one, for whilst medieval noblemen may have been in as little danger of death from unrequited passion as ourselves, they seem to have felt that they should at least appear capable of such an extreme of emotion. Since the capacity to experience exalted human love was, by definition in the middle ages, restricted entirely to the well-born, it followed that one way in which a man might display his gentility was to suggest that he was in love; thus the conventions by which this emotion was defined, originally pure literary hyperbole, became part of a code of polite behaviour. An elaborate social ritual which sought to render literally the romantic exaggerations of fiction informed the public aspects of aristocratic courtship, flirtation, and indeed almost all intercourse between the sexes.[10]

Here Green is touching upon the lighter traditions of *fin amor*. The question of how such traditions might influence a nobleman's expression of genuine grief are a little different. Perhaps Gaunt never did express his own grief in the form of French courtly poetry. But since Chaucer describes him as doing so we must conclude that it would have been perceived by a courtly audience to be an appropriate mode of expression for a nobleman at the very least, and an ideal that would have been acknowledged as such.

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[10]Richard. F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980), p. 114.

There is certainly evidence from the late fifteenth century to support Green's claims. John Skelton's poem *The Bowge of Courte* suggests that the conventions of courtly love poetry were being used by this time to conceptualise the individual's relation to the real court.[11] Firstly, the *Bowge of Courte* is a dream vision, and some of the standard personifications that are found in the context of love visions such as the *Romance of the Rose* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, appear, but without any reference to Eros at all. Instead the narrator is singled out amongst a group of 'marchauntes' and is assisted in his entry to the court by 'Desyre', who gives him the 'precyous jewell' of *'Bone aventure'* (85-98). He then refers to himself as 'Drede' and later meets 'Dysdane', both common personifications in *fin amor* poetry. When the narrator is questioned by 'Daunger' as to why he seeks entry to the court, he replies 'to bye some of youre ware' (79). He clearly associates this particular figure, who in love poetry helps determine whether or not the lover succeeds in his erotic aims, with the material benefits that all on the 'Bowge' seek. Writing a hundred years after Chaucer, Skelton demonstrates the complete transference of courtly love conventions to a court, not of erotic love, but of material gain and self-interest. He demonstrates the later progression of the process identified by Green, whereby the conventions of courtly love poetry came to be applied to the individual's experience in the real world. In the process Skelton uses these conventions to provide the point of view of a commoner, thereby divorcing them from any particular association with the nobility.

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[11]John Skelton, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Scattergood (New Haven and London, 1983), pp. 46-61.

In the late fifteenth century, then, the process identified by Green has reached the point at which the conventions of *fin amor* poetry seem to have become the common possession of all who were in any way associated with the court, even those ranked with the likes of 'marchauntes'. What had previously been a set of conventions for conceptualising the business of love, has now become a metaphorical vehicle for the expression of personal ambition at court. Presumably, in order for such a development to occur, the association of the love conventions with the real court had to be taken for granted. I therefore agree with Green that the conventions of courtly love poetry were firmly associated with the real court and the aristocracy in the late fourteenth century.

It becomes necessary at this point to state what I mean by the 'court' and 'courtliness' in this thesis. My definition of the court is a broad and inclusive one. It incorporates not only the royal household and the personnel of the royal palaces, but also the wider circles in which the king and his advisers moved, including parliament and the offices of the central administration in London and Westminster, and the aristocratic households that accommodated the royal court throughout the country.[12] The idea of courtliness I employ is even broader, including the ideals of conduct governing not only those directly involved in the court as defined above, but also those who aspired to a place there. In particular I am primarily concerned with the

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[12]See David Starkey, *The English Court from the Wars of the Roses to the Civil War* (London, 1987), Introduction, and Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1991), Chapter One, for similar definitions of the court.

literary representation of courtliness, making connections between literature and what we know of Chaucer's historical experience where appropriate.

There were many wealthy people in and around Chaucer's London who would no doubt have considered themselves to be courtly on some level, even if they were not naturally viewed as such by the aristocracy. Maurice Keen provides us with some hard evidence that the sharp lines of social distinction which an acutely hierarchically conscious society required' were becoming increasingly blurred in the fourteenth century. The regulations for the graduated poll tax of 1379 make it clear that wealth was certainly no reliable guide as to where one was placed in the social hierarchy:

> Among lawyers, justices of the bench were charged even more than earls, £5: sergants of the law (senior barristers), the same as barons, 40s., and junior barristers at the same rate as knights. The mayor of London was charged at the same rate as an earl (£4), London aldermen and mayors of major cities at 40s., greater merchants at 20s. (as knights bachelor) and mayors of lesser towns at the same rate or less according to their borough's capacity. Lesser merchants and well-off artificers, and also franklins (substantial freeholders), were charged at the same rate as esquires, at 6s. 8d.[13]

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[13]Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990), p. 9.

The great wealth that lawyers, mayors and aldermen, as well as others of a mercantile background were acquiring, especially in and around London, meant that in strict monetary terms they were on a par with members of the aristocracy. In Keen's view, they could no longer be easily placed in the 'old three-estates categories'. Edward III's sumptuary laws of 1363 provide some earlier evidence of the concerns that were felt at the thought of people assuming manners not normally associated with their rank. These laws, as Keen notes, were aimed against 'the outrageous and excessive apparell of divers people, against their estate and degree.'[14] Gold cloth could be worn only by the great lords. Rich knights could wear anything else apart from this, and their ladies could wear embroideries of pearls in their head-dresses. Knights of lesser rank and esquires could only wear cloth of a specified value. Then came other groups

> Merchants, citizens and artificers of London and elsewhere, with chattels worth £1,000 or above, are to observe the same limitations as the richer esquires, those with chattels worth £500 or above the same as lesser esquires and gentlefolk ... clerks with 200 marks of land or rent must abide by the same rules as knights of equivalent wealth.[15]

Legislation of this kind was clearly aimed at maintaining the cultural markers that identify rank in a hierarchical society. The way in which it equated merchants with

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[14]Ibid., p. 10.

[15]Ibid., p. 10.

esquires and clerks with knights shows, that at least in terms of wealth, equivalencies could be drawn by the aristocracy between themselves and commoners, if they were forced to do so. Also this legislation makes it clear that commoners were prepared to assume the signs of aristocracy, and presumably in considerable numbers if a law should be deemed necessary. It is therefore likely that other markers of courtliness would also have been adopted. Chaucer's courtly poetry would help to inform someone with social pretensions of some of the characteristics of the gentry and many of the protocols of courtliness. Perhaps this is what Alceste means in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, when she defends the narrator (who represents Chaucer in some form) before the 'god of Love', with the words 'Yet hath he maked lewed folk delyte / To serve yow, in preysinge of your name' (F Text, 415-16).

Keen gives other examples, however, of 'the relationship between court, government and city' which demonstrate the extension of the concept of courtliness to include those who would not naturally be viewed as courtiers. Edward III and his sons on one occasion 'jousted accoutred as the mayor and alderman'.[16] This was taken to be a great compliment by the London merchants. Walsingham, commenting upon the knighthood of John Philipot, a grocer, in 1381 says that he was a 'most faithful knight, although a merchant'.[17] This comment reveals that the bestowing of the markers of the aristocracy upon the likes of merchants, though acknowledged as in some sense unnatural, was possible. And though such events as Philipot's knighthood

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[16]Ibid., p. 125.

[17]Ibid,. p. 125.

were by no means common in Chaucer's day, such a great honour would surely have had an effect upon the identity of his class as a whole. Though in practice very few would be admitted into the privileged ranks in this way, the door was at least seen to be open to them. And given this fact it is likely that many would have wanted to gain an understanding of courtliness, and indeed would recognise the possible advantages of such an understanding. As with Skelton's 'marchaunts' on the 'Bowge', familiarity with the protocols of courtliness amongst their class in Chaucer's day could only have increased their prospects of *'bone aventure'* in their dealings with the aristocracy.

The nature of the relationship between Westminster and London ensured that many of a non-aristocratic background would come into contact with the court. London was the centre of the greatest commercial activity and commercially generated wealth in the kingdom, and Westminster was the bureaucratic headquarters of the royal court, chosen as such because of its proximity to London.[18] Chaucer's own family reflected the ties that existed between the commercial and political capitals of the kingdom. John Chaucer, Geoffrey's father, was a successful vintner, who in 1347 was appointed as deputy to the king's chief butler in the port of Southampton. This position meant that he was responsible for the import of wine for the king's cellars.[19] He later became a freeman of the city of London, which gave him some responsibility for its government. He gained a vote in mayoral elections, which at the time was a very significant marker of one's social standing. We also have

[18]Ibid., p. 111.

[19]Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), p. 14.

documentary evidence that links him directly with those involved in some of the more infamous dimensions of politics concerning the royal court. In 1364 he stood surety for Richard Lyons, a vintner, so that the latter would not impede Alice Perrers from going about her business, or cause her harm.[20] Perrers was the mistress of Edward III and an important channel through which the king could be approached and manipulated in his later dotage. She was later impeached, along with Lyons, during the Good Parliament and banned from the king's presence. What precisely John Chaucer's relation to Lyons was is not known. However, the events that gave rise to the Good Parliament, in which the king's lust was implicitly identified as compromising his political credibility, are, I shall argue, directly relevant to Chaucer's fusion of political themes with the conventions of *fin amor* in the *Parliament of Fowls* (see Chapter Three). We shall never know what John told his son of these events, but it is unlikely that such intriguing tales of the great would not have been the subject of family discussion.

The *Canterbury Tales* provides some useful insights into Chaucer's perception of courtliness in the context of a wider social framework. First of all it is important to note that the General Prologue gives us an individual perception of 'condicioun' and 'degree' according to what the narrator sees and hears. This is not necessarily an accurate guide to the true status of the pilgrims. He tells us at the outset

Me thynketh it acordaunt to resoun

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[20]Ibid., p. 14.

> To telle yow al the condicioun
>
> Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
>
> And whiche they weren, and of what degree,
>
> And eek in what array that they were inne. (G.P. 37-40)

This clear marker of the subjective implications of the first person narrative of the General Prologue - 'so as it semed me' - is also a signal to proceed with caution in any attempt to use the *Canturbury Tales* as a basis for claims about late fourteenth-century social realities, other than with respect to the viewpoint of the narrator. Therefore what we draw from the work as a whole can only be used to indicate possibilities with regard to the actual court, and the practice of courtliness in Chaucer's society. However, one conclusion can be made about Chaucer's emphasis upon the subjective viewpoint. The narrator's emphasis that the descriptions of 'condicioun' and 'degree' are to be accepted as only subjective may well reflect the way in which traditional markers that indicated rank, manners and dress for example, were no longer reliable guides, as the introduction of Edward III's sumptuary laws suggests. And although this means that the descriptions in the General Prologue cannot be taken as an objective reflection of the social reality, the narrator's difficulty in ascertaining the true nature of his fellows 'condicioun' and 'degree' seems to have been a real problem, to the extent the laws were thought necessary to regulate appearance. We can reasonably infer, therefore, that individuals were assuming dress, and quite probably manners, that may not have been traditionally thought proper to

their rank or occupation. This would make a revision of the practice and significance of courtliness most useful. In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer's description of courtliness is broad and inclusive, rather than narrowly confined to the aristocracy and their immediate subordinates. This is why the Prioress is a courtly figure in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, even though certain of the attributes of the court are clearly seen by the narrator to be incompatible with her calling as well as poorly practised. The narrator tells us of her accomplishments in the French language in what appears to be a less than complimentary manner:

> And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
>
> After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
>
> For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe. (G.P. 124-26)

The French she speaks is certainly not that of the royal court, indicating that her courtly attributes have been cultivated at some remove from the circles in which they would be more appropriately suited. And as the narrator makes this explicit he implies that a great deal of her energies are devoted to assuming manners of the court not natural to her.

> And sikerly she was of greet desport,
>
> And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
>
> And peyned hire to countrefete cheere

> Of court, and to been estatlich of manere. (G.P. 137-40)

Courtliness in this case is arguably compromising the time and effort that would more properly be spent in spiritual devotion.[21] However, even though the narrator indicates the possible incongruities between devotion and courtliness, the Prioress is charitably accepted amongst the community of pilgrims. Her courtliness may be out of place, and obviously the product of much personal striving, but, like many of the failings of the pilgrims, it seems to be an aspect of social experience that all must come to terms with, rather than something which must be opposed.

The Knight is a contrast to the Prioress. Chaucer's description of him does not suggest that his courtly manners are in any sense inappropriate. The narrator tells us

> That fro the tyme that he first bigan
>
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
>
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie. (G.P. 44-46)

As a martial knight, experienced in warfare, it would be unusual if he did not uphold such values. The Wife of Bath's Tale would have little impact if we were not

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[21]Debate has ensued over the extent to which Chaucer's description of the Prioress draws attention to her inadequacies in devotion. I accept that the degree of apparent irony can be overstated, but even so the description of her courtly attributes are, in my opinion, by and large at odds with the demands of her calling (See Hardy Long Frank's 'Chaucer's Prioress and the Blessed Virgin,' *Chaucer Review*, 13 (1979), 346-62, for evidence that not all of Chaucer's descriptions are necessarily perjorative).

supposed to assume that the very highest ideals are expected of martial knights, whether they be aristocrats or not. This suggests that the literary convention of the noble knight at least could be assumed to be accepted amongst the pilgrims. I believe there is nothing to suggest that the statement 'He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght' (72) should be taken at any other than face value. It is therefore appropriate that his Tale is courtly, as are his manners in his conduct with the pilgrims. He does not dominate them as a social superior, instead the reader is conscious of his presence as benign though strong, and an important factor in maintaining the harmony of the group.

The Franklin, however, is another example of the narrator's broader description of courtliness. He is clearly a non-aristocratic figure, yet his narrative displays an exploration of courtly ideals to rival that of the Knight. Chaucer tells us that he was involved in government at both local and national levels: 'At sessiouns ther was he lord and sire; / Ful ofte tyme he was knyght of the shire' (355-56). As 'knyght of the shire' he would have been no stranger to Westminster, where he would have had ample opportunity to both display and discuss the courtly values he seems so much to admire. He takes just such an opportunity with the Knight, at the expense of his own son.[22] As a wealthy freeholder of non-noble background the Franklin's courtliness could only help him to associate with those who though equals in terms of wealth, were still thought of as superiors in terms of birth and tradition. Courtliness could help him to negotiate his less than clear social position.

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[22]See the Franklin's Prologue, V (F) 673-94.

The Host does not appreciate the Franklin's respect for courtly ideals, and responds to his eulogy to 'gentillese' in no uncertain terms, 'Straw for youre gentillesse! quod oure Hoost' (695). The Franklin understands that his courtly values are under attack, 'I prey yow, haveth me nat in desdeyn' (700). The Host is clearly opposed to the values of courtliness here, and the relationship between Southwark and the government may be of significance to this.[23] Southwark was an independent parliamentary borough. David Wallace describes it as a 'historian's nightmare' because of uncertainties over its boundaries, and emphasises the significance of its unusual relation to both the city and the crown.[24] In short it was a place that both the Crown and the City of London struggled to exercise control over. This might help us to understand the Host's rejection of courtliness. He may demonstrate the kind of independent attitude that developed amongst those practising what Wallace describes as the 'messy or marginal trades ... that flourished there' beyond the bounds of the City's jurisdiction.[25] The Host may well have associated courtliness with the powers of both Westminster and especially the City, that sought to extend its authority over a

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[23]This could be ironic if we accept that the figure of the Host is based upon the Herry Bailly who was himself a Member of Parliament. Pearsall's views on the Host are worth considering here in contrast to my own: 'The Host is, we may think, unnecessarily short with him [the Franklin], but the Host generally has the roughness towards those he sees as his equals (after all, Herry Bailly was a Member of Parliament too) that goes with genuine obsequiousness to rank, as evidenced in his words to the Knight, the Squire and the Prioress.' Pearsall, p. 247.

[24]David Wallace, 'Chaucer and the Absent City' in *Chaucer's England, Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 59-90.

borough 'that continually undermined the monopolies and privileges of its trade and craft guilds[26] We can therefore see how the relation of the Host to London and Westminster could be reflected in his attitude to courtliness.

The General Prologue strikes the reader initially as a mirror of fourteenth-century English society. But, if we ignore the significance of 'so as it semed me' we lose sight of the most important way in which the text relates to historical context: that is through the eyes and the mind of a particular individual who is himself having to work out precisely where people fit into the social hierarchy. The practice of courtly ideals seems to be a particular matter of debate with regard to this. I believe that the narrator is having to accommodate a broad, rather than exclusive notion of courtliness, because of the difficulty of determining rank from manners and dress at this time.

Courtliness was not, however, an issue of interest only to Chaucer. It was a notion, and an ideal, of profound importance to many of those individuals who would have made up the poet's earliest audience. Sir Lewis Clifford, Sir Philip de la Vache, Sir Richard Sturry, Sir William Beauchamp, Sir John Clanvow, and Sir William Nevill, were all Chamber Knights to Richard II, and all were known associates of Chaucer.[27] Two of these men are associated with Chaucer via literary sources. The French poet Eustache Deschamps addressed a poem to Chaucer and Lewis Clifford

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[25]Ibid., p. 60.

[26]Ibid., p. 60.

[27]See K.B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 182-185; and Pearsall pp. 130-131.

brought it to England (the poem referring to its carrier as 'l'amoureux Cliffort').[28] Philip de la Vache, Lewis Clifford's son-in-law, is the person to whom Chaucer addressed *Truth: Balad de bon conseyl*.[29] The rest of these Chamber Knights are associated with Chaucer through a legal case involving the charge of rape made against the poet. These men, along with two commoners, John Philipot and Richard Morrel, witnessed a document confirming that the plaintiff, Cecily Champain, released Chaucer from any further actions.[30] The charge of *raptus* did not necessarily mean rape in the modern sense of the word, and was often used to mean abduction.[31] But, whatever the details of the charge against Chaucer, it is a measure of his social standing that these men of the royal court should become involved in the matter on his behalf. Also what we know of these knights suggests that intellectually and culturally they would have appreciated Chaucer's work. They were serious minded, but from the evidence of the books that they were known to possess - as well as some poetry of their own, and the association of some of them with other poets - they would seem to have been ideally suited to understand and enjoy Chaucer's poetry.[32]

This evidence shows how Chaucer was linked with the court at the highest level. However, the poet's social background and the nature of his employment

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[28]*Œuvres Complètes de Eustache Deschamps*, ed. Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire and G. Raynaud (Paris, 1878-1903), iii. pp. 375-6, cited in McFarlane.

[29]*Riverside Chaucer*, p. 653.

[30]*Calendar of Close Rolls* (London, 1896-1932), 1377-81, p. 374

[31]See Pearsall, p. 135.

[32]Ibid., pp. 181-182.

would have meant that the majority of courtly individuals with whom he would have had regular contact would have been of a less exalted kind. Thomas Hoccleve for example, a clerk of the Privy Seal, seems to have known Chaucer and was influenced by him as a writer. John Gower was an Oxford logician and he, along with Ralph Strode, a London lawyer, are the joint dedicatees of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Another notable figure who was clearly influenced by Chaucer was Thomas Usk. He was a commoner, identified initially in records as a scrivener, who achieved considerable social advancement by negotiating a dangerous course between opposing London factions.[33] At the height of his achievements he was under-sheriff of Middlesex, and Sergeant-at-Arms to the king. But he ultimately paid for his ambitions with his life. Usk is of interest in that his life and death demonstrate the very real opportunities for social advancement that were possible for those of humble origins in Chaucer's day, as well as its accompanying dangers. A shrewd individual who could carefully negotiate the hazards of London and Westminster could go far, and in attempting such a rise an understanding of courtliness would no doubt have been indispensable. Later I shall return to Usk and his prose work, the *Testament of Love*, as evidence of the influence of Chaucer's dream visions as a model of self-reflexive narrative for the courtier. Usk's example will show that social mobility at this social level was inextricably linked to an understanding of courtliness, and will suggest that he

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[33]Reference to Usk as a 'scryvein' appears in the *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1381-85* (London, 1920), p.476.

attempted to work out and display his relation to courtly literary ideals along lines that had been clearly defined by Chaucer.

II

The court as defined above provided the social context for the poet and his work. Its members identified themselves as 'courtly' both through their occupations, and through their knowledge and practice of the various protocols that defined courtliness. Many of these protocols were described and transmitted in literature. It is the central argument of this thesis that Chaucer explores the relationship of the individual to literary ideals of courtliness through his use of the dream device. I shall argue that this device enabled Chaucer to describe specifically how the mind of the individual is shaped by the texts of the court. The dream device is conducive to such a description because it draws explicitly upon specific medieval dream theory, which in turn explains how the mind is shaped in philosophical terms. To understand Chaucer's dream poetry, then, it is necessary to understand the particular dream theory that provides its philosophical basis.

A.C. Spearing notes 'the analogy between dream-interpretation and literary interpretation.'[34] In using the dream device the medieval author consciously invites his readers to question the status of his text and its possible relation to the individual subject (whether the protagonist/narrator or the reader of the poem). A medieval

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[34]A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 49.

reader could display their awareness of dream theory and use it to explain the particular form and characteristics of a dream vision. Chaucer provides us with a comic example of this practice in the Nun's Priest's Tale, in which cock and a hen attempt to interpret the significance of a dream. Pertelote tries to dismiss the significance of Chauntecleer's 'sweven' of a hound-like beast, by offering an explanation of its cause in terms of medieval physiology:

> Swevenes engendren of replecciouns,
>
> And ofte of fume and of complecciouns,
>
> Whan humours been to habundant in a wight. (2923-25)

This idea, that the dream is determined according to the balance of bodily fluids ('complecciouns') and influence of vapours ('fumes'), is a version of one aspect of Aristotle's theory of dreams. Such an interpretation precludes the possibility of the dream having any prophetic value.[35] Rather it is interpreted as a symptom of a physical disorder, and a medicinal remedy is consequently recommended by Pertelote: 'For Goddes love, as taak som laxatyf', (2943) 'The whiche han of hire

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[35]See *Parva Naturalia*, Ch. I, 'On Prophecy in Sleep', 'Regarding prophecy in sleep and the prophecy said to be derivable from dreams, it is difficult to treat it with contempt or believe in it.' However, Aristotle goes on to write that 'most prophetic dreams are things of chance...neither sign nor cause of the event, but only accident.' Quotation from *Aristotle's Psychology, A Treatise On The Principles of Life (De Anima and Parva Naturalia)*, trans., William Alexander Hammond (New York, 1902), pp.247-50.

propretee by kynde / To purge yow bynethe and eek above' (2952-53). Chauntecleer, however, is disturbed by what he has dreamed and is anxious not to ignore a possible supernatural warning. He tells a story he has heard of a dream that came true and cites Macrobius, one of the great medieval authorities on dreams:[36]

> Dame Pertelotte, I sey yow trewely,
>
> Macrobeus, that writ the avisioun
>
> In Affrike of the worthy Cipioun,
>
> Affermeth dremes, and seith that they been
>
> Warnynge of thynges that men after seen. (3122-26)

The dream does indeed turn out to have been a prophecy, and the hound-like creature is revealed as a fox, who later attempts to carry Chauntecleer off. Here, then, we see Chaucer's knowledge of medieval dream theory, and his playful exploitation of the way in which different theories encourage radically different interpretations. The important distinction in the Nun's Priest's Tale is that between the spiritual and the physical as rival sources of inspiration of dreams. And, although in the context of the farmyard the spiritual interpretation was the correct one, in the context of the court, as we shall see, it is the naturalistic explanation in Aristotelian terms, that enables us

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[36]See Spearing, pp. 8-11, for an account of Macrobius's classification of dreams. The *insomnium* and *visum* are both types of dream, according to Macrobius, that are inspired by either psychological or physiological causes. The *visio*, however, is a dream which is prophetic and actually comes true, and the *oraculum* is one in which some respected figure gives guidance or advice that is not to be ignored.

properly to understand Chaucer's poetic method. There, I shall suggest, it is the content of the individual's mind that is the source of all that he sees in the dream visions, rather than any supernatural inspiration.

Steven Kruger argues that by the later middle ages, Aristotelian dream theory had come to dominate dream interpretation.[37] In Chapter Two I shall argue that, from the *House of Fame* onwards, Thomist psychology is the important theoretical influence upon Chaucer's dream visions. Thomas Aquinas was the great interpreter of Aristotle, and it is through Dante's *Divine Comedy* that Chaucer became acquainted with his ideas. The influence of Aquinas upon Chaucer is most obvious in the impact of the *Divine Comedy* upon the *House of Fame,* for, as I shall show, Dante's great work is deliberately organised according to Thomist psychology. Prior to the *House of Fame,* however, Aristotle was still the main influence upon Chaucer's dream theory, as the *Book of the Duchess* suggests. In Chapter One this influence is demonstrated to be derived not from Aquinas but from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* as well as from the French courtly poetry that the poem refers to and which also utilises Aristotelian psychology.

Aristotle distinguished between the 'active' intellect (or agent intellect) and the 'receptive' intellect (or passive intellect) as the two principle powers of the mind. The former is the source of all rational and critical thought, acting upon the images which sensation provides, and enabling judgements to be made about them. The latter is shaped by sense impressions and is a storehouse of the images that the senses

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[37]Steven Kruger, *Medieval Dreaming* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 26-34, 83-122.

provide. It is therefore passive, and is shaped from without, whereas the active intellect is 'self-moving'.[38]

The relevance of this to Chaucer's description of the courtly subject is that it enables the poet to divide the mind and describe that part of the courtier's identity that is shaped and determined from without - the receptive intellect - and that which is unshaped and self-determining, the agent intellect. According to Aristotle, the images that a dream is composed of are derived from the receptive intellect giving up various of its contents without the guidance of the agent intellect. The receptive intellect is instead triggered by the kind of bodily processes that Pertelote describes. This is what happens when we dream, according to Aristotle, so that the usual hierarchy of the active intellect over the passive intellect is suspended. It is only upon waking (when the individual can reflect upon the dream) that the hierarchy is restored. This means that Chaucer can describe both how the mind is shaped by courtly ideology in the form of the dream, and how the individual can transcend this shaping by reflecting critically upon the dream when awake. In this way the individual becomes conscious of that which is shaping their identity, and can morally evaluate the various elements of courtliness that are described in the dream.

In all four of Chaucer's dream visions we are presented with various aspects of courtliness and courtly experience as they have been impressed upon the mind of the narrator. Chaucer uses the device, not simply to create fantastic narratives, but to

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[38]See Chapter Two, n.56.

link the narrative directly to the dreamer. This means that the poems represent a self-reflexive process and are a glimpse into the mind of a courtly individual.

Chaucer, I believe, naturally employed the dream device for two reasons. Firstly it was a recognisably courtly form. The popularity of the *Romance of the Rose* ensured that the dream vision was the ideal form for exploring courtliness and courtly behaviour and for presenting this exploration to a courtly audience. Secondly, it enabled Chaucer to show precisely how the mind of the individual was shaped by courtly experience, in such a way as to demonstrate the potential for transcendence of such determinism - through an affirmation of the proper hierarchy of agent intellect over receptive intellect. This meant that although the poet was able to demonstrate his knowledge of courtliness, he was also able to maintain some distance from its ideology.

I now want to return to the figure of Usk, and consider how his *Testament of Love*, reveals the influence of Chaucer's method as described above. The *Testament of Love* is a Boethian vision (not a dream vision), that contains many allegorical descriptions and is very much indebted to Chaucer. Usk writes, as Skeat observes 'with a copy of Chaucer's Boethius always open before him, and takes from it passage after passage.'[39] Skeat also points out specific borrowings from the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Good Women*. But it is in the transformation of his materials that I

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[39]Walter W. Skeat, *Chaucerian And Other Pieces* (Oxford, 1894), p. xxv. *7 vols.* *volume 7,* Skeat is no admirer of Usk and much of what he says about his work today seems unnecessarily pejorative, and at times plain silly. Nevertheless he provides us with a modern version of the *Testament of Love*, and usefully identifies specific borrowings from Chaucer.

believe Usk demonstrates the most important influence of the poet, whom he describes in the *Testament* as 'the noble philosophical poete in English'.[40]

What is extraordinary about Usk's work is that the figure who provides the narrator with counsel in the manner of Boethius's Lady Philosophy is called 'Lady Love'. This is quite an innovation, given that it is a common premise of the literature of *fin amor* that love is opposed to reason.[41] However, I believe that Usk has recognised the important example which Chaucer's dream visions provide, that an exploration of courtliness and courtly love conventions can be conducive to an affirmation of reason. In Chaucer's dream visions we shall see that the exploration of the conventions of *fin amor* invariably lead to an affirmation of the rational capabilities of the individual, which in turn leads to an affirmation of free will and personal autonomy over convention. The Black Knight, in the *Book of the Duchess,* for example, is counselled against reinforcing his grief in the poetic forms developed by French love poets. Similarly, in the *Legend of Good Women,* Alceste provides rational counsel that limits and counterbalances the angry reactions of the 'god of Love', offering reasoned arguments in an environment determined by the conventions of *fin amor.* It is because Usk has internalised the association between love and reason in Chaucer's dream visions, that he is able to have Lady Love stand in the place of reason, as when she speaks to affirm free will:

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[40]Ibid., p. 123. The *Testament of Love*, Bk III, Ch. IV, 249.

[41]See for example the *Romance of the Rose*, at the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II. Here reason is clearly described in opposition to Love.

'Now see,' quod she, 'thou thy wil shal folowe, thy free wil to be

grounded continuelly to abyde. It is thy free wil, that thou lovest and

hast loved, and yet shal loven this Margaryte-perle; and in thy wil thou

thinkest to holde it.[42]

The affirmation of free will is part of the Boethian ideal, but this ideal is expressed in

the language of *fin amor*. Lady Love uses the symbol of the 'Margaryte-perle', a

recurrent symbol of the beloved in both French and English courtly poetry, in order to

signify what is an essentially spiritual goal, previously identified as 'blisse in parfit

joye'.[43] The use of the pearl to indicate the biblical pearl of great price is, of course,

traditional. But, in the Gawain-poet's *Pearl*, for example, the voice that counsels

clearly assumes the spiritual perspective, speaking from across the river which divides

the truths of heaven from the flawed perceptions of humanity. In Usk's work the

counselling voice seems to be deeply implicated in the ideology of *fin amor*.

Consequently we are never precisely sure whether the narrator is really trying to see

beyond those ideals to a spiritual goal. Usk, I believe, is trying to follow in Chaucer's

footsteps and work out his relation to the ideology of courtliness by using the

language of courtly love in a Boethian framework. The result is not entirely successful

because there is no clear distinction between the courtly and the spiritual in his work.

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[42]Skeat, p. 129. *Testament of Love* Bk.III, Ch.VI, 24.

[43]Ibid., p. 128, Bk.III, Ch.VI, 5.

This is why critics have long been divided as to whether Usk is really trying to affirm spiritual ideals, or the more worldly ideals of courtliness.[44] Paul Strohm, for example, interprets the *Testament of Love* strictly according to Usk's known role in the factional politics of the time.[45] In brief, Usk switched sides, moving from a group of powerful merchants that had connections with John of Gaunt and sought Mayoral office in London, to join the group of royalist merchants headed by Nicholas Brembre. His betrayal of the former mayor of London, John of Northampton, enabled him to escape punishment and join the royal party. When Northampton's enemy, Brembre, won a disputed election, the former embarked on a campaign to overturn the result and Usk played a significant role on Northampton's behalf. He was one of a delegation that went to John of Gaunt to ask that a royal writ be issued demanding a new election. Gaunt did not comply and Usk was then involved in a series of civil disturbances that eventually led to the arrest of Northampton and his followers. Usk then seems to have switched sides, giving evidence against Northampton and thereby enabling him to side with the party associated with the royal court. Strohm therefore interprets the *Testament of Love* as Usk's attempt to enhance his own reputation before the likes of Walworth, Philipot, Brembre and others who supported the king.

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[44]Skeat, for example, disagrees with an earlier critics views on the *Testament of Love*: 'Warton dismisses it in two lines:- "It is a lover's parody of Boethius's book *De Consolation...*" whereas the author was not a lover at all, except in a spiritual sense.' *Skeat, p.xxii*.

[45]See Paul Strohm, 'Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380's', in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* edited by Lee Patterson (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990), pp. 83-112.

Strohm then goes on to contrast Usk's unreserved allegiance to the royal party with Chaucer's more shrewd political associations: 'For in those very years, when Usk was seeking so unreservedly to enter into the service of the royal faction, Chaucer was wisely and systematically curtailing the extent of his factional visibility.'[46] Strohm therefore interprets Usk's work as a blatant attempt to associate himself with the court through the creation of a courtly text, and contrasts this with Chaucer's refusal to indicate allegiances in his work: 'in working through literary traditions of generic and stylistic difference he assimilates his social vision into a textual model of unresolved and unresolvable conflict.'[47] I disagree with this. There is a point of resolution in Chaucer's work, but it exists on a totally different level, and is to do with the individual transcending the plane of social and political conflict to assume a higher, and ultimately spiritual perspective. This is what Chaucer does in his dream visions (rather than simply shifting the conception of social and political conflict on to an alternative literary plane, as Strohm suggests) and what Usk tries to do, far less successfully, is to emulate Chaucer's Boethian ideal.

In the Prologue to the *Testament of Love,* Usk makes plain these intentions in a manner that can help our understanding of Chaucer's dream visions, because what Usk says represents something of his understanding of them. He begins by referring indirectly to Lady Philosophy's dismissal of the muses at the beginning of the *Consolation.* There are many, says Usk, who 'swalowen the deliciousness of jestes

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[46] Ibid., p. 91.

[47] Ibid., p. 112.

and of ryme' without considering 'the goodnesse or of the badnesse of the sentence...'[48] This is the beginning of a defence of poetic writing, and as Usk goes on he articulates the value of such work. Literature, says Usk, is able to help perfect the intellect:

> Certes perfeccion is the soveraynest thing of desyre, and moste creatures resonable have, or els shulde have, ful appetyte to their perfeccion; unresonable beestes mowen not, sith reson hath in hem no werking. Than resonable that wol not is comparisoned to unresonable, and made lyke hem. For-sothe, the most soverayne and fynal perfeccion of man is in knowing of a sothe, withouten any entent disceyvable, and in love of oon very god that is inchaungeable; that is, to knowe and love his creatour.[49]

The notion of 'perfeccion' employed here by Usk is derived from Aristotle's suggestion that all things strive to realise their potential and assume their proper place in the overall scheme of things. A man, having the capacity to reason, finds his perfection by exercising his intellect critically and seeking to understand the hidden causes of things, or the general truths that underlie events in the material world.[50] The

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[48]Skeat, p. 1. Prologue to the *Testament of Love*, 2-4.

[49]Ibid., p. 2. 45-53.

[50]William A. Hammond describing Aristotle's concept of the soul writes 'The sum of sense-data constitutes the potentiality of reason, i.e. it constitutes the passive reason [receptive intellect], while

idea that through such an application of the critical intellect man can be brought closer to God, was one that Aquinas championed, and which Usk here endorses:[51]

> Now, principally, the mene to bringe in knowleging and loving his creatour is the consideracion of thinges made by the creatour, wherthrough, by thilke thinges that ben made understonding here to our wittes, arn the unsene privitees of god made to us sightful and knowing, in our contemplacion and understonding. These thinges than,

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their construction into actual rational significance constitutes the activity of creative reason [agent intellect]; the real content is given in the former, the formal content in the latter.' *Aristotle's Psychology*, Introduction, p. lxxxvi. This description of how the receptive intellect ('passive reason') is shaped by 'The sum of sense-data', then interpreted and given significance by the agent intellect ('creative reason') is a good summary of how a rational subject realises their full potential through the conversion of empirical experience into constructive rational thought. This ability to reflect critically upon our personal experience is the special characteristic of human beings and what enables us to fulfil our unique potential according to Aristotle.

[51] Aquinas believed that it was possible to use 'natural reason' to bring pagans to a knowledge of God, as Anthony Kenny's description of Aquinas's *Summma contra Gentiles* demonstrates: 'What gives the book its particular character, and its importance in the history of philosophy, is the fact that the Muslims and the Jews for whose conversion it was written included men thoroughly versed in Aristotelian learning. Hence it sets out to argue from philosophical premises without sectarian presuppositions...' Anthony Kenny, *Aquinas* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 7-8. The fundamental premise that reason can bring individuals to a knowledge of God's existence informs much of Aquinas's use of Aristotelian philosophy.

forsoth, moche bringen us to the ful knowleginge of sothe, and to the

parfit love of the maker of hevenly thinges.[52]

It is hard to see the value of such philosophising as a preface to a text that is simply a

display of courtliness designed to associate the author more closely with the royal

court. This is how Strohm views the text and he would presumably regard this aspect

of the work as a display of learning or an awareness of a particular convention that

would have been recognised by a courtly audience. But what we have here is more

than that. It is Usk's understanding that in thinking critically about his or her

experience in the world, the individual is able spiritually to transcend their immediate

circumstances: 'Wherof Aristotle, in the boke *de Animalibus*, saith to naturel

philosophers: it is a greet lyking in love of knowinge their creatour; and also in

knowinge of causes in kyndely thinges.'[53] The specific aspect of natural experience

that he identifies as his principle object is 'love'. This is in itself conventional, and

also locates the text as a whole within the conventions that pertain to the literature of

fin amor. But this in no sense negates the serious intent that Usk has declared. Any

natural object (or emotion) is as good a starting point as any other, and as the mind

apprehends its place in the whole - i.e. its function in creation - a rational progression

can be made from any point in the creation to the creator.

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[52]*Testament of Love*, pp. 2-3. 54-61.

[53]Ibid., p. 2.64-66.

Chaucer's legacy to Usk was a literary model of how the 'naturel' philosopher could approach medieval courtly experience as an object of critical thought.[54] Chaucer uses dream theory that is itself Aristotelian in origins, in order to bracket off empirical experience - which informs the receptive intellect - and hold this up before the agent intellect, that can then read, comprehend, contemplate, and interpret the dream text.

Usk was not alone in recognising the philosophical basis of Chaucer's art. Hoccleve, in his *De Regimine Principum*, includes a lament for Chaucer in which he compared his worthy master to Cicero in the art of rhetoric, Virgil in the art of poetry, and asks 'Also who was hier in philosophie / To Aristotle in our tonge but thow?' [55] This was more than mere compliment, or a justification of the worth of poetry by suggesting an intellectual content that is not really there. These contemporaries of Chaucer recognised that his poetry sought an understanding of the relations of things in an Aristotelian sense. In the case of Usk at least, the Boethian form as employed by Chaucer was clearly understood to hold the key to a consideration of the individual's relation to the court, with a view to assuming a transcendent spiritual perspective.

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[54]It is true that other writers, such as Walter Map and John of Salisbury, had philosophised about the court before in a way that was literary in part. But Chaucer does so in a way that is new, in that he uses Aristotelian psychology, via the dream device, to show precisely the relation of mind to its context within court culture. The narrative structure is consequently highly refined both in terms of form and as a means of describing individual experience.

[55]*De Regimine Principum*, 2087-88, quoted from *The Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall for the
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Early English Text Society (London, 1892), p. xxxii.
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Strohm would interpret Chaucer's use of this form as a convenient vehicle for evading one's actual political associations in the real world. He cannot see Usk seriously attempting to transcend the political arena, given what we know of his career. But I believe it is wrong to propose such a direct link between the socio-political context of the individual and their poetry. For Usk, whose personal designs clearly came to be overtaken by political events, the problem of free will may have been acutely felt. Even if he was predisposed to act in ways that seem to have been blatantly opportunistic, he could still reflect upon his own circumstances and actions and consider alternative ideals in the context of his writing. Strohm feels that Usk could not detach himself from his circumstances and that his work as well as his life bear testimony to that. The same is certainly not true of Chaucer, whom Strohm sees as making shrewd career decisions: distancing himself from the court when it was expedient to do so, and writing in such a way as to hide his true allegiances. What I would suggest, however, is that Chaucer's dream visions do not hide allegiances by obscuring the poet's relation to courtly ideals. Rather they helped him to reflect upon those ideals and realise their limited value in a spiritual sense. This realisation enabled Chaucer to change his actual circumstances when the need arose. In other words his art helped empower his personal agency. Usk perceived Chaucer's literary model for reflection and transcendence and sought to emulate it himself.

A modern analogy to the problem of political issues in Chaucer's work can be seen in the case of Seamus Heaney. A citizen of Northern Ireland and of Catholic background, he writes in English and avoids explicit political references in his work.

In due course he obtained both the Nobel prize for literature and the prestigious Chair of Poetry at Oxford University. His refusal to tackle political issues head on could arguably be construed as careerist. In the course of lectures delivered upon receiving the Chair, however, Heaney presented a theory of poetry that carefully described its relationship to the world of politics. Poetry, like politics looks to ideals against which present experience is measured. 'Poetic fictions', Heaney argued,

> the dream of alternative worlds, enable governments and revolutionaries as well. It's just that governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their reader's sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable.[56]

These words demonstrate his consciousness of his own difficult position and the need to make some statement regarding his art and its political significance. He is writing here with the reality of violence very much in mind:

> The nobility of poetry, says Wallace Stevens, 'is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.' It is imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality.[57]

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[56]Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London, 1995), p. 1.

[57]Ibid., p. 1.

The standard that Heaney invokes in order to redress 'the pressure of reality from without' is expressly derived from what are ultimately spiritual ideals. He quotes Simone Weil, who, in her book *Gravity and Grace,* outlines an essentially spiritual approach, and then says

> Clearly, this corresponds to deep structures of thought and feeling derived from centuries of Christian teaching and from Christ's paradoxical identification with the plight of the wretched. And in so far as poetry is an extension and refinement of the mind's extreme recognitions, and of language's most unexpected apprehensions, it too manifests the workings of Weil's law.[58]

Here Heaney makes plain the fact that his notion of what poetry should invoke in order to resist the 'pressure of reality' is, in the last analysis, spiritual and derived from Christian ideals. It is at this point, however, that the cultural materialist protests, and levels the charge of convenient escapism from a direct and unequivocal engagement with the political and the real; indeed an escapism that is beneficial to the poet personally in terms of his personal career.

This is in fact how Strohm treats both Usk and Chaucer. He fails to take serious account of the Boethian ideal in their work, and chooses instead to interpret

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[58]Ibid., p. 3. Heaney is referring to Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London, 1963), p. 151.

the intentions of the poets in terms of their involvement with political factions, and concerns for their own careers. But this, I believe, is patronising to both poets. Such a view requires us to reduce the value that they have attached to the spiritual in their work, and interpret its significance cynically in terms of political expediency. In what follows I shall explore Chaucer's poetry as a 'redress' in favour of the autonomous subject, against the deterministic pressures that existed in the context of the court.

In this thesis, then, I regard Chaucer's dream visions as part of a tradition that goes back through Boethius to the very foundations of Christian thinking. In Proverbs we find an expression of the paradox whereby an individual is at once called to be separate from the world in some sense, and yet remain open to reflect upon the meaning of worldly experience:

III

Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh and intermeddleth with all wisdom.[59]

This enigmatic proverb is a useful starting point for an explanation of my understanding of Chaucer's dream visions. In interpreting it I find some of the key concepts that pertain to the use of the dream device in the late fourteenth century. One interpretation of this proverb is that the wise man cannot be exposed to knowledge

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[59]*The King James Bible*. Proverbs, Ch. 18, v. 1.

indiscriminately without first establishing how precisely the soul relates to its objects of knowledge in ultimate terms. The notion of separation might involve some form of journey, for example. The individual leaves the normal confines of his or her society and culture, and exchanges this for a more ascetic environment that is conducive to contemplation and prayer. Then, after some time it is possible to reintegrate with that which has been set aside. This can be a more comprehensive re-engagement, based upon the fact that one's essential self has been formally established in the knowledge of God's presence. Having acted upon the 'desire' to set everything aside it is then possible to be entrusted with a greater knowledge of things than before.

But this separation need not be merely physical. The individual can be separated within, in order to look and find the point at which one's essential being is separate, or can be separated from that which it has immediate experience of in the world. It is precisely such a point of separation that Aristotle provides by distinguishing between the agent intellect and the receptive intellect.

The extent to which fourteenth-century writers could be analytical about this process of separation is demonstrated in the *Cloud of Unknowing*. In this late fourteenth-century text the 'desire' to be 'separated' is such that even the concepts, or signifieds, that language is made up of come to be considered in objective terms, so that language itself can be set aside from the essential self that uses it. This occurs in the text where the author recognises the worldly basis of the conceptual images that are attached to words, and their inadequacy in conveying the presence of God. The

author describes the contemplative as being suppressed by the normal workings of his own mind:

> And therfore the scharp steryng of thin understondyng, that wile alweis prees apon thee when thou settest thee to this blynd werk, behoveth alweys be born down; & bot thou bere him doun, he wile bere thee doun.[60]

Instead of allowing images of any kind to interpose between self and God, the individual must 'put doun soche clere beholdinges, be thei never so holy ne so likyng'.[61] This teaching is founded upon the realisation that the concepts that we use to picture spiritual things only stand in for the reality they appear to describe. It is therefore better to 'soche a prive love put upon this cloude of unknowyng' than it is

> for to have the ighe of thi soule openid in contemplacion or beholding of alle the aungelles or seyntes in heven, or in hering of alle the mirthe & the melody that is amonges hem in blisse.[62]

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[60]*The Cloud of Unknowing*, Edited by Phyllis Hodgson for the Early English Text Society (London, 1944), Ch. 9. 17-20. v.218

[61]Ibid., Ch. 9. 4.

[62]Ibid., Ch. 9. 9-14.

This rejection of the traditional concepts of religious language, images of 'aungelles or seyntes in heven' is what the 'cloude of unknowyng' is. It is a complete negation of the signifieds that constitute the conceptual realm of language, because they are derived from worldly experience.[63] Even prepositions that describe spatial relations, such as the word 'up'/are treated by the author because they are founded upon worldly experience: 'how that thees presumptuous goostly disciples misunderstonden this other worde UP.'[64] Like all other components of language they must be rejected in favour of the 'cloude of unknowyng':

> Bot I sey that the werke of oure spirit schal not be directe neither upwardes ne donwardes, ne on o syde ne on other, ne forward ne bacward, as it is of a bodely thing. For whi oure werke schuld be goostly, not bodely, ne on a bodely maner wrought.[65]

These are remarkable insights into the way in which conventions of language are 'on a bodely maner wrought' and therefore contingent upon the information provided by

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[63]By 'signifieds' I mean the conceptual components of words that Saussure identified as being determined by the practical experience of a speech community, and which harder versions of structuralism regard as determining the conceptual abilities of the individual. See Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (London, 1976), Chapter Two, 'Saussure's Theory of Language', pp. 18-51, and also Culler's *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 58-59.

[64]*The Cloud of Unknowing*, Ch. 57. 3-5.

[65]Ibid., Ch. 57. 11-15.

the senses. The meanings of words do not seem to be guaranteed by any kind of Platonic archetype for the author, and do not therefore relate directly to the spiritual forms that they sometimes attempt to describe.

What is exceptional about this text is its non-scholastic appearance. The writer seems to be outlining a mode of separation that is not based on any recognisable principles of medieval psychology. It seems instead that the logic which underpins the author's work has been inspired on a personal level. If so then this is evidence indeed of the great thought that an intelligent medieval believer could apply to the ideal of 'separation' with regard to language, and how language informs thought. This kind of 'separation,' where the individual seeks that point at which their essential self divides from knowledge derived from both the senses and from language, is precisely what Chaucer sought to explore in his dream visions.

Like the *Cloud* author and also like Usk, Chaucer sought to distance himself from his immediate circumstances through what he wrote in his dream visions. This enabled him to think critically about his relationship to both courtly experience and courtly conventions. Rather than using the dream device to evade the pressures of politics, philosophy, and religious faith, and escape into abstractions, Chaucer employed it to question his position as a courtly subject directly and rigorously. This was an undertaking of profound significance both to himself and his audience. As the following chapters will suggest, the dream device allowed the poet to address issues of crucial moral and philosophical importance, specifically how the individual thinks and acts in the context of the court. In the *Book of the Duchess* we find the author

beginning his analysis of the courtly subject's relation to courtly conventions and language - an analysis which he sustained in the form of dream visions throughout his career.

1.

The Book of the Duchess.

The *Book of the Duchess* is the first of Chaucer's dream visions. In it the poet represents an idealised courtly version of himself encountering and conversing with a knight of high rank. Their discourse takes up most of the narrative. The poem is developed around the theme of the hunting of the 'hert.' Chaucer uses this as a metaphor for pursuing what is contained in the heart of the Black Knight. This is made clear when the conversation between the narrator and the Black Knight is brought to a close by the sound of the hunt being called off:

> And with that word ryght anoon
>
> They gan to strake forth; al was doon,
>
> For that tyme, the hert-huntyng. (1311-13)

The emphasis of the poem is consequently very much upon how language can 'hunt,' or access, the inner experience of the Black Knight. And, because of the great discrepancy in rank between the poet's persona and the Knight, this 'hert-huntyng' must be carried out in the most respectful and tactful manner. The poet therefore explores the conventions of courtliness that govern the conduct and language used between individuals of different rank. Such issues would have been of great interest to

the courtly subjects who provided the first audience for Chaucer's poem, enabling them to observe and consider conventions that were central to their own social experience.

Much of the language of the *Book of the Duchess* is closely modelled upon French source texts. This language forms the substance of the Black Knight's speech, and is presented in a framework that is governed by the ideals of courtliness. The French source texts that are translated by Chaucer provide the means by which we access the Black Knight's inner-most thoughts and feelings. This means that if his thinking becomes subject to moral examination, then his language must be also. In what follows I shall show that in utilising a narrative structure that scrutinises the language of the Black Knight, the poet is working out his relationship, and that of his audience, to this French literature of *fin amor*. Ultimately, then, we are encouraged to adopt an ethical perspective upon the language of the Black Knight, seeing its effect in terms of its influence upon his psychological state. That Chaucer can present such an enquiry without compromising the capacity of his chosen forms to delight and entertain is a testimony to the achievements of the poem. In the course of this chapter I shall look at how this relation of courtly identity to courtly love literature is described, so that the reader is guided into a critical relation to the French literature of *fin amor* that provides much of the narrative's substance. I shall begin by considering the narrator as he is described in the frame, and how some of the details of his description relate to the dream vision which follows.

The Narrator.

The introductory lines to the *Book of the Duchess* are modelled upon Jean Froissart's

Le Paradys d'Amours and describe the troubled state that is characteristic of the

unrequited courtly lover, although here, unlike in Froissart's poem, there is no

specific reference to any beloved,[1]

> I have gret wonder, be this lyght,
>
> How that I lyve, for day ne nyght
>
> I may nat slepe wel nygh noght;
>
> I have so many an ydel thoght
>
> Purely for defaute of slep
>
> That, by my trouthe, I take no kep
>
> Of nothing, how hyt cometh or gooth,
>
> Ne me nys nothyng leef nor looth. (1-8)

In this state the narrator is himself aware that his thought is wayward, and lacks the

mental equilibrium of a rational mind:

> Al is ylyche good to me -

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[1]Jean Froissart, *Paradys d'amours* (1-12). References to the French source texts are taken from B.A.

Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Woodbridge, 1982).

Joye or sorowe, wherso hyt be -

For I have felynge in nothing,

But as it were a mased thyng,

Alway in point to falle a-doun;

For sorwful ymagynacioun

Ys alway hooly in my mynde. (9-15)

Since there is no specific person mentioned as the cause of his condition it is perhaps tempting to regard the narrator's speech as being highly affected and essentially rhetorical. He seems to be revelling in the emotions that are typical of the conventional courtly lover without adequate cause: 'Myselven can not telle why' (34). But whether or not it is the case that this is more a question of assuming a role than of recognising the effect of some previous experience of love, the narrator's self-description has serious moral implications for a medieval audience.[2] Taken by themselves these remarks would not necessarily provoke an immediate moral response. But in the course of the poem the Black Knight's much more intense feeling and the way in which this is treated, encourage a reconsideration of these remarks in terms of their ultimate significance both psychologically and morally. In particular the narrator's recognition of the harm that is being caused to himself physically is a genuine cause for concern,

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[2] That this poem is included in Chaucer's *Retractions* is in itself a reminder that its subject matter is ultimately subject to moral scrutiny.

> And wel ye woot, agaynes kynde
>
> Hyt were to lyven in thys wyse,
>
> For nature wolde nat suffyse
>
> To noon erthly creature
>
> Nat longe tyme to endure
>
> Withoute slep and be in sorwe. (16-21)

'And wel ye woot' demonstrates an assumed common perspective upon the state of being described. The narrator knows that his audience ought to perceive his condition in a particular way, and indeed guides them to do so. This state is a contradiction of 'nature' and therefore harmful physically, to the extent that the narrator tells us 'thus melancolye / And drede I have for to dye'(23-4). There is certainly a degree of hyperbole in this remark. However, if the condition of the Black Knight is a further commentary upon the milder distress of the narrator in the frame, then I do not think it is wrong to take his words more literally than might be deemed appropriate for a piece of courtly entertainment. This is because Chaucer follows Machaut's *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne* in bringing the subject of death into direct relation to the conventions of *fin amor*.[3]

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[3]Machaut's poem involves a debate between a nobleman and noblewoman about whether it is better to be a bereaved lover or an unrequited lover. Chaucer intensifies his exploration of such issues by making the poem refer to an actual bereavement, and by avoiding anything like the conclusive

The themes of death and physical destruction integrate the frame with the dream vision proper by linking the narrator's fear of his own decline ('And I ne may, ne nyght ne morwe, / Slepe; and thus melancolye / And drede I have for to dye' (22-24)), with the more fully realised condition of the Black Knight. The narrator's subjection to the emotions typical of a courtly lover are destructive in terms of both soul and spirit: they damage that which animates the physical self.

> Defaute of slep and hevynesse
>
> Hath sleyn my spirit of quyknesse
>
> That I have lost al lustyhede.
>
> Such fantasies ben in myn hede
>
> So I not what is best to doo. (25-29)

The vision that consequently comes to the narrator can be taken as an answer and potential cure for the condition that he has outlined. The *Book of the Duchess* provides entertainment for a courtly audience whilst challenging the emotional excesses that are typical of the literary ideal to which they subscribe. In doing so the poem comments upon literary conventions in a manner that is also relevant to real states of distress, by drawing attention to the way in which literary forms and ideas can encourage and support such states of mind. The fact that the narrator is of a far

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resolution of Machaut's poem, in which the figure of Roy de Behaigne decides it is better to be bereaved than never to have been rewarded by one's beloved.

more 'bookish' type than any comparable narrator in the French sources, reflects Chaucer's desire to explore the way in which the thinking of a courtly subject can be shaped by the texts that they read.[4]

There is of course a fundamental difference between the condition of the narrator in the frame and that of the Black Knight. The narrator at the beginning of the poem is not a highly refined figure, and so there is a comic dimension to his version of the troubled courtly lover.[5] He does his utmost to assume the role, but he does not naturally possess the highly refined sensibility to which the sentiments of courtly love are attuned. The Black Knight, in contrast, is 'the genuine article', so to speak. He is able to fulfil those conventions that are synonymous with his class and nature. This means that he is capable of going to tragic extremes, whereas the narrator's innate limitations reduce his experience to lesser comic proportions. This is entirely in accordance with Christian teaching that the more excellent the individual, the greater

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[4]Although the French poets such as Machaut, Froissart, and Deschamps utilise recognisable textual borrowings, none present a narrator who is so overt about the texts that influence him. Perhaps because these texts (such as the *Romance of the Rose*) were part of their language and culture, these poets did not feel they were 'borrowing' in quite the same way as Chaucer did. Certainly being able to cite the influences upon his work was a mark of scholarship for Chaucer. But I feel that more than this there is a consciousness of the status of these texts as aspects of a foreign culture to the mind of an Englishman - a culture that is admired in many respects, but one that is not to be simply absorbed into English, so much as understood critically in terms of its effects upon the thinking and behaviour of individuals.

[5]This is most apparent in his response to the story of Ceyx and Alcyone which I shall discuss below.

their potential fall - Satan being the supreme example.[6] The way in which the narrator's experience in the frame is a comic shadow of that of the Black Knight's, thus offers a poetic analogue to the visual motifs of comic disfigurement that are commonplace in medieval gothic art - such as the grotesque figures that adorn manuscript illumination and cathedral fronts. Just as such figures are confined to the 'edges' of worthy aesthetic representations, so too is the comic effect of Chaucer's

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[6]See Alastair J. Minnis, _The Shorter Poems_ (Oxford, 1995). Minnis writes ' "Gentle is as gentle does" is an excellent sentiment, and was recognised as such by Boethius, Dante, and the Wife of Bath, but the more fundamental medieval belief - as evinced in legions of romances and lyrics - was that someone who was not a gentlemen would not be _gentil_, and degrees of rank were related to degrees of sensitivity, as with other chivalric virtues. Thus the higher the rank, the greater the sensitivity'(p.109). Because Minnis does not recognise the Black Knight's thinking as fundamentally 'unwise', however, he does not see a combination of comic and tragic critical perspectives upon the language of courtly love in the poem. On the contrary he endorses the Black Knight's language and feeling as unequivocally a model of superior medieval thought and discourse with respect to love and loss: 'Neither is there any place for the most devastating proposition found in the _Behaingne_, as introduced by the unrequited knight, reiterated by Reason, and accepted by the King of Bohemia, that when the beloved's body dies, so also must the human love which it attracted. For the dreamer's role is to ask questions rather than make affirmations like that, to learn from the other's experience rather than dispute its validity or advance his own case'(p.110). This reading effectively proposes that Chaucer's agenda is less moral and philosophical than that of the French poets such as Machaut and Froissart, and that it is therefore less informed by considerations of a spiritual kind. Such a reading, however, fails to take into account the influence of rank and historical circumstances upon the design of the poem, which necessitate a 'subdued' and intimated criticism of the Black Knight's thinking (though the warning of damnation is an example of this criticism becoming explicit).

persona confined to the frame that surrounds the dream vision proper. Once the vision commences the comedy is respectfully left behind.

Chaucer's use of the Alcione story enables further contrast to be drawn between the nature of the narrator and that of the Black Knight in the dream vision to follow. This contrast is manifest in terms of the apparent comic superficiality of the narrator and the tragic depths of feeling of the Black Knight. The way in which Chaucer draws this distinction around the Alcione story is inspired by the use of that story by Machaut and Froissart. The humorous responses of the narrators in these French poems to the story are utilised in the *Book of the Duchess* to show how refined and non-refined individuals relate in different ways to the same text. Having already asserted that 'Suche fantasies ben in myn hede / So I not what is best to doo' (28-9) the narrator turns to a 'romaunce' for comfort:

> So whan I saw I might not slepe
>
> Til now late this other night,
>
> Upon my bed I sat upright
>
> And bad oon reche me a book,
>
> A romaunce, and he it me tok
>
> To rede and drive the night away. (44-49)

This 'romaunce' tells the story of Ceyx and Alcione, which evidently makes a deep impression upon the narrator,

> Such sorowe this lady to her tok
>
> That trewly I, that made this book,
>
> Had such pittee and such rowthe
>
> To rede hir sorwe that, by my trowthe,
>
> I ferde the worse al the morwe
>
> Aftir to thenken on hir sorwe. (95-100)

Yet, he does not seem to see any real relevance of it for himself, apart from the description of Morpheus, the god of sleep - to whom he successfully appeals for help in order to get over his sleeplessness. Chaucer takes this idea of a comically effective appeal to Morpheus from Froissart's *Le Paradys d'Amours*. Indeed the narrator in the frame is close to Froissart's in terms of the hints of comedy with which he describes the experience of love, and in the fact that he immediately falls asleep upon praying to Morpheus. How Chaucer's narrator goes about this, however, displaying a youthful enthusiasm for the part of the Alcione story that he deems to be of immediate importance to himself, serves to expose the superficiality of his 'feeling' for the subject matter of the story. He tells us

> Whan I had red thys tale wel
>
> And overloked hyt everydel,
>
> Me thoghte wonder yf hit were so,

> For I had never herd speke or tho
>
> Of noo goddes that koude make
>
> Men to slepe, ne for to wake,
>
> For I ne knew never god but oon. (231-37)

He is so desperate to find a remedy for his lack of sleep that the subject matter of death and grief that the story contains is forgotten. He then goes on to describe various gifts that he would give to 'Morpheus, / Or hys goddese dame Juno, / Or som wight elles, I ne roghte who' (242-44) if they can help him to sleep. The difference between the narrator's response to this story and that of the nobleman in *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse* by Machaut, the other French source upon which Chaucer has modelled this part of his poem, clearly demonstrates the way in which the narrator has missed the point of the story. In Machaut's poem the nobleman recounts the story of Ceyx and Alcione because he would like Morpheus to carry a message to his own beloved and appear in his form to her. He therefore sees the carrying of the message by Morpheus as the crux of the story, as any unrequited lover should. Since Alcione's suffering is answered by Morpheus's ability to speak to people in dreams (although it obviously is not the answer she would have liked) it would be reasonable to assume that the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess* would recognise this and want Morpheus to do likewise for him.

The narrator at the beginning of the *Book of the Duchess*, then, conforms most closely to Froissart's narrator at the beginning of *Le Paradys d'Amours*, rather than

the nobleman in Machaut's *Fonteinne Amoureuse*. The nobleman in Machaut's poem is not ostensibly concerned with such things as sleeplessness. He suffers the rigors of love dutifully. They are a natural consequence of his feelings for his beloved, and in this sense the Black Knight conforms to his type. Theirs is the experience of refined nobility, and it contrasts with the 'lighter' devotion of Froissart's narrator and Chaucer's, who each fall asleep quickly and easily upon praying to the god of sleep. The way in which the narrator and the Black Knight in Chaucer's poem relate to the story of Ceyx and Alcione - one consciously and superficially, the other unconsciously and substantially - consequently reveals the inherent difference of their natures. We are amused by the ultimate effect of the narrator's reaction,

> I hadde unneth that word ysayd
>
> Ryght thus as I have told hyt yow,
>
> That sodeynly, I nyste how,
>
> Such a lust anoon me took
>
> To slepe that ryght upon my book
>
> Y fil aslepe...(270-75)

And we are moved by the similarity of the Black Knight's condition to that of Alcione, as well as the strength of his feeling and devotion. However, both states are physically and spiritually damaging, albeit to different degrees.

Chaucer exploits the story of Ceyx and Alcione, then, in order to describe the comic subjection of a lesser nature to the conventions of courtly love, in contrast to the graver subjection of a more refined nature to those conventions as a result of his tragic circumstances. And ultimately for the Black Knight the story has a message, since its primary concern is the fact of the death of Ceyx. This could be a suggestion to the Black Knight to accept the finality of the death of the beloved and get on with life, just as the image of Ceyx counsels Alcione:

> Awake! Let be your sorwful lyf,
>
> For in your sorwe there lyth no red;
>
> For, certes, swete, I am but ded. (201-4)

Such a bold statement could never be put to the Black Knight, except by his beloved, and this is, I believe, the nearest that Chaucer can allow us to come to hearing her voice in the poem. Such a bold statement of the truth concerning the beloved is not appropriate for the narrator - as he is described in the course of the poem - to make. We must now consider Chaucer's presentation of the narrator, and in particular how the influence of the narrator's reading upon his mind is described, and how it shapes his thinking.

The Chamber as a Symbol of Self-Containment.

At the beginning of the dream vision proper, just as at the beginning of the *Romance of the Rose*, we find the narrator paradoxically thinking that he has woken up on a beautiful May morning:

> Me thoghte thus: that hyt was May,
>
> And in the dawenynge I lay
>
> (Me mette thus) in my bed al naked. (291-3)

This has the effect of strengthening the described sensations by implying that they carry the full force of reality as it is normally perceived. There is no dream-like sense of a disruption of normal perception (such as is characteristic of the *House of Fame*) here. The delicate, yet concrete nature of the narrator's environment is introduced to us with the description of the singing birds:

> And, as me mette, they sate among
>
> Upon my chambre roof wythoute,
>
> Upon the tyles, overal aboute,
>
> And songe, everych in hys wyse,
>
> The moste solempne servise
>
> By noote that ever man, y trowe,
>
> Had herd, for som of hem song lowe,
>
> Som high, and al of oon acord. (298-305)

The ethereal splendour of the music is anchored to the physical details that surround the narrator, such as the 'tyles' of the 'chambre roof' upon which the birds are perched. This fusion of the immaterial delights of music with the narrator's immediate material environment is enhanced with a dream-like intensity when the narrator says that

> For al my chambre gan for to rynge
>
> Thurgh syngynge of her armonye;
>
> For instrument nor melodye
>
> Was nowhere herd yet half so swete. (312-15)

Just as immaterial phenomena, such as bird-song and light are perceived as permeating the chamber - 'And thro the glas the sonne shon / Upon my bed with bryghte bemes'(336-7) - and are connected with its physical details, so too do aspects of the narrator's literary experience permeate the room and are concretised within it. The chamber functions as a bridging device: a place of transition from consciousness to dream. It is also a place in which some of the ideology that shapes the dreamer's thinking is now given substance, in such a way as to make it recognisable to an audience. Captured in the glass of the window are images from well known courtly literature:

And sooth to seyn, my chambre was

Ful wel depeynted, and with glas

Were al the wyndowes wel yglased

Ful clere, and nat an hoole ycrased,

That to beholde hyt was gret joye.

For hooly al the story of Troye

Was in the glasynge ywroght thus. (321-27)

The special quality of glass, its transparency and solidity, make it a particularly appropriate medium for materialising these images derived from the narrator's literary experience. It enables Chaucer to symbolically present the images as ideological entities that contain the narrator's consciousness, whilst enabling him to see through them as new paradigms for poetic creation.

Painted upon the walls of the chamber are images from the narrative to which the initial substance of the vision is largely indebted:

And alle the walles with colours fyne

Were peynted, both text and glose,

Of al the Romaunce of the Rose. (332-334)

The literary world which the narrator inhabits has become the substance of the imagined world that surrounds him now, in such a way as to allude to the fact that the

mind of the individual exists within narrative. The narrator is completely enclosed, there is not even a crack in the glazed windows 'Were al the wyndowes wel yglased / Ful clere, and nat an hoole ycrased' (323-34), a detail which emphasises the hermetic seal of an ideological enclosure. By establishing the literary forms that are a part of that ideological enclosure, through the images in the unbroken windows, Chaucer is able to foreground the literary paradigms through which the narrator's mind is conceptualising his new dream environment.

Texts like the *Romance of the Rose* provide the imaginary forms that enable the courtly subject to construct ideal environments. To this extent the enclosure of the mind in narrative is not a limiting or self-negating state of affairs. Rather, the motif of the chamber demonstrates the positive way in which the narrator's mind uses predetermined forms to create further imaginary worlds with extended horizons of possibility. This means that instead of feeling trapped inside the chamber, the narrator has an uninhibited sense of what lies beyond. The birds are an example of something that penetrates this enclosed space with their song that resonates within the chamber. The motif of light is used to similar effect:

> My wyndowes were shette echon,
>
> And throgh the glas the sonne shon
>
> Upon my bed with bryghte bemes,
>
> With many glade gilde stremes. (335-38)

Although the windows are all 'shette echon' they do not impede this sense of an outside world. The sky is 'Blew, bryght' and 'clere was the ayr',

> And ful attempre for sothe hyt was;
>
> For nother to cold nor hoot yt nas,
>
> Ne in al the welken was a clowde. (341-43)

Through windows that have 'in the glasynge ywrought' images from the texts that have shaped the narrator's mind, he looks out beyond into a world, that, although it is constructed out of the elements and conventions that those texts contain (and is therefore substantially conventional even to the extent of its temperature 'ful attempre for sothe hyt was'), it is nevertheless a world of sheer delight for the dreamer. Eventually he hears the sound of a hunt preparing outside and this is his cue to leave the chamber and enjoy whatever lies beyond.

This use of the chamber to present us with the texts that shape imaginative experience (in such a way as to enable further enjoyable experience through and beyond the parameters that they provide), is a contrast to the use of a similar device, the temple of glass in the *House of Fame*. There Chaucer uses the same device of an enclosed space that is also glazed and which presents the story of Dido and Aeneas. But he uses the device to explore the strict epistemological limits of the individual (as I shall later suggest). The narrator in that dream has to visit Fame's palace in order to know how the images in the temple came to be there, and when he does so he is

forced to recognise the gulf that can exist between text and reality. Because of the comparatively negative implications of such an enquiry, the experience of the narrator in the temple is not presented in a such pleasurable manner, and all that lies beyond its confines is a sterile desert of sand that he must pray to be delivered from. Comparison with the *House of Fame* therefore serves to demonstrate just how positive is the description in the *Book of the Duchess* of the imagination being shaped by literary forms. It is instead the willing abnegation of an individual's reasoned judgement which is the object of criticism in this poem.

Chaucer, then, is drawing attention to the texts that have influenced the narrator's mind, and as the vision proper begins he moves us into a deeper exploration of how the texts that describe courtly love can shape the thinking of a courtly subject, through the figure of the Black Knight.

Interpretation: The Importance of Rank.

Any analysis of the Black Knight must begin with an important realisation. The narrator is the Knight's social inferior, and so before we can make critical judgements about the content of his language we must take into account the rigid social conventions that force him to think very carefully about what he says. Consequently what is left unsaid or understated, or what is suggested in terms of visual motifs or other non-discursive details, demands careful consideration, given the pressures and demands of rank.

Conventions of courtesy govern all that is said between the Knight and the narrator. Tensions therefore arise when the narrator desires to say that which convention does not allow for. It is for this reason that there are inevitable moments of strain in the dialogue, points of disruption in otherwise well rehearsed speeches, which offer some of the most significant exchanges of information.[7] These exchanges, which I shall now examine, indicate ways in which the dialogue as a whole might best be understood.

The descriptions of the Black Knight's immediate physical surroundings play a part in the way in which his nobility is perceived by the narrator. The trees that surround him are large and imposing,

> So grete trees, so huge of strengthe,
>
> Of fourty or fifty fadme lengthe,
>
> Clene withoute bowgh or stikke. (421-23)

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[7]The narrator uses the word 'rehearsed' himself in describing one of the Knight's speeches 'Hyt ys no nede to reherse it more, / How ye sawe hir first, and where' (1128-29). Though it could be taken to mean narrate or tell, it could also mean repeat - an allusion perhaps to the narrator's perception of the Knight's long speeches as repeated outpourings of emotion in precisely set narrative forms. I shall argue that it is the fundamental ambiguity of such words as 'reherse' that the narrator is forced to exploit because of rank, as he very carefully contradicts the language and thinking of the Knight.

The concept of 'fadme', a unit of measurement based upon the length of the outstretched arms, brings the human frame in direct contrast to the scale of the trees, intimating its comparative smallness. The height of these trees, and the way in which they block out the light beneath them ('They were nat an ynche asonder- / That hit was shadewe overal under'(424-26)) serves to suggest the depths of emotion into which the Black Knight has sunk. When the narrator happens to find him he tells us

> I was war of a man in blak,
>
> That sat and had yturned his bak
>
> To an ook, an huge tree. (445-47)

The size of the trees might diminish a lesser figure by obscuring innate qualities. But here their greatness serves to reinforce the stature of the Black Knight, since his noble bearing is undiminished and is clearly apparent to the narrator, despite the grand and overwhelming scale of his surroundings:

> Than found I sitte even upryght
>
> A wonder wel-faryngne knyght -
>
> By the maner me thoghte so -
>
> Of good mochel, and ryght yong therto. (451-54)

These descriptive details form an important visual context for the courtly dialogue which follows. Chaucer has established a scene in which the darkness of negative sentiment will be set against the light of nobility and reason. This opposition persists throughout the poem, and central to our interpretation of the dialogue must be the recognition of the Black Knight's superior social standing. The narrator does not address the Knight as an equal, he is sensitive to the noble status of the Knight and equally sensitive to the excessive negative sentiments which threaten to overwhelm his true self and shroud him in darkness. The fact of rank means that language has to be very carefully chosen, especially by the narrator, and is designed to communicate much that must necessarily be presented in a guarded and understated manner.

The narrator's recognition of the knight's attractive physical appearance is given in terms that express courtly ideals, 'wel-farynge' (attractive) and 'good mochel' (well proportioned), and which are indicative of nobility.[8] This makes the outward signs of grief seem very pronounced to the narrator as they are detrimental to the Knight's physical being or natural self. The narrator's detailed description of the Knight subsequently expresses physiological concerns, which in turn display a heightened degree of sensitivity towards him, inspired by the feelings of awe and difference that a social inferior would feel towards a superior in an habitually deferential society:

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[8]See C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp 133-143 for the importance of physical appearance as an aspect of courtliness, and Castiglione's *The Book of the trans, Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (New York, 1903),* Courtier, Bk.IV sections 57-58 for a later courtly consideration of the link between physical attractiveness as a guide to the nature of the soul.

Whan he had mad thus his complaynte,

Hys sorwful hert gan faste faynte

And his spirites wexen dede;

The blood was fled for pure drede

Doun to hys herte, to make hym warm -

For wel hyt feled the herte had harm -

To wite eke why hyt was adrad

By kynde, and for to make hyt glad,

For hit ys membre principal

Of the body; and that made al

Hys hewe chaunge and wexe grene

And pale, for ther noo blood ys sene

In no maner lym of hys. (487-99)

Some of the more obvious indicators of rank now appear.

He was war of me, how y stood

Before hym and did of myn hood,

And had ygret hym as I best koude,

Debonarly, and nothyng lowde. (515-18)

The narrator is keen to inform us that he has observed a suitable degree of social decorum in greeting the Knight, removing his hood and being careful to respect the conventions of courtly conduct in his modest ('debonaire') approach. It has been noted by critics that in the initial exchange of words whereas the Knight uses the informal 'thee', the narrator is careful to use 'ye' or 'yow', a clear mark of respect for a social superior.[9] The content of the narrator's language also reveals a desire to 'tread carefully', 'Foryive me, yif I have mystake' (545) he offers humbly at an important juncture in their conversation. He is struck by the Knight's willingness to speak with him in a manner which does not place too great a stress upon refined courtly manners. This suggests a sense of relief on the part of the narrator that the disparity in their social status is not being affirmed:

> Loo, how goodly spak thys knyght,
>
> As hit had be another wyght;
>
> He made hyt nouther towgh ne queynte. (529-31)

Such graciousness is in itself a courtly ideal and the narrator warms to this to the extent that his previous remark 'For he had wel nygh lost hys mynde'(511) is either qualified or contradicted when he describes the Knight as 'Ryght wonder skylful and resonable / As me thoghte, for al hys bale'(534-5).

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[9]See Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington, 1979) p. 11.

But, although the narrator's social inferiority seems to be well born out by the language of the poem, it is important to recognise the ways in which his conduct demonstrates a determination to follow his own inclinations, thereby providing/ /the impetus for the narrative even within the confines of such rigid social constraints. The way that the narrator describes his stealthy approach to the Black Knight, for instance, intimates a sense of daring:

> I stalked even unto hys bak,
>
> And there I stood as stille as ought,
>
> That, soth to saye, he saw me nought. (458-60)

One could not imagine a great aristocratic figure, such as John of Gaunt, taking kindly to the prospect of being stalked by a complete stranger in such an isolated place.

The narrator also shows a determination to examine the mind of the Knight by carefully manipulating the course of the conversation:

> Anoon ryght I gan fynde a tale
>
> To hym, to loke wher I myght ought
>
> Have more knowynge of hys thought. (536-8)

A social inferior the narrator may be, but he is not averse to taking the initiative in the course of the dialogue - and although the Black Knight produces the bulk of the

narrative content, it is the narrator who is the means whereby that narrative is structured and developed. [10]

Having remarked upon the hunt as a means of furthering the conversation, the narrator reacts to the Black Knight's uninterested response by offering to help him get over his 'gret sorrow', whatever it is. The Knight then goes into a very long speech (that shall be considered in detail later) which employs various metaphors and consists of many borrowings from Chaucer's French sources. In this speech the Knight strives to communicate that he is suffering a far greater woe than anyone has ever had to bear, including the tragic figures of pagan antiquity and myth. The narrator's response to this speech again demonstrates his concern that the effects of 'sorrow' are a contradiction of, and detrimental to, the Knight's noble nature

> 'A, goode sir,' quod I, 'say not soo!
>
> Have som pitee on your nature
>
> That formed yow to creature.' (714-16)

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[10]Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1989). Strohm qualifies the narrator's degree of social inferiority by speaking of a 'mixture of equality and inequality' that would have also characterised Chaucer's actual relation to Gaunt: 'Chaucer, as a newly appointed esquire of the King, was a gentleperson and hence a member along with Gaunt of the broadly conceived fellowship of gentlepersons and clerks that R.T. Lenaghan, in 'Chaucer's Circle of Gentlemen and Clerks', *The Chaucer Review*, 18(1983-84), 155-160), has described as 'embracing all the members of the household and court, from the civil servant most recently elevated to gentle status to the King himself.' (p. 53).

Despite the fact that great feeling is characteristic of the true lover, the narrator can be seen as dutiful in opposing the thinking and language of the Knight, if the latter's physical (and even spiritual) well-being is jeopardised. The narrator can legitimately risk going to the limits of what might be considered socially acceptable behaviour in good conscience. A scenario is established, then, that calls for Christian concern on the part of the narrator, and therefore affords an opportunity for what might appear to be a temporary act of self-promotion.

The question arises as to the role that the largely conventional rhetoric the Knight employs has in shaping his thought and altering his physical self. This is something I will consider in detail in the next section, but the issues need to be touched upon here as they form the background to the 'conflict' between the narrator and the Knight, the interpretation of which is complicated by rank.

There seems to be a fundamental assumption in the poem that altering the Knight's thinking will restore his physical well-being, which is to affirm an hierarchy of mind and reason over things physical. This is entirely consistent with medieval wisdom in general, though it seems to be the reverse of what the Black Knight thinks. He keeps reiterating his position in a world of material facts and immediate feeling, and even expresses a desire to die:

> For al my wille, my lust holly
>
> Ys turned; but yet, what to doone?

Be oure Lord, hyt ys to deye soone. (688-90)

The narrator then becomes engaged in changing the mind of the Knight by subtle disputation, in a manner that is consistent with his position. He mentions 'Socrates' as a positive example of rationality to the Knight, 'For he ne counted nat thre strees / Of noght that fortune koude doo' (718-19). And goes on to say that

> Thogh ye had lost the ferses twelve,
>
> And ye for sorwe mordred yourselve,
>
> Ye sholde be damped in this cas
>
> By as good ryght as Medea was,
>
> That slough hir children for Jasoun. (723-27)

These are strong words from the dreamer, a rebuke that temporarily sets aside the demands of courtesy.[11] The examples of 'Phyllis', 'Dydo', 'Ecquo' and 'Sampson' are also included, demonstrating that the narrator is at least the Knight's equal in terms of learning. In response to the narrator's moral argument against courting death, the Knight seems to indicate the limits of conventional forms for communicating his

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[11]James Winny calls this a 'scornfully depreciative judgement of romantic suicide' which 'shows more clearly than any other of the dreamer's remarks how fundamentally he is opposed to the standards of *fine amour,'- Chaucer's Dream Visions* (London, 1973) p. 69. Though I agree with the idea that the standards of *fin amor* are being examined in this poem I do not agree that Chaucer is fundamentally opposed to them.

grief by temporarily moving beyond them. He tells the narrator that he does not really understand what he is being told, and demands that he pay better attention to what is being said:

> ... 'Com sytte adoun!
>
> I telle the upon a condicioun
>
> That thou shalt hooly, with al thy wyt,
>
> Doo thyn entent to herken hit.'
>
> 'Yis, syr.' 'Swere thy trouthe therto.'
>
> 'Gladly.' 'Do thanne holde hereto!'
>
> 'I shall ryght blythely, so God me save,
>
> Hooly, with al the wit I have,
>
> Here yow as wel as I kan.' (749-57)

The freshness and sense of spontaneity in this exchange contrasts with the more unwieldy chunks of formal narrative in the poem. It may well be that this exchange conforms to other formal modes of address.[12] But I would suggest that there is a definite sense of the tension that exists between two speakers who are set against one another, though in a most courteous manner. There is the possibility of a breakdown

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[12]It could be that the Knight's request to the narrator, 'Swere thy trouthe thereto', creates a courtly bond that enables a closer intimacy between them both. Chaucer certainly seems to regard aspects of courtliness as positive: providing a framework for people of different rank to communicate and interact.

here of the Knight's faith in the efficacy of conventional rhetoric to convey real meaning, hence his appeal to this bond. If this is so, then it is a minor victory on the part of the narrator since it suggests that the Knight may have been brought to a sense of the limits of his so far conventional modes of expression.

It is, however, only after another very long dramatic monologue on the part of the Knight that the narrator interjects in a telling manner. His response to the Black Knight's description of his 'fers' is to emphasise its subjective basis ('with your eyen'), thereby questioning the reality, or truth of what the Knight has described:

> I leve yow wel, that trewely
>
> Yow thoghte that she was the beste
>
> And to beholde the alderfayreste,
>
> Whoso had loked hir with your eyen. (1048-51)

This statement is immediately preceded by some other exchanges of a more spontaneous kind that indicate moments of stress in the narrative: points where the formal expression of emotions in large chunks of conventional verse gives way to moments of contradiction. When this occurs, the confines of social decorum are placed under stress because of the spontaneity of the utterances and what might possibly be said. Such moments reveal the importance of rank as a factor in interpreting the dialogue because this is the kind of exchange where the narrator comes as close as he feels able to saying what he really thinks. This means that we

must be sensitive to implications and suggestions that may be held just beneath the surface tension of the verbal exchange by the difference in rank.

A similar moment of exchange with meanings loaded by implications of rank occurs after the Knight's next long monologue, which is concluded with the words

> And yet she syt so in myn herte
>
> That, by my trouthe, y nolde noght
>
> For al thys world out of my thoght
>
> Leve my lady; noo, trewely! (1108-11)

to which the narrator replies with

> 'Now, by my trouthe, sir,' quod I,
>
> 'Me thynketh ye have such a chaunce
>
> As shryfte wythoute repentaunce.' (1112-14)

What the narrator seems to be saying here is that it is as impossible for the Knight to forget his lady as it is to be forgiven without repenting. But it is a provocative analogy since repentance is the prerogative of sinners, something which lies within their power to do if they so choose. Is he therefore saying that it also lies within the Knight's power to stop dwelling upon her image in this way, if he so wished? Indeed he could be saying even more than this by linking the notion of sin to the Knight's act

and mode of remembering. His reference to the bond ('by my trouthe, sir') also suggests that he is pushing things to the limit: vindicating his moral stance by the terms of his earlier agreement to fully apply his 'wyt' to the Knight's narrative. Certainly the Knight's response suggests that he has interpreted the narrator's remark in such a literal, moral manner, rather than as a metaphor:

'Repentaunce? Nay, fy!' quod he,

'Shulde y now repente me

To love? Nay, certes...'(1115-17)

The Black Knight is dismissing the idea that he should repent of his 'love', which means that he has interpreted the narrator's remark as a moral rebuke. The narrator makes no attempt to correct any possible misunderstanding, and so it may well be that he has succeeded in communicating what he really feels about the Knight's excessive emotional state, via the guarded device of analogy. If this is so and the suggestion of 'repentaunce' has been made with regard to the Knight's mode of remembering the past, then the Knight's condition is being described as a sinful one.

How then might the narrator conceive of the Knight's condition as sinful? It is easy to identify various ways in which some of the fundamental concepts of courtly love are a contradiction of strict Christian teaching. Idolatry is perhaps the most obvious charge that could be levelled at the typical courtly lover, and his or her obsession with a creature rather than the creator. But Chaucer's Parson offers a more

precise definition of the particular sin into which the Black Knight seems to have fallen. This is his description of *Accidia*, one of the seven deadly sins which is commonly defined as *slouthe*, though this is a much more psychological concept than the modern meaning of the word.

'Accidie', says the Parson, makes a man 'hevy, thoughtful, and wraw [fretful]'. He goes on to describe *accidia* in terms that emphasise its effect upon the mind of individuals, binding them in misery, harming their physical well being and cutting them off from God and his grace:

> ...Now
>
> certes this foule synne Accidie is eek a ful
>
> greet enemy to the liflode of the body, for it
>
> ne hath no purveaunce agayn temporeel neces-
>
> sitee, for it forsleweth and forsluggeth and de-
>
> stroyeth alle goodes temporeles by recch-
>
> eleesnesse. (684)

The condition of *accidia* is likened to that of souls in hell: [13]

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[13]This is a definition that indicates the similarity between the Black Knight's possible condition and that of Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, where philosophy describes the faithless as being similarly subject to material determinism, by virtue of their ineffective will being cut off from God

After completion of this chapter I obtained D.W. Robertson's article 'The Historical Setting of Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (in *Medieval Studies in Honour of Urban T. Holmes Jr.*, ed. J.

The fourthe thyng is that Accidie is lyk

hem that been in the peyne of helle, by cause

of hir slouthe and of hire hevynesse, for they

that been dampned been so bounde that they

ne may neither wel do ne wel thynke. (685)

The Parson then goes on to distinguish between the psychological nature of *accidia* and its physical manifestations in the behaviour of individuals which is 'Slouthe'. This is defined as a general sluggishness - 'slaknesse' - that 'wol nat suffre noon hardnesse ne no penaunce' (687). The means of escaping this condition, according to the Parson, is 'to doon goode werkes, and manly and vertuously cacchen corage wel

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Mahoney and J.E. Keller,1966 [*University of North Carolina Studies in Romance Language and Literature*,] 56, 169-95). Robertson also identifies the Knight's sin as *Accidia* and also sees the structural parallel with the *Consolation* as a device for correcting his sinful thinking. There are, however, important differences in our arguments. Robertson does not regard Chaucer's poem as being concerned with psychology so much as with providing a public tribute to Blanche: 'a memorial to a great lady celebrating neither Chaucer's nor anyone else's intimate feelings and "psychological" reveries' (p. 171). But I believe that the poem is very much concerned with the Knight's mind and the language of courtly love which seems to shape that mind. I therefore regard the poem's concerns as both psychological and linguistic. Nevertheless the similarity of our approach convinces me that we both recognise devices in the poem that a medieval audience would also have recognised - which compensates for the initial disappointment at discovering that someone else has already travelled a good distance along my path.

to doon, thynkynge that oure Lord Jesu Crist quiteth every good dede, be it never so lite'(688). If the Knight is in a state of *accidia* then there is some irony in his earlier description of his service to his lady where he directly refers to an absence of *slouthe* in serving her:

> To do hir worship and the service
>
> That I koude thoo, be my trouthe,
>
> Withoute feynynge outher slouthe. (1098-1100)

Perhaps the narrator does his best to encourage the memory of the vitality and enthusiasm associated with this earlier time of devotion when there was no hint of 'slouthe', as a means of escape from the present state of *accidie*. This is perhaps preferable to the Knight's attempts to crystallise his grief in a formal, even rehearsed manner:

> 'Now, goode syre,' quod I thoo,
>
> 'Ye han wel told me herebefore;
>
> Hyt is no nede to reherse it more,
>
> How ye sawe hir first, and where'. (1126-29)

The narrator re-directs the Knight to remember the initial disclosure of his feelings to his lady in a manner that is typical of his careful but sure grip on the course of the

dialogue. This may be because Chaucer's audience would have been most interested in the courteous confession of love - perhaps it may even demonstrate a didactic intent: the education of elements of the poet's audience in the ways of courtly love. But I feel that it also represents the narrator's awareness that the long monologues of formal narrative are not really moving the Knight or the narrative forward in any real sense. And that breaking these sustained and 'reherse[ed]' expressions of grief is the first step in overcoming the Black Knight's present state of mind.

When the Knight departs from his dramatic associations of himself with mythical characters he does seem to be speaking more from the heart. He seems to be dealing with genuinely spontaneous feelings and thought, such that aspects of these past experiences are irrecoverable in detail:

> Trewly hir answer hyt was this -
>
> I kan not now wel counterfete
>
> Hir wordes, but this was the grete
>
> Of hir answere...(1240-43)

I feel that the subtle and oblique connection between the Knight's expression of his sorrow and *Accidia*, which is made by the narrator's analogy, is intended to trigger a moral debate in any interpretation of the poem. Such debate may have taken place as part of the courtly game of discussing narratives on social occasions, though I think that it is more likely to occur in reflection upon having read the poem, since this

reading demands careful attention and argument. In reading the poem the basic condition of the Knight would have been perceived as one of *Accidia* by a medieval audience, and the subtlety of the connection made by the narrator's 'repentaunce' analogy, is a consequence of rank forcing him to oppose the Knight's sin in a very careful and courteous manner.

This is not to say that such moments of courteous contradiction provide the only 'meaning' of the poem. Chaucer is able to capture the tensions that courtesy seeks to control in dialogue between subjects of divers social status. Also these occasions add vitality and impetus to the poem, irrespective of what is actually being said in them, and are therefore included and exploited for aesthetic purposes, as well as for moral ones. They may even reveal a didactic purpose by indicating a possible ideal when conversing with a social superior on a very sensitive issue; especially in terms of an appropriate courtly mode of behaviour that enables people of different rank to come together.

A useful text for consideration of this latter possibility is the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus. There the author proposes highly formal models of dialogue between individuals of different sex and rank. The dialogues each deal with the question of love in the form of a debate. Some of these debates take place between social equals, where a nobleman addresses a noble woman for example, or a commoner addresses another commoner of the opposite sex. In each debate there is usually an advance from a would-be lover that is either accepted or rejected. Some of the debates, however, take place between characters of differing rank, as when a

commoner addresses a noble lady with a proposition of love. Here her reaction to such a proposition highlights an acute awareness of rank as a social superior converses with a subordinate on a very delicate issue,

Ait mulier: Plurimum miror et miranda res est quod ad tantum rerum turbationem ipsa non deficiunt elementa, nec mundus corrit ipse.

[*The woman says*: 'I am exceedingly surprised, and it is a cause for surprise, that such an upheaval of the established order does not cause the very elements to vanish or the very world to disintegrate.][14]

The strength of her reaction is perhaps understandable as a response to a sexual advance from a commoner, and the actual theoretical situation is obviously quite different to a debate about grief between people of differing social status. It also might be argued that Andreas was writing at a time when society was perhaps less accustomed to upward mobility from the lower ranks. But what is relevant in this dialogue is the persistent and very strong affirmation of rank as something that divides the two - counteracted by the crucial practice of courtliness, which provides the framework within which dialogue between those of different rank is at least made

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[14] *Andreas Capellanus On Love,* ed. P.G. Walsh (London, 1982), p. 60-62.

possible.[15] This partial amelioration of the divisiveness of rank by the ideals of courtesy comes through in her next sentence:

Si meae quidem nobilitatis ignoscere pudori non insisterem, acerrime tuos compesceret mea lingua sermones; quia tamen in nobilis ore nimis res esset inconcinna aspera contra quemlibet et inurbana verba proferre, patienter meus animus tolerat tua dicta vesana et suavi tibi respondet affatu.

[If I were not bent on pardoning the affront to my nobility, my tongue would apply the sharpest curb to your words - but because harsh and rude remarks against any individual would be incongruous on the lips of a noble person, my spirit bears patiently with your crazed words and addresses you with courteous reply.] [16]

This example of instruction in the practice of courtesy and its stress on rank, raise the possibility that Chaucer may be providing instruction for the nobility as well as for commoners. The *Book of the Duchess* may not only be suggesting possible models of decorum for aspiring members of the poet's own class, but may also be of use to

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[15]This is provided that *De amore* is not interpreted as completely ironic in intention, a possibility that although unlikely, cannot be entirely dismissed.

[16]Ibid. p. 62-63.

noble readers, as a subtle and sensitive exploration of important and delicate issues beyond the confines of *fin amor*.

If this is so, then the Knight's request that the narrator 'Swere thy trouthe therto' is a focal point in the dialogue, establishing their mutual confidence as a formal plighting of loyalty, in an age where a verbal contract meant a great deal. It is one of those occasions of brief and lively exchange in the dialogue charged by rank, which counterbalances the formal gravity of the monologues. And it is also an example of courteous speech and conduct that enables the possibility of further communication. Such an emphasis upon courtliness, expressed in terms of 'curteisy' as a means of facilitating communication, is referred to in a more obvious manner in the *Canterbury Tales*. There it enables different narrative styles and differing opinions to hold together in the body of the work. Indeed the narrator himself makes a direct appeal to 'curteisy' in order to guarantee that the narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*, with all that it contains, might be received and accepted by his audience,

> But first I pray yow, of your curteisy,
>
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
>
> Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
>
> To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
>
> Ne thogh I speke hir wordes and hir wordes properly. (G.P. 725-29)

Though 'curteiseye' and speaking 'pleynly' (as in the lewd manner of the Miller) might reasonably be thought of as being opposed to one-another, the poet seems to be suggesting instead that 'curteisy' might provide the necessary context within which speech and customs of a diverse society might temporarily hold together - in a manner not dissimilar to the examples of courtly conduct that we encounter in *De amore*. Just as the courteous manner of the noble lady enables her to overcome a desire simply to cease further dialogue, so too occasions of friction amongst the community of pilgrims are contained by appeals to courtesy. We can see this in the verbal conflict between the Friar and Summoner. The Friar, freely indulging in some verbal abuse of the Summoner, is rebuked by the Host:

> Our Hoost tho spak, 'A sire, ye sholde be hende
>
> And curteys, as a man of youre estaat;
>
> In compaigne we wol have no debaat'. (III. 1286-8)

Reminding the Friar to be 'curteys' seems to the Host to be the obvious way to hold the fellowship together. The Summoner makes a similar appeal to 'curteisye' when he is about to stretch the bounds of acceptability in his response to the *Friar's Tale*.

It is this appeal to the notion of courtesy, an aspect of courtliness, in order to accommodate a greater range of types and social life, that is particularly evident in Chaucer's writing. Courtesy itself, arguably, has always been about acceptance and

toleration.[17] It is the figure of 'Courtesy' for example that invites the initially

alienated dreamer in the *Romance of the Rose* to join the court of the god of Love in a

carol. But the ways and manners of that allegorical court are exclusive and refined.

The *Romance* does not seem to describe a courtly framework that can accommodate

much more than the concerns and tastes of a privileged elite. There is certainly

nothing in the garden that is tolerated that appears to be base in any sense. The values

and ideals that make up the notion of courtliness in the *Romance of the Rose* are not

designed to include the kind of friction and affronts to refined sensibilities that are

included in the *Canterbury Tales*, with its particular social vision.[18] Chaucer's is a

robust definition of courtesy, with its emphasis upon tolerance and graciousness

enabling his social vision to cohere.

In much the same way we find a definition of courtesy in the *Book of the*

Duchess that enables the narrator to converse, and even dispute with, a social

superior. This is the positive dimension of courtliness that the poem describes and

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[17]As in Langland's description of Christ's 'curteisie' in the stoning of the woman caught in adultery:

> With stones men sholde hir strike, and stone hire to dethe.
>
> A womman, as we fynden, was gilty of that dede:
>
> Ac Crist of his curteisie thorugh clergie hir saved. (XII. 75-77)

[18]Chaucer's concept of courtesy seems to have developed in the *Canterbury Tales* to be prepared to

tolerate and include the ugly the challenging and the genuinely progressive. It therefore enables him to

explore an entirely different range of aesthetic possibilities that tend to be manifest in the specifically

'English' dimensions of his language. The refined French vocabulary and textual sources are enriched

by the full bodied qualities of his vernacular culture and vocabulary, and this is achieved by appealing

to the tolerance that is contained in a far more robust definition of 'courtesy'.

upholds. Despite the difference in rank between the Knight and the narrator, they are able to communicate with one another, to the extent that the narrator is able to provide some kind of challenge to the Knight's thinking.

Having considered the importance of rank and courtliness in the construction of the poem, I now want to look at the language of the Black Knight. In particular I want to examine the way Chaucer uses various sources to create a particular 'frame of mind' for the Black Knight. This frame of mind, I shall argue, represents a subjective mode of consciousness, that whilst it is applauded for its courtly refinement, is also challenged on moral and spiritual grounds. The basic dialogic structure of the poem encourages an examination not only of the Black Knight's thinking, but also of the French sources that provide the vocabulary within which his thoughts are cast. Chaucer achieves this by referring to Boethius's the *Consolation of Philosophy*: through pointed parallels between its narrative structure and that of the *Book of the Duchess*, the audience is encouraged to apply the wisdom that Philosophy represents to the Black Knight's situation.

II

The 'prikkynges of talentz or affeccions': the lessons of the *Consolation of Philosophy.*

The *Consolation*, like Chaucer's poem, is a narrative based upon a discussion between two figures. In it the narrator's depressed and fatalistic view of things is contradicted by the figure of Philosophy who offers a means of overcoming a faithless state of mind through the application of reason. Although Chaucer's narrator is no equivalent to Philosophy in terms of perception of intellectual ability, readers familiar with the *Consolation* might recognise the similarity of the narrative structures in the broadest sense. If so, the Knight's state of mind can be equated with that of Boethius, and can then be challenged by the wisdom of Philosophy.[19] This possibility is, I believe, encouraged by the poet who is seeking to use the dream device to examine the language of courtly love within a recognisably moral framework. This permits the identification of the Black Knight's subjection to the language of courtly love as something which is fortifying his state of *Accidia*.[20]

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[19]See Minnis, pp.135-146, on the possible relation of the *Consolation* to the *Book of the Duchess*.

[20]See Michael D. Cherniss, 'The Boethian Dialogue In Chaucer's *The Book Of The Duchess*,' *Journal of English And Germanic Philology* (Illinois, 1969), 68, 655-65. Cherniss argues that 'Chaucer deliberately and closely follows the pattern of the first two books of the *Consolation*.' He quotes D.W. Robertson who says that the similarity of the structures of the two poems 'would hardly have escaped Chaucer's audience' (p. 656). I agree with Cherniss that 'The parallel between the structural pattern of the dialogue of the narrator and the Black Knight and the structural pattern of Boethius' *Consolation* suggests that Chaucer desires that his audience apply the doctrine of Lady Philosophy to the tragic loss of the Knight' (p. 657).What I would add to this is that it is not simply 'the tragic loss of the Knight' to which the audience is being encouraged to apply Philosophy's teaching, but his language in general, which is the language of French courtly love poetry. This language and the way it describes the identity of the lover is what I think is being scrutinised by virtue of the Boethian structure.

The parallels with Boethius are most apparent at the beginning of the *Consolation*, where the poet, like the Black Knight, is casting his sorrow in the form of verse:

Allas! I wepynge, am constreyned to begynen vers of sorwful matere, that whilom in florysschyng studie made delitable ditees. For lo, rendynge muses of poetes enditen to me thynges to ben writen, and drery vers of wretchidnesse weten my face with verray teres.[21]

Boethius goes on to tell us that the muses are dictating to him the words to frame his sorrow: 'endyting wordes to my wepynges'(Bk.1, P.1. 46). This appals Philosophy who refers to them as 'thise comune strompettis'(Bk.1, P.1. 49),

...The whiche nat oonly ne asswagen noght his sorwes with none remedies, but thei wolden fedyn and noryssen hym with sweete venym.[22]

She then goes on to describe how these 'poetical muses'(Bk1 P.1. 44) are opposed to reason:

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[21]Bk.1 Prosa 1, lines 1-6, of Chaucer's translation, *Boece.*

[22]Ibid. Bk.1. Prosa 1. 50-53.

...Forsothe thise ben tho that with thornes and prikkynges of talentz or

affeccions, whiche that ne ben bien nothynge fructifyenge nor

profitable, destroyen the corn plentyvous of fruytes of resoun.[23]

By divorcing the individual from reason they then, according to Philosophy, 'holden

hertes of men in usage' - or, to quote V.E.Watts's translation, 'They habituate men to

their sickness of mind instead of curing them'.[24] The words 'talentz' and 'affeccions'

need to be properly understood.[25] In Middle English 'talent' could mean a power or

ability of mind or body viewed as something divinely entrusted to a person for use

and improvement. But it could also mean an inclination, disposition or passion, which

is the sense in which it is used here by Chaucer. The word 'affeccion' in this context

meant an emotion of the mind as opposed to reason. The relevance of 'talentz or

affeccions' to the condition of the knight is that he, like Boethius, is being stimulated

by the 'poetical muses' in a manner that affirms the non-rational, emotional aspects of

self.

This idea that the 'poetical muses' consolidate emotional states of mind, by

casting the non-rational thoughts of the individual in language of an aesthetically

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[23]Bk.1 Prosa 1. 53-57.

[24]*The Consolation Of Philosophy,* ed. and trans., V.E. Watts (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 36.

[25]See H. Kurath and S. Kuhn, et al., eds., *The Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor,1956 -), s.v. 'Affeccioun': '1.That faculty of the soul concerned with emotion and volition; the emotional (as opposed to the intellectual) side of human nature, capacity for feeling or emotion; the capacity for desiring or willing, the will,' p. 116, and s.v. 'Talent 2.'(a) Desire, will; inclination, habit, bent.' p. 92.

satisfying kind, is linked to the Black Knight's *Accidia*, and the way in which he expresses his depressed state of mind in the forms of French courtly love poetry. There may be a deterministic relationship being implied by Chaucer: that the rhetoric of courtly love can shape thinking and memories, specifically by affirming immediate feelings and sensations over the rational and intellectual faculties of the subject. The following description of Boethius by Philosophy seems to be directly appropriate to Chaucer's Knight and especially to the descriptive details that surround the narrator's initial encounter with him,

Allas! Now lyth he emptid of lyght of his thoght, and his nekke is pressed with hevy cheynes, and bereth his chere enclyned adoun for the grete weyghte, and is constreyned to loken on the fool erthe![26]

This structural parallel between the *Consolation* and the *Book of the Duchess*, suggests that Boethius's 'poetical muses', which consolidate the emotional states of his mind, should be seen to be inspiring the Black Knight's 'lay,' and all of the rest of his poetic borrowings and language. Unlike Philosophy in the *Consolation*, however, Chaucer's narrator does not provide an emphatic counter to the Knight's condition. The protocols of rank and courtesy in Chaucer's poem serve to hold the moral concerns below the surface of the verse, and prevent the *Book of the Duchess* from appearing to be one of Chaucer's Boethian poems (unlike *Troilus*, the *Knight's Tale*,

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[26]Bk.I.M.2. 28-32. *Boece*.

or the *House of Fame,* for example, in which there are more overt references to the *Consolation).* Nevertheless, I think that the parallel is sufficiently significant to make the *Consolation of Philosophy* a fundamental textual influence upon the *Book of the Duchess.* The fact that the narrator does not dismiss the Knight's poetic self-expression in the same way that Philosophy dismisses the 'comune strumpettis' points towards a more sophisticated exploration of courtly literature. In particular I believe that Chaucer examines the way in which the language of French courtly love poetry can influence the identity of the courtly individual, whilst deferring any definitive moral conclusions.

The first reported words of the Black Knight are in the form of a lay overheard by the dreamer, 'He sayd a lay, a maner song, / Withoute noote, withoute song'(471-72).[27] Though the overhearing of a knight's complaint is a device employed by Machaut in *Le Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse,* it also echoes Boethius being attended by the poetic muses, much more so in Chaucer where the complaint is very short and is immediately followed by conversation with the narrator (in much the same way as Boethius's short complaint precedes the arrival of Philosophy). In Machaut's poem the knight's complaint is very long and is not immediately associated with the kind of symptoms of physical distress which we have already seen in the Black Knight (Machaut in fact comments upon the good appearance of his knight, who is bearing

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[27]It is interesting to note that since Chaucer explains what a lay is ('a maner song') some members of his audience at least may not have been familiar with the forms of French love poetry.

up rather well, considering that his lady has gone away). Chaucer in contrast to Machaut makes it very clear that there are self-destructive consequences of thinking and speaking as the Black Knight does.

After the initial courteous exchanges between the Knight and the narrator, the latter offers his services in helping the Knight overcome his sorrow (550-1). The Knight's reply to this confirms the depths of his condition, in such a way as to stress that his language is no mere pretence, but a true reflection of a very real state of inner turmoil:

> No man may my sorwe glade,
>
> That maketh my hewe to falle and fade,
>
> And hath myn understondynge lorn
>
> That me ys wo that I was born! (563-66)

Here again are intimations of a Boethian influence: the Knight is declaring the breakdown of reason - 'myn understondynge lorn' - which is what Philosophy discerns as Boethius's real problem. His words here are part of a long speech of one hundred and fifty three lines. When it finally ends, the narrator responds as we have seen with,

> 'A goode sir,' quod I, 'say not soo!
>
> Have some pitee on your nature

That formed yow to creature'. (714-16)

Connections are being made here between thought, language and the Knight's physical condition. In order for the narrator to be able to say that the Knight must 'Have some pitee' upon his nature, the narrator is assuming a division between the Knight's mind and his body, and that the former should hold sway over the latter, otherwise the Knight could not be expected to have any influence over the 'nature / that formed yow to creature'. The narrator then adopts the orthodox medieval view that reason can transcend and overcome physical conditions. But this cannot take place as long as the Knight fails to reflect upon the nature of his language and its effects. He seems instead to think and speak in the conventional forms of courtly love poetry, and therefore allows these literary traditions to dominate and shape his experience of grief.

The ideal of transcendence of material conditions via reason is described in *Fortune*, one of Chaucer's short Boethian poems. This poem is a useful contrast to the Black Knight's way of thinking as it contains thematic elements in common with the *Book of the Duchess*. The figure of Fortune in the poem, in the tradition of the *Consolation*, is described as having power over the material world and the way in which it defeats the aspirations and designs of men - or as '*le Pleintif countre Fortune*' says

This wrecched worldes transmutacioun,

> As wele or wo, now povre and now honour,
>
> Withouten ordre or wys discrecioun
>
> Governed is by Fortunes errour. (1-4)

It is, however, the principle of 'resoun' that enables the plaintiff to overcome the ups and downs of 'Fortunes errour',

> Yit is left the light of my resoun
>
> To knowen frend fro fo in thy mirour.
>
> So muchel hath yit thy whirling up and doun
>
> Ytaught me for to knowen in an hour.
>
> But trewely, no force of thy reddour
>
> To him that over himself hath the maystrye.(9-14)

This argument is relevant to the Knight since judging 'frend fro fo' represents the liberating use of reason, which is the lesson learned from this persona's adverse experience. The Knight too could learn to choose the ultimate good in all circumstances.

Also in the *Book of the Duchess* the narrator offers the example of Socrates to the Knight:

> Remembre yow of Socrates,

> For he ne counted nat thre strees
>
> Of noght that Fortune koude doo. (717-19)

And the example of Socrates is also referred to by the plaintiff in his speech against Fortune:

> O Socrates, thou stidfast champioun,
>
> She never, mighte be thy tormentour;
>
> Thou never dreddest hir oppressioun,
>
> Ne in hir chere founde thou no savour. (17-20)

The speaker in *Fortune* however, unlike the Black Knight, is able to join with Socrates entirely in his view of Fortune. He does recognise her to be a 'fals dissimulor'. The Knight, however, is unable to adopt this frame of mind (which is one of defiance of the government of Fortune over the soul or mind: 'For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye!' - lines 8,16, and 24). The repeated refrain is the product of 'the light of my resoun' (9), and is exemplified in the course of the argument.

The poem *Fortune* is an aesthetic representation of a frame of mind (or model of thought) that is structured according to the principle of reason. It thereby describes how an individual can overcome the oppositions of the material realm by maintaining a rationally detached viewpoint, refusing to allow the mind to be swayed by any emotional experience of immediate physical circumstances. The argument in *Fortune*,

dramatically presented in the form of courtroom dialogue between the plaintiff and the defendant Fortune, serves to sustain the persona's essential self, the rational part of his soul, above the things of the present and past, equating this self with the pronoun 'I', which is placed in an intellectually active relation to worldly circumstances in general: 'Fortune I thee defye'.[28] In short, the design of the poem is a model of the correct way for its readers to think (as is the *Consolation*). It is a pattern of thought that serves to illustrate by contrast the harmful, indeed sinful way of thinking of the Black Knight.

The Black Knight, however, is a passive figure, whose language, rather than enabling a disengagement from circumstance, encourages an emotional fixation with his actual condition in the world. This makes him subject to material conditions, sensations and images. His passivity is expressed in his determined commitment to the past, and to the way in which his memories are formed by the language of courtly love. He is not thinking in a critically detached way, as the persona in *Fortune* is, but is allowing his thoughts to be framed by literary conventions - cast by the 'poetical muses', 'who habituate men to their sickness of mind rather than curing them'.[29] If

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[28] I say 'active' to allude to the Aristotelian description of reason as part of the 'agent intellect': that part of the mind that acts upon objects of thought, rather than being passively acted upon by them - something I shall later refer to in detail in Chapter Two in the section titled 'The Temple of Glass'.

[29]It could be said that the persona in *Fortune* is equally subject to literary convention: his thoughts being shaped by Boethian texts. I would argue however that the Black Knight is not choosing his language rationally, but that sentiments are determining the use of courtly love conventions as most appropriate to feelings and conditions - hence the sense of passivity and lack of power in the Knight's

the Knight were to consider his experience rationally in accordance with Christian teaching, he would be able to see his place in the divine scheme of things, which reason - exemplified by the lady Philosophy in the *Consolation* - enables men to see.

In Boethian terms the language of the Black Knight is issuing from 'talentz or affeccions', the non-rational aspects of self, and the 'poetical muses' provide him with various models from French sources in which to cast these thoughts. When the Knight proclaims to the narrator that 'y am sorwe, and sorwe ys y' (597) he attempts to explain his acutely disturbed sense of self:

> 'Allas! and I wol tel the why:
>
> My song ys turned to pleynynge,
>
> And al my laughtre to wepynge,
>
> My glade thoghtes to hevynesse;
>
> In travayle ys myn ydelnesse
>
> And eke my reste; my wele is woo,
>
> My good ys harm, and evermoo
>
> In wrathe ys turned my pleynge
>
> And my delyt into sorwynge. (598-606)

language. The persona in *Fortune* is consciously choosing to express things in the forms given by Boethius and seems morally empowered by doing so.

It is interesting to compare this formulation of the Knight's condition with one of its possible sources: lines 4293-4334 of the *Romance of the Rose*. In the *Romance* the representation of the experience of being in love as a set of oppositions conveys the sense of a disturbing, yet essentially natural disruption of normal human experience. Despite the description of Love as a 'foul smelling sweet perfume' and 'a sin touched by pardon but a pardon stained by sin', Love is also 'a spineless force, a strong weakness...a foolish sense, wise folly, a prosperity both sad and pleasant. It is the laugh filled with tears and weeping, and the repose always occupied by labour.'[30] Despite the rigours of the experience, the humorous dimension is accentuated by the fact that the description is part of Reason's lecture to the narrator on why he should not give in to Love. And it fails as a sermon because rationally structured language cannot capture the essence of Love. The narrator complains that he is still none the wiser as to what precisely Love is, having been presented instead with a list of confusing contradictions. In effect Reason is attempting to speak beyond the boundaries of her domain when she discourses upon Love.

De Meun's playful description of Love gains its effect, then, by drawing attention to the limitations of rational language as a means of engaging with the experience of love. Rational language can, like love, be seen as the object of the humour. In the *Book of the Duchess* however, any sense of playfulness in the Knight's version of this speech, is dismissed by the fact that the disruptive language of the *Romance* has been internalised by the Knight to form a disconcerting description of

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[30]*The Romance of the Rose*, trans., Charles Dahlberg (Princeton University Press, 1971), p 95.

self. Instead of love or language being the elusive object that escapes signification, it is a positive sense of *being* that is now lost and beyond the grasp of words. This darker aspect of the device of oppositions comes through towards the end of the Knight's version:

> Myn hele ys turned into seknesse,
>
> In drede ys al my sykernesse;
>
> To derke ys turned al my lyght,
>
> My wyt ys foly, my day ys nyght,
>
> My love ys hate, my slep wakynge,
>
> My merthe and meles ys fastynge,
>
> My countenaunce ys nycete
>
> And al abaved, where so I be;
>
> My pees in pledynge and in werre.
>
> Allas, how myghte I fare werre? (607-16)

The sense of instability that was associated with the oppositions in the *Romance* is being used by the Knight to show the degradation of his soul. 'In drede ys al my sykerness' indicates that reality seems to be in turmoil, and each line presents one category of experience that has now devolved into another, 'wyt ys foly', 'day ys nyght', 'love ys hate' etc. Experiences that are derived from perception are confusing because they cannot now be rationally placed or understood. The Knight's sensations

are overwhelming his soul, rather than informing it, because he cannot rationally disengage from them. Consequently the reality that lies beyond sensation escapes him.

This represents an utter sense of confusion in which rhetoric of a playful and essentially literary nature has become part of a serious description of self as 'sorwe'. The loss of 'countenaunce' (self-possession) and sense of being 'abaved' (disconcerted) are not merely the delightful disorientation of a young inexperienced lover, but the loss of a firm basis of self-worth. The light of reason has been overcome by dark emotions, 'To derke ys turned al my lyght', that threaten the very life of the Knight, physical as well as spiritual.

Without the aid of reason the Knight is unable to disengage from his immediate circumstances and arrange his experience according to the hope of Christian teaching. Instead of this, formulating his experience in terms of the language of courtly love is like Boethius submitting to the 'poetical muses'. It is only the narrator that is in a position to challenge this, as when he cautions against suicide by formulating an argument that takes into account damnation and therefore the life hereafter (722-41). Otherwise the Knight is unable to perceive of himself as part of a universe that is structured according to the wisdom of God, a structure which reason enables men to perceive. The disruption of this structure, or rather the disruption of the perception of the structure, is effected by Love in the *Romance* and indicated by the set of oppositions describing a breakdown of ordered reality.

Another example of the Knight's use of courtly love poetry to define himself is when he remembers his first encounter with his 'queen':

> Dredeles, I have ever yit
>
> Be tributarye and yive rente
>
> To Love, hooly with good entente,
>
> And throgh plesaunce become his thral
>
> With good wille, body, hert and al. (764-68)

His self-description goes on to include extensive borrowings from Machaut's *Remede de Fortune*. Amongst these is the description of 'self' as a 'whit wal or table':

> Paraunter I was theto most able,
>
> As a whit wal or a table,
>
> For hit ys redy to cacche and take
>
> Al that men wil theryn make,
>
> Whethir so men wil portreye or peynte
>
> Be the werkes never so queynte. (779-84)

These lines are modelled on a part of the *Remede de Fortune* in which the poet describes the potential of young people to learn. Machaut is drawing upon Aristotelian psychology which views the heart as the *sensorium*, the organ associated

with the perception of forms and images and their retention. He explains that the innocent are best able to learn since their hearts are not yet filled with wickedness. Their hearts can therefore receive any ideas that are put into them in the form of images by the senses.

Aristotelian psychology also divides the intellect into two components: the receptive (or potential intellect) and the agent intellect. The agent intellect equates with reason and, rather than being acted upon, it is fully active and acts upon objects of knowledge, making them known and making judgements about them. The receptive intellect is potential and passive, it is therefore acted upon, receiving the images of sense impressions. It has an infinite capacity to receive forms, and is associated with the *sensorium*. Machaut seems to be thinking of this when he says that human understanding 'is capable of receiving everything one wants, and can conceive of everything that one wants to put into it'.[31]

What Chaucer seems to be drawing out in the context of the Boethian structure of the *Book of the Duchess*, is the passive dimension of the receptive intellect that is intimated by Machaut. It is the receptive capacity of the lover that is stated, the way in which he responds to sense impressions 'As a whit wal or a table / For hit ys redy to cacche and take / Al that men wil theryn make' (780-82). The Knight is content to emphasise the passive aspect of his identity as a typical courtly lover, enthralled by the image of his beloved. This may be acceptable for the lover when initially encountering his beloved, but now it is time to stop emphasising the

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[31]Windeatt, p. 58.

passive aspect of identity and recognise the rational and active aspect of the soul. And there exists, via the structure of Chaucer's poem, a connection with an argument by Philosophy against theories of identity that emphasise the human soul as a passive entity shaped purely by sense impressions. It is an argument that also seems to be informed by Aristotelian psychology. It must therefore be considered in some detail, because it is the kind of response that the structure of the *Book of the Duchess* may be encouraging the audience to relate to the Knight's words.

In the *Consolation of Philosophy* subjection to fortune and fate is actively resisted. Part of the argument involves the refutation of the idea that the soul is simply *tabula rasa*, passively receiving the impression of forms from without. By showing that the senses perceive objects in one way, and that reason understands them in another, the author develops an argument by analogy to show how God perceives future events differently from man's 'time-bound' perspective. Just as the senses know objects in one way - textures, colours or smells for example - and reason perceives them in another - recognising the form of the object in the sense impressions - so too is God's perception as far above man's, as reason is above the senses. The importance of this part of the *Consolation* is that it provides a description of the mind that Chaucer was familiar with, and an explanation of how the conventional Lover can be alienated from the rational part of the soul (and therefore from the moral universe governed by divine reason).

Philosophy tells Boethius of the stoics who believe that 'ymages and sensibilities' are 'enprientid into soules fro bodyes withoute-forth', just as someone

might see 'a swift poyntel to fycchen lettres emprientid in the smothnesse or in the pleynesse of the table of wex or in parchemyn that ne hath no figure ne note in it' (Bk.5. Metrum 4., 16-20). She then argues against this, questioning from 'whennes comith thilke knowynge in our soule, that discerneth and byholdith alle thines?' Next she asks what is the power of the soul that can discern individuals ('byholdeth singuler thinges'), separating, analysing and then synthesising the things that are perceived ('devydeth thinges iknowe; and thilke strengthe that gadreth togidre the thingis divided'). In particular, asks Philosophy, what is the power of the soul which rather than being passively subject to sense impressions, can actively process that sense data and make moral judgements about it? 'Certes' she says 'this strengthe is cause more efficient, and mochel more myghty to seen and to knowe thynges, than thilke cause that suffrith and resceyveth the notes and the figures empressid in manere of matere'(42-46). As V.E. Watts observes 'The active power of mind which Boethius opposes to this theory of passive receptivity seems to owe something to Aristotle's problematic Active Reason [agent intellect].'[32]

It is this 'strengthe' or power of the mind that we know as reason which enables us, unlike other animals, to reflect upon and consider the products of the senses, and thereby transcend the realm of the material: 'hevyth up the heved to ryght heye thinges' (38). At any point in a person's experience there exists the possibility of escaping the bondage of the self to the material realm by catching sight of the divine perspective through reason.

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[32]Watts, *Consolation*. p. 160.

This, then, is a contradiction of the conventional image of the courtly lover, whose thought and actions are determined by the image of the beloved. And it is a direct contradiction of the Black Knight's description of himself as a 'whit wal or table'. As long as he emphasises the passive dimension of his soul he is denying its active capacity - the agent intellect or rational faculty - which enables detachment from immediate sensations and critical reflection upon images and memories. It is this active aspect of Boethius's mind that Philosophy represents, transforming his view of his circumstances, and releasing him from his bondage to emotion through sustained rational argument.

If the reader analyses the Black Knight's language strictly according to reason, then much of it is questionable. The Black Knight's language, like that of all literary lovers, revels in its irrationality. Indeed the strength of the feeling of love is often in direct proportion to the decline of reason in the lover's thinking. This gives rise to extravagant metaphors and assertions that replace objectively truthful claims with subjective statements. When the Knight begins to describe his initial encounter with his lady he does so in terms that reiterate the incapacity of his young mind to think critically and rationally:

> For that tyme Yowthe, my maistresse,
>
> Governed me in ydelnesse;
>
> For hyt was in my firste youthe,

> And thoo ful lytel good y couthe,
>
> For al my werkes were flyttynge
>
> That tyme, and al my thoght varyinge. (797-802)

The Knight is oblivious at this point to the fact that such an admission hardly provides a sound basis for anyone to accept any of his subsequent descriptions as accurate. Even the courteous narrator, as we shall see, is compelled to suggest this, although in a very careful manner. The thinking of someone so governed by 'Yowthe', whose 'thoght' is 'varyinge' inevitably must be regarded as subjective, no matter how much the rhetoric of the love poetry strives to convince us of the excellent 'reality' of the beloved. These lines are taken from Machaut's *Remede de fortune*, and Windeatt translates them there as 'Because of this I have said that when I was still at the innocent stage, when youth governed me and idleness kept me, then all my behaviour was unstable.'[33] The courtly lover is an 'unstable' figure whose actions are necessitated, rather than being the intentions of a will informed by reason:

> And Love, that had wel herd my boone,
>
> Had espyed me thus soone,
>
> That she ful sone in my thoght,
>
> As helpe me God, so was ykaught
>
> So sodenly that I ne tok

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[33]Windeatt. p. 59.

No maner counseyl but at hir lok

And at myn herte...(835-41)

As the Knight goes on to describe his beloved her physical appearance assumes a highly conventional form. Her substantiality is emphasised in a material sense, as an object that causally effects the passive figure of the Knight, evident in his perspective as a passive reporter to the narrator:

And goode faire White she het;

That was my lady name ryght.

She was bothe fair and bryght;

She hadde not hir name wrong.

Ryght faire shuldres and body long

She had, and armes, every lyth

Fattyssh flesshy, not gret therwith;

Ryght white handes, and nayles rede;

Rounde brestes; and of good brede

Hyr hippes were; a streight flat bak. (948-57)

The more informed of Chaucer's audience may have recognised *Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne* as the source for these lines. And if so they may have perceived the irony of the Knight's addition to them

> I knew on hir noon other lak
>
> That al hir lymmes nere pure sewynge
>
> In as fer as I had knowynge. (958-60)

The irony is that he is describing her in terms that have already been used to describe another. Each courtly lover draws upon a limited pool of language to describe their beloved, and in doing so their object is reduced to a recognisable type. This is contradictory to the highly individual effect of the beloved which the lover wishes to describe. And since Chaucer has designed the poem so that the Knight and his queen can be related to the historical figures of Gaunt and Blanche, then reality is brought into direct conflict with the inherent subjectivity of the language of courtly love.[34] The illusion of individuality is best achieved by omission, as when the Knight previously considered his beloved's face:

> But which a visage had she thertoo!

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[34]It is possible that Blanche did conform to the Knight's physical descriptions of her. But it is far more likely that she did not, and that some of the audience that knew this may have been encouraged to be especially conscious that this was the Knight's ideal view of her. In other words his use of the conventional rhetoric of a courtly lover could have been perceived by them as a subjective description of someone they had actually known. This need not have been a denigration of the real person, but would have served instead to demonstrate the subjective effect of conceiving of reality in terms of the language of courtly love.

> Allas, myn herte ys wonder woo
>
> That I ne kan discryven hyt!
>
> Me lakketh both Englyssh and wit
>
> For to undo hyt at the fulle;
>
> And eke my spirites be so dulle
>
> So gret a thyng for to devyse'. (895-901)

There is an inevitable distance between the pseudo-objectivity of the rhetoric and the obviously subjective effect of being in love. The reality must rarely, if ever, conform to such a well known ideal, and the Knight seems inadvertently to acknowledge this:

> Trewly she was to myn ye,
>
> The soleyn fenix of Arabye,
>
> For ther livyth never but oon,
>
> Ne swich as she ne knowe I noon. (981-84)

Reason however would call for a greater recognition of the divide between the rhetoric of courtly love and the reality. And the narrator, who in the Boethian structure of the *Book of the Duchess* most closely equates with Philosophy and her function, attempts to stress the point as far as courtesy and the complicating factor of rank will allow:

> I leve yow wel, that trewely
>
> Yow thoghte that she was the beste
>
> And to beholde the alderfayreste,
>
> Whoso had loked hir with your eyen. (1047-50)

The words 'to myn ye', and 'with your eyen' emphasise the subjective nature of the Knight's position (and that of all courtly lovers). Recapitulating the experience of love in the conventional language of courtly love, can only create an illusion of objective truth. The lover's position is inevitably subjective and reason demands that it be recognised as such.

The Black Knight responds immediately to the dreamer's suggestion that his judgements concerning his beloved are subjective:

> With myn? Nay, alle that hir seyen
>
> Seyde and sworen hyt was soo.
>
> And thogh they ne hadde, I wolde thoo
>
> Have loved best my lady free. (1053-6)

He then attempts to construct an argument to support his claim that her excellent qualities would have been universally recognised - and hence that they had objective status. His method is to imagine that even if the conditions of his own subjectivity

were different (he imagines sharing the attributes and resources of various historical
and mythical figures) he would still have recognised his beloved's qualities:

> Thogh I had had al the beaute
>
> That ever had Alcipyades,
>
> And al the strengthe of Ercules,
>
> And therto had the worthynesse
>
> Of Alysaunder, and al the rychesse
>
> That ever was in Babyloyne,
>
> In Cartage, or in Macedoyne,
>
> Or Rome, or in Nynyve;
>
> And therto also hardy be
>
> As was Ector, so have I joye,
>
> That Achilles slough at Troye -
>
> And therfore was slayn alsoo
>
> In a temple, for bothe twoo
>
> Were slayne, he and Antylegyus
>
> (And so seyth Dares Frygius),
>
> For love of Polixena -
>
> Or ben as wise as Mynerva,
>
> I wolde ever, withoute drede,
>
> Have loved hir, for I moste nede. (1056-74)

The argument is, however, ultimately self-defeating. Its conclusion in lines 1073-74, 'I wolde ever, withoute drede, / Have loved hir, for I moste nede', is a direct contradiction of the Knight's previous assertion in line 1055 that, even if others had not recognised the high worth of his lady, he would 'Have loved best my lady free' - in other words that he freely chose to love her of his own volition, in response to his perception of her high nobility and worth. His recognition that 'I moste nede' (I had to love her out of necessity) defeats the claim that his love was the result of a free choice, rationally detached from the information of his senses. The Knight realises this and attempts to correct what he has said:

> 'Nede?' Nay, trewly, I gabbe now;
>
> Noght 'nede,' and I wol tellen how:
>
> For of good wille myn herte hyt wolde,
>
> And eke to love hir I was holde
>
> As for the fairest and the beste. (1075-79)

What the Knight has been trying to affirm in lines 1052-79 is the function of the higher faculties of his soul (intellect and reason) in his love for his beloved, rather than the idea that love is based entirely upon the subjective impulses of desire initiated by the senses. 'For of good wille myn herte hyt wolde' indicates the natural desire to love her, 'And eke to love hir I was holde / As for the fairest and the beste'

claims the involvement of reason in the form of a judgement: that in comparison with others, her qualities were deemed the best. This is, however, an untenable position according to the conventions of French courtly love poetry. Reason is generally incompatible with the kind of rhetoric which has been modelling the Knight's language so far. Bearing in mind his previous presentations of himself as the ideal courtly lover, whose thoughts, actions, and language are presented as the direct 'effect' of the beloved as 'cause', it is difficult to believe his claim that he was able sufficiently to detach himself from feelings to make a rationally informed decision to love. 'I moste nede' is therefore an unintentional recognition of the fact that the mind of the courtly lover cannot transcend material circumstances. It negates the claim that, even if the circumstances were different, that the lover would still be capable of making a free choice to love. Free choices require clear objective rational thinking, in order to detach the intellect from immediate desires and sense information. But in the tradition of courtly love literature it is impossible to make objective claims about the experience of 'Love': the perspective of the lover is fixed and is subject to the senses, rather than being governed by the abstract capacities of reason.

A comparison of this argument by the Knight with its source - in Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* (lines 107-34) - shows just how careful Chaucer is to separate the concept of reason from the principles of courtly love. The lover in the *Remede* claims that even if he had the wisdom of Solomon, the valour of Alexander, the honour of Godfrey of Bouillon, the beauty of Absolom, the patience of Job, the constancy of Judith and Socrates, the humility of Esther and the faithfulness of Abraham, he would

still lack the virtues required by the love of his lady. This argument is of a different kind to that of Chaucer's Knight. The lover is citing his examples of outstanding character to emphasise his own inadequacy in meeting the demands of love - as opposed to the Knight who argues against the view that his love is founded upon subjective experience. The more important contrast, however, is in Chaucer's complete expurgation of biblical characters from his version of this speech. Most importantly, rather than the wisdom of Solomon we have the wisdom of Minerva.

The reason for this, I believe, is that Chaucer is very keen not to allow his essentially scriptural understanding of wisdom to be confused with the principles of courtly love. The wisdom of Solomon is very much akin to the reason of Philosophy, which the structure of Chaucer's poem highlights as being absent from the thought and language of the Knight. The apocryphal *Book of Wisdom* especially defines the concept of wisdom in a manner that seems to synthesise the Hebrew notion of discernment and perception with the more philosophical descriptions of Greek thought, such as Aristotle's 'agent intellect':

> For within her is a spirit intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, *active*, incisive, unsullied, lucid, invulnerable, benevolent, sharp, irresistible, beneficent, loving to man steadfast, dependable, unperturbed, almighty, all-surveying, penetrating all intelligent, pure and most subtle spirits; *for wisdom is quicker to move than any motion*; she is so pure, she pervades and permeates all things. She is a

breath of the power of God, pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; hence nothing impure can find a way into her. She is a reflection of the eternal light, *untarnished mirror of God's active power*, image of his goodness.[35]

This description of wisdom, which fuses the Hebraic definition with notions of a scholastic kind (indicated by italicised phrases), is clearly pertinent to Boethius' Philosophy. It also shows the broad nature of the concept of wisdom that Chaucer would have derived from Scripture - a concept that includes medieval definitions of reason, and could be referred to as the wisdom of Solomon.

I repeat, then, that Chaucer is unwilling to have his character confuse such things as the wisdom of Solomon with the principles of courtly love. These principles are essentially antithetical to the divine light of reason as it can be understood in Scripture, in terms of a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.[36] Instead he allows his knight to speculate on the qualities of mostly pagan figures, some of them mythological, in an argument that by its very failure demonstrates the incompatibility of reason with the thought processes of the courtly lover. For Chaucer such a mind is in a state of darkness and is clearly in need of divine illumination. This is too serious a matter to

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[35] The Book of Wisdom. Ch.7 v.22-26, *The Jerusalem Bible* (London, 1966), italics mine.

[36] This concept of wisdom was also clearly linked to the work of the Holy Spirit: 'As for your intention, who could have learnt it, had you not granted Wisdom and sent forth your holy spirit from above'. The Book of Wisdom . Ch.9 v.17.

allow the Knight ironically to refer to the very qualities that would cure the sickness of his soul.[37]

In the *Book of the Duchess* the inability of the Black Knight to develop a rational argument against the narrator's subtle suggestion that his language and thinking are fundamentally subjective, demonstrates the absence of reason in his thought. If the Knight were forced rationally to examine the content of his words to any great extent, then he would be forced to acknowledge that reason, and any kind of objective criteria, have so far had little to do with his descriptions of Love. It is now time for him to seek the consolation of reason, or Philosophy, in setting his experience in its proper context: a universe that is governed according to the wisdom of God, for the benefit of his creatures and their spiritual well being. This is the realisation that Boethius had to achieve and which the Black Knight must also reach if he is to escape the highly subjective rhetoric of courtly love - a rhetoric that shapes his memories and experience according to conventions diametrically opposed to the wisdom of Solomon and Scripture in general.

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[37]Machaut, for whatever reason, is willing to allow his persona to associate the qualities of biblical characters with the business of courtly love, in a manner that Chaucer regards as inappropriate. It may be that Machaut expects his audience to recognise the folly of his character's thinking, and see that if he had possessed any such qualities in any degree, then the whole business of courtly love would seem entirely different to him, perhaps even worthless. The care with which Chaucer separates biblical references in his version of Machaut's speech may be an indication of a more fervent religious attitude amongst the poet and his audience.

So far I have considered the language of courtly love as divorcing the Knight from the reality of his beloved, only insofar as he attempts to communicate his knowledge of her to the narrator. I shall now consider the possibility that the images which constitute his memory of his beloved are the product of this language, overriding any previous empirical experience of reality.[38]

The impression that the Black Knight initially seeks to convey is that the beloved was such a wonderful presence that she has formed an indelible image upon his mind, as in his description of her amongst a group of 'ladyes,'

> For I dar swere withoute doute,
>
> That as the someres sonne bryght

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[38]See Minnis, pp. 155-160. Minnis also acknowledges that poetic language provides images to frame experience, and gives evidence for the medieval theories behind this idea, - though he sees the function of such language in the poem as being expressed in positive terms. He regards Blanche as being 'rescued from oblivion' by Chaucer in a poem which 'may... be said to offer to Gaunt and his household a key which will unlock remembrance of their duchess' p. 155-6. I cannot agree with this reading because the very language which provides this key is in my opinion destructive of the individual identities of both lover and beloved in the poem, as remarks by the narrator and the references to the *Consolation* suggest. D.W. Robertson's reading of the descriptions of Blanche is that the conventional physical details give way to descriptions of her intangible qualities: her soul and its
(See n. 13)
virtues. I do not agree with Robertson that this effectively counters the Black Knight's more misguided
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thinking, but I am in agreement with such readings that fully recognise his subjectivism and *Accidia*. I go further in maintaining that Chaucer is drawing attention to the way in which literary forms and language might be re-creating the image of Blanche contained in the mind of the Black Knight.

> Ys fairer, clerer, and hath more lyght
>
> Than any other planete in heven,
>
> The moone or the sterres seven,
>
> For al the world so hadde she
>
> Surmounted hem alle of beaute. (820-26)

The effect of this description is to create the illusion that the beloved was a very real presence, upon whom the Knight's material universe has become centred. The reality, however, is that the real person has now been deferred by a collection of conventional poetic tropes, not only from the material world, but also from the Knight's memory. The real beloved, whom we are encouraged to equate with Blanche, has been replaced with a familiar figure of courtly love poetry.

This is more serious than the idea that the Knight is retreating into the rhetoric of courtly love poetry only when communicating his experience to the narrator. It is one thing to suggest that the Knight contains within himself a stable set of memories based upon reality which he chooses to express in the conventional terms of courtly love poetry, and something quite different if it is the case that the language of courtly love has permeated and altered those memories that reside in his mind. The latter effectively subjugates the stability of the Knight's mind to language, and points towards a disconcerting fluidity of identity. Again there seems to be a moment of hesitation in the Knight's use of such language, which suggests the possibility that he might be aware that his memories are being shaped by poetic language:

> Hyr throte, as I have now memoyre,
>
> Semed a round tour of yvoyre,
>
> Of good gretnesse, and noght to gret. (945-47)

Initially it seems that the Knight has a strong image before him, but this may not be the case. The Knight is trying to suggest the enduring power and stability of memories. But there is no way of telling whether or not the images associated with the language of courtly love are simply displacing his actual knowledge of the real beloved; 'as I have now memoyre' I believe indicates the divorce of the present from the past, and the possibility of images based upon empirical experience being replaced by poetic ideals. In these highly conventional physical descriptions, then, it is not only the beloved whose real identity is being transformed by poetic language and devices. Both lover and beloved are identities in the process of being overcome and restructured by the language of courtly love.

The poem by virtue of its structure draws attention to the way in which language interposes between individuals - the Black Knight and the narrator - and also between the present and the past. The intimation of subjectivism is not as serious where communication in the present between individuals is concerned, though it is still of great concern. The communication of the present with the past is the more worrying with regard to the description of the Knight's identity. This is because it is a self-communion which seems to be going on without the guidance of reason. The

dangers can be limited only as long as they take place within the context of the dialogue with the narrator. If they do then the narrator is able to apply some measure of reason to what is being said by his careful and strategically placed comments and prompts.

Conclusion.

Chaucer ends the *Book of the Duchess* in a manner that emphasises the narrator as bookish, and very much influenced by his reading and the activity of writing. After seeing the Knight ride back to his castle and hearing a 'belle, / As hyt hadde smyten houres twelve' (1322-23) the narrator tells us

> Therwyth I awook myselve
>
> And fond me lyinge in my bed;
>
> And the book that I hadde red,
>
> Of Alcione and Seys the kyng,
>
> And of the goddes of slepyng,
>
> I fond hyt in myn hond ful even.
>
> Thoghte I, 'Thys ys so queynt a sweven
>
> That I wol, be process of tyme,
>
> Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
>
> As I kan best, and that anoon.' (1324-33)

There is an aesthetically satisfying sense of having come full circle, with the reference to the Alcione story as a starting point and conclusion to the dream vision. But there is also the intimation of a circle that needs to be broken. Waking up with the book of 'romaunce' in hand is an obvious indication of the influence of the text upon the dream that has been experienced. And, as we have previously seen, it is a text that the narrator seems not to have really understood in terms of its relevant message to courtly lovers. His limited understanding is again evident in his description of the dream as 'queynt' or curious: it is something that he has yet to figure out. But the implication of this ending is that there is some connection between the Alcione story and the dream that it inspired, and that it remains for the audience to try to identify the meaning by discovering the relation between the two narratives.

Such an attempt, however, whether it is conclusive or not, is in itself a breaking of the circle of being passively influenced by narratives and constrained to think in ways that are determined by them. As a conventional courtly lover, the rational capabilities of the narrator, like those of the Black Knight, are impaired, and he is prevented from thinking critically about the meaning of what he has read, and the way it shapes his thinking about his experience of love and loss. The audience of the poem, though, if they partake in any kind of debate as to the meaning of the poem, are doing precisely what he is unable to do. Rather than simply being subject to the delights or sorrows of a work of art, the audience are encouraged, by virtue of the structuring of the various narrative elements, to think about their significance and

their potential meanings. I do not regard the poem as designed to be conclusive. Rather, it is deliberately inviting of critical thought, and this in itself is the attitude, or relation, that Chaucer adopts to the French sources that constitute much of the substance of the narrative. They are to be enjoyed, but readers, in true Boethian manner, should apply reason in their encounter with them and thereby avoid the passive subjection to the language of courtly love that is so evident in the example of the Black Knight.

Chaucer's intention is implicit in the design of his poem, which revolves around a nobleman, who despite his great status and refined sensibility, is portrayed as being in a state of sin. 'For y am sowe, and sorwe ys y' (597) is in some ways a strikingly modern statement of being, since it subjugates reality to a solipsistic sense of more imminent sentiment - one that is not dissimilar to the way in which Descartes's affirmation of the rational self, 'I think, therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*) is contradicted by Kierkegaard's affirmation of the primacy of the feeling self 'I feel therefore I am' (*sentio ergo sum*).[39] However, despite the fascinating possibilities that such a mode of non-rational experience would afford a medieval author (and which was surely part of the attraction of the figure of the tortured courtly lover to any

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[39]See Robert C. Soloman, *From Rationalism to Existentialism, The Existentialists And Their Nineteenth Century Backgrounds* (New York, 1970), pp. 84-90, for an account of the difference between Descartes's and Kierkegaard's view of the self. It is important to realise that Kiekegaard's affirmation of the 'feeling' self over the rational self is a reaction to Hegel rather than Descartes, because Hegels rationality leads away from an orthodox notion of God, which Descartes does not necessarily.

intelligent medieval person), it is one that is unequivocally deviant from a theological point of view. Precisely how it is so would have been a subject of inquiry for any religious and philosophically inclined members of Chaucer's audience, for whom the equivalent definitive statement of personal existence was still that advanced by Augustine, *Si fallor sum*: 'If I err, I exist' - a statement that makes the perception of error, or sin, defined against the wisdom of God, the fundamental fact concerning individual existence.[40]

Men like Lewis Clifford, who knew Deschamps, and Sir Richard Stury, who knew Froissart, would have been ideally suited to appreciate Chaucer's exploration of the Black Knight's subjectivity,and the way it is influenced by the language of French courtly poetry.[41] As Chamber Knights deeply versed in the practice of courtliness they would have seen the necessity of addressing the relationship between language, rank and courtesy. Also, since Lollardy, as exemplified by what we know of the tastes of these men, does not seem to have been inimical to the appreciation of courtly literature, they would presumably have possessed both the broad minded attitude, and intellectual capability, necessary to discern the serious Boethian approach of the author, underlying his use of the conventional language of *fin amor*. Indeed the *Book of the Duchess* would have been ideal for those who appreciated French literature of

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[40]See Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (London, 1950) vol. II, p. 54 on Augustine's definition of self.

[41]See McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings*, pp. 182-184.

fin amor, but also appreciated the moral dilemmas that such literature raised when viewed from a spiritual perspective.

For Chaucer the question of how precisely literature affects the individual, how it informs the words, thought, and knowledge of the courtly subject, is a persistent one. And it is in the form of the dream vision, a genre that Chaucer finds ideally suited to such inquiries, that he explores this question at different times throughout his career - most obviously and energetically, perhaps, in his next exploration of the genre, the *House of Fame*.

2.

The House of Fame.

Chaucer's *House of Fame* is strikingly different to any of his other dream visions. The range of imagery and ideas and the imaginative energy of the poem are such, that at times the text threatens to exceed the boundaries of poetic decorum and convention. Chaucer seems to be genuinely excited by the poem to the extent that the reader is often hard pressed to follow his exploration of such things as epistemological issues, science, reading, and much else besides. The narrator, having briefly considered various causes of dreams, falls asleep and dreams that he is inside a temple of glass, where he sees various scenes from the story of Dido and Aeneas depicted. He goes outside to discover that the temple is located in a vast desert. After being carried by an eagle up into the heavens, the narrator is taken to visit the palace of Fame, where everything that is said in the world is recorded and disseminated according to her capricious designs. Following this he is taken to the house of Rumour, where he hears all manner of things spoken before the text breaks off, apparently unfinished, with the arrival of 'A man of gret auctorite' (2158). The poem is eclectic in terms of its structure, imagery and subject matter. Because it is so varied and dream-like in its association of different forms and ideas, it is resistant to any all-embracing reading or interpretation. It therefore demands a detailed and varied examination of the different elements that make up its unique appearance.

In the reading that follows I shall explore various aspects of the poem's design, aspects that are unified only by the principle that what we encounter is derived from the individual mind of the narrator. The poem's design is governed by how this mind has come to know what it knows, and how it then expresses this in the form of a dream. Chaucer's treatment of such things as science, epistemology, psychology and *trecento* art shall be explored in separate sections. The reading will conclude with a return to the theme of courtliness, and how some of Chaucer's major metaphors in the poem are analogous to those used by court satirists. What the poem therefore adds to the exploration of courtliness in the *Book of the Duchess* will form the conclusion of the chapter.

The Alchemy of Imagination.

There is no single known source for the overall structure of the *House of Fame*, and it is tempting to regard the real experience of dreaming as the fundamental influence upon the eclectic design of the poem. However, there is a central intention running throughout the narrative that is undream-like in that it is governed by a definite rational.[1] Also, there is one body of knowledge that does provide a structural precedent for the overall design of the poem, especially given the scientific aspect of

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[1]This 'definite rational' is the inquiry into how the notion of Fame is born of the epistemological limitations of the individual. Fame governs that which lies beyond the individuals actual empirical experience and which is therefore constructed by texts as she ordains them. This is the issue with which the poem is predominantly concerned.

the text, and that is the subject of alchemy. The author allows his imagination great freedom in order to conduct an analytical exploration of the concept of Fame. This analytical approach involves the broadening of the idea of 'love', which is the ostensible courtly basis of the narrative (641-81), to include that love which is the force governing the system of attractions in the Aristotelian conception of the universe:[2]

> And for this cause mayst thou see
>
> That every ryver to the see
>
> Enclyned ys to goo by kynde,
>
> And by these skilles, as I fynde,
>
> Hath fyssh duellynge in flood and see,
>
> And trees eke in erthe bee.
>
> Thus every thing, by thys reson,
>
> Hath his propre mansyon
>
> To which hit seketh to repaire,

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[2]The following remarks by Aquinas on 'Love' demonstrate how the feeling is conceived of in terms of the movement of 'agents' in the realm of the material: 'Love is said to transform lover into beloved because it moves a lover towards the actual thing loved, while knowledge assimilates by bringing a likeness of what is known into the knower; the former is the way agents seeking goals move, the latter the way forms move.' *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo* (*Opera Omnia*, Leonine edn., vol. xxiii. Question 6), quotation taken from Timothy McDermott's, *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford, 1993), p. 182.

Ther-as hit shulde not apaire.

Loo, this sentence ys knowen kouth

Of every philosophres mouth,

As Aristotle and daun Platon,

And other clerkys many oon. (747-760)

This expansion of the concept of love is typical of the poem's analytical bias, and demonstrates the way in which Chaucer is keen to incorporate philosophical and scientific ideas into the design of the narrative. Indeed, this imaginative utilisation of scientific thinking is perhaps most obvious in the parallels that exist between the poem's design and alchemical experiments and language. A consideration of these parallels will serve as a useful introduction to the shape of the poem, since alchemical traditions provide the only comparable examples of outlandish imagery and dream-like narrative.

In the poem we find what are in effect three vessels, the temple of glass, Fame's palace and the house of Rumour. These are interrelated and are involved in the process of sublimation whereby living, competing discourses are converted into stable, recorded texts. These texts are the basis of the individual's knowledge of history. This process - the focus of the poem - bears a striking resemblance to the central pursuits of alchemy.

The process of transformation in the language of the alchemist, requires breaking down the material to be worked upon, some form of sublimation, and some

form of 'fixing'. There is little agreement amongst alchemical writers as to the precise details of these processes, but the broad outline is consistent. One of the aims of alchemists was to bring imperfect metals to the perfection of gold. The idea that such transformation was possible was founded upon the Aristotelian belief that all matter consisted of a mix of the four elements and was therefore theoretically capable of alteration by changing the proportions of this mixture.[3] These four elements were governed by a fifth, which was more like a spiritual entity than a material substance. In the early days of alchemy, Stoic and Hermetic philosophy provided the foundations for the art, and both emphasised the role of a kind of breath or spirit in organising the elements that produced different forms of matter:

> The stoic philosophy was then in its ascendant. The stoics held that all things were 'body', material in the sense of taking up space. They conceived of all the changes in the world as the result of changes in body, achieved by the working of the primal fire, which brought into action the seed-like potentialities of things and caused them to develop in accordance with the plan inherent in their nature. The agent in effecting all such changes was a 'breath,' *pneuma*.[4]

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[3]See Gareth Roberts, *The Mirror of Alchemy* (London, 1994), p. 57, and F. Taylor, *The Alchemists* (New York, 1949), pp. 6-17, for more detailed accounts.

[4]Taylor, p. 16.

This *pneuma* became the quintessence in medieval alchemy and was the entity that held the key to all alchemic practice. In the writings of Ramon Lull *'argent vive'* (quicksilver, mercury) is the original matter that God created and it can exist in different degrees of refinement.[5] The finest formed the bodies of angels, a lesser kind the heavenly bodies, and a coarser kind the world, as earth, water, air and fire. But, even in the baser form of the four elements, a part remained as the quintessence:

> Thus, in every body there was some stuff akin to the heavenly bodies, and it was through this material that the heavenly bodies could bring about the changes of generation and corruption. The activity of the body abode in the quintessence, and alchemy was a process dealing with this fifth element and multiplying the activity in it.[6]

It is this idea, that underlying all matter is the governing power of a kind of 'breath' that brings the subject of alchemy in close proximity to the business of poetry. For poetry deals with spoken words, that subsist as a form of breath, and which can transform the material world into the imaginary realm of the text. This is the alchemic dimension of Chaucer's goddess Fame, who can bestow a kind of perfection and immortality to corruptible bodies, through her government of the air. The perfection

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[5] 'Lull was not considered an alchemist until the 1370's, well after his death [1316], and was then cited as an alchemical authority from the fourteenth century onwards. There are no manuscripts of 'Lullian' alchemical works before 1500' (Roberts, p. 40). See Michael Pereira, *The Alchemical Corpus Attributed to Raymond Lull*, Warburg Institute Surveys and Texts XVIII (London, 1989).

[6] Taylor, p. 111-12.

of living bodies was also one of the central dreams of alchemy, along with the perfection of metals into gold; though it was an unfulfilled dream, in contrast to the very real transformations that the poets had achieved, and which are described by Chaucer in the palace of Fame.

The relationship of the three houses, the glass temple, Fame's palace and the house of Rumour, is not unlike the arrangement of the apparatus of the alchemist, if one considers them in terms of the transformation of reality into text. The house of Rumour is set 'Under the castel, faste by'(1919) and it contains the discourses of the world in a raw, or disorganised form. It 'Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles, / Of werres, Of pes, of mariages, / Of reste, of labour, of viages' (1960-62) and all manner of contrasting information. The ideas that are found here multiply beyond recognition, fermenting like a successful reaction with the fervour of those who pass them on to the ear of their neighbour:

> But al the wondermost was this:
>
> Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
>
> He com forth ryght to another wight,
>
> And gan him tellen anon-ryght
>
> The same that to him was told,
>
> Or hyt a forlong way was old,
>
> But gan somwhat for to eche
>
> To this tydynge in this speche

> More than hit ever was. (2059-67)

The narrator describes the multiplied forms of such 'tydynges' as 'Wynged wondres'(2118), escaping through the many openings in the whirling house of Rumour. Truth and falsehood come into contact as they try to escape,

> And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
>
> A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,
>
> That gonne of adventure drawe
>
> Out at a wyndowe for to pace. (2088-91)

They may then become 'compounded' together before flying up to Fame's palace where they will be ultimately fixed (or lost) as historical texts,

> Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
>
> Togeder fle for oo tydynge.
>
> Thus out at holes gunne wringe
>
> Every tydynge streght to Fame,
>
> And she gan yeven ech hys name,
>
> After hir disposicioun. (2108-13)

This process has definite parallels with alchemic processes, and certainly corresponds with the alchemic symbolism that describes a conjunction of substances. Small winged creatures are often used in alchemical pictures and texts to describe a successful conjunction of the alchemists gold and silver, or Sol and Luna:

> The simplest symbol that applies to this stage is the flying of the soul, shown as a small human figure, winged or otherwise, up to heaven. The celestial influence can be shown as dew descending, for dew was often identified with this heavenly influence. The other symbol is that of birds who fly up to heaven and descend again: these are an obvious symbol for sublimation, distillation, and all the processes where a 'spirit' is raised from a body.[7]

One point of controversy amongst art historians illustrates the way in which imagery that initially seems dream-like and confusing can be interpreted in a coherent form by reference to alchemy. Laurinda Dixon argues convincingly that the symbolic imagery in Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Plate 1) is directly taken from alchemy, and if understood as such, an otherwise surreal and nightmarish painting becomes coherent and intelligible. The images in question are found in the left wing of the triptych:

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[7]Ibid., p. 149-50.

The upper left background of the panel contains peculiar hut-shaped formations, around and through which black and white birds fly. This image represents a common way of illustrating circulating gases in the process of distillation. Alchemically, flying birds symbolised the gasses which issued from the fetid matrix of the *prima materia*, and mountains symbolised the vessels and furnaces which contained them.[8]

Dixon's interpretation of these images and the painting in general provide a plausible explanation for Bosch's disturbing visual imagery, which is after all religious art conceived for an altarpiece. Other scholars have been led to regard the painting as being inspired by actual dreams in order to account for its startling and apparently original imagery.[9] Such explanations of Bosch's painting demonstrate the close proximity of the imaginative material shared by alchemy and the activities of the unconscious, and hence the relevance of such ideas to the effects that Chaucer seeks to create in the *House of Fame*.[10] It may be that Chaucer felt the appropriateness of

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[8]Laurinda S. Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights* (Michigan, 1980), p. 23.

[9] 'When confronted with Bosch's extraordinary original vision, with its strange dream-like quality, it is hardly surprising to learn that he has been regarded as an anticipator of Freud and Jung. And attempts have been made to interpret his works psychoanalytically. In other features Bosch seems to be anticipating surrealism.' John Rowlands, *Bosch* (London, 1975), p. 9.

[10]See C.J. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, The Collected Works (London, 1953), for a fascinating study of the subject of alchemy in relation to the unconscious.

some of this imagery in seeking to create the realistic effect of a dream experience. The 'Wynged wonders' that fly up to Fame's palace can be regarded as the first stage in the sublimation of the disorganised discourse that takes place in the house of Rumour. The unrefined and disruptive nature of this confused discourse of the world and of the moment, is emphasised by the poet in his choice of metaphor:

> ...Thus north and south
>
> Wente every tydyng fro mouth to mouth,
>
> And that encresing ever moo,
>
> As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo
>
> From a sparke spronge amys,
>
> Til al a citee brent up ys. (2075-80)

However in Fame's palace the base stuff of rumour is transformed into the refined language of the poets, who serve to chronicle history. This process of the sublimation of rumour, and its transformation and fixing into the stuff of history is clearly established upon pseudo-scientific principles, as expounded by the eagle:[11]

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[11]See Sheila Delany Chaucer's _House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism_ (Chicago and London, 1972), Ch. 8 'History and Story'. Her account of the relation of the house of Rumour to Fame's palace, and the function of this relation in the production of historical narrative is particularly useful: 'Yet despite this wholehearted dedication to the present in the House of Rumour. the scene is a portrait of history in the making. It is a vision of the present as history, for what it shows is the raw material of tradition. At Fame's palace Geffrey was able to observe the process by which the past

Hyt seweth, every soun, parde,

Moveth kyndely to pace

Al up into his kyndely place.

And this place of which I telle,

Ther as Fame lyst to duelle,

Ys set amyddys of these three,

Heven, erthe, and eke the see,

As most conservatyf the soun.

Than ys this the conclusyoun:

That every speche of every man,

As y the telle first began,

Moveth up on high to pace

Kyndely to Fames place. (840-52)

Fame's palace can therefore be seen as a kind of scientific apparatus for the production of the refined language of history. The eagle draws elaborately and humorously upon Aristotelian science in his description, demonstrating the materialistic dimension of the poem since the dissemination of knowledge is conceived of in terms of the movement and conservation of matter. When speech

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becomes known to, or hidden from, the present; conversely, the House of Rumour reveals the present fast becoming history.' (p. 106).

enters the palace it is mysteriously transformed into the likeness of those who spoke

it:

> But understond now ryght wel this:
>
> Whan any speche ycomen ys
>
> Up to the paleys, anon-ryght
>
> Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight
>
> Which that the word in erthe spak,
>
> Be hyt clothed red or blak;
>
> And has so verray hys lyknesse
>
> That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse
>
> That it the same body be,
>
> Man or woman, he or she. (1073-82)

This kind of transformation, which has its imaginative precedent in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, is akin to the mysterious transformations that embody the very essence of alchemy, especially in the context of a pseudo-scientific exemplum. Chaucer is describing a system with interrelated parts that functions according to principles that are part scientific and part fantastic. The result is a language that is analogous to the dream-like language of alchemy with its part scientific and part fantastic approach to the material world. Ultimately, however, Chaucer's poem, unlike the language of alchemy, acknowledges the capacities of the imagination to

transform things, by showing that the text is born out of the mind of an individual, through the device of the dream.

'I wil myselven al hyt drynke'.

The narrator and his perceptions are very much the focal points of the *House of Fame*, more so than in the *Book of the Duchess*, or the *Parliament of Fowls*. Chaucer's design of the poem is such that there is no one locus of meaning external to the narrator around which the narrative develops, as was the case with the person of the Black Knight, or the assembly of birds. Fame's palace might initially seem to be such a locus, but it is, of course, itself a disruption and negation of the ideals that validate narrative *per se*.[12] The overall effect of the experience of Fame's palace and her blatant disregard for truth have a profound effect upon the narrator. When asked by a mysterious person if he has come to seek fame, he replies in the strongest of terms:

> 'Nay, for sothe, frend' quod y;
>
> 'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
>
> For no such cause, by my hed!
>
> Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
>
> That no wight have my name in honde.' (1873-77)

---

[12]Chaucer undermines its apparent authority further by following it with the house of Rumour, which logically precedes Fame's palace as it is the source for her narratives.

His reaction demonstrates the ideal moral response to the things that have been witnessed in Fame's palace. And, as he continues, the narrator goes on to imply certain things about his relationship to his art:

> I wot myself best how y stonde;
>
> For what I drye, or what I thynke,
>
> I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
>
> Certeyn, for the more part,
>
> As fer forth as I kan myn art. (1878-82)

He seems to be saying that he can be certain of what he experiences ('what I drye') and what he thinks in so far as he can know ('kan') his own art. In other words his art is of very great value to him as a mirror of his experience and of his own mind. This suggests that the *House of Fame* has a private function that is more important to its author than its public significance. The promises of Fame are subjugated to a private understanding of one's own mind that is achieved through the craft of poetry. However this understanding is by no means simple or conclusive; 'for the more part, / As fer forth as I kan' is an acknowledgement by Chaucer that his art reflects the mystery, complexity, limitations, and contradictions of his own experience and thought. The poet therefore precludes any straightforward or reductive interpretation of his work by bracketing it off from any public function, and declaring quite openly

that it can only be understood as a reflection of the truth of individual experience, and therefore as a sustained and highly imaginative act of introspection, or 'soul searching'.

These lines, then, form the guide for my reading of the poem, which, in the briefest possible terms, is that Chaucer is using the text to conduct an exploration of the self. In so doing he adopts certain ideas that are fundamental to the *Divine Comedy* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*, as well as general principles derived from The Bible and Christian tradition. The *House of Fame* facilitates a highly imaginative mode of self-analysis, utilising various literary forms and images, and arranges these according to an Aristotelian description of the mind. At the heart of this process of self-analysis is a fundamental epistemological question: how does the individual mind derive knowledge of the world, and how do texts contribute to the acquisition of such knowledge? In Aristotelian psychology, as we have seen, the mind is conceived in terms of the 'agent intellect' - which acts upon things, making them intelligible and able to be understood - and the 'receptive', or 'potential intellect' - which is passive, and is shaped by the agent intellect as it provides the images that are to be stored as memory. Vision is a very important sense since it provides the images which the mind can store in order to build up a picture of the material world. But language is also perceived via the senses. It contributes to our view of the world, and, most importantly, enables us to look to the realities beyond:

Classical philosophy, especially the sign theory of Aristotle, provided

Augustine and his medieval successors with the notion that sensory

data, in this case words perceived aurally, could conduce the subject to

an accurate knowledge of prior and non-sensible realities.[13]

The *House of Fame* is not directly concerned with providing the 'subject' with 'an

accurate knowledge of prior and non-sensible realities' (indeed it seeks to question

the status of such knowledge as derived from language), but it does place spoken

words on the same level as other 'sensory data'. The individual's relationship to texts

is expressed in terms both of images, as found in the temple of glass, and spoken

words, as described analytically by the eagle in Book II, and which are re-embodied in

the palace of Fame. Chaucer's sensitivity to the question of how an individual's

knowledge relates to texts, especially those of a literary kind, is acute, and in seeking

to arrive at some understanding of it his creative imagination is pushed to the

extreme.

The results of this poetic exploration of the self, which reveals the dependence

of the individual upon language as a source of knowledge, seem at first to be

pessimistic. The individual is cut off from the truth concerning things which have

happened, either in the past or far away, and is also cut off from others, since the true

nature of one's self is incommunicable in the world as it is governed by Fame. Hence

the narrator declines even to give his name when requested to do so by the mysterious

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[13]Marcia L. Colish. *The Mirror of Language* (New York, 1968). p. viii.

person in Fame's palace. But his refusal to enter into the unstable realm of public discourse is born out of personal enlightenment and is a moral stance. The narrator's declaration that 'For what I drye, or what I thynke, / I wil myselven al hyt drynke, / Certeyn, for the more part, / As fer forth as I kan myn art', sounds much more like a triumphal realisation and new found acceptance of one's art as a means of knowing one's self, than disillusionment with the role of language in its public function of interposing between individuals and informing their knowledge. It is an important declaration by the author that his poetry is a means of knowing his own self, and a coming to terms with the fact that language does in part determine the nature of his own identity.

In Canto XXVIII of *Purgatorio* there is an interesting exposition by Virgil on 'love' which might help us to understand the nature of Chaucer's conception of the self. This exposition is an explanation of how the inner-self, or mind, receives images from outside itself, to which the individual then has a naturally determined predisposition:

> L'animo, ch'è creato ad amar presto,
>
> ad ogni cosa è mobile che piace,
>
> tosto che dal piacere in atto è desto.
>
> Vostra apprensiva da esser verace
>
> tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega,
>
> sì che l'animo ad essa volger face;

> e se, rivolto, inver di lei si piega,
>
> quel piegare è amor, quell'è natura
>
> che per piacer di novo in voi si lega.

[The mind created quick to love, is readily moved towards everything that pleases, as soon as by the pleasure it is roused to action. Your perception takes from outward reality an impression and unfolds it within you, so that it makes the mind turn to it; and if the mind, so turned, inclines to it, that inclination is love, that is nature, which by pleasure is bound on you afresh.][14]

This is an important description of self because it unites psychology and cognition to the idea of love. The convictions we feel, says Virgil, about the images we perceive, are manifestations of love, which is the principle of attraction that animates the entire universe in Dante's scheme of things. Just as fire is attracted to rise by its form, so too the mind will not rest until it reaches its object of love:

> Poi, come l foco movesi in altura
>
> per la sua forma ch'è nata a salire
>
> là dove più in sua matera dura,

---

[14]Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy,* trans., John D. Sinclair (New York, 1939), XVIII, 19-27, p. 232.

così l'animo preso entra in disire,

ch'è moto spiritale, e mai non posa

fin che la cosa amata il fa gioire.

[Then, as fire moves upwards by its form, being born to mount where

it most abides in its matter, so the mind thus seized enters into desire,

which is a spiritual movement, and never rests till the thing loved

makes it rejoice.][15]

These lines are relevant to the *House of Fame* because they show how the idea of love

is integral to any exploration of how the inner-self relates to outer-reality. Dante's

conception of love is wide enough to encompass Chaucer's 'tydynges' of 'Love's

folk' (644-45), which are the basis of the entire movement of his poem. These

'tydynges' are news or stories about love, to which the poet's mind is attracted, and

they are born out of the exploits of various lovers immortalised by Fame. As the eagle

carries the poet skywards he clearly identifies him as a servant of Venus:

That thou so long trewely

Hast served so ententyfly

Hys blynde nevew Cupido,

And faire Venus also,

---

[15] Ibid., 28-33, pp. 232-234.

Withoute guerdon ever yit,

And never-the-lesse hast set thy wit -

Although that in thy hed ful lyte is -

To make bookys, songes, dytees,

In ryme or elles in cadence,

As thou best canst, in reverence

Of Love and of hys servantes eke,

That have hys servyse soght, and seke. (615-26)

The eagle points out that the poet has applied his mind, or understanding ('wit') to the ways of love, but that the mind is lacking in knowledge, 'Although that in thy hed ful lyte is'. In the course of the poem some form of redress shall be effected between the imbalance of 'lyte' knowledge and a fuller understanding of the minds object of love - 'tydynges' - by exploring the relation between the individual mind and literary tradition. By showing the capricious and amoral principle of Fame, and the way in which stories of lovers are divorced from the truth, the poem cautions the attraction that the poet feels towards such 'tydynges'. This enables him to re-order his loves by putting his attraction for these things in a proper moral perspective. This is akin to the function of purgatory in the *Divine Comedy*. It is a place in which penitents acknowledge the guilty loves that they have failed to control on earth, and re-order them in accordance with their ultimate love of God. It is reason which enables individuals to order their loves in such a way, as Virgil explains to Dante:

Or perchè a questa ogn'altra si raccoglia,

innata v'è la virtù che consiglia,

e dell'assenso de' tener la soglia.

Quest'è il principio là onde si piglia

ragion di meritare in voi, secondo

che buoni e rei amori accoglie e viglia...

Onde, poniam che di necessitate

surga ogni amor che dentro a voi s'accende,

di ritenerlo è in voi la podestate.

La nobile virtù Beatrice intende

per lo libero arbitrio...

[Now in order that to this will every other may be conformed there is innate in you the faculty which counsels and which ought to hold the threshold of assent. This is the principle in which is found the reason of desert in you according as it garners and winnows out good and guilty loves...Admitting then that every love that is kindled in you arises out of necessity, the power to control it is in you; that noble faculty Beatrice means by freewill...][16]

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[16]Ibid., 61-66, 70-74, p. 234.

Describing the mind, how it perceives images and receives knowledge through spoken words, and how this process is governed by love, or natural attraction, are all ideas that are of central importance to understanding the structure and imagery of Chaucer's *House of Fame*. It is a poem unlike Dante's *Divine Comedy*, only in so far as it limits itself to a principally secular description of self and personal responsibility. It is, however, no less philosophical a poem, despite its apparently 'lighter' and more spontaneous treatment of similar themes. Graver spiritual concerns are voiced in the poem, but are left outside of the dream vision proper, to be worked out by the audience on an individual basis, just as the narrator leaves it to others to decide what precisely the reason is for such dreams:

> For I of noon opinion
>
> Nyl as now make mensyon,
>
> But oonly that the holy roode
>
> Turne us every drem to goode! (55-58)

We must now consider the most important source for Chaucer's conception of personal identity in the poem, the *Divine Comedy* and its descriptions of the intellect, before going on to examine this conception in relation to the overall design of the *House of Fame*.

Descriptions of the Intellect and Memory in the Divine Comedy.

> O Thought, that wroot al that I mette,
>
> And in the tresorie hit shette
>
> Of my brayn! now shal men se
>
> If any vertu in thee be,
>
> To tellen al my dreem aright. (523-27)

Chaucer's use here of lines taken from the *Inferno* (II, 7-9) indicate his awareness of the theories of psychology that are prevalent in the *Divine Comedy*. The precise interpretation of these lines is a matter of some debate as they seem to differ in sense from the lines in the *Inferno* upon which they are modelled. Dante calls upon memory to help him tell of his vision, memory having written down what he has seen in hell. Chaucer, however calls upon 'Thought' rather than memory to aid him, and seems to ascribe a much more active function to this faculty than Dante does to memory.[17] 'Thought' seems to have been responsible for both seeing the images, and then having them stored in the 'tresorie' 'Of my brayn'. This makes the 'brayn' or 'tresorie' seem a separate and more obvious representation of memory. In other words, Chaucer has subtly reworked Dante's formulation to indicate the dual aspect of the intellect as

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[17]See Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A Revaluation* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1984). As Minnis writes 'Schless has argued that Chaucer was thinking 'not in terms of memory but rather in terms of the considerative power of the mind' Minnis p. 175 .

defined by Aristotle and refined by Thomas Aquinas.[18] In Chaucer's version

'Thought' represents the agent intellect that is pro-active, capable of extracting

meaningful forms out of sense data, and the 'tresorie' of 'my brayn' represents the

potential intellect that passively stores those images. In altering Dante's lines in this

way Chaucer indicates his clear understanding of the psychological information that is

integral to the *Divine Comedy*.

A version of the Aristotelian description of the intellect as part active and part

potential has been seen by some critics as informing Boethius' *Consolation of*

see pp. 104-105

Philosophy (specifically Bk V, Pr.4 and M.4). But in Dante's *Divine Comedy*

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Aristotelian psychology has a much more direct and discernible influence upon the

design of the narrative. Even if the influence of Aristotelian psychology upon the

Consolation had escaped Chaucer's attention, he could not have missed its influence

upon Dante's poem. In the *Divine Comedy* Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotelian

psychology has such a profound influence that many lines in the poem are impossible

to understand fully unless the reader has some understanding of the relevant

intellectual framework. This framework, I suggest, had an equally profound influence

upon the design of the *House of Fame*. It therefore merits close and detailed attention.

Dante's introduction to the *Paradiso* is in marked contrast to the relatively

confident pronouncement at the beginning of the *Inferno*. In his description of hell

think it likely

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[18]I do not ⸱ that Chaucer has either half understood Dante's lines, or attempted only a very rough

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interpretation of them.

Dante is sure that what he has seen has been accurately recorded by his memory ('O memory who has written what I saw'), and that with the aid of the Muses he will be able to provide us with an accurate and worthwhile account of it. Describing heaven, however, presents a problem, in that the memory has difficulty in retaining what the intellect has understood:

La Gloria di colui che tutto move

per l'univeso penetra e risplende

in una parte più e meno altrove.

Nel ciel che più della sua luce prende

fu'io, e vidi cose che ridire

nè sa ne può chi di là su discende;

perche appressando sè al suo disire,

nostro intelletto si profonda tanto,

che dietro la memoria non può ire.

Veramente quant'io del regno santo

nella mia mente potei far tesoro,

sarà ora matera del mio canto.

[The glory of him who moves all things penetrates the universe and shines in one part more and in another less. I was in the heaven that most receives His light and I saw things which he that descends from it

has not the knowledge or the power to tell again; for our intellect,

drawing near to its desire, sinks so deep that memory cannot follow it.

Nevertheless, so much of the holy kingdom as I was able to treasure in

my mind shall now be matter of my song.][19]

When Dante saw hell his intellect derived images from sensible objects. Hell, in other

words, was a material place, and therefore Dante's memory could be supplied with

images that correspond to the images that we derive from things in the sensible world

(being trapped in the base stuff of matter, bodily suffering, was an aspect of the

punishment of the fallen angels and damned souls). His understanding and memory

could therefore function in a normal manner: the agent intellect processing sense data

to make it intelligible, and then these images being stored by the potential intellect.

Dante's body is therefore in some way present in hell and also in purgatory, according

to the terms of his fiction. Indeed when he ascends to purgatory his is a unique bodily

presence, all other persons are souls that are connected to 'provisional aerial

bodies'.[20] Consequently in Canto III, some of these souls are amazed at the shadow

which Dante's body casts upon the ground. Virgil has to explain to them,

Sanza vostra domanda io vi confesso

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[19]*Paradiso*, I, 1-12, p. 18.

[20]See Philip H. Wicksteed, *Dante and Aquinas* (New York, 1913) pp. 223-26, for a detailed and

fascinating account of the embodiment of souls and angels in hell and purgatory as described by Dante.

che questo è corpo uman che voi vedete;

per che il lume del sole in terra è fesso.

Non vi maravigliate; ma credete

che non sanza virtù che da ciel vegna

cerchi di soverchiar questa parete.

[Without your asking I declare to you that this is a human body you

see, by which the sun's light is divided on the ground. Do not marvel,

but believe that not without power that comes from Heaven he seeks to

scale this wall.][21]

Because of the miraculous presence of a living body in hell and purgatory, and

because these are material places, cognition and memory are still the same as on earth.

The senses and the agent and potential intellects function as normal. This is not the

case in heaven, however, where there is no suggestion that Dante is present bodily in

the same way. Heaven is not a material place in the same way that hell, earth and

purgatory are. The human senses therefore do not have the same sensible objects to

work upon. This means that the memory is not able to store images derived from

sense impressions. Cognition is different, and what Dante sees is instead the result of

divine grace providing him with direct understanding. It is consequently difficult for

him to communicate what he has seen because he must somehow match earthly visual

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[21]*Purgatorio*, III, 94-99, p. 48.

images to his inspired experience of heaven, all that he relates to us is explicitly metaphor. Dante has to cope with the chasm that has opened up between the intellect and memory. Hence he can only talk of 'the shadow of the blessed kingdom imprinted in my brain' ('l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo', 23-4). Beatrice herself, Dante's guide in *Paradiso*, speaks about the normal human process of cognition. In doing so she clearly echoes Thomist epistemology, which states that all knowledge is derived from the senses

> Così parla conviensi al vostro ingegno,
>
> però che solo da sensato apprende
>
> ciò che fa poscia d' intelletto degno.

[It is necessary to speak thus to your faculty, since only from sense perception does it grasp that which it then makes fit for the intellect][22]

Here she is commenting upon the appearance of certain spirits in one of the spheres of heaven. They do not really exist there, but have appeared to do so in order to indicate their rank to Dante (this purpose informs much of the structure of *Paradiso*). In fact all spirits, says Beatrice, have their seat in the same part of heaven: the greatest and the least, irrespective of their rank. In other words, what Dante is being shown is a version of reality best suited to his immediate needs and human limitations, rather

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[22]*Paradiso*, IV, 40-42, p. 62.

than the ultimate state of affairs. What she is saying of this vision is then extended to include metaphor in scripture:

Per questo la Scrittura condescende

a vostra facultate, e piedi e mano

attribuisce a Dio, ed altro intende;

e Santa Chiesa con aspeto umano

Gabriel e Michel vi rappresenta,

e l'altro che Tobia rifece sano.

[For this reason Scripture condescends to your capacity and attributes hands and feet to God, having another meaning, and Holy Church represents to you with human aspect Gabriel and Michael and the other who made Tobit whole again.][23]

Such remarks would surely have been highly stimulating to a poet such as Chaucer, since they draw attention to the way in which the text should be interpreted (as well as certain parts of Scripture). In reading the *Divine Comedy* we should understand that the imagery and narrative structure are contingent upon the limitations of human understanding, as described by Thomist psychology.

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[23]Ibid., IV, 43-48, p. 62.

As well as these direct references to the Aristotelian description of the mind there are other interesting features of the *Divine Comedy* that are a direct consequence of the theory of psychology that it employs. These features of the text would certainly have been of profound interest to any intelligent medieval reader. The way in which thought is effectively shared in heaven for example, is a result of the fact that all minds there participate in the one divine intellect (which is the pure source of agent intellect), rather than gaining understanding from individual sense experience.[24] One of the spirits that Dante meets (Cacciaguida, one of Dante's ancestors) explains this to him,

> Tu credi che a me tuo pensier mei
>
> da quel ch'è primo, così come raia
>
> dall' un, se si conosce, il cinque e' l sei.

[Thou believest that thy thought flows forth to me from Him who is the First, even as from the unit, when it is known, radiate the five and the six.][25]

The spirit goes on to give the analogy of a mirror to help Dante to understand:

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[24]Though it is important to note that this participation in the divine intellect does not negate individuality: understanding is still somehow simultaneously specific to the individuals that live in heaven.

[25]*Paradiso*, XV, 55-57, p. 216.

Tu credi l vero; chè I minori e' grandi

di questa vita miran nello speglio

in che, prima che pensi, il pensier pandi.

[Thou believest rightly, for small and great in this life gaze into the

mirror in which, before thou thinkest, thou makest plain the thought.][26]

One of the effects of this pure understanding is that there is a breakdown of the

individual perspective. Vast distances become strangely condensed in the *Paradiso* as

the poet's senses are transcended by God's absolute vision. This is something which

Chaucer certainly picks up on and experiments with in relation to the eagle, as I shall

later consider. Dante's description of angels and their understanding is another

interesting application of Thomist psychology. Here the poet seeks to correct the error

of thinking that angels remember things by referring to images stored in the memory.

This is not so according to Aquinas and Dante because the angels are non-corporeal

beings, and therefore do not derive images from sense impressions:

Questa sustanze, poi che fur gioconde

della faccia di Dio, non volser viso

da essa, da cui nulla si nasconde:

---

[26]Ibid., XV, 61-63. p. 216.

però non hanno vedere interciso

da novo obietto, e però non bisogna

rememorar per concetto diviso.

[These beings, since they were made glad with God's face from which

nothing is hid, have never turned their eyes from it, so that their sight

is never intercepted by a new object and they have no need to recall the

past by an abstract concept.][27]

Details such as these bring illuminating and stimulating insights into various aspects

of Christian doctrine. Dante takes refined scholastic philosophy and allows it to

blossom into arresting moments of highly effective art. It is necessary for us to

recognise that the numerous ways in which the *Divine Comedy* manifests Thomist

psychology would have had a great impact on a poet such as Chaucer, since his own

identity and imagination are here being described. And it is natural that a poem such

as the *House of Fame*, which is very much concerned with the individual's acquisition

of knowledge in relation to texts and memory, should utilise some of the key

psychological principles found in Dante's work. What is especially striking about

Chaucer's poem, however, is that what is taken from Dante is put into an entirely

different context, which totally transforms Dante's sublime expression of the soul.

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[27]Ibid., XXIX, 76-81, p. 420.

At the beginning of the *Paradiso* the poet is allowed to participate in the divine intellect, via Beatrice, and thereby begins an ascent that transcends the limitations of the body and the senses. The beginning of this process is described in terms of vision, with them both fixing their eyes upon the sun, which represents the light of divine understanding:

> quando Beatrice in sul sinistro fianco
>
> vidi rivolta e riguardar nel sole:
>
> aquila sì non li s'affisse unquanco.
>
> E si come secondo raggio suole
>
> uscir del primo e risalire in suso,
>
> pur come pellegrin che tornar vuole,
>
> Così dell'atto suo, per li occhi infuso
>
> nell' imagine mia, il mio si fece,
>
> e fissi li occhi al sole oltre nostr' uso.

[...when I saw Beatrice turned round to the left and looking at the sun - never eagle so fastened upon it; and as a second ray will issue from the first and mount up again, like a pilgrim that would return home, so from her action, infused by the eyes into my imagination, mine was made, and beyond our wont I fixed my eyes on the sun.][28]

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[28]Ibid., I 46-54, p. 20.

The ascent of Chaucer's narrator at the beginning of book II of the *House of Fame* borrows some elements of Dante's description. Beatrice, who looks upon the sun as an eagle can, is replaced by an eagle itself in Chaucer's version of this ascent. And, whereas Dante is allowed to share in her vision and intellectual understanding, Chaucer's narrator's visual capabilities and understanding remain very much restricted. He struggles to see the approaching bird and is clearly puzzled by what he sees:

> Tho was I war, lo! at the laste,
>
> That faste by the sonne, as hye
>
> As kenne might I with myn ye,
>
> Me thoughte I saw an egle sore,
>
> But that hit semes moche more
>
> Then I had any egle seyn. (496-501)

Chaucer affirms the limitations of his narrator's understanding in relation to his guide, and develops this into a source of comedy in the way that the bird talks and lectures to his reluctant passenger. This comic relationship is an example of the special tone of Chaucer's epistemological exploration. It is evidence of the way in which the exploration of the individual's consciousness in the *House of Fame* is to a large extent limited to experience in the world, as opposed to Dante's integration of the individual

into the greater spiritual realm.[29] The humour is actually born out of the anxiety that the narrator experiences as an individual with limited knowledge, who is forced to depend upon a most unusual guide:

> With that this egle gan to crye,
>
> 'Lat be,' quod he, 'thy fantasye!
>
> Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?'
>
> 'Nay, certeynly,' quod y, 'ryght naught.'
>
> 'And why?' 'For y am now to old.'
>
> 'Elles I wolde the have told,'
>
> Quod he, 'the sterres names, lo,
>
> And al the hevenes sygnes therto,
>
> And which they ben.' 'No fors,' quod y. (991-99)

Geoffrey is not suited to lessons at such altitude, and his effort to appear casual in his reply to the eagle's offer of an account of the names of stars ('No fors,' or 'it doesn't matter') epitomises the way in which the humour is brought to the surface of their dialogue by an undercurrent of anxiety.

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[29]Chaucer does make explicit reference to the spiritual realm through the occasional prayers of his narrator (57-58, and 492-95), and implicit reference through the psychological theory that he borrows from Dante, which views a part of the individual's mind (the agent intellect) as always participating in the divine intellect. But in the main he restricts the subject matter of the poem to experience in the world.

It is clear, then, that a wealth of ideas concerning psychology are contained in the *Divine Comedy* and were therefore available to Chaucer, (depending on how much of the poem he actually read).[30] The implication of Aristotelian psychology, as defined by Aquinas, is that sensory experience is the source of the images that form the substance of our thought - hence it is to a significant extent an empiricist epistemology.

We have seen, then, how the poem draws upon scientific and philosophical theory in two ways: first in the form of the poem and its use of alchemical metaphors, second in the use of Aristotelian psychology and epistemology, as defined by Aquinas. I now want to look at the way in which the *House of Fame* describes the narrator's individual perspective, his empirical experience of his surroundings, as the primary means of his gaining knowledge. This will help us to see how the influence of Aristotelian psychology gives rise to a particular way of developing the imagery of the poem, according to the limited perspective of the narrator. It will also show how the poet's very real engagement with experience in the world finds expression in his art. In order to understand the way in which the individual perspective arranges the

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[30]We can never know for sure how much of the *Divine Comedy* Chaucer actually read for himself, but the influence of Dante's poem is clearly evident in both the *Parliament of Fowls* and *Troilus and Criseyde* (see explanatory notes in *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 996-997, 1025-1058, for detailed references). I believe it is safe to assume that Chaucer was acquainted with most if not all of the *Comedy*. Certainly as regards the *House of Fame* I agree with Minnis who describes it as 'a poem clearly written with the *Comedy* in mind' (*Shorter Poems*, p. 49).

representation of experience in the world, it will be necessary to consider parallels with the visual arts and innovations by *trecento* artists, who also incorporate the individual perspective as a means of structuring their subject matter. In the section that follows I shall argue that certain innovations in *trecento* painting that acknowledge the individual perspective were known to Chaucer and inform the design of the *House of Fame*.

The Individual Perspective, Italian Trecento Art and the House of Fame.

One of the most prevalent formulations used by the narrator in the *House of Fame* involves the validation of experience through reference to sight: 'I saugh', 'Tho saugh I' or 'As I mighte see with ye'. The poem stresses the probative potential of the individual perspective, both visual and intellectual, and also the fallibility or limitations of that perspective, especially where the descriptions of the palace of Fame are concerned. The limitations of the individual perspective are especially apparent when the narrator moves from one place to another, as when the eagle carries him out of the desert at the end of book I. Each major movement - from the temple of glass to the palace of Fame, and from there to the house of Rumour - results in a reassessment (which is moral as well as descriptive) of what has previously be seen, as a new position and hence a new perspective is forced upon the narrator. It is necessary to consider the various ways in which the individual perspective is described in the *House of Fame*, and how such a description fits in with certain developments in

trecento literature and painting which Chaucer was likely to have seen during his trip to Italy. The theoretical argument around which this discussion shall range is as follows: Chaucer's concept of fame is one that depends upon the epistemological limitations of the individual, and in the *House of Fame*, he uses visual devices developed in *trecento* art, specifically the stress upon the individual perspective, in order to describe and explore these limitations.

When the dream begins, the narrator describes being enclosed within a well defined space filled with an abundance of images:

> But as I slepte, me mette I was
>
> Withyn a temple ymad of glas,
>
> In which ther were moo ymages
>
> Of gold, stondynge in sondry stages,
>
> And moo ryche tabernacles,
>
> And with perre moo pynacles,
>
> And moo curiouse portreytures,
>
> And queynte maner of figures
>
> Of old werk, then I saugh ever. (119-27)

At this early point in the dream the narrator has no idea where he is, his present perspective is tightly restricted to what is set immediately before him within the

boundary of the temple. This he identifies as belonging to Venus as he recognises her 'portreyture':

> For certeynly, I nyste never
>
> wher that I was, but wel wyste I
>
> Hyt was of Venus redely,
>
> The temple; for in portreyture
>
> I sawgh anoon-ryght hir figure. (128-32)

His ability to understand and interpret what he sees is essential at this point in the poem because he has no guide and no idea where he really is. His competence in the visual arts is all that he has to rely on. The limitations of his vision therefore correspond to fixed epistemological boundaries: although he knows what the particular images represent, he does not know why they are there or what they mean in the overall structure of the dream vision. This makes us sensitive to the movement of the narrator as any shift in his position regulates a flow of new information to his audience,

> But as I romed up and doun,
>
> I fond that on a wall ther was
>
> Thus writen on a table of bras:
>
> 'I wol now synge, yif I kan,

The armes and also the man

That first cam, thurgh his destinee,

Fugityf of Troy contree,

In Italye, with ful moche pyne

Unto the strondes of Lavyne.' (140-48)

Already, then, the movement of the narrator in the poem is integral to the way in which the audience receives information. In contrast to *The Book of the Duchess*, where the majority of the information that the narrator receives is born out of dialogue, here the alterations of the limited perspective of a single viewing narrator are necessary to the development of the narrative. He therefore repeats the 'I saw' formulation in order to enable narrative progression: 'First saugh I'(151), 'And next that sawgh I' (162), 'And I saugh next'(174), 'Ther sawgh I graven'(193), 'Ther saugh I thee'(198), 'Ther saugh I'(209). At this point in the narrative we are given only the outline of the story of Dido and Aeneas as it appears to the dreamer viewing the scenes depicted upon the wall.[31] It is only after the shift in the narrator's position from within the temple to outside, and upwards to Fame's palace, that we can begin to consider its significance. This first major shift is introduced by the narrator in a very deliberate manner,

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[31]The narrator does make some ethical comments concerning the images, but these do not directly relate to his initial desire to know who made the pictures and why.

'A, Lord,' thoughte I, 'that madest us,

Yet sawgh I never such noblesse

Of ymages, ne such richesse,

As I saugh graven in this chirche;

But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,

Ne where I am, ne in what contree.

But now wol I goo out and see,

Ryght at the wiket, yf y kan

See owhere any stiryng man

That may me telle where I am.' (470-79)

His desire for knowledge encourages him to leave the temple, despite the attraction of its art. There is a sense in which the very excellence of the images - 'Yet sawgh I never such noblesse / Of ymages' - is captivating to the narrator, that he feels the attraction of their beauty. But this is not enough to stop him leaving. This movement might therefore be taken as analogous to the critical orientation which Chaucer is seeking to adopt to the texts that are the source of these images. Wondering 'whoo did hem wirche' and 'in what contree' they exist is akin to the need to know the intentions underlying creative art, rather than simply submitting to its delights. When the narrator goes outside, the view that now presents itself contrasts markedly with the enclosed space of the temple:

> When I out at the dores cam,
>
> I faste aboute me beheld.
>
> Then sawgh I but a large feld,
>
> As fer as that I myghte see,
>
> Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
>
> Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond. (480-85)

The contrast between the details of the illustrations within the temple of glass, which yield a high degree of information to the narrator, and this wide expanse of emptiness, foregrounds the way in which the narrator depends upon his sight to glean knowledge. This is achieved by temporarily frustrating his vision with a motif of repetitive uniformity: the grains of sand:

> For al the feld nas but of sond
>
> As smal as man may se yet lye
>
> In the desert of lybye.
>
> Ne no maner creature
>
> That ys yformed be Nature
>
> Ne sawgh I, me to rede or wisse. (486-91)

The narrator is still trying to interpret visual information, trying to search the scene before him for any meaningful signs. But, whereas the inside of the temple was

designed to accommodate this, the new scene is a deliberate barrier to such a process. The narrator is trained in recognising meaningful visual details which he can then convert into narrative. Hence he now talks of being unable to 'rede' the scene: 'Ne sawgh I, me to rede or wisse'.

Another effect of the view of the 'feld' extending 'As fer as that I myghte see' is that the horizontal plane is underlined as the space within which all of the present action has taken place. The drama now shifts instead onto the vertical axis in the spatial arrangement of the poem. This development coincides with the narrator's spiritual awareness voiced in his prayer,

> 'O Crist,' thoughte I, 'that art in blysse,
>
> Fro fantome and illusion
>
> Me save!' And with devocion
>
> Myn eyen to the hevene I caste. (492-95)

It now becomes possible, since the idea of spiritual transcendence has been introduced, to interpret everything that has previously been seen on the horizontal plane (everything that the temple of glass contains) as a representation of the worldly and profane. This representation of spiritual transcendence in terms of the flight of the eagle is taken primarily from Dante, but it is also a commonplace of Christian iconography to direct the eyes of the contemplative upwards in order to signify a raising of the mind to the things of heaven.

The limitations of the narrator's own visual capabilities are demonstrated with his description of the arrival of the eagle, a creature famed for its powers of vision,

> Thoo was I war, lo, at the laste,
>
> That faste be the sonne, as hye
>
> As kenne myghte I with myn ye,
>
> Me thoughte I sawgh an egle sore. (496-99)

Whereas the images in the confined space of the temple were very close to the narrator, and submitted to the scrutiny of his eye, the eagle marks the very edge of his visual capabilities - the vanishing point perhaps of his perspective - which is again the epistemological limit of the narrator as he dreams. However, the way in which the eagle enables a leap of understanding, in terms of how the story in the temple of glass is promulgated through time (the lesson of Fame's house), is not without some tension and ambiguity. Nevertheless, with the eagle as a guide, the epistemological limits of the narrator (manifest in terms of his limited field of view) are dramatically extended. Chaucer's development of the description of the eagle again emphasises the importance of space and vision in the poem. Starting with the eagle entering into the outermost limits of his vision, the image of the bird expands to fill the narrator's field of view,

> This egle, of which I have yow told,

> That shon with fethres as of gold,
>
> Which that so hye gan to sore,
>
> I gan behold more and more
>
> To see the beaute and the wonder. (529-33)

The effect of this is that a sense of space is dramatically maintained by the narrative. This is fundamental to the sense of fear and insecurity that the narrator feels, as he realises that he is the exposed prey of the descending raptor. Initially he is so overwhelmed by the experience of being carried away by the eagle 'That al my felynge gan to dede / For-whi hit was to gret affray'(552-3). The precariousness of his position and the anxiety that he feels are then used to develop humour. This is an important modulation of the narrative. Not only does it make for entertainment, it also shifts the focus away from the description of certain other feelings. If the tone of humour were not introduced, then Chaucer would have to become preoccupied with an exploration of the inevitably strong emotions that would accompany such an experience. These emotions are referred to, but are immediately displaced as the object of the narrative by the comic attitude of the eagle, who assumes the voice of what is most likely the narrator's wife in order to rouse him from his stupor:

> And for I shulde the bet abreyde,
>
> Me mette 'Awak,' to me he seyde
>
> Ryght in the same vois and stevene

That useth oon I koude nevene. (559-62)

Having been spoken to in this way the narrator is able to gain some control over his feelings again,

And with that vois, soth for to seyn,

My mynde cam to me ageyn,

For hyt was goodly seyd to me,

So nas hyt wont to be. (563-66)

As the eagle speaks he exposes the bookish nature of the narrator's persona, and the extent to which his knowledge is limited to literature. The eagle identifies him as a servant of 'Cupido' and 'Venus', who writes about their ways but has no practical knowledge of them. He also suggests that the lack of experience in love is symptomatic of a lack of experience generally,

That is, that thou hast no tydynges

Of Loves folk yf they be glade,

Ne of noght elles that God made;

And noght oonly fro fer contree

That ther no cometh to thee,

But of thy verray neyghebores,

That duellen almost at thy dores. (644-50)

Because the eagle links the lack of experience of love to a lack of experience generally, and says that this is why Jove has ordered him to carry 'geffrey' to the 'Hous of Fame', it is possible to interpret the vision as epistemological in its concerns: - as indicating the limitations of the narrator's view of reality. Whereas Boethius, in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, is challenged on the intellectual plane by the arguments of Philosophy, the narrator in the *House of Fame* is being challenged in terms of the movement and transformations of perspective on a physical level, that presents scenes to him requiring critical interpretation.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the most influential source for Chaucer's linking of effects of visual perspective with epistemology. In the *Paradiso* Dante foregrounds perspective - the visual limitation of the individual - in order to contrast this with the unlimited knowledge that the citizens of heaven share in God. In canto XXXI, for example, Dante finally sees the community of saints in heaven inhabiting an immense rose, the proportions of which are incomprehensible since its dimensions are so vast. The limitations of his own vision are overcome, however, by an act of grace, so that he is able to see beyond the limits of his own natural powers, as when he sees Beatrice in her proper place in heaven after she has left him:

Sanza risponder, li occhi su levai,

e vidi lei che si facea corona

reflettendo da sè li etterni rai.

Da quella regïon che più su tona

occhio mortale alcun tanto non dista,

qualunque in mare più giù s'abbandona,

quanto li da Beatrice la mia vista;

ma nulla mi facea, chè sua effige

non discendea a me per mezzo mista.

[Without answering, I lifted up my eyes and saw her where she made

for herself a crown, reflecting from her the eternal beams. From the

highest region where it thunders no mortal eye is so far, were it lost in

the depth of the sea, as was my sight there from Beatrice; but to me it

made no difference, for her image came down to me undimmed by

aught between.][32]

Previously Dante had contrasted 'natural law', which limits our visual capabilities on

earth, with the direct understanding in heaven, that is not dependent upon the senses,

La vista mia nell'ampio e nell'altezza

non si smarriva, ma tutto prendeva

il quanto e'l quale di quella allegrezza.

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[32]*Paradiso*, XXXI, 70-78, p. 450.

Presso e lontano, lì, nè pon nè leva;

chè dove Dio sanza mezzo governa,

la legge natural nulla rileva.

[My sight did not lose itself in the breadth and height, but took in all

the extent and quality of that rejoicing; there, near and far neither add

nor take away, for where God rules immediately natural law is of no

effect.][33]

Dante's uses of vision, perspective and space in the *Paradiso* are very much linked to

his Thomist epistemology. On earth the knowledge of the individual is derived from

the senses, and is as limited as is our actual sight. In heaven, however, knowledge

transcends sense. This contrast between vision subject to 'natural law' and vision that

is divinely inspired, is what informs Dante's striking, and innovative description of

the structure of heaven. These devices are paralleled in the *House of Fame*, and

Chaucer presents us with a similar use of space and perspective to describe the

epistemological limitations of the narrator. In Chaucer's poem, however, the

limitations of the individual's perspective are not transcended in a spiritual sense but

rationally. Since his is an essentially secular poem it does not seek seriously to

describe or explore heaven, or things of a spiritual kind. On the contrary, the *House of

Fame* is very much a materialistic poem, in that 'natural law' is fundamental to

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[33]Ibid., XXX, 118-123, p. 436.

providing the basis of an individual's knowledge. What the eagle then enables the narrator to see are things that can be inferred from thinking about the material world in which he lives. The lecture by the eagle on the manner in which Fame receives her knowledge of things is an example of the way in which knowledge is subject to material reality in the poem. Fame does not know of anything that is not propagated through the air in the form of waves, and when the narrator eventually meets her, the emphasis upon her senses is evident in his description of her: 'For as feele eyen hadde she / As fetheres upon foules be' and 'Had also fele upstondynge eres' (1381-89).

Chaucer's eagle, then, is the vehicle whereby the perspective of the narrator is radically transformed. He therefore represents the way in which reason, or the agent intellect, can advance the understanding of an individual, by making judgements and thinking about the things that are sensed. And as the narrator's position shifts, he finds himself far removed from the things that he knows or recognises. The eagle makes the narrator acknowledge that he is a long way from things that he has been immediately acquainted with,

> By thy trouthe, yond adoun,
>
> Wher that thou knowest any toun,
>
> Or hous, or any other thing.
>
> And whan thou hast of ought knowyng,
>
> Looke that thou warne me,
>
> And y anoon shal telle the

How far that thou art now therfor. (889-95)

As the narrator looks down he finds that their flight has exceeded by far the bounds of his knowledge,

And y adoun gan loken thoo,

And beheld feldes and playnes,

And now hilles, and now mountaynes,

Now valeyes, now forestes

And now unnethes grete bestes,

Now ryveres, now citees ,

Now tounes, and now grete trees,

Now shippes seyllynge in the see.

But thus sone in a while he

Was flowen fro the ground so hye

That al the world, as to myn ye,

No more semed than a prikke. (896-907)

The narrator then makes the connection for us between the eagle and the power of 'thought' (reason, or the agent intellect):

'O God,' quod y, 'that made Adam,

> Moche ys thy myght and thy noblesse!'
>
> And thoo thoughte y upon Boece,
>
> That writ, 'A thought may flee so hye
>
> Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
>
> To passen everych element,
>
> And whan he hath so fer ywent,
>
> Than may be seen behynde hys bak
>
> Cloude' - and al that y of spak. (970-78)

He has left the world with the things that he has had direct empirical experience of, things made up of 'everych element'. As the journey takes him to the limits of his imagination he is able to verify what he has read:

> And than thoughte I on Marcian,
>
> And eke on Anteclaudian,
>
> That sooth was her descripsion
>
> Of alle the hevenes region,
>
> As fer as that y sey the preve;
>
> Therefore y kan hem now beleve. (985-90)

It would seem a fantastic opportunity for the narrator to bring his actual experience into line with his literary experiences. However, there is the sense of things going too

far, that the eagle is forcing the narrator further on than he might wish to go. The narrator certainly seems to think so and becomes resistant to the eagle when he suggests that he learns something about stars,

> With that this egle gan to crye,
>
> 'Lat be, quod he, thy fantasye!
>
> Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?
>
> 'Nay, certeynle,' quod y, 'ryght naught.'
>
> 'And why?' 'For y am now to old.' (991-95)

The poet goes on to say that he is content with the literary experience of such things, and does not require empirical observation of them:

> 'No fors,' quod y, 'hyt is no nede.
>
> I leve as wel, so God me spede,
>
> hem that write of this matere,
>
> As though I knew her places here;
>
> And eke they shynen here so bryghte,
>
> Hyt shulde shenden al my syghte
>
> To loke upon hem.' (1011-17)

The tension that exists between the narrator and the eagle might be understood if the eagle is interpreted not as reason in any abstract sense, but as the capacity of an individual to reason, perhaps excessively and even in a fallible manner. Some critics, such as Sheila Delany, have chosen to regard the eagle as an instrument of satire upon the methods of the scholastics.[34] But I think that, although the eagle might seem to be separate from the narrator as a teacher might be, he is, as the narrator has said, a representation of 'Philosophy' and of 'thought' in the Boethian sense, and as such is a representation of an aspect of the poet's own self. The tension that exists between the eagle, who advocates rising above 'everych element' via reasoning based upon empirical experience of material reality, and the unadventurous poet who is happiest at home with his books, can be explained as the tensions that exist within the single identity of a highly intelligent, yet primarily creative individual such as Chaucer. What the poem seems to be drawing attention to is how the intellect reconciles the different sources of knowledge with one-another, in a primarily literary context. The eagle can dramatically transform the narrator's perspective, just as reason can radically alter our relationship to the material world. But, unlike the instructive figures in the *Divine Comedy* or Boethius' Philosophy, the eagle is a much more specific representation of a personal faculty. He is therefore fallible and comical in his arguments, and he does not necessarily lead to spiritual transcendence. Instead he is instrumental in providing the narrator with a new and highly imaginative view of the

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[34]Delany, pp.74-75.

things which he has previously been acquainted with but has not really thought about in terms of their source and context.

The flight of the narrator, then, has added reason to the reading of literature. The movement from the desert to the house of Fame and that of Rumour, can only be achieved by the intellect, transforming the perspective of the individual radically. These dramatic movements are Chaucer's version of the way in which the limitation of Dante's knowledge of reality, subject to the senses and natural law, is transcended by participation in divine understanding. The narrator in the *House of Fame* does not participate in divine understanding directly, but instead is carried forward by his God-given ability to think critically about his situation and his knowledge. When the narrator is set down once more he must again attempt to 'rede' what he sees before him, bearing in mind what he has been told by the eagle.

As the two approach the house of Fame the emphasis moves temporarily from the visual to the aural, as the narrator hears the sound 'Bothe of feir speche and chidynges, / And of fals and soth compouned' (1028-29). 'And what soun is it lyk?', asks the eagle, to which the narrator replies

> 'Peter, lyk betynge of the see,'
>
> Quod y, 'ayen the roches holowe,
>
> Whan tempest doth the shippes swalowe,
>
> And lat a man stonde, out of doute,

> A myle thens, and here hyt route;
>
> Or elles lyk the last humblynge
>
> After the clappe of a thundringe,
>
> Whan Joves hath the air ybete.' (1034-41)

These similes of shipwreck and storm reveal the anxiety the narrator feels as he hears 'The grete soun'. It is a similar confusion of sensory information to that which he experienced after leaving the temple of glass. Just as particular images were replaced by the vast uniformity of the desert, individual voices are lost in the 'grete swogh' of sound. Fortunately for the narrator, however, this aural information is converted into a visual form, as the voices entering Fame's palace are re-embodied in the likeness of their speakers.

This emphasis upon vision as the source of knowledge means that the movement of the narrator is again the means of extending that knowledge. As he enters into the space that is Fame's palace the narrator's perspective is once again limited to what is set before him. We become sensitive to his movements since alterations in his limited perspective yield information in the form of visual details. His initial movements after the eagle leaves him are arduous, and therefore reveal his determination to find things out:

> I wol yow al the shap devyse
>
> Of hous and site, and al the wyse

How I gan aproche

That stood upon so hygh a roche,

Hier stant ther non in Spayne.

But up I clomb with alle payne,

And though to clymbe it greved me,

Yit I ententyf was to see. (1113-20)

The information we are now being given has not been won without effort. And though

the narrator has previously wondered whether it is 'in body or in gost' (981) that he

has experienced this vision, the presence of the body is certainly being felt. There can

be no certainties now as to what the narrator sees or experiences, as knowledge

derived from his own senses is fallible.[35] This is apparent when he tries to work out

what the house of Fame is built upon:

Yf I koude any weyes knowe

What maner stoon this roche was.

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[35]This fallibility of the senses is the basis of the epistemological limitations of the self in Aristotle's

empiricist epistemology. This is the epistemological limitation that Fame exploits: creating narratives

that begin where the empirical experience of the individual ceases. Abstract as this might sound it

describes the basic state of affairs that the courtier must have been very conscious of: knowing that

someone is always capable of presenting an account of events that might differ from the truth, with

harmful possibilities for one's self. It is necessary to bear in mind that the philosophical aspect of the

House of Fame is born out of the immediate experience of the courtly subject.

> For hyt was lyk alum de glas,
>
> But that hyt shoon ful more clere;
>
> But of what congeled matere
>
> Hyt was, I nyste redely.
>
> But at the last aspied I,
>
> And found that hit was every del
>
> A roche of yse, and not of stel. (1122-30)

'I nyste redely' demonstrates the limitations of the narrator's understanding, and hence the determination that is required if he is to understand what he meets with properly. 'But at the last aspied I' indicates that it is only after careful consideration that he can understand what he sees. He then goes on to work out the moral implications of Fame's palace being built upon such a foundation,

> Thoughte I, 'By seynt Thoma of Kent,
>
> This were a feble fundament
>
> To bilden on a place hye.
>
> He ought him lytel glorifye
>
> That hereon bilt, God so me save!' (1131-35)

Since the narrator's knowledge is restricted to the limit of his own senses, then, the poet can metaphorically describe the way in which Fame operates beyond those

limits, manipulating what cannot be experienced directly. As the narrator struggles with the words that have disappeared, he is effectively confronting the epistemological boundary which Fame exploits:

> Tho sawgh I al the half ygrave
>
> With famous folkes names fele,
>
> That had iben in mochel wele,
>
> And her fames wide yblowe.
>
> But wel unnethes koude I knowe
>
> Any lettres for to rede
>
> Hir names by; for, out of drede,
>
> They were almost ofthowed so
>
> That of the lettres oon or two
>
> Was molte away of every name,
>
> So unfamous was woxe hir fame.
>
> But men seyn, 'What may ever laste?'. (1136-47)

This clearly demonstrates the way in which Chaucer's concept of Fame is dependent upon the epistemological limitations of the individual. Fame's narratives begin where empirical experience ends: she determines how that which has never been seen or heard shall be understood by the individual. This is what Chaucer describes metaphorically as the narrator struggles to read that which is effectively beyond the

range of his senses. As the narrator goes on to describe Fame's house he makes it clear that his experience was predominantly visual, and that it pushes his descriptive capabilities to their limit. This is because Fame's house is an iconic representation of the sum total of what can be known through discourse and tradition.[36] Therefore Chaucer's visual motifs must reflect the great diversity and range of collective courtly knowledge:

> That hit astonyeth yit my thought,
>
> And maketh al my wyt to swynke,
>
> On this castel to bethynke,
>
> So that the grete craft, beaute,
>
> The cast, the curiosite
>
> Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
>
> My wit ne may me not suffise. (1174-80)

Although the recapitulation of the manifold and elaborate imagery in narrative supposedly exceeds the capabilities of the poet, he succeeds in communicating to us a wondrous sense of space, as his eye roves across the varied surfaces of Fame's hall:

> But natheles al the substance

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[36]Here I am in agreement with Sheila Delany's view: 'Fame, I suggest, is to be understood as the body of traditional knowledge that confronted the educated fourteenth century reader' (Delany, p. 3).

I have yit in my remembrance;

For whi me thoughte, be Seynt Gyle,

Al was of ston of beryle,

Bothe the castel and the tour,

And eke the halle and every bour,

Wythouten peces or joynynges.

But many subtil compassinges,

Babewynnes and pynacles,

Ymageries and tabernacles

I say; and ful eke of wyndowes

As flakes falle in grete snowes. (1181-92)

The rich aesthetic surfaces of Fame's palace have made a deep impression on the mind of the narrator. And his excited description of them conveys a strong sense of movement to us, as we re-trace the sequential storage of discrete images in his 'remembrance'. The final simile in these lines, 'of wyndowes / As flakes falle in grete snowes' is like the description of the 'grete swogh': in that the narrator's surroundings threaten to overwhelm the limitations of his senses with a surplus of detail that threatens to become unintelligible. He can only prevent himself from being overcome by an excess of sensual information by paying attention to the particular. The whole, or sum total of Fame's house is always beyond his powers of comprehension.

There are all manner of 'mynstralles / And gestiours' that contribute aurally to the inundation of the narrator's senses, as well as harpists, pipe players, and trumpeters. These too are devices that enable the poet to develop a strong sense of space, which they fill with sound:

> Tho saugh I in an other place
>
> Stonden in a large space,
>
> Of hem that maken blody soun
>
> In trumpe, beme, and claryoun;
>
> For in fight and blod-shedynge
>
> Ys used gladly clarionynge. (1237-42)

The narrator employs variations of the 'Ther saugh I' formulation in quick succession during the initial description of the hall of Fame. As he does so he further increases the sense of space in Fame's hall by saying that a full description of all that he saw there would take up far too much time:

> There saugh I sitte in other sees,
>
> Pleyinge upon sondry glees,
>
> Whiche that I kan not nevene,
>
> Moo than sterres ben in hevene,
>
> Of whiche I nyl as now not ryme,

For ese of yow and los of tyme.

For tyme ylost, this knowen ye,

Be no way recovered be.

What shuld I make lenger tale

Of alle the pepil y ther say,

Fro hennes into domes day? (1251-58, 1282-84)

The contrast here with the narrator's experience in the temple of glass, is that of a greater sense of space and freedom. This serves to increase the focus upon the individual's sensual perception of things:

Whan I had al this folk beholde,

And found me lous and nought yholde,

And eft imused longe while

Upon these walles of berile,

That shoone ful lyghter than a glas

And made wel more than hit was

To semen every thing, ywis,

As kynde of thyng of Fames is. (1285-92)

Fame relies upon the way in which the knowledge of the individual is based upon sensory information, information that can be manipulated - as in the way in which clear walls of beryl can magnify the images of things. Hence there are 'Magiciens, and tregetours, / And Phitonesses, charmeresses, / Olde wicches, [and] sorceresses' (1260-62) in the hall who can deceive by appearances,

> And clerkes eke, which konne wel
>
> Al this magik naturel,
>
> That craftely doon her ententes. (1265-63)

Fame takes full advantage of natural law, which governs the way in which knowledge is acquired via the senses in any predominantly empiricist epistemology. Therefore the narrator's description of her tells of her many eyes and ears, as well as the way in which she appears, to his eyes, to change in size:

> For alther-first, soth for to seye,
>
> Me thoughte that she was so lyte
>
> That the lengthe of a cubite
>
> Was lengere than she semed be.
>
> But thus sone in a whyle she
>
> Hir tho so wonderliche streighte
>
> That with hir fet she erthe reighte,

And with hir hed she touched hevene. (1368-75)

Everything points back towards perception and the senses of the narrator. This is again emphasised when the narrator describes the poets upon the pillars. First of all he is very careful about the spatial arrangement of the scene, so as to create a sense of depth according to his perspective:

> Tho saugh I stonde on eyther syde,
>
> Streight doun to the dores wide,
>
> Fro the dees, many a peler
>
> Of metal that shoon not ful cler. (1419-22)

But later he realises that the dimensions of the hall vary:

> And ther he bar up wel hys fame
>
> Upon this piler, also hye
>
> As I myghte see hyt with myn ye;
>
> For-why this halle, of which I rede,
>
> Was woxen on highte, lengthe, and brede,
>
> Wel more be a thousand del
>
> Than hyt was erst, that saugh I wel. (1490-96)

A careful visual composition of a scene has been deliberately disrupted in order to show how Fame's dominion effectively corresponds with the epistemological limitations of the individual, which in turn corresponds with the limitations of the senses and natural law.

As the narrator looks upon Fame ordaining how the various figures shall be known or forgotten in the world down through history, his role is still that of an observer. He is being shown how far narratives can be divorced from truth, as Fame arbitrarily decides if, and how, the lives of the figures shall be described. This further increases the reader's consciousness of just how limited his knowledge is about the real world. This comes to the fore when he replies to the mysterious figure behind him, who, as we have seen, asks if he has come to seek fame:

> 'Nay, for sothe, frend,' quod y;
>
> 'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
>
> For no such cause, by my hed!
>
> Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
>
> That no wight have my name in honde.
>
> I wot myself best how I stonde;
>
> For what I drye, or what I thynke,
>
> I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
>
> Certeyn, for the more part,
>
> As fer forth as I kan myn art.' (1873-82)

If the poem has so far demonstrated how Fame relies upon the limited knowledge of individuals, then the narrator himself now seems to be circumscribing the self as the limits of what he can truly know. He seems to be conscious of the fact that truth is, to a large extent, subject to the human point of view, and he now seems to have worked out how to reconcile the limitations of his own perspective with this realisation: It is enough for him to know himself as he really is ('I wot myself best how I stonde') and to accept that fame, or public discourse, is liable to create untruth, by taking advantage of human knowledge subject to the limitations of sense and texts.

The narrator is then taken by the unknown figure to see the house of Rumour, since he has not yet heard what he 'desirest for to here' (1911). This house is situated 'Under the castle, faste by', it is 'queyntelych ywrought' and revolves constantly 'as swyft as thought'. It is an astonishing sight, and from it issues an incredible noise,

> And therout com so gret a noyse
>
> That, had hyt stonden upon Oyse,
>
> Men myghte hyt han herd esely
>
> To Rome, y trowe sikerly.
>
> And the noyse which that I herde,
>
> For al the world ryght so hyt ferde
>
> As dooth the rowtynge of the ston
>
> That from th' engyn ys leten gon. (1927-34)

The noise is like the roar of the stone that flies from the siege engine. This metaphor tells us that the narrator cannot initially make sense of the information that is emitted from the house of Rumour - it is an unintelligible homogeneous roar. The limitations of his present perspective upon the house are also demonstrated visually. The house is spinning as quickly as thought, which makes it resistant to the narrator's limited viewpoint, without the help of the eagle. The textures of the surfaces of the house are an interesting aesthetic contrast to those of Fame's hall. Rather than there being a great density of significant visual detail, the surfaces are uniform and lacking in detail that might yield information,

> And al thys hous of which y rede
>
> Was mad of twigges, falwe, rede,
>
> And grene eke, and somme weren white,
>
> Swiche as men to these cages thwite,
>
> Or maken of these panyers,
>
> Or elles hottes or dossers. (1935-1940)

The walls of this house, rather than encoding information upon their surface, are acoustically transparent - allowing all kinds of confused and contradictory information to pass through them. The structure is 'ful of gygges' (1942) and 'entrees / As fele as of leves ben in trees' (1945-6), and on the roof there are 'A thousand

holes, and wel moo, / To leten wel the soun out goo' (1949-50). The news that escapes through these crevices and openings is of 'werres, of pes', 'of deeth, of lyf', 'Of love, of hate', 'Of hele, of seknesse', in short all manner of contrasting concepts that vie with one another to escape into the world. At least in Fame's house information is stabilised and organised into the coherent narratives that constitute history: the renowned histories that are valued by Chaucer's society.[37] The value of these narratives corresponds with the highly structured appearance of Fame's house, which aesthetically expresses the high ideals of gothic art and architecture. The house of rumour is of a lower kind, architecturally and aesthetically. This is because it represents information, or discourse, in a higher state of entropy: it is the multifarious discourse of the present, which is yet to be organised and structured into discrete and coherent narratives. This is the business of Fame, hence these rumours fly to her palace. It is little wonder, then, that the house of Rumour should pose more of a problem to the narrator's empirical understanding. Indeed, its incomprehensibility is expressed in terms of its constant and swift movement, a factor inconsistent with an object of its size. Consequently the narrator's description of it is extremely disconcerting, and seems deliberately to contradict our normal experience of moving objects:

And loo, thys hous, of which I write,

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[37]See Delany Ch.8: 'In the movement of tidings from the House of Rumour to Fame's palace, we see histories becoming history, and rumour becoming renown.'

> Syker be ye, hit nas not lyte,
>
> For hyt was sixty myle of lengthe. (1977-79)

The overall effect of the noise, the movement, and the size is of a total disruption of natural law, and of the reality that is usually perceived by the senses of the individual in accordance with such law. The narrator cannot further his understanding of this place from his present position; it simply will not submit to empirical scrutiny, and does not correspond to anything he has previous knowledge of:

> 'Certys,' quod y, 'in al myn age,
>
> Ne saugh y such an hous as this.' (1986-7)

It is precisely at this point, when the narrator realises he is being confronted with the unknown and the unknowable, that he becomes aware of the eagle's return,

> And as y wondred me, ywys,
>
> Upon this hous, tho war was y
>
> How that myn egle faste by
>
> Was perched hye upon a stoon. (1987-90)

The narrator turns to the eagle for help:

And I gan streghte to hym gon,

And seyde thus: 'Y preye the

That thou a while abide me,

For Goddis love, and lete me seen

What wondres in this place been.' (1992-96)

Again the eagle is the means whereby the narrator's limited perspective can be transformed, and he underlines this fact to the narrator,

But certeyn, oon thyng I the telle,

That but I bringe the therinne,

Ne shalt thou never kunne gynne

To come into hyt, out of doute,

So faste hit whirleth, lo aboute. (2002-6)

Where sense fails, intellect or reason (in the form of the eagle) shall prevail. He can enable the narrator literally to rise above the limitations of natural law and the material world, in order to assume a new perspective upon objects that are initially encountered by the senses. And the way in which Chaucer now transforms the perspective of the narrator, brilliantly underlines the way in which understanding via the senses is supremely relative:

With this word he ryght anoon

Hente me up bytweene hys toon,

And at a wyndowe yn me broghte,

That in this hous was, as me thoughte -

And therwithalle, me thoughte hit stente,

And nothing hyt aboute wente. (2027-32)

At first sight the modern reader might wonder if this is an anticipation of Newtonian physics, which state that an object continues in motion unless acted upon by force. It seems as if Chaucer understands that bodies moving at the same speed would not necessarily sense that movement themselves, except in relation to a reference point moving at a different speed. However, such physics cannot apply here, after all there is no description of the centripetal forces that the whirling house would generate. Instead Chaucer is underlining the relativity of the perspective of the individual by imagining that the unnatural momentum of the house of Rumour can dominate the senses of the narrator, preventing him from knowing that in reality he is moving at great speed. This is therefore a fantastic disruption of natural law for the narrator, but one which is designed to express something very close to a modern world view: that much of our personal experience is relative: subject to circumstances and the senses, rather than to absolute points of reference, or ultimate truth.[38]

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[38]At least this is the initial state of affairs in the house of Rumour. Because this is a medieval poem Koonce (in *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*) chose to interpret the man of great authority at the end

In the house of Rumour, then, the stress upon the individual perspective and knowledge derived from the senses is at its most extreme. What can be known is confined to that which is in close proximity to the individual,

> That, certys, in the world nys left
>
> So many formed be Nature,
>
> Ne ded so many a creature;
>
> That wel unnethe in that place
>
> Hadde y a fote-brede of space.
>
> And every wight that I saugh there
>
> Rouned everych in others ere
>
> A newe tydynge prively,
>
> Or elles tolde al openly. (2038-46)

People within the house are so cut off from any wider reality that the development of their knowledge is utterly dependent upon the information that they receive from their immediate neighbours, who whisper in their ear or shout across the room. This emphasises the epistemological subjection of the inhabitants of the house to language to a frightening degree, and ultimately, because the 'tydynges' are not governed by

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of the poem as Christ, because he finds it inconceivable that Chaucer, as a medieval subject, could imagine people being so cut off from any contact with absolute truth. But such an identification of this figure is not necessary, since it is characteristic of this dream vision that the individual's access to absolute truth is limited. It is only upon waking from the dream that this limitation can be remedied.

wisdom or truth, their ultimate effect is to undermine any possible basis of a stable society,

> Were the tydynge soth or fals,
>
> Yit wolde he telle hyt natheles,
>
> And evermo with more encres
>
> Than yt was erst. Thus north and south
>
> Wente every tydyng fro mouth to mouth,
>
> And that encresing ever moo,
>
> As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo
>
> From a sparke sprronge amys,
>
> Til al a citee brent up ys. (2072-80)

The epistemological argument of the house of Rumour seems ultimately to be pessimistic. Individuals are not only cut off from truth but also from one another in real terms. Knowledge of things external to self are described as exclusively derived from empirical experience of spoken words. In Fame's house and the temple of glass by contrast, there were at least pictorial and architectural sources which offered information of a more stable and permanent kind to the viewer. This visually accessible knowledge was Chaucer's way of describing the relative stability of famous narratives, which can at least provide a body of knowledge - irrespective of their truth value - which is able to help facilitate secular social cohesion. Such

narratives provide individuals with common knowledge of a cultural kind. In the house of Rumour there is no culture, and so there are no stable aesthetic visual forms. This is consistent with the absence of narratives around which social practices can develop. Rather the description of the many individuals that inhabit the house in relation to the discourse there is predominantly anti-social.

In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, then, the limitation of the narrator's knowledge is evident as he encounters the rich and varied aesthetic surfaces that characterise the poem, and seeks to derive understanding via the senses. This limitation underlines the narrative's stress upon the individual perspective. Fame is a creature who exploits such limitations: she takes advantage of the individual's isolation in a particular place in space and time, and produces narratives that can manipulate the truth of events that take place beyond the immediate horizons of a limited perspective. This is the epistemological aspect of Fame that Chaucer's elaborate imagery describes.

Chaucer's expression of this limited individual perspective has its roots, I believe, in the developments of *trecento* art. Dante's description of the individual perspective in the *Divine Comedy* is a coherent development of Thomist psychology, as we have already seen, and is one source, I believe, suggesting to Chaucer a sustained exploration of such a perspective in relation to the concept of Fame. Another important influence upon Chaucer's development of the individual perspective in the *House of Fame*, is derived from the visual arts of the *trecento*, as we shall see in what follows.

Trecento artists enabled, for the first time, the individual viewer's empirical experience of reality to be acknowledged and made part of the description of religious truths in pictures. The principle device of the *trecento* that made painting correspond more closely with empirical experience was the development of linear perspective. It was Brunelleschi, early in the fifteenth century, who was responsible for codifying the geometrical foundations that are necessary for achieving the effect of perspective in two dimensional art.[39] However, it was the *trecento* artists, who developed and utilised some of the key principles of perspective in a less refined form, who made Brunelleschi's invention possible:

Fourteenth-century artists in Italy had developed a wide variety of stratagems for the evoking of space and for the depiction of solid forms in a more or less convincing manner.[40]

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[39]See Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art* (New Haven and London, 1990): 'Linear perspective was invented by Filippo Brunelleschi. His priority has never been seriously questioned. either at the time or subsequently, though we can be sure that it would have been if anyone had even flimsy grounds for an alternative claim. Recently discovered evidence, in the form of a letter of 1413 that particularly associates Brunelleschi with perspective suggests that the invention occurred at or before this date' (p. 9).

[40]Ibid., p. 9.

These artists had built up 'systematic techniques based upon rules' for a more realistic depiction of space, and chief amongst them was Giotto, whose work 'bears witness to a sustained, orderly and deeply pondered attention to the representation of figures and space'.[41] In his fresco cycle in the Santa Croce Church in Florence, Giotto depicts a number of key events from the life of St. Francis which relate to the establishing of the Franciscan order (the Santa Croce being a Franciscan Church). The paintings in this cycle, which are all located in one chapel, are important precursors to the development of perspective. The *Trial By Fire* (Plate 2) for example, is an account of St. Francis's missionary work.[42] It tells the story of his contest with the Sultan's priests, in which the Saint is willing to walk through flames in order to demonstrate the reality of his faith. The artist has located the vanishing point somewhere behind the Sultan's throne. This gives the Sultan a strong presence at the centre of the painting, and makes the throne solid and three dimensional. Colour is also used to further the impression of three dimensional space in the picture. Red is used to emphasise things in the foreground and blue to intimate the distance behind the immediate action. Because of these devices we are drawn into the narrative drama, looking first at the Sultan, and then to the right and left of him in order to read the painting. This painting represents a concerted attempt to present us with space realistically, as it is perceived by an individual viewer from a specific position.

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[41]Ibid., p. 9.

[42]See Rona Goffen (*Spirituality in Conflict: Saint Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel* (London, 1988), pp. 57-58) for the dating of the completion of the following paintings as some time between 1310 and 1316.

In *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata* (Plate 3), however, the artist draws upon the traditions of earlier iconic representation, so that this painting contrasts with those that present space realistically. Here the artist is depicting a supernatural event: St. Francis receiving the wounds of Christ. St. Francis and the crucifix-seraphim dominate the scene in a manner that excludes additional space. The building to the right, and mountain to the left, complete this exclusion of space by filling the background and denying any sense of depth in the painting. This abandonment of the devices that create a realistic illusion of space in favour of earlier traditions in religious art, has a definite significance and occurs at key points in Giotto's narrative cycles, as we shall see.

The *Confirmation of the Stigmata* (Plate 4), the next painting in the cycle, returns us to a realistic depiction of space. The brothers are gathered around the person of St. Francis in order to see for themselves the wounds that he has miraculously received. These are solid figures in real space, and the narrative drama of the painting is experienced as we look from one face to another, reading the emotions on the faces of the brothers as they respond to what they see. A realistic description of space is conducive here to the theme of seeing and touching the wounds for oneself, because it is the empirical verification of the stigmata that the artist is keen to stress. By presenting the brothers as solid bodies in real space the artist is able to communicate the sense of being in the world, where empirical experience contributes to the development of an individual's knowledge.

In the *Sanctioning Of The Rule* (Plate 5) the Franciscan order is officially established by the Pope. This painting is a very important precursor to the advent of perspective. Again the artist uses reds to emphasise action in the foreground, and blue to suggest distance. The deep red of the Pope's robe draws our attention to him as a figure, but the vanishing point in the painting is located at a point somewhere behind the heads of the kneeling brothers. This tends to draw our attention away from the Pope and towards them. The architectural enclosure that surrounds these figures functions to contain them as solid bodies in real space once again. The fact that the empirical experience of the individual viewer is being included in this depiction through the device of perspective, suggests to me that the sanctioning of the order is being presented by the artist as a worldly event, in comparison to the supernatural occurrence of St. Francis receiving the wounds of Christ.

It seems that Giotto uses, or does not use, the device of perspective depending upon the subject matter of the painting. If the theme is predominantly supernatural, then he utilises the earlier iconic style which does not attempt to describe space realistically. If the subject matter involves events that are perceived by individuals in the world, then the artist describes space realistically and incorporates the fixed perspective of the individual viewer. In *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata* Giotto abandons any attempt to make the painting conform to empirical experience in the real world because he wants to emphasise the supernatural dimension of what he is describing. This enables him to develop a contrast within the context of the cycle as a whole, so that he can immerse the viewer once again 'in the world' when he describes

the brother's empirical experience of St. Francis's wounds in the next painting in the sequence, the *Confirmation*. The early development of the device of perspective therefore gave Giotto an extra level of vocabulary in his art. The earlier iconographic style, with its stress on symbolism rather than realism, could now be applied specifically to deal with subject matter of a predominantly supernatural kind, and the use of perspective could be used where the subject matter of the painting concerned experience in the world.

Two other paintings in the adjacent chapel confirm this view. There Giotto depicts scenes from the life of St. John. In *St. John on Patmos* (Plate 6) the Saint is shown receiving the vision of *Revelation*. The abandonment of any attempt to create a realistic impression of space is striking. The island of Patmos is barely long enough for St. John to lay down on, and above him in the sky are various images from the vision. There is a complete abandonment of the devices that can create an impression of realism. The whole emphasis of the painting is upon the supernatural, which has abolished the limitations of human sense by allowing the Saint to see things according to divine inspiration. The painting reflects this fact by refusing to submit to the perspective of a viewer in the world. This world is then returned to once more in the *Assumption Of Saint John* (Plate 7), in which an architectural enclosure creates a realistic sense of depth, and contains the persons who witness the Saint leaving the world. Here the emphasis is upon their empirical experience of this miraculous event.

The contrast between the two styles in the context of a single fresco cycle is particularly striking, and would have served to emphasise the impact of the new

development in the realistic depiction of space. It is the empirically determined view-point of the individual that is being acknowledged through the device of perspective. The religious truths that these paintings convey are presented as subject to the senses of the individual who perceives them. This is a major shift from the iconographic style, which sought to communicate truths without concession to the psychological processes that govern their reception by individuals. The development of perspective consequently leads to a more self-conscious attitude to visual art and points towards the individual viewer as the locus of meaning: the point at which the separate visual elements in a pictorial composition are perceived and interpreted.

Boccaccio provides us with a contemporary account of the impact of Giotto and his innovations upon the individual viewer:

Giotto, was so extraordinary a genius, that there was nothing Nature, the mother of all things, displays to us by the eternal revolution of the heavens, that he could not recreate with pencil, pen or brush so faithfully, that it hardly seemed a copy, but rather the thing itself. Indeed, mortal sight was often puzzled, face to face with his creations, and took the painted thing for the actual object. Well, as he brought to light again that art. which had lain buried through the mistaken notions of those who painted more to flatter the eye of the ignorant, than to

satisfy the intellect of the connoisseur, he might well be called one of

the luminaries of Florence's glory.[43]

Boccaccio begins by affirming that Giotto is able to present the material world in his

pictures in a uniquely powerful way. The phrase 'there was nothing Nature, the

mother of all things displays to us by the eternal revolution of the heavens, that he

could not recreate with pencil, pen or brush' is revealing. It demonstrates the

influence of the materialistic bias in Aristotelian epistemology and psychology, which

regards the soul as knowing things through the information provided by the senses; a

process that Aristotle says is ultimately determined by the movements of the heavenly

bodies. Boccaccio's remark may well reflect a greater stress in the arts upon the

senses, as informing our knowledge of the world, and it would be natural to expect

the influence of Aristotelian empiricism to be greater following the canonisation of

Aquinas in 1323, since this event meant in effect that the Church had sanctioned his

interpretation of Aristotle's teaching. Boccaccio's remarks also reveal the self-

consciousness that the advent of perspective inspired in the first viewers. Although

we may struggle as modern viewers to regard Giotto's style as realistic, Boccaccio

was struck by the impression that what these paintings described 'hardly seemed a

copy, but rather the thing itself'. When he says that 'mortal sight was often puzzled,

face to face with his creations, and took the painted thing for the actual object' he

conveys the sense of struggling with his own perceptions in order to work out what is

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[43]*Decameron*, VI, V. trans., F. Winwar (New York, 1955), pp. 365-67.

really going on in his reception of the visual stimuli. He is therefore moving towards a self-reflexive awareness of the power, and potential fallibility, of his own senses, in determining his view of the world. This is a consequence of the stress that is placed upon the empirically determined view point of the individual observer by the device of perspective.

Boccaccio's testimony as to the effect of Giotto's art is invaluable as a guide to the feelings that would have arisen in an individual encountering these frescoes for the first time. They would have seemed like windows that open upon a reality previously neglected by religious art. Boccaccio's remarks can help us to appreciate the profound effect that such a development would have had upon an English courtier, sensitive to issues of a philosophical and psychological kind.

Given, then, that these paintings predicate the empirically determined view-point of an individual perspective, and therefore correspond with Chaucer's stress upon the limitations of the individual perspective in the *House of Fame*, what evidence is there that he actually saw them?

Giotto's fresco cycle in the Santa Croce depicting scenes from the life of St. Francis is located in the Bardi chapel, and the adjacent Peruzzi chapel contains the scenes from the life of St. John. The Bardi and Peruzzi families, who were the patrons of these chapels and their art, were two of the greatest merchant families in medieval Christendom. Both were banking families and the Bardi were financiers of Edward III. It is their role as financiers of the royal court that offers the most probable

explanation for Chaucer's visit to Florence in 1373.[44] And if Chaucer's delegation went to Florence to do business with the Bardi then it is highly likely that he would have attended mass at the Santa Croce which was their family church. The Santa Croce was not the only church in Florence to benefit from the wealth of the Bardi, but it had been especially chosen judging from the extent of their patronage:

> ...whereas the Bardi endowed only one chapel in Santa Maria Novella, and one in Santo Spirito, the major church of their quarter, the family eventually came to establish an extraordinary four chapels in Santa

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[44]This visit is documented in the form of a mandate to the Exchequer to account with Chaucer for his late trip to Genoa and Florence, an enrolled account of receipts and expenses for the trip and a final settlement for those expenses. See *Chaucer Life Records*. Ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford, 1966), pp. 34-36. Also see Edwin S. Hunt *The Medieval Super Companies: A Study of the Peruzzi Company of Florence* (Cambridge, 1994). Hunt points out the complexities of the relationship between the Bardi Company and the royal court. For instance the company was involved in the selling of royal debts to Richard, earl of Arundel as well as holding large deposits on his account, and Walter de Bardi was master of the mint for both Edward III and Richard II. Settlement between the Bardi Company and the royal court for unpaid debts did not take place until 1392. Given the complexity of the financial relations between the Bardi Company and the royal court, it is impossible to speculate on the precise nature of Chaucer's visit to Florence. It is well to note that, despite the earlier failure of the company in 1346, 'Back in Florence, the Bardi remained a very large and prosperous family after 1350. Brucker cited it as "the wealthiest and the largest family in Florence" in 1364. By 1427, the Bardi had fallen to second place behind the Strozzi, but was still enormously wealthy, holding 2.1 percent of the total net capital of the city.' pp. 241-3. (Hunt refers here to Gene A. Brucker *Florentine Politics and Society*, (Princeton, 1962), p. 21.)

Croce, beginning with Ridolfo's Chapel of Saint Francis. No other Florentine family made such a conspicuous commitment to any church, so far as one can tell from surviving evidence.[45]

The reason for the family choosing this church to worship was due to a combination of kinship and business, and also, perhaps, religious preferences. The Acciaiuoli were also wealthy patrons of the Santa Croce and were the family of Ridolfo Bardi's mother. The Peruzzi were close business associates:

> Although the Bardi did not live quite so near to these families as they did to each other and to Santa Croce, the Bardi became the neighbours of their business partners and their kinsmen in worship, and indeed in death, by means of their family funeral chapels. Thus Ridolfo, who might just as well have continued the family patronage in Santa Maria Novella, or closer to home, in the church of Santo Spirito, chose instead to follow (or accompany) his Peruzzi banking associates to the Franciscan church.[46]

If worship could include business relations between these two great Florentine houses, then this is further evidence that representatives of the royal court are likely to

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[45]Goffen, pp. 52-53.

[46]Ibid., p. 53.

have worshipped with the Bardi in the Santa Croce, and to have experienced Giotto's frescoes. Boccaccio's remarks show that Giotto's art was a source of pride for Florence as a whole. If Chaucer, who as a conscientious believer may well have heard mass more than once a day, was afforded the full hospitality of his hosts, then it is most likely that he would have taken the Eucharist at the Santa Croce church. If he did so the evidence of Boccaccio's testimony suggests that he, like everyone else that saw the frescoes, would have been struck by their realism. This realism is founded upon the device of perspective which acknowledges the individual's empirical experience of the world. The experience of these paintings, combined with the Aristotelian empiricism derived from the *Divine Comedy*, inspired and equipped Chaucer to conduct his own exploration of the individual perspective in relation to the theme of Fame.[47]

The testament that Boccaccio gives to Giotto's achievements provides us with an idea of the impact of his work. It is a resounding approval of the way in which Giotto's art conforms to the way in which we experience things in the world. It also demonstrates that these achievements were considered to be part of the glory, or fame of Florence, and it is in the context of fame that Dante also refers to Giotto in the

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[47]David Wallace gives some relevant thoughts here on Chaucer's ability to interpret Florentine art: 'Since Chaucer was chosen to travel to Italy for his ability to read political signs and help facilitate political negotiations, he was surely primed to read all cultural and civic forms (buildings, paintings, piassas, and literary texts) as particular expressions of and clues to specific political communities.' Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stamford, 1997), p. 10.

Divine Comedy. In this earlier reference to the artist (around 1310) Dante tells us that the fame of Cimabue, a predecessor, has now diminished before that of Giotto. The purpose of this observation by the spirit of Oderisi in purgatory is to warn Dante himself of the dangers of hoping for fame through one's art:

> Oh vana gloria dell'umane posse!
>
> com poco verde in su la cima dura,
>
> se non è giunta dall'etati grosse!
>
> Credette Cimabue nella pintura
>
> tener lo campo, e ora ha Giotto il grido,
>
> sì che la fama di colui è scura.

[O empty glory of human powers, how briefly lasts the green on its top, unless it is followed by an age of dullness! In painting Cimabue thought to hold the field and now Giotto has the cry, so that the other's fame is dim.][48]

Oderisi goes on to define such fame in a manner that is highly suggestive of Chaucer's description of Fame in relation to sound:

> Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato

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[48]*Purgatorio*, XI, 91-96, p. 146.

di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,

e muta nome perchè muta lato.

[The worlds noise is but a breath of wind which comes now this way

and now that and changes name because it changes quarter.][49]

If Chaucer had been impressed by the paintings that adorned the walls of Florence's

Churches, and if he had seen Giotto's pictures with their realistic description of the

individual perspective, he would no doubt have been profoundly impressed. But I

would also like to think that at the same time as being attracted to the exciting

innovations in the visual arts in Florence, he would have held reservations about their

ultimate significance. In attempting to develop the literary equivalent of the individual

perspective as encountered in the paintings of Giotto, Chaucer may well have thought

along similar lines to Dante and Giotto, and felt it appropriate to demonstrate in the

House of Fame that anything that captivates the senses of the individual, and is

perceived through them, is of its very nature temporal, and therefore of the world.

And it is in just such a sober vein as that struck by Dante, that Chaucer has chosen to

explore the implications and limitations of the individual perspective as one of the

necessary conditions for his concept of Fame. Fame can take advantage of the

epistemological limitations of the individual and determine the knowledge of subjects

through the manipulation of narratives. But ultimately the worldly domain within

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[49]Ibid.. XI, 100-2, p. 146.

which her authority is exercised, is transcended by the divine reality in which truth is both known and eternal.

<div align="center">II</div>

The Temple of Glass.

Having considered the philosophical background to Chaucer's description of the mind, and some of the historical circumstances that may have inspired his method, I now want to return to the opening of the poem and re-evaluate the significance of the temple of glass in which the narrator's dream begins. In particular I want to demonstrate how what we have seen already about the sophistication of Chaucer's poetic exploration, encourages a different view of the symbolic significance of this particular literary motif.

It is now possible to understand the primacy of the 'temple ymad of glas' in the sequence of the dream vision's imagery. First of all it is important to consider what the substance of glass itself would have meant to the cultivated medieval courtier. Bennett interprets its significance in terms of renaissance moral iconography: 'if the temple in Fame is "ymad of glas" it is to denote - as any renaissance iconologist would recognise - love's insubstantiality'.[50] However, the sixteenth-century perspective may be misleading. Glass was cheaper and more commonplace

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[50] J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame* (Oxford, 1986), p. 11.

during the renaissance than it was in Chaucer's day, when it was regarded with much more of a sense of wonder. Trevisa acknowledges that it is the brittleness of glass that limits its value 'For sikerliche if glasene vessel were nought brotel it scholde be acounted more worth than vessel of gold, as Isider seith'.[51] Nevertheless, he suggests, it is marvellous stuff with wondrous curative properties: 'But most worschip is in white glas that is next to cristal in colour for it is ofte ychose tofore siluer and golde to drynke therof, as Isider seith'.[52] Walter Map, in an account of the wonders achieved by our ancestors who lived for hundreds of years - and therefore acquired knowledge superior to that of normal men - also includes the example of glassmaking along with the practice of alchemy:

Quis adinuenit metallorum decoctionem, alterius in alterum reduccionem? Quis silicem conflauit in uitrum? Certe non nos; non comprehendit huiusmodi septuaginta curriculum annorum.

[Who was it that discovered how to melt metals and transmute one into another?...Who melted flint into glass? Not we, assuredly. A course of threescore and ten years leaves no room for such discoveries.][53]

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[51] John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum,* ed. M.C. Seymour, 3 vols., (Oxford, 1975), II, p. 880.

[52] Ibid., p. 879.

[53] Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialum,* trans., M.R. James (Oxford, 1983), Dist. I. c.1, p. 7.

An example of the wondrous attitude towards glass is found in the *Squire's Tale*.
Some of those present in Cambyuskan's court find it difficult to believe in the
magical properties of Canacee's ring, which is said to enable its wearer to understand
the language of birds, as well as to know the properties of herbs. Others however are
not so dismissive of such wonders, and point to the equally wonderful example of the
manufacture of glass:

> But natheless somme seiden that it was
>
> Wonder to maken of fern-asshen glas,
>
> And yet nys glas nat lyk asshen of fern;
>
> But, for they han yknowen it so fern,
>
> Therefore cesseth hir janglyng and hir wonder. (247-57)

The idea that glass could be made purely from the ashes of ferns is a mythical idea,
probably propagated by the glass makers themselves to shroud the processes of their
craft in mystery. However, some form of alkaline flux is a necessary part of glass
production. And because the rise of Islam meant that it was no longer possible for
medieval glass makers to get their raw supply of soda from middle eastern sources,
potash, another alkali, was used, which was derived from the ashes of ferns.[54] Ruth
Vose summarises the popular medieval view of the manufacture of glass thus:

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[54]Ruth Vose, *Glass*, (London. 1980), p. 28.

Before our technologically advanced era, the glassmaker was regarded

in the popular imagination as akin to the alchemist - the maker of gold

from the elements: his fiery furnaces dramatically transformed base

materials into a translucent, sparkling substance which was valued by

the rich and coveted by the poor. Glassmaking families guarded their

formulae and production methods jealously, only passing them on from

father to son.[55]

It seems to me, then, to be necessary to hold in mind the wonderful associations that

the substance of the temple of glass would have had for Chaucer's audience - and

with such wonderful implications in mind ask what the precise relationship of the

temple of glass is to that of Fame's palace and the house of Rumour.

If the house of Rumour is the source of the raw discourse that is sublimated

then transformed and fixed by Fame's palace, then the temple of glass is the ultimate

destination for the finished texts that constitute history and legend. since it is there

that narratives acquire the relative stability and permanence of a pictorial form. As

such it is reasonable to assume that, just as those texts must originate with individuals

- the likenesses of which are re-embodied in Fame's palace - they must also end with

an individual who receives those texts, and gives form to them in his or her own

imagination. The ultimate end of any text in the mind of the individual is what I take

the temple of glass to represent, hence it is logically the starting point for Chaucer's

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[55]Ibid., p. 28.

enquiry into the relationship of the individual mind to the narratives that constitute

history and literary tradition. The introductory proem on the possible causes of dreams

has already prepared the way for this association to be made, specifically the lines that

identify materialistic, rather than spiritual causes of dreams:

> As yf folkys complexions
>
> Make hem dreme of reflexions,
>
> Or ellys thus, as other sayn,
>
> For to gret feblenesse of her brayn,
>
> By abstinence or by seknesse,
>
> Prison-stewe or gret distresse,
>
> Or ellys by dysordynaunce
>
> Of naturel acustumance,
>
> That som man is to curious
>
> In studye, or melancolyous,
>
> Or thus so inly ful of drede
>
> That no man may him bote bede;
>
> Or elles that devocion
>
> Of somme, and contemplacion
>
> Causeth suche dremes ofte;
>
> Or that the cruel lyf unsofte
>
> Which these ilke lovers leden

That hopen over-muche or dreden,

That purely her impressions

Causeth hem avisions. (21-40)

It is Aristotelian dream theory that enables these possible materialistic causes to be

linked with the dream vision itself. For Aristotle the soul, or mind, of the individual

does not come into the world containing any innate images or ideas. The soul instead

derives all of its images through sense impressions. Sensory information, as was

suggested earlier, is processed by the agent intellect and then stored in the receptive,

or potential intellect. According to Aristotle there is no thought without images, and

the receptive intellect has an unlimited potential for receiving the forms of images,

and re-representing them in any act of imagination, such as remembering, creative

activity, dreaming, or any other meaningful mental activity. However, while the

individual is sleeping, the agent intellect, that which is capable of rational structured

thought, is 'veiled', and the imagination can be triggered by physiological activity -

sometimes governed by the immediate environmental context of the dreamer, or

indeed by the influence of the heavenly bodies. Pertelote provides a good example of

the influence of Aristotelian dream theory in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, when she tries

to dismiss the significance of Chaunteceer's dream by arguing that

Swevens engendren of replecciouns,

And ofte of fume and of complecciouns,

Whan humours been to habundant in a wight. (2923-5)

Hence the causes listed above by Chaucer could be possible causes of the dream that

follows according to Aristotelian dream theory, since they all in some way relate to

the physical condition of the dreamer and might therefore trigger the contents of the

receptive intellect whilst the agent intellect is temporarily not in control of mental

activity.[56] Since the *House of Fame* is concerned with the relationship between the

individual narrator and the texts that constitute the basis of his knowledge in

empiricist terms, I consider the temple of glass to be a representation of his

imagination, or receptive intellect, which is the logical starting point for any

exploration as to how texts shape the knowledge and mind of the individual. The

substance of glass, rather than emphasising the fragility of erotic love, is instead an

appropriate symbol for expressing the wondrous and alchemical power of the

imagination, which furnishes the mind with its forms and images.[57]

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[56]See *Aristotle's Psychology*, trans., William A. Hammond (New York, 1902), *De Anima* and *Parva*

Naturalia. The former describes Aristotle's notion of the soul, or mind, and the latter explores much of

the minds experience in the world, including sections on 'Sensation', 'Memory and Recollection',

'Sleeping and Waking', 'Dreams', and 'Prophecy in Sleep'. There is a good summary of Aristotelian

psychology in Mary Carruther's *The Book of Memory. A Study of the Memory in Medieval Culture*

(Cambridge, 1990). Also Steven Kruger's *Medieval Dreaming* (Cambridge, 1992) provides arguments

for the dominance of Aristotelian dream theory over Macrobius's Platonic theories in the latter middle

ages.

[57]See V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (London, 1984) pp. 41-42. Kolve explains

the confusing shifts from pictorial to written information in the temple of glass in terms of imagination:

When the narrator has finished looking at the images contained in the temple

he is compelled to go outside in order to 'See owher any stiryng man / That may telle

where I am' (478-9). He finds, as we have seen, that the temple is surrounded by a

'large feld' devoid of any detail

> Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
>
> Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
>
> For al the feld nas but of sond
>
> As smal as man may se yet lye
>
> In the desert of Lybye. (484-8)

The contrast between the sense of enclosure within the temple and the sense of

exposure outside of it is pronounced, as is the contrast between the lack of visual

detail outside and the abundance of detail within. This latter contrast makes the

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whether the sensory information is aural or visual it is the imagination which realises the forms with

which the intellect can work. Kolve's argument is therefore supportive of my reading of the temple as a

representation of the imagination or receptive intellect. See also Beryl Rowland's article 'Bishop

Bradwardine, The Artificial Memory, In Chaucer's *House of Fame*' in *Chaucer At Albany* (1975), pp.

41-62, and Elizabeth Buckmaster 'Meditation and Memory In Chaucer's House of Fame' *Modern*

Language Studies 16, (1986), 16, 3, 279-87. These articles both claim that the poem employs the

device of the artificial memory system, and therefore indirectly supports my impression of the glass

temple as a symbolic representation of the poet's own inner self, since the artificial memory system is

founded upon Aristotelian psychology and involves the conscious shaping of one's own memory in the

form of bold imagery spatially arranged in the mind.

images inside the temple seem even more pronounced and significant in the context of so much emptiness. It is at this point that the narrator utters his prayer of deliverance,

> 'O Crist,' thoughte I, 'that art in blysse,
>
> Fro fantome and illusion
>
> Me save!'.(492-4)

With the stress upon vision being so pronounced in the temple of glass, and with this stress being emphasised by the contrast with the emptiness of the desert, the choice of the word 'fantome' seems most significant. As Sheila Delany points out 'It is not a common word in medieval literature', and its meaning could include something quite different then, in addition to its present day association with apparitions or insubstantial presences only.[58] The word certainly carries these modern associations in the sense in which it is used in the proem (line 11) to describe a particular kind of dream, defined by Macrobius as a kind of insignificant hallucination. But the word also had a technical meaning derived from Aristotelian psychology;

> Phantom - in Middle English *fantome*, in Old French *fantosme*, in Greek and Latin *phantasmata* - denoted, in the Aristotelian theory of mental processes, an image which serves as intermediary between

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[58]Delany, p.59.

perception and understanding. It was a kind of 'immaterial sensation' representing things already perceived or, by inference from these, things that could be perceived.[59]

This meaning was added to in the late classical period by the Stoics. They used the word 'phantasy' to denote the Aristotelian definition of phantom as 'the basis of conceptual thought', and used phantom to denote that which 'occurs only in dreams and waking illusions. Having no mimetic relation to reality'.[60] This definition of phantom as an illusory assembly of forms that do not correspond directly to reality was further used by Augustine and appears in other medieval literary texts to denote an illusory imaginative creation.[61] The most important significance of the word to Chaucer, according to Delany, is that it can be used to signify 'the deception of the written word'.[62] As an artist Chaucer is both a receiver of imaginative forms and also a creator of them, and it is the status of such forms, or poetic images, that is being explored in the *House of Fame*. According to Delany, Chaucer is working out his relation to a poetic tradition that can deceive the individual with imaginative forms that may have little, or no relation to reality.

I agree with Delany, and I also want to re-emphasise the technical connotations of the word 'fantome' as a scholastic term for images as the basic units

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[59]Ibid., p.60.

[60]Ibid., p.61.

[61]Ibid., p.62-63.

[62]Ibid., p.66.

of thought. If the temple of glass is a metaphor for the part of the mind that stores

images, then it is quite possible that the word 'fantome' has been chosen by Chaucer

to indicate the fact that this is a psychological allegory of the mind. What leads me to

conclude that this is so is the overall design of the poem, which represents how texts

are created and disseminated, and therefore should reasonably be expected to describe

how they are received and visualised by the individual. There is evidence to support

this idea in something the eagle says to the narrator about what he shall see in Fame's

palace. The eagle tells him that he shall see

> Mo discordes, moo jelousies,
>
> Mo murmures and moo novelries,
>
> And moo dissymulacions,
>
> And feyned reparacions,
>
> And moo berdys in two houres
>
> Withoute rasour or sisoures
>
> Ymad then greynes be of sondes. (685-91)

This association of delusions ('berdys', 'dissymulasions') with the 'greynes ... of

sondes' is provocative, given that the glass temple is located in a great desert of

'sond' that stretches 'As fer as that I myghte see'. Could it be that since the eagle uses

grains of sand as a metaphor for the plethora of visual images contained in Fame's

palace, that they are also some kind of metaphor at the end of Book One also? I would

like to suggest that they are an integral part of the metaphor of the imagination provided by the temple of glass, rather than simply an interesting aesthetic effect, or an iconographic intimation of 'sterility' or the like.[63] Sand is of course one source of the silicate ingredients necessary for glass making; and if Chaucer's knowledge of glass making is in advance of that of the Squire, then it could be that the temple of glass is being presented in the context of its raw ingredients in their basic unstructured form. If this is so, then, how does this function as a metaphor for the imagination? The key, I believe, is in Aristotle's dualistic conception of the mind. The receptive intellect, as Aristotle describes it, has a vast capacity to take on the form of anything that is presented to it by the agent intellect, which extracts meaningful images from sense data:

> Now since in all nature there is a factor that is as matter in the genus,
> and is potentially all that is in the genus, and something else which is
> as cause and agent as making everything in it (thus art is related to its
> material): so there must be these differences in the soul. There is that
> intellect, which is such as being able to become everything; and there

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[63]Koonce sees the desert as an indication of the sterility of carnal love 'In book I Chaucer's equivalent of Dante's experience in the "gran diserto" and sterile waste of Hell is his own experience in the temple and desert of Venus.' (Koonce. *Tradition of Fame.* p. 85) And Bennett similarly sees it as 'a sandy waste: denoting, like pale-faced Patience's hill of sand in the *Parliament* (243), and Spenser's palace of Lucifer (*Faerie Queene.* I. iv. 4-5), the decadent and the illusory.'(Bennett. *Book of Fame*, p. 47).

is that which acts upon everything, as a sort of state, like light; for light too, in a way, makes potential colours actual.[64]

I suggest that the desert represents that aspect of the intellect which is, in Aristotle's language, unactualised or potential, 'able to become everything'. And just as sand is capable of becoming any glass form, so too can the receptive intellect take on any form dictated to it by the agent intellect. The receptive intellect retains these forms just as the temple of glass retains the images which the narrator sees. In the context of the possible materialistic causes of dreams in the proem, these ideas provide an interpretation of the allegorical design of Chaucer's 'temple ymad of glas', located in a desert of 'sond': the mysterious process of glass making is being drawn upon to describe the mysteries of the imagination.

If the 'Wynged wonders' that fly up to Fame are viewed as the confused discourses of the moment, undergoing a process of sublimation and fixing as refined historical and literary discourse in her palace, then the flight of the narrator up from the glass temple and the desert can also be viewed as a process of self-sublimation in which the active part of the intellect transcends the passive part that receives and visualises such refined discourse. By being taken to Fame's palace and being shown its relation to the house of Rumour, the narrator can critically interpret his dream and see how his own knowledge is based upon texts that must not be given undue

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[64]Aristotle, *De anima*, Bk III Ch.V. 1-2. Quoted from Moerbeke's version, trans.. Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries (London. 1951), p. 425.

authority: they are removed from truth and can remove the uncritical individual from truth also.

Chaucer presents us, then, with the sublimation of self, in terms of the narrator's flight from the desert to Fame's palace, just as we are presented with the sublimation and fixing of Rumour in the form of the 'Wynged wonders' that fly up to the palace also. The *House of Fame* is designed to be read in such a way so that the individual can become aware of the influence upon the self of the narratives that help constitute court culture. This sensitivity with regard to the culture of the court and its language has some precedence in the writings of other authors, who are also keen to encourage a philosophical awareness on the part of the courtier with regard to their immediate social context. I shall conclude this chapter with an appreciation of the tradition of philosophical writing for courtiers, within which the *House of Fame* would have been interpreted, as well as a general consideration of the representation of courtliness in the poem.

Courtliness, Authority and the Context of Self.

In the *Book of the Duchess* the principles of courtliness enabled the narrator to converse with his social superior. The existence of an established set of protocols provided a framework within which individuals greatly divided by rank could address one another formally, yet also in a meaningful way, broaching issues of a very delicate and personal nature. Courtliness in the *Book of the Duchess* is therefore

presented in a positive light, in terms of its capacity to structure the discourse that forms the substance of the poem. This presentation reveals one of the main characteristics of courtly discourse, that it conforms to protocols that function within power relations. Courtliness is the product of an environment where there is a need for individuals of different rank to communicate with one another. This is also the case where *fin amor* is concerned. The conventional description of the beloved as a figure of great power over the lover, calls for a language that acknowledges this fact, and therein lies the close relationship between the language of courtly love and the protocols of courtliness in its political role within medieval culture. It is, therefore, generally the case that in a courtly poem authority figures provide the foci around which the language of courtliness is expressed. In the *House of Fame*, however, the issue of authority is itself a matter of debate. and one of the striking features of the poem is its ambiguous treatment of authority figures. Those who seem to have authority over the narrator or over the development of his vision are undermined in various ways, which therefore effects the representation of courtliness in the poem which we shall see in what follows.

Chaucer's eagle is the first authority figure we encounter in the text. He addresses the narrator with the 'Thou' pronoun, which is consistent with addressing a social inferior. But at the same time there is a curious intimacy between the two which subverts any sense of social superiority or decorum, as when the eagle addresses the narrator 'Ryght in the same vois and stevene / That useth oon I koude nevene' (561-2), and also when the narrator is addressed by name 'Geffrey, thou

wost ryght wel this' (729). Though this is in keeping with the eagle's detailed knowledge of the narrator's character it is not consistent with the address of a social superior to one of significantly lesser status. The eagle, though he has a great deal of symbolic power over the narrator (whom he holds aloft in his claws) is a comic figure, and does not really command the kind of respect that one associates with the ideals of courtliness.

Fame initially seems to be different. She is certainly a figure of authority over those who seek her favours, as the herald's assistants in her palace proclaim

> A larges, larges, hold up wel!
>
> God save the lady of thys pel,
>
> Our oune gentil lady Fame,
>
> And hem that wilnen to have name
>
> Of us!   (1313)

The first crowd that seek her favours make clear the esteem in which they hold her name, as the narrator describes:

> ...And also sone
>
> As they were come in to the halle,
>
> They gonne doun on knees falle
>
> Before this ilke noble quene,

And seyde, 'Graunte us, lady shene,

Ech of us thy grace a bone!' (1532-37)

But this is, of course, misplaced devotion, and when the narrator is asked if he too is

present to seek fame he makes his feelings clear,

'Nay for sothe, frend,' Quod y;

'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,

For no such cause, by my hed!' (1873-5)

Expressions of courtliness in Fame's palace are therefore largely used to negative

effect, since any show of respect for Fame is misplaced, contempt for her authority

being the general argument of the poem. Fame, is, nevertheless, a figure of authority,

who can at least establish order in her house. This contrasts greatly with the house of

Rumour. There we find no representation of courtliness that might order the discourse

and behaviour that is contained in it. The absence of social decorum is reflected

symbolically in the permeable structure of the wicker house full of,

A thousand holes, and wel moo,

To leten wel the soun out goo. (1949-50)

Because there is such an outstanding absence of the social conventions that might bring some degree of order to the activities inside the house of Rumour, it is not surprising that a figure should eventually appear to establish this with his presence; as we find in the last line of the poem. However, since this figure is left undeveloped we do not know whether his authority brings principles of courtesy or rank to offset the disorder of this place. His authority may be other-worldly, or indeed of a non-ideal kind. It may even be being suggested by Chaucer that in the context of such a disordered society, in which conventions that provide structure have broken down, there is always the danger of someone assuming power illegitimately. Perhaps the arrival of one who 'semed for to be / A man of gret auctorite' is the pessimistic outcome, or fulfilment, of the kind of discourse that spreads,

As fyr ys wont to quyke and goo

From a sparke spronge amys,

Til al a citee brent up ys. (2078-80)

in which case his arrival would be a fitting close to the vision.

In the *House of Fame*, then, we do not seem to find the same representations of courtliness that can facilitate communication, or provide control over the kind of things that are said, as we do in the *Book of the Duchess*. Fame does at least organise the myriad of conflicting and disordered discourse found in the house of Rumour. But this organisation is at the expense of both truth and justice, and is therefore to be

ultimately rejected on moral and spiritual grounds. Because the authority figures in the poem are themselves called into question, any expression of courtliness that pertains to them seems incapable of providing stability for the narrative as a whole. Because the *House of Fame* is bereft of any fundamental claim as to who is the ultimate figure of authority, the courtly language that pertains to the powerful figures is flawed and breaks down. This is the case with the eagle who speaks as if he is Geoffrey's wife, and Fame who, in Charles Muscatine's view, 'periodically shrinks to the dimensions of a fishwife':[65]

'Fy on yow,' quod she, 'everychon!

Ye masty swyn, ye ydel wreches,

Ful of roten, slowe techches!

What? false theves! wher ye wolde

Be famous good, and nothing nolde

Deserve why, ne never ye roughte?

Men rathe yow to hangen oughte!

For ye be lyke the sweynte cat

That wolde have fissh; but wostow what?

He wolde nothing wete his clowes.' (1776-85)

---

[65]Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkely and Los Angeles. 1957), p. 113.

The protocols of courtliness, then, that govern discourse between individuals, are not used to provide a framework for the poem's structure. And, instead of an exploration of the language that is born out of specific encounters between individuals, the onus shifts onto the authority of texts *per se*, and how they affect the individual. We must now consider how the literary culture of the court is described in the poem.

The refined language of poetry, which is the source of the images in the temple of glass is to be respected on aesthetic grounds, but it must also be recognised that it is divorced from truth and potentially deceptive. Otherwise the uncritical reader or listener, might find themselves beguiled by language in the same way that Dido, and other famous lovers are. The advice given to lovers by the narrator is therefore equally relevant as a warning to the audience on the deceptive properties of refined courtly discourse:

> For, be Cryste, lo, thus yt fareth:
>
> 'Hyt is not al gold that glareth.'
>
> For also browke I wel myn hed,
>
> Ther may be under godlyhed
>
> Kevered many a shrewed vice.
>
> Therfore be no wyght so nyce
>
> To take a love oonly for chere,
>
> Or speche, or for frendly manere...

> Therfore I wol seye a proverbe,
>
> That 'he that fully knoweth th' erbe
>
> May saufly leye hyt to his ye' -
>
> Withoute drede. this ys no lye. (271-8, 289-92)

This suspicion towards the appearance of things in the Dido story is then extended in the course of the poem to the influence of all discourse upon the imagination, and therefore of the significance of the poem itself. The true benefit of courtly poetry, it seems, must be seen in terms of the useful moral lessons that can be drawn from it, as well as its general ability to please. When understood in these terms, then, the poem, like the 'erbe' may safely be put to the 'ye'.

Analogues to Chaucer's method of describing the way in which medieval subjects relate to the court and its writings in the poem, can be found in some of the manuals of courtly conduct. When defining the concept of *curia* at the beginning of *De nugis curialium*, Walter Map adopts an interesting view of the court that involves an imaginative use of metaphor,

> 'In tempore sum et de tempore loquor,' ait Augustinus. et adiecit:
>
> 'nescio quid sit tempus.' Ego simili possum admiracione dicere quod
>
> in curia, sum, et de curia loquor. et nescio, Deus scit, quid sit curia.'

['In time I exist, and of time I speak,' said Augustine: and added,

'What time is I know not.' In a like spirit of perplexity I may say that

in the court I exist and of the court I speak, and what the court is, God

knows, I know not.']⁶⁶

What Map seeks to achieve with this analogy is the realisation that the 'reality' of the

court is not what it might seem. He wants to encourage a view of the court that will

effectively undermine it as a powerful presence in the mind of the courtier. To do this

he utilises a metaphor that robs the concept of the court of any notion of substance.

Chaucer similarly seeks to question the foundations of the refined language that forms

the corpus of the secular literary traditions of the court. And as Map continues he

provides us with insights that suggest possible ways of understanding Chaucer's

metaphor of the whirling house of Rumour,

Scio tamen quod curia non est tempus; temporalis quidem est,

mutabilis et uaria, localis et erratica, nunquam in eodem statu

permanens.

---

⁶⁶ Walter Map, p. 2.

[I do know however that the court is not time; but temporal it is,
changeable and various, space-bound and wandering, never continuing
in one state.][67]

Map's language subverts the sense of any real essence to the court. It is presented as a
chimerical abstraction: a product of perception, rather than a thing of substance. His
observations, that it is 'changeable', 'various', 'space-bound', and 'wandering',
accord in certain respects with the impression we get of Chaucer's house of Rumour.
Like Map's court it seems to contain a kind of society, but it lacks the very essence
and substantiality that a genuine society requires for its existence. Consequently there
is a strong undercurrent of anxiety and confusion. It is continually in motion,

> And evermo, so swift as thought,
>
> This queynte hous aboute wente,
>
> That never-mo stille hit ne stente. (1924-26)

The image of the siege engine which Chaucer employs to describe the sound of its
motion, associates the house with the discord and anxieties of war:

> And the noyse which that I herde,
>
> For al the world right so hit ferde,

---

[67]Ibid., p. 2.

As doth the routing of the stoon

That from the engyne is leten goon. (1931-34)

It is a very open place, and because it is lacking in any principle or values which might bring stability to its contents, it offers free admission to 'tydings' of any kind:

And by day, in every tyde,

Ben al the dores open wyde.

And by night, echon, unshette;

Ne porter ther is non to lette

No maner tydings in to pace;

Ne never rest is in that place,

That hit nis fild ful of tydinges,

Other loude, or of whispringes. (1951-58)

Though the house of Rumour is not specifically identified as a representation of the court, Chaucer, like Map, is building up a picture of a community in which intimacy is coupled with anxiety and uncertainty

That wel unethe, in that place,

Hadde I oon foot-brede of space;

And every wight that I saugh there

Rouned ech in otheres ere

A newe tyding prevely. (2041-45)

This results in a picture of society that is disconcertingly subverted by the absence of truth. Although the people in the house exist in close proximity to one-another, there is no certainty or code that might bind them together with the permanency which a stable society requires. Perhaps this is what the 'man of greet auctorite' introduces at the point at which the poem ends. However, Map's description of the court as an illusive entity suggests that such a powerful figure may not guarantee a fruitful or stable society:

Si descripsero curiam ut Porphirius diffinit genus, forte non menciar, ut dicam eam multitudinem quodammodo se habentem ad unum principium. Multitudo certe sumus infinita, uni soli placere contendens: et hodie sumus una multitudo, cras erimus alia: curia uero non mutatur, eadem semper est.

[I shall perhaps be within the bounds of truth if I describe it in the terms which Porphyry uses to define a genus, and call it a number of objects bearing a certain relation to one principle. We courtiers are assuredly a number, and an infinite one, and all striving to please one individual. But today we are one number, tomorrow we shall be a

different one: yet the court is not changed; it always remains the same.][68]

Map's conception of the court is such that within it individual identity and personal worth are de-valued. The courtier is an impersonal object whose significance, or lack of significance, is determined in relation to the prince and the multitude of other anonymous courtiers who extend throughout time. There is a similar sense of personal identity and self-worth being defeated in Chaucer's description of the inhabitants of Rumour's house,

> But which a congregation
>
> Of folk, as I saugh rome aboute,
>
> Some within and some withoute,
>
> Nas nevere seen, ne shal ben eft;
>
> That, certes, in the world nis left
>
> So many formed by Nature,
>
> Ne deed so many a creature. (2034-40)

The inhabitants of the house are an anonymous group, like Map's courtiers, and are differentiated only through their occupations,

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[68]Ibid., p. 2.

> And, Lord! this hous, in alle tymes,
>
> Was ful of shipmen and pilgrymes,
>
> With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
>
> Entremedled with tydinges,
>
> And eek alone by hem-selve.
>
> O, many a thousand tymes twelve
>
> Saugh I eek of these pardoneres,
>
> Currours, and eek messangeres,
>
> With boistes crammed ful of lyes
>
> As ever vessel was with lyes. (2121-30)

or according to the particular kind of 'tydings' to which they are predisposed,

> I herde a gret noise withalle
>
> In a corner of the halle,
>
> Ther men of love tydinges tolde. (2141-43)

They are all eventually reduced to a great 'hepe' who gather around the 'man of greet auctorite':

> For I saugh renninge every wight,
>
> As faste as that they hadden myght;

And everych cred, 'What thing is that/'

And somme sayde, 'I not never what.'

And whan they were alle on an hepe,

Tho behynde begunne up lepe,

And clamben up on other faste,

And up the nose and yen kaste,

And troden faste on otheres heles,

And stampe, as men doon aftir eles. (2145-54)

In the context of such a society, in which there seems to be no possibility of meaningful relationships between its members, inevitably the onus must fall upon the individual to question and re-conceive his relation to it, whatever the immediate secular social group might be. Chaucer's narrator differentiates himself from the crowd by withholding the 'tydings' that he has sought after, thereby refusing to submit to the ways of rumour:

That shal not now be told for me;-

For hit no nede is, redely;

Folk kan synge hit bet than I. (2136-8)

A calculated frustration of audience expectation this most certainly is, but it may also represent an affirmation of personal autonomy and self-worth. The narrator refuses to submit to the normal practice in the house of Rumour as a point of principle.

The intention of Map in his opening to *De nugis curialium* is I believe, similar to that of Chaucer in his creation of the house of Rumour. For both authors, reason, or philosophy, effectively delivers the individual from fruitless social relations that are fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. Map argues for this with his eloquent, witty, and learned meditation upon the nature of the court. Chaucer does the same in an aesthetic form that employs dense poetic metaphors. Chaucer's heightened consciousness as a poet of the effect of language upon the identity of the courtier is shared to some degree by John of Salisbury in his courtly conduct manual *The Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*,

> The pleasure of letters, agreeable in many respects, is especially so for the reason that all inconvenience due to interval of time or space is banished, friends are brought into the presence of one another, and matters worth knowing do not remain unknown because of their separation. For arts as well had inevitably perished, law disappeared, fidelity and religion itself crumbled, and even the proper use of

language been lost, had not divine commiseration, to offset human frailty, provided mortals with the knowledge of letters.[69]

John's argument here is essentially the opposite of Chaucer's in the *House of Fame*, the dependence of the narrator upon texts for his knowledge of things is not being brought into question. But John's affirmation of the importance of writing offers evidence of the great influence that intelligent medieval thinkers thought their valued texts could have upon the knowledge, and hence the identity and conduct, of the courtier:

> Even as it is, the shortness of life, our obtuseness, our careless indifference, and our sterile activities permit us to know but little; and even this little is straightway driven from our minds by forgetfulness, that betrayer of knowledge, that ever hostile and faithless counterpart of memory. Who would ever have heard of an Alexander or a Ceasar? Who would ever have felt admiration for the Stoics or Peripatetics, had not the testimony of writers given them their distinction? Who would ever have followed in the footsteps, so revered, of the apostles and

---

[69]John Of Salisbury, *Frivolities Of Courtiers And The Footprints Of Philosophers*. trans. Joseph B. Pike (New York, 1972), Bk. I p. 6.

prophets, had not Holy Scripture consecrated them to the service of posterity?[70]

The author then goes on to advise the aspiring courtier how to ensure that his achievements are not lost:

> Indeed no one has ever gained permanent fame except as the result of what he has written or of what others have written of him. The memory of fool or emperor is, after a brief lapse of time, the same unless it be prolonged by courtesy of writers. How many great kings do you imagine there have been, with regard to whom there is nowhere in the world a thought given or a word uttered? Therefore there is no wiser policy for those who crave glory than to cultivate sedulously the favour of scholars and writers; for their own achievements, doomed to utter darkness unless illumined by the lamp of letters, avail them naught.[71]

John is certainly encouraging the courtier to take an interest in history, even if it is from a somewhat egotistical point of view. However this is not a vindication of an uncritical submission to texts of any kind. The author is referring to those writings

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[70]Ibid., p. 6.

[71]Ibid., pp. 6-7.

that are of obvious moral and spiritual worth, and offers guidelines on how to read them, and how much to remember.[72] But in comparison to such recommendations of the written word, Chaucer's *House of Fame*, appears to be an astute and sceptical appreciation of the great influence of courtly literature, an argument for the profound influence of writing from the other side of the coin as it were. In Chaucer's poem 'permanent fame' is a contradiction in terms: fame is an aspect of worldliness, and as such is transient. Like John of Salisbury, then, Chaucer is concerned with the way that the individual courtly identity relates to those writings that make up the literary traditions of the court.

The similarity between the *House of Fame* and these guides for courtiers is that the emphasis is upon the individual to think critically about their immediate social and linguistic context. The immediate reality of the court or of courtly literary traditions is something to be questioned, so that the self can adopt a liberating understanding of those things that might otherwise prove all pervasive and dominating. It is in this sense, then, that the *House of Fame* is courtly: everything that is described in the dream is of the court, in that the poetry of Virgil and Ovid and the concept of fame, as well as the problems of rumour, are all experienced by the

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[72] 'Cato or someone else (for the author is uncertain) said "read much but having read keep reading much"/I am inclined to think that there is nothing more helpful than this for one aspiring to knowledge, except keeping the commandments of God, which is undoubtedly the one and only way of progress in philosophy. All reading should be done in such a way that some of it when finished should be disregarded, some condemned, and some viewed en passant. that the subject matter be not entirely unknown...' John of Salisbury, Ibid., Bk. VII. p. 246.

courtier, who must evaluate the significance of these things morally and spiritually, with the aid of reason, or philosophy.

The *House of Fame* is, then, a particularly sophisticated poem. Its diverse structure and sometimes enigmatic imagery are designed to encourage a special degree of self-consciousness on the part of its courtly readers. This self-consciousness is at first a form of inward looking: to the contents of the imagination and the epistemological limitations of the mind, expressed in terms of a literary description of the individual perspective. Then the poem encourages a wider contextual awareness of the courtly self through its representations of courtliness and the written culture of the court. Such an ambitious philosophical aim for a courtly poem inevitably demands a lot of its readers, and it could be suggested that Chaucer's aims may have exceeded the bounds of his literary ability at this point in his career. The fact that the poem is unfinished might even be cited as evidence that he recognised this himself. I would, however, disagree with such a view. The *House of Fame* is, in my opinion, a highly successful engagement with the issues surrounding individual identity, especially in relation to texts. Chaucer has used various materials at his disposal, some of which were newly acquired from his recent trip to Italy, in a sustained act of introspection and self-exploration which demonstrates his own active and imaginative response to the varied stimuli that were part of his own social and cultural context. The *House of Fame* is therefore a necessary and rewarding experiment that equipped the poet for his more refined engagement with some of these issues in both *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his next dream vision the *Parliament of Fowls*.

At the beginning of the *House of Fame* in the temple of glass the narrator encounters a pictorial description of Aeneas's pursuit of 'synguler profit' (310), or personal desire. Throughout the poem the emphasis is inevitably upon 'synguler' experience because there is nothing like the positive description of courtly language that we find in the *Book of the Duchess*, where such experience can be shared and indeed challenged because of the protocols of courtliness. In the house of Rumour there is a complete absence of any protocols, courtly or otherwise, that might enable individuals to integrate in a positive manner. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, Chaucer re-introduces courtly protocols to provide a framework within which individuals of different kinds and rank can once again communicate. In doing so he replaces the concept of 'synguler profit' with that of 'commune profyt' (47). This gives us a positive social vision that is a marked contrast to the politically pessimistic description of subjects separated by the deceptive properties of language in the *House of Fame*.

3.

The Parliament of Fowls.

The *Parliament of Fowls* is Chaucer's third dream vision. It, like the *House of Fame*, demonstrates the influence of Italian literature, as Chaucer closely models his description of the temple of Venus in the poem on Boccaccio's treatment of the same subject in the *Teseida*. The *Parliament of Fowls* is a much more elegant and aesthetically satisfying work than the *House of Fame*, however, and, like the *Book of the Duchess*, it brings the protocols of courtliness once again to the fore as one of its central thematic concerns. The narrator happens across a gathering of birds who have come to commune with Nature in order to find mates. This process involves a great deal of debate, and of particular interest are the different kinds of language that are appropriate to different degrees of the social hierarchy. This subject matter. combined with the narrator's less obtrusive role as an observer of the avian parliament means that the poem seems less focused upon the individual and more concerned with corporate social issues. Nevertheless, the narrator and his reading are still very much integral to the substance of the vision which follows. And even though this is the most politically engaged of Chaucer's dream visions (as I shall later suggest) it still takes the experience of a particular courtly subject as its starting point.

The Impressionable Narrator and the Lessons of Reading.

When an active intellect devotes itself to reading and writing what is

really worth while, the soul is purged of its defects and is revivified

even in adversity by a mysterious and serene cheerfulness.[1]

In the course of this section I shall look at the kind of narrator that Chaucer presents

us with, how he reads and what effect that reading has upon him. I want to do so in

the light of the general significance that reading might have for the courtly subject.

Just as John of Salisbury stresses the distinction between the 'active' and 'passive'

intellect with regard to reading, I intend to consider the *Parliament of Fowls* and its

design as encouraging the impressionable subject to adopt an active critical attitude to

its contents. John of Salisbury outlines his attempts to encourage critical interest in

the materials that he borrows and presents to the young courtier:

I have been at pains to use appropriate matter from other writers,

provided I found it profitable and helpful, occasionally without giving

credit; partly because I know that your familiarity with writers has for

the most part made it known to you; partly to inspire the ignorant with

the love of reading.[2]

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[1] John of Salisbury, *Frivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers*, ed. and trans.. Joseph B. Pike (New York, 1972), p. 7.

[2] Ibid., p. 9.

John's borrowings are different to Chaucer's but the effect he aims at is the same, in so far as he encourages his reader to think critically about those borrowings, rather than accept them passively as authorities.

> If anything appears incredible therein I trust to be forgiven, for I am
>
> not promising that all that has been here written down is true but that,
>
> false or true, it is helpful to the reader.[3]

The material is intended to be 'helpful' in the sense that it encourages the young courtier to think critically about court culture, its narratives and practices, and to exercise sound judgement, which enforces a stable sense of self. Chaucer's method is different in that he is writing in the form of verse, and therefore/providing aesthetic delight for his audience is also a major part of his authorial intention. Entertainment is certainly a major factor in the process of reading as it is presented to us via the narrator:

> But now to purpos as of this matere:
>
> To rede forth hit gan me so delite
>
> That al that day me thoughte but a lyte. (26-28)

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[3]Ibid., p. 9.

But in the process Chaucer is also conscious of the morally and spiritually vulnerable position of an impressionable courtly subject, and in the creation of an impressionable narrator he provides a focal point for such concerns.

The narrator of the *Parliament of Fowls* initially presents himself as one who is familiar with 'Love' and what Love is:

> The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
>
> Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquerynge,
>
> The dredful joye alwey that slit so yerne:
>
> Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge
>
> Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge
>
> So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke
>
> Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke. (1-7)

He is clearly aware of certain of the conventions that pertain to *fin amor* and which constitute some of the traditions that make up what we now refer to as courtly love.[4] The idea that it is a 'craft' or art, and that it requires enormous dedication for uncertain reward is typical of many courtly narratives. But when he says that 'my felynge / Astonyeth', 'So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke / Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke' it is apparent that Love is an object of reflection for the narrator,

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[4]See Introduction, n. 9.

rather than one of immediate experience, and as such he finds it difficult to understand. He goes on to admit that it is only through books that he knows about Love:

> For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,
>
> Ne wot how that he quiteth folk here hyre,
>
> Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede
>
> Of his myrakles and his crewel yre.
>
> There rede I wel he wol be lord and syre;
>
> I dar nat seyn, his strokes been so sore,
>
> But 'God save swich a lord!' I can na moore. (8-11)

His attempt to understand Love through reading is not a systematic affair. 'Yit happeth me ful ofte in bokes reede' suggests that he is discovering things about Love in an unstructured manner. This means that there is a certain freedom to form his own ideas about the kind of thing that Love is, and this is reflected in his language. The words 'quiteth folk here hyre' may well reflect his individual approach to fine loving. Rather than conceiving of Love in the older terms of a purely feudal society, in which Love might demand service from a vassal as of right, the narrator sees the relationship in terms of a non-hereditary contract. The words 'quiteth' and 'hyre' imply monetary

payment for service in this context.[5] This casts Love in the role of a lord that must pay for his servant's loyalty, therefore giving the servant a greater degree of power, and making the business of love seem more conventional than natural.[6] This is surely an inappropriate way of looking at things if the desire to love is as irresistible as the conventions of courtly love usually maintain. It is very different to the utter subjection of the narrator that is emphasised in the *Romance of the Rose* at the beginning of Book Two. There the words of the narrator to Love demonstrate a much more binding relationship that accords with the bond of a lord to a vassal:

> Hoolly and pleyn Y yelde me,
>
> Withoute feynyng or feyntise,

---

[5]See H. Kurath and S. Kuhn, et al., eds., *The Middle English Dictionary*, (Michigan, 1956-), s.v. 'quiteth' (p. 100) and s.v. 'hyre' (p. 800). The point I am making is also reinforced by Paul Strohm who says of the narrator's metaphor that it 'displays the narrator's relation to Love less as that of vassal to lord than that of hireling or temporary worker to employer', Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 126.

[6]See Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages* (London,1990). Chaucer's language reflects changes in medieval society at the time. Keen discusses the shift away from the old feudal system of hereditary rights, towards a contract of payment for service on a non-hereditary basis: 'Unlike the "feudal" relation, an agreement this kind was an individual one, not hereditary but for the retainer's lifetime only; it did not give the retainer any landed freehold, only the assurance of a pension: and it was more flexible than a feudal relationship, since the lord if he was dissatisfied could simply stop the annuity, and the retainer in the same circumstances could simply transfer his services elsewhere'. pp. 19-21.

To be governed by youre emprise. (1970-72)[7]

Here service is unreserved and is not restricted to the terms of a commercial agreement, instead the shooting of arrows into his heart necessitates his swearing lifelong loyalty to Love.

Seemingly, then, the narrator of the *Parliament* conceives of the relationship between Love and his servants as less binding, because Chaucer wants to emphasise his lack of real experience of Love, and his inability to understand the all-consuming nature of the experience as described in courtly literature. However, he has at least demonstrated his knowledge of courtly love literature and his awareness of certain of the conventions of *fin amor* - conventions that will prove to be of central importance to the aims of the parliament later in the poem.

The narrator then returns to the question of literature, telling us of another text that he has recently read:

> Of usage - what for lust and what for lore -
>
> On bokes rede I ofte, as I yow tolde.
>
> But wherfore that I speke al this? Nat yoore
>
> Agon it happede me for to beholde
>
> Upon a bok, was write with lettres olde
>
> And therupon, a certeyn thing to lerne,

---

[7]Chaucer's translation, *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 708.

The longe day ful faste I redde and yerne. (15-21)

There does not seem to be any reason for reading this particular text: 'it happede me for to behold' suggests a merely fortuitous selection. The text is the *Dream of Scipio* by Cicero and its subject matter is civic duty, something not directly relevant to the narrator's previous musings. The thrust of Cicero's sentence is condensed by the narrator as he informs us of Africanus's counsel to Scipio, which the latter receives in a dream:

> Thanne preyde hym Scipion to telle hym al
>
> The wey to come into that hevene blisse.
>
> And he seyde, 'know thyself first immortal,
>
> And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse
>
> To commune profit, and thow shalt not mysse
>
> To comen swiftly to that place deere
>
> That ful of blysse is and of soules cleere'. (71-77)

The significant idea here is working for 'commune profyt', or the good of the community. But it is not clear yet to the narrator what the implications of this are, and he expresses some degree of consternation because the sentence of the text is not what he is looking for:

> And to my bed I gan me for to dress,
>
> Fulfilled of thought and busy hevynesse;
>
> For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,
>
> And eke I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde. (87-90)

It seems that he is looking to learn something specific from his reading because he does not have what he desires ('that thyng that I wolde'). Since in the opening lines the narrator is preoccupied with the ways of love, it is reasonable to suppose that the thing that he seeks concerns love too. Cicero's civic poem does not therefore seem to be immediately relevant. However, in the course of the narrator's dream the business of love comes to be seen from the perspective of 'commune profyt', in such a way as to demonstrate the intimate relation between civic duty and issues of personal desire.

The narrator of the *Parliament* reads in order to extend his limited knowledge, and the way that he reads determines how large the imaginative reserves are upon which the subsequent dream is based. If the narrator's reading was restricted to political writing only, then the dream would lack the illumination that issues of love bring to it, and vice versa. As it is, the narrator reads with a definite purpose in mind, but he is open to chance to dictate the course of his reading (lines 10, 18). This strategy means that Chaucer is able to bring into play a wide range of source material for the vision, and thereby compensate for the limitations that would otherwise accompany the device of an inexperienced narrator. It is therefore appropriate that the narrator should liken his experience of reading to agricultural activity:

> For out of olde feldes, as men seyth,
>
> Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere,
>
> And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
>
> Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (22-25)

He metaphorically ploughs through narratives that provide fields of new possibilities, widening his horizons of experience. As he does so the narrator registers the profound impact that certain narratives have upon his consciousness: 'Al this mene I by Love, that my felyng / Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge' (4,5). What the narrator is acknowledging here is that consciousness, or 'felyng', is in some way effected by what is read. Whether the word 'Astonyeth' implies that this is perceived to be a positive thing by the narrator is unclear. But what we do know is that the dream, which is constructed out of the impressions made upon the narrator's 'felyng', shows that his consciousness has changed. To employ the terms of Aristotelian psychology, certain, as yet unspecified texts, have actualised his consciousness of courtly love, and the *Dream of Scipio* has actualised some form of political consciousness. The *Dream of Scipio* is his most recent reading experience, and this text will provide a paradigm through which some of his previous reading is re-experienced and reorganised in his own mind. The poem therefore describes a revisionary process, an unfolding of different aspects of consciousness that correspond with the acquisition of new knowledge. Before looking in detail at the process whereby courtly love traditions are

revised according to the new paradigm offered by Cicero I want briefly to consider the

psychological basis for this, and the representation of that psychology by another

court poet with whom Chaucer was familiar.

Representations of Mind in Machaut.

The direct association of study with some form of Aristotle's receptive

intellect is made by Guillaume de Machaut in *Remede de Fortune* - a poem that

Chaucer knew intimately, borrowing many lines from it for the *Book of the Duchess*.

Guillaume presents us with an impressionable narrator and outlines a basic theory of

education based on specific psychological principles. Machaut's narrator tells us that

anyone seeking to acquire knowledge 'should undertake it at a young age, before his

heart turns to wickedness through too much experience'.[8] The heart - which is the seat

of the intellect and memory according to Aristotle - is impressionable and therefore

most receptive in this youthful state of innocence before it 'turns to wickedness':

For the true state of innocence exactly resembles the white polished

table, which is able to receive without any interference whatever one

wishes to paint or portray on it; and it is also like wax, which can be

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[8]*Remede de Fortune*, translated in B.A. Windeatt, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues*

(Cambridge, 1982). p. 58.

written upon, and which retains the shape or impression just as it has

been imprinted upon it.[9]

The impressionable capacity of the receptive intellect is unlimited with regard to its

proper objects of knowledge, and Machaut states this in terms that equate closely with

Aristotelian psychology:

Thus it is indeed with true human understanding, which is capable of

receiving everything one wants, and can conceive of everything that

one wants to put to it, whether of arms, or of love, or other art or

letter.[10]

These remarks demonstrate Machaut's awareness of the relevance of psychological

principles to reading and education. They provide a basis for the development of his

characters and a theoretical framework for the development of his narrative. They also

made a deep impression upon Chaucer who translated them closely in the *Book of the*

Duchess (lines 779-90). For Chaucer these ruminations upon the psychological

dimensions of literary experience were particularly relevant to his conception of an

inexperienced narrator. Chaucer takes Machaut's general consideration of mind and

education and develops them in the form of a narrator whose dream registers the

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[9]Ibid., p. 58.

[10]Ibid., p. 58.

direct effect of what he has read. The imaginative juxtaposition of different aspects of the narrator's reading in the dream then provides a further education when interpretation is attempted. It is during this process of interpretation that a poem like the *Parliament of Fowls* becomes a subject of debate for a courtly audience, and therefore an educational device. Such texts encouraged the development of skills of judgement and of debate that were fundamental to the individual identity of the courtier.[11]

In the narrator's dream, images and ideology derived from different narratives are synthesised into a new form that stimulates the activity of the critical intellect, thereby encouraging the individual to relate to those literary narratives as an active agent. Prior to the dream the narrator's position has been essentially passive, he has been receiving ideas and images that have furnished his receptive intellect. It is out of this private store of images that the dream is derived. The narrator himself considers the personalised origins of dreams:

The wery huntere, slepynge in his bed,

To wode ayen his mynde goth anon;

---

[11]Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* provides us with the best example of how such debate might have appeared in reality. As the protagonists debate over the attributes of the perfect courtier many themes, including love, offer the speakers the opportunity to impress with their intellectual and discursive abilities. Baldesar Castiglione. *The Book of the Courtier*, trans., Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (New York, 1903).

> The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;
>
> The cartere dremeth how his cart is gon;
>
> The riche, of gold; the knyght fyght with his fon;
>
> The syke met he drynketh of the tonne;
>
> The lovere met he hath his lady wonne.
>
>
> Can I not seyn if that the cause were
>
> For I hadde red of Affrican byforn
>
> That made me to mete that he stod there. (99-108)

At the outset of the poem it is clearly established, then, that everything that is seen, remembered and narrated is derived from an individual point of view. What we are given represents, not a direct engagement with a transcendent authority as in *Pearl*, but a reworking of the learning of a specific individual, explored from his own historical and cultural position. The poem then ends with the narrator returning to his books and his quest for wisdom through reading:

> And with the shoutyng, whan the song was do
>
> That foules maden at here flyght awey,
>
> I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
>
> To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
>
> I hope, ywis, to rede so som day

That I shal mete som thyng for to fare

The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare. (693-99)

These lines could be re-expressed in the terms of the narrator's previous field metaphor as a continued ploughing of texts for some kind of knowledge. On the face of it the narrator's final remarks seem to be an endorsement of the obvious benefits of reading in terms of the acquisition of helpful knowledge. But it is strange that there is no time given for reflection upon the dream itself. Rather than consider the implications of the material drawn from the books and juxtaposed in his dream, the narrator abdicates this task, leaving it for his reader or audience to explore.

The way in which the narrator is so removed from any attempt at interpreting his dream and reconciling its varied subject matter and imagery, suggests that Chaucer is particularly keen to leave room for this activity on the part of his audience. It is this activity, the active critical evaluation of texts, rather than the passive reception of them, which establishes the individual self in a positive sense. Also, because the poem describes the revisionary capacity of the narrator's consciousness, it is the act of reflection which is the source of stability for his identity. If the acquisition of new knowledge alters the narrator's mind (by astonishing the 'felynge', for example), in the sense that previous learning is reorganised according to more recent paradigms, then, logically, identity is in constant flux, unless some aspect of self is transcendent of this process. That aspect is the agent intellect, the part of mind that is unmoved and pro-active towards objects of knowledge. Unless the narrator (or

reader) gives space to exercise this power, rather than maintaining a passive role as a recipient of narrative, he will remain in a state of flux.

The narrator has, however, attempted to apply critical thought to the subject of Love before. At the outset of the poem he told us that 'my felynge / Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge / So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke / Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke' (4-7). He has tried to think critically but has either been unable, or is too easily dissuaded from doing so. But now his previous reading has been revised according to the new paradigm supplied by the *Dream of Scipio*. This revision gives us the dream which now demands interpretation, and from the perspective of 'commune profyt' there is an opportunity for the narrator to think about 'Love' without the feeling of not knowing 'wher that I flete or synke'.

Constant Revision: The Reading Process and Stability of Personal Identity.

I now want to explore the way in which the narrator reconsiders his earlier experience of courtly love traditions in the vision that follows, as a result of reading the *Dream of Scipio*. This text, as I have suggested, provides the narrator with a new paradigm through which previous reading can be reorganised and reviewed.

The narrator tells us that at the beginning of his dream he meets Africanus, who takes him to the gate of a walled park. There are contradictory inscriptions on either side of the gate:

'Thorgh me men gon into that blysful lace

Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure;

Thorgh me men gon unto the welle of grace,

There grene and lusty May shal evere endure.

This is the wey to al good aventure.

Be glad, thow redere, and thy sorwe of-caste;

Al open am I - passe in, and sped thee faste!' (127-33)

'Thorgh me men gon,' Than spak that other side,

'Unto the mortal strokes of the spere

Of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde.

Ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.

This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were

There as the fish in prysoun is al drye;

Th' eschewing is only the remedye!' (134-40)

The narrator is completely confused by these inscriptions and tells us 'No wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese / To entre or flen, or me to save or lese' (146-7). He describes himself as paralysed by what he has read 'Right as betwixen adamauntes two / Of evene myght, a pece of yren set / Ne hath no myght to meve to ne fro' (148-150). But it is Africanus who overcomes this state by brusquely shoving the narrator through the gate 'Affrycan, my gide, / Me hente and shof in at the gates wide' (153-4). The

narrator's state corresponds with the feeling he has previously described of not knowing 'wher that I flete or synke' when thinking about Love. In this instance the metaphor of the piece of iron set compass-like between two magnets serves to describe his suspended capacity as a willing agent. This is different to being unable to frame useful thoughts about something, but in both instances the narrator cannot progress beyond a certain point. Reading the *Dream of Scipio*, however, has made the difference. Somehow this text has framed all previous knowledge and reading, in such a manner as to enable progress, which is comically symbolised by Africanus' shove. Aficanus is an authority figure who is quite clear about the narrator's relation to the subject matter of courtly love poetry,

> And seyde, 'It stondeth writen in thy face,
>
> Thyn errour, though thow telle it not to me
>
> But dred the not to come into this place,
>
> For this writyng nys nothyng ment bi the,
>
> Ne non but he Loves servaunt be:
>
> For thow of love hast lost thy tast, I gesse,
>
> As sek man hath of swete and bytternesse'. (155-61)

This offers a strategy for self-reflection. Africanus is a suitable mirror to reflect the narrator and his relation to the conventions of courtly love because he is a man of experience who is concerned with great affairs of state and noble conduct. This

detaches him from the business of personal desire and gives him the ability to consider the narrator's condition objectively. He is certainly not ignorant of love, rather he is sure of what it means to the narrator, whose impressionability is a contrast to Africanus's experience. Africanus defines the narrator's relation to his previous reading further:

> But natheles, although that thow be dul,
>
> Yit that thow canst not do, yit mayst thow se.
>
> For many a man that may nat stonde a pul
>
> Yet liketh hym at wrastlyng for to be,
>
> And demen yit wher he do bet or he. (162-66)

Africanus asserts that the narrator is an observer of the business of *fin amor* and not a participant, which is a clear definition of the narrator's relation to the traditions of courtly love. His confident judgements are evidence of the way in which the narrator's prior reading about Love has been revised according to the paradigm provided by the *Dream of Scipio*. Here we see the narrator looking at both himself and the culture of courtly love through that text, or through the eyes of Africanus. The departure of Africanus signals the end of any authoritative guide to reflect upon what the narrator sees. His presence is brief, but the narrator's subsequent view of courtly love ideology must be seen in terms of a revision in which previous reading is reorganised to encourage new interpretations.

The garden which the narrator now describes is itself the product of a set of well established conventions. Africanus's assurances are immediately supported by the narrator's delightful impressions of the place, 'But, Lord, so I was glad and wel begoon!' (171). He describes the trees that are there in a way that is also conventional, but which serves to create a naturalistic effect by emphasising the practical qualities of the different kinds of wood: 'The bylder ok, and ek the hardy asshe; / The piler elm, the cofre unto carayne; / The boxtre pipere, holm to whippes lashe' (176-78). These qualities serve to create a point of contact between dream and reality, and with the description of the elm as the wood for making coffins, and the ewe for making arrows (180) they do so in a way that connects with the sober tone of the *Dream of Scipio.* The general feeling in the garden however is one of delight:

> A gardyn saw I ful of blosmy bowes
>
> Upon a ryver, in a grene mede,
>
> There as swetnesse everemore inow is,
>
> With floures white, blewe, yelwe, and rede.
>
> And colde welle-stremes, nothyng dede,
>
> That swymmen ful of smale fishes lighte,
>
> With fynnes rede and skales sylver bryghte. (183-89)

When thinking about the trees in terms of their practical value the narrator's mind is open to a wide range of impressions associated with human industry and practices.

But when he views the garden without recourse to experience in the real world he is conscious merely of its vitality and beauty. It seems to be a place beyond the strivings and anxieties of humankind in this description, with its 'swetnesse evermore' and 'nothyn dede'. The description of the river as 'swymmen ful of smale fishes lighte' emphasises the way in which this place is teeming with life, nothing is dead or in decay. With the description of the birds that 'synge, / With voys of aungel in here armonye' (191) and 'instruments of strenges in acord' with their 'ravyshyng swetnesse' (197-98) there is a complete and perfect consummation of the senses, none are left unfulfilled, and there is a consequent feeling of well being and happiness:

> Th' air of that place so attempre was
>
> That nevere was grevaunce of hot ne cold.
>
> There wex ek every holsom spice and gras;
>
> No man may there waxe sek ne old;
>
> Yit was there joye more a thousandfold
>
> Than man can telle; ne nevere wolde it nyghte,
>
> But ay cler day to any mannes syghte. (204-10)

These feelings are of course conventional since the experience of such a garden is a common feature of courtly poetry. But they are being re-focused according to a new paradigm: we are meant to relate this 'joye more a thousandfold' to the 'blysful place' that Africanus described to Scipio:

Thanne preyede hym Scipion to telle hym al

The wey to come into that hevene blisse.

And he seyde, 'know thyself first immortal,

And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse

To commune profit, and thow shalt not mysse

To comen swiftly to that place deere

That ful of blysse is and of soules cleere'. (71-77)

The aesthetics of the poetry that convey the consummate beauty of the garden are political in their effect since they outline the reward of working for the 'commune profit'. Chaucer is already re-focusing the delights of courtly poetry through the practical lens of a roman civic poem. There is therefore a revision of the narrator's previous orientation to such delights of poetry. Rather than simply enjoying these descriptions and aesthetic effects as ends in themselves, they are being used as an incentive to reconsider one's responsibilities in the real world. This is evidence of the high degree of self-consciousness with which Chaucer uses the different textual sources. There is nothing accidental about his arrangement of the different source elements. His next major textual source, Boccaccio's description of the temple of Venus, further demonstrates this. There we encounter feelings and images that are contrary to the experience of bliss and which illustrate the consequences of acting with disregard to the concept of 'commune profit'.

Alienation and Courtly Language in Venus's Temple and Nature's Garden.

In Venus's temple individuals succumb to a desire which ultimately alienates them. This experience of alienation also involves elements of the language of courtly love. I shall therefore identify these elements in order to compare them with other uses of such language in the poem. As the new political paradigm offered by Cicero alters the narrator's reading of courtly love narratives, the language of courtly love, and the traditions it contains come under moral scrutiny in Venus's temple.

The narrator moves from his consideration of the garden to the figures that are outside Venus's temple in a contemplative manner, rather than in a physical sense. Apart from Africanus's shove there is not the same stress upon the spatial movement of the narrator that we saw in the *House of Fame* for example. Instead the movement from the garden to the figures and the temple involves the transference of vision,

Yit was there joye more a thousandfold

Than man can telle; ne nevere wolde it nyghte,

But ay cler day to any mannes syghte.

Under a tre, besyde a welle, I say

Cupide, oure lord, his arwes forge and file. (208-12)

Following on from the figure of Cupid and 'Wille' (desire) we encounter the conventional personifications of courtly ideals. The 'Disfigurat' appearance of 'Plesaunce' is the first disruption of the beautiful aesthetic established in the garden. Within the temple itself the narrator's visual experience contrasts further with that outside in the garden. Instead of the clarity that characterised his previous descriptions, things are perceived according to a less certain light, that is itself dependent upon the emotions that the temple contains:

> Withinne the temple, of sykes hoote as fyr
>
> I herde a swogh that gan aboute renne,
>
> Whiche sikes were engendered with desyr,
>
> That maden every auter for to brenne
>
> Of newe flaume; and wel espyed I thenne
>
> That al the cause of sorwes that they drye
>
> Cam of the bittere goddesse Jelosye. (246-52)

As the sighs that are engendered by feelings of 'desyr' stoke the flames upon the altars, more within the temple can be seen. This is a direct contrast to the stable illumination of the garden in which 'ne wolde it nyghte, / But ay cler day to any mannes syghte' (209-10). Vision is contingent upon emotion in the temple, which implies a heightened degree of subjectivism there. Though the followers of Venus might attempt to exploit the darkness to obtain their wishes, ultimately they end up

alienated from the objects of their desire. This is the fate of Priapus who was disturbed whilst trying to rape a nymph in the night and is now embarrassingly exposed to all (253-259). The narrator sees Venus herself in the fluctuations between darkness and light:

> And in a prive corner in disport
>
> Fond I Venus and hire porter Richesse,
>
> That was ful noble and hautayn of hyre port -
>
> Derk was that place, but afterward lightnesse
>
> I saw a lyte, unnethe it myghte be lesse -
>
> And on a bed of gold she lay to reste,
>
> Til that the hote sonne gan to weste. (260-66)

Outside in the garden there is no darkness to exploit. Being able to see things clearly and derive joy from them is an aspect of the way in which the individual's material needs are fulfilled in the garden. The description of the temple of Venus is taken from Boccaccio, but a major difference is the fact that the narrator in Chaucer's text is not omniscient as in the original. This is evident in the use of the word 'espye' here (250, 280). Chaucer's narrator is striving to satisfy his curiosity, and in doing so reinforces the message that the 'thyng that I wolde' is continually out of reach. It is a place of striving and disconnection, in which selves who seek erotic love as an end in itself, without regard for the needs of others, are isolated in a world of shadows, cut off from

the objects of their desire. This place is a contrast to the delights of the garden and serves to demonstrate the consequences of acting without regard for 'commune profyt'.

The personifications 'Plesaunce', 'Aray', 'Lust', 'Curtesysie', 'Delyt' and 'Gentilesse' (211-245) relate directly to the temple of Venus, in which the elitist aspect of courtly traditions are presented as part of the process that alienates individuals. They precede entry to the temple and represent ideals to which those who wish to enter must conform. The process of alienation occurs first of all by elevating the lover above any common experience of love, and then, when the individual is thoroughly subject to the ways of Venus, by alienating them from their object of desire - this is the fate of the characters depicted upon the temple walls. Only the elite, the true followers of courtly love, therefore seem capable of entry into Venus's tragic hall of fame. Indeed the personification that pertains most exclusively to social elevation, 'Richesse' is most closely associated with Venus in Chaucer's description, placed right at the heart of the temple.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the representations of courtliness in Venus's temple and those in the garden, specifically in the context of the subsequent parliament. Because Chaucer uses the motifs of the conventional courtly garden as a representation of the 'blysful place' spoken of by Scipio, it

becomes necessary for him to 'democratise' that space somehow. [12] This follows on

from the fact that the reward spoken of by Africanus is not exclusive,

> ...what man, lered other lewed,
>
> That lovede commune profyt, wel ithewed,
>
> He shulde into a blysful place wende
>
> There as joye is that last withouten ende. (46-49)

This 'joye' can be earned by anyone, learned ('lered') or unlearned ('lewed'), who

acts in consideration of the needs of the community. [13] This must be so if the ethical

system is to have any value to society as a whole. The beautiful gardens that we tend

to find in courtly literature, however, are traditionally exclusive territories. [14] They are

the preserve of gentlefolk who follow Love's ways. [15] The personifications or

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[12] I use the word 'democratise' in the sense of opening up to all members of society. How this occurs is discussed below.

[13] In fact Africanus states that even wrong doers will eventually arrive at the 'blysful place' after having been put through purgation as it were, whirling about the earth. But to arrive immediately after death is clearly still a reward. Writing of the open nature of the reward spoken of by Africanus, Minnis writes: 'This forms a marked contrast with the intellectual elitism of Cicero's text, wherein Africanus tells his grandson to ignore the chatter of the "common herd"'. A.J. Minnis, *The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), p. 269.

[14] This no doubt reflects the fact that walled gardens were the exclusive preserve of the social elite.

[15] It is true that these conventions appear in the *Divine Comedy*, but as with other expressly religious poems such as *Pearl* the place of bliss is entered as a result of faith, the aesthetics accord with

characters that inhabit them are therefore courtly, and not of low origins. This leads to the major difference between Chaucer's garden with its avian assembly and the majority of those in earlier sources. In most analogous texts the gardens which contain the assemblies are exclusive territories. The anonymous *Li Fablel dou Dieu d'Amors* for example, is addressed to 'noble knights, barons, ladies and young girls'. The narrator of the poem happens upon a garden which is walled and surrounded by a moat. The exclusive nature of this domain is stated emphatically:

If any person of low birth came there and wished to enter despite his degree, when he came to the bridge the drawbridge was drawn up and the gate shut. They did not wish that any *villain* should enter there, and as soon as he went away the gate was opened and the bridge lowered. And if a courtly person wished to go inside into the garden to give delight to his body, he would find the gate open for him to enter, and there would be no trouble about raising the bridge. This garden is forbidden to those of low birth, for it is the garden of the King of Love...[16]

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theological principles. The *Parliament of Fowls* is different in that it presents an ethical system that is essentially pagan, in order to remain within the secular domain of courtly literature and culture.

[16]Windeatt, p. 85.

The fact that this garden is forbidden to those of 'low birth' may even preclude someone of Chaucer's social origins entering. The *Fablel's* narrator is allowed to enter, 'without any opposition', and hears the birds begin a debate whether clerks or knights make the better lovers. In *Melior et Ydoine,* another anonymous text, the narrator happens across a garden whilst on his way to Lincoln. It belongs to a manor and the figures within it are noble. The exclusivity of this garden is particularly evident because the narrator does not enter: 'I tied up my horse and went nearer to the garden, and I sat under the hedge to listen to their discussion'.[17]

The notable exception to this principle of exclusivity is *La Messe des Oisiaus et li Plais des Chanonesses et des Grises Nonains*, by Jean de Condé. The fact that the bird assembly is conceptualised in the form of a mass prepares us for the possibility of a more catholic principle underpinning the treatment of fine loving. The mass which the birds celebrate utilises courtly love traditions and is presided over by Venus:

> Venus summoned the nightingale and commanded him in a loud voice
>
> that he should sing Mass in her presence, and that the other birds who
>
> were the most attractive and gifted in singing should accompany him.[18]

When the time for the sermon arrives it is delivered by the nightingale. He gives advice upon how the noble lover should conduct himself:

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[17]Ibid., p. 100.

[18]Ibid., p. 105.

In the service of his lady the lover must always give himself over to

following in everything that he is able to discover and observe to

please his lady in word and deed. To this end he must offer up his soul

and body. Afterwards he must happily suffer all the griefs, pains and

evils, the woes, the vexations and labours that he feels through the

force of loving.[19]

The call to serve one's lady and gladly suffer any adversity in love is typical of the

language of courtly love. A more ingenious use of the symbolism of *fin amor* is the

use of the red rose as host:

Then the priest with great devotion made the Elevation of a red rose,

that supremely delightful flower which surpasses all other flowers in

beauty, fragrance and grace. From the rose the priest took three petals

with which he served himself, and yet the rose remained one and

entire.[20]

This use of a familiar image in courtly love narrative, the red rose is ultimately used

to spiritualise the tradition. This occurs at the end of the poem, when, following a

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[19]Ibid., p. 106.

[20]Ibid., p. 107.

complaint by white nuns that grey nuns are stealing their lovers, the author, somewhat incredibly, imposes an exclusively orthodox religious reading upon the poem. Even though there may be a strong element of satire involved in the mass scene, calling into question perhaps the fashionable manners of the regular clergy, what we are ultimately asked to accept is a Christian interpretation of it:

> By the sacrament of the rose, one can easily understand what the words signify: the bread consecrated on the altar undergoes such a miracle through God that it is utterly His Body, whoever bears witness to this true account. I have expounded the dogma of transubstantiation by means of the image of the rose, which is more prized than any other flower for its loveliness, its fragrance, its gracefulness and its colour.[21]

This confusing movement between the sacred and the secular is a far more dramatic shift than that between *fin amor* and politics in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Whereas *La Messe* attempts at the end to convey Christian teaching via the language of courtly love, by representing it in the context of a mass, the *Parliament of Fowls* politicises this language by putting it in the context of a parliament. After the mass the poem describes a gathering of people that is expressly non-exclusive: 'There were gathered there all sorts of folk in their hundreds and thousands, both high-born and low, both

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[21]Ibid., p. 116.

clerks and laity'.[22] This catholic inclusion of 'all sorts of folk', 'high-born and low', is the exception to the usual exclusivity of poems that feature avian assemblies.

In Chaucer's temple, then, the exclusive tendencies of courtly love are used to negative effect. But the *Dream of Scipio* provides a paradigm that can alter the conventions that govern the space outside the temple, in the garden, so that it can describe a reward for selfless conduct by any member of society. This means that when the traditions of courtly love are again in evidence in the conduct of the eagles they have a very different function. Rather than being part of a process of alienation, they provide protocols that are socially beneficial. As in the *Book of the Duchess* Chaucer is conscious of the positive as well as the negative aspects of courtliness and the ideals of courtly love. Sometimes the elitist aspects of courtly language are used by him to indicate alienation, and sometimes the set of established protocols such language contains are used to bring individuals of different background and rank together - if only on a temporary basis. It is the context and the effect of the conventions as they are described in the course of the poem that determine their moral value.

The Parliament Scene.

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[22]Ibid., p. 108.

When the narrator leaves the temple and returns to the garden he implies a clear distinction between the emotional impressions that the two places make upon him:

> Whan I was come ayeyn into the place
>
> That I of spak, that was so sote and grene,
>
> Forth welk I tho myselven to solace. (295-7)

We are never given any definite description of the narrator's feelings whilst inside the temple, but these remarks seem designed to reinforce the idea that the experience was not entirely enjoyable - not without some degree of pleasure in terms of interest perhaps, but certainly overpowering.

In contrast to the sense of emptiness in Venus's temple, in which the 'swogh' of 'sykes hoote', 'engendered with desyr', blows through the darkened hall, the gathering of birds around Nature is an image of fullness and vivacity:

> For this was on Seynt Valentynes day,
>
> Whan every foul cometh there to chese his make,
>
> Of every kynde that men thynke may,
>
> And that so huge a noyse gan they make
>
> That erthe, and eyr, and tre, and every lake
>
> So ful was that unethe was there space

For me to stonde, so ful was al the place. (309-15)

The sense of fullness is such that we are temporarily reminded of the narrator's physical presence as he is crowded by the birds that gather around Nature. He also indicates the literary origins of the figure of Nature that he sees:

And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde,

Devyseth Nature of aray and face,

In swich aray men myghte hire there fynde. (316-18)

The narrator tells us that Nature looks like the figure described by Alanus de Insulis in his *Complaint of Nature*. However, she is less overpowering in comparison to the awesome demi-goddess of Alanus's poem. In *The Complaint* the entire natural realm responds to the presence of Nature and the narrator is quite overcome:

After I had looked on her a time, not far distant from me, I fell on my face, prostrated by stupor of mind and all buried in the delirium of ecstasy, and the powers of my senses imprisoned; and, neither in life or in death, I struggled between the two.[23]

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[23] Alanus de Insulis, *De Planctu Naturæ*, trans., Douglas M. Moffat (New Haven, Conn., 1908), 6-10, p. 23.

By having the narrator disturbed in such a profound manner, Alanus ensures that we

are made conscious of his limitations as a reporter. This means that, if we are to trust

what he tells us, then the frailties of his sense and consciousness must be overcome.

Alanus achieves this by having Nature communicate with the narrator via images that

his mind can comprehend:

> When she saw that I had returned to myself, she depicted for my
>
> mental perception the image of a real voice, and by this brought into
>
> actual being words which had been, so to speak, archetypes ideally
>
> preconceived.[24]

This concern with the process of perception and the reliability of the narrator contrasts

with the more relaxed descriptions of Chaucer's Nature. She is a literary figure rather

than a Platonic archetype, much like Venus in the poem, but with particular qualities

that enable the development of an avian parliament. Chaucer's Nature is a literary

figure with political associations, another aspect of the narrator's earlier reading that

is effected by the new paradigm provided by Cicero. The latent political dimensions

of Alanus's Nature which Chaucer builds upon, are apparent at the outset of the

Complaint:

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[24]Ibid., 16-20, p. 24.

I change laughter to tears, joy to sorrow applause to lament, mirth to

grief, when I behold the decrees of Nature in abeyance; when society is

ruined and destroyed by the monster of sensual love; when Venus,

fighting against Venus, makes men women; when with her magic art

she unmans men.[25]

When 'the decrees of Nature' are held 'in abeyance', then 'society is ruined and

destroyed by the monster of sensual love'. For Alanus, homosexuality is the chief

symptom of social decay. But this opposition between the 'decrees of Nature' and the

'monster of sensual love' or false Venus, is what the *Parliament of Fowls* presents as

its central dialectic.[26] Whether this is in the manner of a straightforward opposition

between Nature and Venus is a matter for debate. But it is possible to see how the

association of Nature with society at the beginning of Alanus's poem, is being

associated with the words of Africanus in the mind of Chaucer's narrator.[27] For the

narrator at least, Africanus's account of those who work for 'commune profyt' set

against the 'brekers of the lawe' and 'likerous' folk, is a paradigm through which the

Complaint of Nature can be reviewed and re-represented in a new aesthetic form, one

which is less determinate and allows more room for interpretation and debate.

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[25]Ibid., 1-6, p. 3.

[26]See Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*. pp. 283-4 for a resumé of the tradition of two Venus's in Chaucer's

literary heritage. one a lawful goddess of desire and one a goddess of lust

[27]The place of nature and natural law in medieval political theory will be discussed below.

Since the narrator of the *Parliament* reads Alanus's Nature as a figure through whom a stable society receives its prompting and natural laws, he has her preside over a gathering of birds whose society is potentially unstable and who look to her to provide a facility within which conflict can be resolved. In describing the arrangement of the birds the narrator draws attention to rank:

> That is to seyn, the foules of ravyne
>
> Weere hyest set, and thanne the foules smale
>
> That eten, as hem Nature wolde enclyne,
>
> As worm or thyng of which I telle no tale;
>
> And water-foul sat lowest in the dale;
>
> But foul that lyveth by sed sat on the grene,
>
> And that so fele that wonder was to sene. (323-29)

This description suggests a coming together of all the different strata of society. The 'foules of ravyne' are 'hyest set' and represent the aristocracy. The 'foules smale' are too base to equate with gentles since they eat 'worm or thyng of which I telle no tale', something that is not in keeping with the ideals of courtliness. And since the waterfowl are set 'lowest in the dale' they would seem to represent the lowest in society. The seedfowl are a large group, 'so fele that wonder was to sene' and their location is ill-defined as an indicator of rank. The 'foul that lyveth by sed sat on the grene', but are they above the 'foules smale', and the waterfowl, or below them? It is

only in the course of the speeches that we realise that they are gentles too and might

be taken to represent the social group to which Chaucer himself belonged, the wealthy

merchant class, and perhaps also clerks.

Chaucer's method of democratisation, however, does not involve simply an

allegorical representation of medieval society. The poem does open up the garden to

include non-gentle elements in the form of the lower birds, but in the course of the

parliament they are negatively portrayed. This makes the poem seem even more elitist

than texts that expressly exclude non-gentles, since the lower birds are presented as

incapable of contributing positively to the debate. The poem therefore appears on the

surface to be an argument for excluding such groups from political participation by

demonstrating their inadequacy in debate. But this is not how the poem should be

read. I believe that Chaucer is presenting us with different models of language and

conduct, and is actually leaving the reader to decide which type of bird they want to

identify with. In other words he democratises this courtly space by opening it up to

the reader, be they 'lered' or 'lewed', and giving them the opportunity to recognise

that the refined conduct of the eagles is best for their society as a whole. This is

because their attitude enables them to act with regard to 'commune profyt'. Of course

the poem is written for an audience that is literate and educated and is therefore

constrained to utilise narrative forms and language that pertained to the social elite.

The extent to which it could ever have applied to the 'lewed' was surely always

limited. But even so, Chaucer's use of Africanus's speech is evidence that he desires

to extend the territory and language of courtliness to include those who show due

respect for the values and conduct that are beneficial to social harmony. I therefore consider the seedfowl as a bridging element in terms of the social allegory. We are not sure in visual terms where they are in relation to the other birds in terms of hierarchy. This uncertainty, and the fact that the turtle dove affirms one of the fundamental principles of *fin amor*, even though he is not a bird of prey, suggests that the seedfowl could represent to a medieval audience an example of commoners who are nevertheless capable of participating in the language of courtliness. Democratisation occurs, then, as the reader recognises the most socially beneficial way of speaking and behaving in the poem.[28]

There are considerable obstacles to harmony in the avian assembly, and these function as a counterbalance to the socially beneficial ideals exemplified by the language of the birds of prey. Apart from the potentially divisive reality of rank, the natures of the birds themselves are also a barrier to their coming together. The way in which Chaucer devotes considerable space and energy to the description of the different species, drawing out their anti-social qualities, suggests that he is keen to acknowledge the impediments to a peaceful and successful parliament. There is the 'goshuak' that 'doth pyne / To bryddes for his outrageous ravyne', the 'chough' that is a 'thef', the 'false lapwynge', 'ful of trecherye', and the 'stare, that the conseyl can bewrye' (336-64). This full recognition of reasons for possible disruption are

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[28]Care must, of course, be taken when applying the idea of democracy to medieval society, especially to the real Parliament. This was made up of nobles and gentles only. No representation was given to the lowest and largest group in medieval society, the labouring classes. The process of democratisation that Chaucer explores on a literary level had no place in the reality of fourteenth-century political life.

particularly challenging in the context of a parliament, because it is difficult to see what protocols might enable the birds to transcend their natures and engage in productive dialogue. They do serve however to enhance Nature's role as one who can draw together contradictory elements into a meaningful unity. Indeed this is fundamental to her role in creation as a whole:

> Nature, the vicaire of the almyghty Lord,
>
> That hot, cold, hevy, lyght, moyst, and dreye
>
> Hath knyt by evene noumbres of acord. (379-81)

As the executive of God's will in the material realm, Nature establishes opposing elements and then holds them in balance. This is also her role in the parliament. In doing so she uses the protocols of courtly love to provide a set of values that are the subject of debate in the parliament. The principle of free choice for the females to consent to or refuse their suitors is a traditional one in courtly love narratives. And it is this principle which Nature affirms:

> But natheless, in this condicioun
>
> Mot be the choys of everich that is heere,
>
> That she agre to his eleccioun,
>
> Whoso he be that shulde be hire feere.
>
> This is oure usage alwey, fro yer to yeere,

And whoso may at this tyme have his grace

In blisful tyme he cam into this place! (407-13)

Affirming the paramount importance of the free choice of all subjects in a society is not, however, an unproblematic good. It might be interpreted as leaving the individual constrained in a hell that is the free choice of other individuals.[29] This observation helps focus the political significance of the affirmation of free choice made by Nature. We can now see the full meaning of the inscriptions on the entrance to the garden. The successful suitor will know 'grace' and regard the garden as a 'blysful place', and the unsuccessful suitor will experience 'the mortal strokes of the spere' (135). It all hinges on the free will of an individual: the aspect of the garden can change in an instant with the choice of the beloved. The political significance of this principle is heightened by the fact that all the choices that must be made are part of a hierarchical chain. Any inability to make a choice at any point in that chain effects the entire assembly, hence the right of all that take part to debate, if their happiness is in jeopardy.

This is a very sophisticated use of the protocols of courtly love, elevating them beyond the immediate concerns of the individual lovers to incorporate wider political debate. As such it is part of the revision of the narrator's conception of love that his

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[29] political dilemma recognised by Sartre in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, (New York, 1949). In a society where the freewill of each individual is of paramount importance, then the free choices of others can easily limit the choices of the individual - becoming, that individual's hell, according to Sartre's secular philosophy.

reading of the *Dream of Scipio* has brought about, in which a private interest in love based on reading is converted into a political exploration.

Private Feeling, Public Speaking.

In this section I shall identify those courtly love traditions that are contained in the speeches of the birds, and show how they are being politicised in the context of the poem. In particular I want to consider the way in which they enable the inner feelings of the individual to be externalised in a public context. But before identifying the important conventions of courtly love that are contained in the speeches of the birds of prey, it is important to recognise that these conventions befit their nature. As with the Black Knight in the *Book of the Duchess* the language of courtly love articulates the potential for that great feeling that is claimed to be characteristic of the nobility. When Nature calls upon the royal eagle to speak, she calls attention to his noble qualities, which she has created, and expects him to speak in a manner that accords with them:

> The tersel egle, as that ye knowe wel,
>
> The foul royal, above yow in degree,
>
> The wyse and worthi, secre, trewe as stel,
>
> Which I have formed, as ye may wel se,
>
> In every part as it best liketh me -

> It nedeth not his shap yow to devyse -
>
> He shal first chese and speken in his gyse. (393-99)

This means that the language of the eagle is in accordance with his nature and feeling: he is expected to speak in a certain 'gyse'. The language of the Black Knight, however, threatened to overcome his nature by intensifying feeling in a sinful way. This meant that the poem questioned the value of the language of courtly love in excess. In the *Parliament* the noble birds' use of courtly love rhetoric is not questioned by the author, it is used to provide a set of protocols that can be debated by the birds, and thereby provide subject matter for political discourse. It is a fundamental premise of the bird allegory that its protagonists conform to the ordinances of Nature absolutely, as the female eagle says 'Soth is that I am evere under your yerde, / As is everich other creature' (640-41). This is not true of men such as the Black Knight, who can sin and therefore deviate from her designs. Because the language itself is in complete fidelity to the inner experience and nature of the speakers, we do not have to doubt the sincerity of what is said. The birds speak in a manner that conforms to, and reveals, their true natures. It is therefore a direct expression of their true intentions. The fact that Nature, who made them and therefore knows them intimately, is actually presiding over their parliament, and she never doubts that the words of the speakers express their true thoughts and feelings, confirms that we should not be suspicious of the rhetoric they employ. This premise is derived from the *Complaint of Nature*. The living creatures in that poem are a sinless

example to sinful mankind. There is no need, I believe, to question the integrity of the creatures that are under Nature's guidance in either the *Complaint of Nature* or the *Parliament*. Language is presented in each text as a faithful expression of intention.

Having established that the freedom of the individual to choose is of paramount importance in the parliament, the royal eagle begins his speech, and as he does so he affirms this principle:

> With hed enclyned and with humble cheere
>
> This royal tersel spak, and tariede noght:
>
> 'Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,
>
> I chese, and chese with wil, and herte, and thought,
>
> The formel on youre hond, so wel iwrought,
>
> Whos I am al, and evere wol hire serve,
>
> Do what hire lest, to do me lyve or sterve'. (415-20)

There is, of course, a conventional element of untruth in this statement which does not call the integrity of the eagle's language into question. When the eagle describes the female as 'my soverayn lady, and not my fere' he is using a convention to articulate a feeling, and not describing an actual state of affairs. The convention that says a lover must regard his lady as his sovereign, only has significance if the lady is in fact his social inferior. What is being said is that the feelings are so strong that the lover is compelled to overturn the reality of their respective social positions.

He is her social superior, but because she exerts such a powerful influence upon him he feels himself subject to her, and consents to that feeling by declaring her his 'sovereign'. There is therefore an inherent element of untruth implicit in the discourse if we do not regard the language as a completely faithful expression of what is being felt inside, rather than an objective statement of affairs, and this is an important point for what follows. The Eagle next says something that is less conventional when he declares: 'I chese, and chese with wil, and herte, and thought'. Traditionally the lover is *compelled* to love the beloved. He sees her appearance and her image is locked in his heart and he cannot break away from his attraction to her. This is apparent in the *Romance of the Rose*, with its traditional symbolism of Cupid's arrow going in through the eye and lodging in the heart, thereby forcing the lover to love. It is certainly the case in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Troilus shows contempt for those who fall in love in this way, only to do so himself in spite of his prior determination, when he sees Criseyde for the first time:

> So ferde it by this fierse and proude knyght:
>
> Though he a worthy kynges sone were,
>
> And wende nothing hadde had swich myght
>
> Ayeyns his wille that shulde his herte stere,
>
> Yet with a look his herte wex a-fere,
>
> That he that now was moost in pride above,
>
> Wax sodeynly moost subgit unto Love. (Bk. I. 225-31)

In this typical example of falling in love there is no rational dimension to the original compulsion to love the beloved.[30] The lover cannot critically disengage from his sense impressions and feelings in order to make a completely free and rational choice. This, however, does not seem to be the case for the eagle. He clearly feels the need to love 'I chese, and chese with wil, and herte' (translating 'wil' as desire), but he also includes 'thought' in the process. This affirmation of thought, or reason, means that the eagle's choice to love is not necessitated in the traditional manner of most courtly love narratives. He is truly free because he is able rationally to consent to what he feels compelled to do by nature. This alteration of the protocols of courtly love to include reason in the process of choosing a mate, further enables free will in the conduct of the birds of prey. In the case of the eagle he is freely choosing to subject himself to the female, irrespective of her response to him:

> The formel on youre hond, so wel iwrought,
>
> Whos I am al, and evere wol hire serve,
>
> Do what hire lest, to do me lyve or sterve. (418-20)

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[30]Certainly it is difficult to find an exception to this deterministic tradition in Chaucer's other uses of the conventions of courtly love. In the Franklin's Tale Arverargus swears of 'his free wyl' (745) never to 'take no maistrie / Agayn hir wyl'. But this in no way suggests that he was free to choose whether or not he should fall in love with Dorigen in the first place.

The eagle's language enables his private feelings to be expressed publicly. The language of courtly love is a transparent medium for the eagle. It allows him to express inner feelings and intentions directly to the beloved, to Nature and to the rest of the birds, and to integrate his inner experience with his immediate social context, via an elaborate set of pre-determined conventions. He is confident in his own mind that what he has been saying reveals his true intentions. If this is ever found not to be the case, then he will submit himself to the judgement and punishment of the other birds:

> And if that I be founde to hyre untrewe,
>
> Disobeysaunt, or wilful necligent,
>
> Avountour, or in proces love a newe,
>
> I preye to yow this be my jugement:
>
> That with these foules I be al torent,
>
> That ilke day that evere she me fynde
>
> To hir untrewe, or in my gilt unkynde. (428-34)

Having established that the courtly love rhetoric of the first eagle enables his inner self to be made known to the parliament, and that it affirms his own free will, we can consider the speeches of the other two eagles in comparison. The formal and traditional rhetoric of the eagles is a framework for making public the private feeling and intentions of the highest class of birds. The fact that the language is a direct

expression of their noble nature means that it can be used to assess whose love is the greatest. The one who speaks best is the best suited for the female who is 'of shap the gentilleste / That evere she [Nature] among hire werkes fond' (373-4). This challenge of interpreting the three speeches and evaluating them is one that presumably any courtly audience of the poem would have enjoyed. However, it is no straightforward affair, and requires careful attention to what is said and how it is said.

The second eagle, whom we are told is 'of lower kynde', does not wait to be invited in his eagerness to speak. His opening lines are addressed not to the female, or Nature but to the royal eagle, and by claiming that he loves the female 'bet than ye don, by Seint John, / Or at the leste I love hire as wel as ye' (450-1) he serves to affirm the royal eagle's love as both his object of contention and also as a standard. He has failed to establish his case on independent terms, unlike the first eagle. The oath to 'Seint John' also seems to suggest a nervous tone to his address, as if he is grasping for support for his argument. He does not address the female as his sovereign, indeed he does not seem to address her (or Nature) at all, rather his speech is directed at his rival, and this prevents him from adopting a humble tone and posture. This could be interpreted as a lack of the respect for the object of devotion that is the traditional ideal in courtly love narrative.

The third eagle also begins to speak without invitation. He draws attention to the context of the parliament and the urgency surrounding its affairs:

Now, sires, ye seen the lytel leyser heere;

> For every foul cryeth out to ben ago
>
> Forth with his make, or with his lady deere. (464-66)

This reference to circumstances at the beginning of the speech seems inappropriate, in that it is a distraction from the business of ascertaining precisely what the eagle's intentions are towards the female. It may represent an attempt to avoid presenting these intentions in detail, by invoking the need for brevity. He then says that he cannot boast long service, but claims instead that a man can serve better in half a year than some that serve a full year (475-76). This seems a valid point, but having abandoned such a fundamental principle of the courtly love tradition he is forced into self-justification - 'But I dar seyn, I am hire treweste man' (479) - since he lacks any objective criteria for assessing the worth of his love which such principles provide.

There are, then, possible indictors as to which eagle is the most noble in intention and therefore the most suitable for the female. But more importantly we can see that the language of courtly love provides the elite birds with a set of conventions, enabling them to integrate inner-experience with their immediate social context. Their private feelings are socially structured so that they become the objects of social debate.[31] All three eagles are in competition with one-another, and the strength of

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[31]A deterministic structuralist approach would regard the conventions of courtly love rhetoric as a particularly clear example of the way in which linguistic practices determine all concepts and experience of the individual - to the extent that the individual is itself an illusion brought about by such forms. I take an opposite view to this: shared linguistic practices are the means whereby separate individuals and their private experiences can be integrated, in a manner that promotes individuality as

their feeling could be socially destructive, were they to submit to it in a non-reflexive manner. Instead these feelings are ritualised by the language of courtly love and become part of a formal discursive activity, keeping the individuals integrated within an elaborate social ritual. Most of the lower birds, however, are not able to integrate their private feelings in this way, and to the narrator their 'noyse' suggests the destruction of the garden's harmony:

> The noyse of foules for to ben delyvered
>
> So loude rong, 'Have don, and lat us wende!'
>
> That wel wende I the wood hadde al to shyvered.
>
> 'Com of' they criede, 'allas, ye wol us shende!
>
> Whan shal youre cursed pletyng have an ende?
>
> How sholde a juge eyther parti leve
>
> For ye or nay withouten any preve?' (491-97)

As with his response to Venus's temple, the narrator's reaction offers a guide to the reader as to the emotional content of what is reported. He is shocked by the severity of the outburst of the lower birds, and likens the noise they make to the wood being torn apart: 'wel wende I the wode hadde al toshyvered'. Their explosive protest is a complete contrast to the previously controlled 'gentil ple' of the eagles, and it is a

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the individual is equipped to make more sophisticated, socially responsible judgements and utterances. The self comes further into being as it recognises and respects the needs of others.

faithful reflection of their less refined natures. The narrator's choice of simile helps us to appreciate the very great tensions that Nature must hold in balance. These other birds lack the sensitivity and understanding necessary to interpret and evaluate the language of the eagles, and instead require some more obvious guide as to who would be the best suitor, 'How sholde a juge eyther parti leve / For ye or nay withouten any preve?'. Because the lower birds are alienated from the traditions of courtly love Nature has to exercise her direct authority in order to hold the parliament together. In doing so she enables a contrast to be drawn between the higher birds - who are capable of accommodating their private feelings to social forms - and the lower, who lack any conventional language for doing so. As a result the speech of the latter gives utterance to impulsive thought that elevates the needs of the individual above those of the avian society as a whole. The lower birds appear to be a cohesive group simply because they share the same primary need on Valentine's day: that is 'for to ben delyvered' and satisfy their desire for procreation.[32]

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[32]Indeed it could be argued that the courtly behaviour of the higher birds is the cause of the unrest in the parliament by delaying the process of finding mates, and that they show disregard for the needs of the other birds. Such a reading would, however, be going against the grain of the poem, since Nature herself is admiring towards the royal eagle (631-37) and the female (372-78). There is no suggestion in the poem that they are the cause of unrest in the parliament except from the lowest birds, whose conduct and speech is nowhere endorsed by the narrator or Nature. See B.K. Cowgill, 'The Parlement of Foules and the Body Politic', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 74 (1975), 316-19 for an argument that involves a negative view of the conduct of the royal eagle.

The turtle dove, however, speaking on behalf of the 'sed-foul', disassociates himself from this group instinct based upon a common sexual need, and highlights the ignorance of the lower birds concerning the conventions to which the birds of prey submit themselves:

> I am a sed-foul, oon the unworthieste,
>
> That wot I wel, and litel of connynge.
>
> But bet is that a wyghtes tonge reste
>
> Than entermeten hym of such doinge,
>
> Of which he neyther rede can ne synge;
>
> And whoso hit doth ful foule hyself acloyeth,
>
> For office uncommytted ofte anoyeth. (512-18)

The turtle dove recognises that the cuckoo cannot understand or interpret the language of the eagles - 'of which he neyther rede can ne synge'. He is disturbed that the cuckoo is prepared to force himself upon the proceedings of the parliament in such ignorance, and in a manner that disregards its protocols by assuming responsibility unilaterally 'For office uncommytted ofte anoyeth'. Nature herself then intervenes with an ear to those behind her who cannot contain themselves. She is intent that as far as possible the birds shall submit themselves to a set of temporary protocols that can give them cohesion as a genuine social group: 'I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle / To seyn the verdit for yow alle' (524). All the birds can thereby participate

in the debate, though the purpose of this seems futile, given that the lower birds seem

unable to comprehend the language of the birds of prey. Even the other birds of prey

themselves have difficulty in choosing between the language of the three eagles, as

the falcon who represents them indicates:

> Ful hard were it to preve by resoun
>
> Who loveth best this gentil formel heere;
>
> For everych hath swich replicacioun
>
> That non by skilles may be brought adoun.
>
> I can not se that argumentes avayle:
>
> Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle. (534-39)

The three eagles accept trial by combat, but this is not what the falcon intends. Instead

he appeals to other courtly ideals as a means of deciding between the three:

> Me wolde thynke how that the worthieste
>
> Of knyghthod, and the lengest had used it,
>
> Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste,
>
> Were sittyngest for hire, if that hir leste;
>
> And of these thre she wot hireself, I trowe,
>
> Which that he be, for it is light to knowe. (547-53)

Here certain key courtly concepts, the ideals of 'knyghthod', 'estat' and nobility of 'blod', provide a set of objective criteria that can avoid the need for physical conflict. This further demonstrates that the traditional values which pertain to the nobility might provide a medium for facilitating a stable society, one able to accommodate and overcome the potentially destructive desires of the individual. But they nevertheless seem to be elitist traditions that are meaningless to the 'water-foules' and 'worm-foul', whose views serve only to provide a contrast to the higher sentiment and language of the raptors. The goose for example advises one of the eagles, presumably the first, 'But she wol love hym, lat hym love another!' (567). In order to say this the goose has imagined the feelings of the eagles as if they were his own, 'I rede hym, though he were my brother' (566). He has failed to see that their language is a genuine reflection of their inner-self and faithfully represents feelings of superior depth and strength. In other words the goose is treating the feelings of the eagles much more lightly than they deserve to be treated. A sparrowhawk is therefore compelled to respond:

> Now parde, fol, yit were it bet for the
>
> Han holde thy pes than shewed thy nycete.
>
> It lyth nat in his wit, ne in his wille,
>
> But soth is seyd, 'a fol can not be stille. (571-74)

He is perhaps generous in his condemnation because he takes into account the limitations of the goose's nature, and rather than simply expressing outrage at noble sentiment being taken so lightly, he attributes this to the ignorance - 'nycete' - of the goose whose 'wit' cannot comprehend such a thing. The goose's advice to a royal, offered as though he were a brother goose is certainly bold and lacking in adequate respect or sensitivity. The turtle dove redresses this error on behalf of the common birds by showing a more proper respect for the higher birds and their experience. He declares that, even if the object of his devotion were 'deyede, I wolde non other make' (587-88). But again this perspective seems to be a blessing of nature and is therefore still a complete mystery to the goose, who along with the duck cannot 'resoun finde or wit' in such thinking. The goose goes on to say that it is folly to go on loving where there can be no hope of reward and states 'There been mo sterres, God wot, than a payre!' (595). Outrageous as such a statement may seem to the birds of prey, the goose is at least trying to offer something to the debate that he feels might help the eagles. He lacks in understanding, tact, imagination and respect, but he is not simply indifferent to their plight as is the cuckoo,

> I reche nat how longe that ye stryve.
>
> Lat ech of hem be soleyn al here lyve!
>
> This is my red, syn they may nat acorde;
>
> This shorte lessoun nedeth nat recorde. (606-9)

The cuckoo by contrast shows complete disrespect for both the eagles and the parliament. As such his remarks are the most anti-social sentiments expressed in the parliament, which is in keeping with his nature which the merlin attacks severely:

> Thow mortherere of the heysoge on the braunche
>
> That broughte the forth, thow reufullest glotoun!
>
> Lyve thow soleyn, wormes corupcioun,
>
> For no fors is of lak of thy nature!
>
> Go, lewed be thow whil the world may dure! (612-16)

Cuckoos were known to be parasites and killers of the host bird's chicks. The cuckoo therefore represents the most anti-social element in the bird parliament and the one that is the most disrespectful of any kind of law. Hence the merlin rebukes him, declaring that he is solitary ('soleyn') because of his lack of concern ('no fors') which indicates the 'lak' in his nature'.

Concluding the Debate.

The courtly love traditions that govern the language of the eagles are, then, represented as an ideal in the poem. If a species is alienated from these traditions by the limitations of their nature, then they are unable to rise above the demands of their own natural needs. This is precisely what the three eagles must do, since the female's

decision to defer her choice for another year means that none of them can have their desire satisfied. The ideal of long suffering, a standard feature of courtly love, is consequently upheld and is the means by which the eagles defer the gratification of their needs, thus allowing the other impatient species to choose their mates. This feature of courtly love thereby assumes a paramount political significance in the context of the poem by preventing the tensions within the bird society from getting out of control. It enables the parliament to end on a joyful note.

Chaucer's birds are un-fallen creatures, which is an essential premise shared with the animals in the *Complaint of Nature*. Alanus sets out to contrast the creatures that submit to the government of Nature with men who do not, and who disregard the gift of reason that should raise them up above the level of beasts. Alanus's creatures appear on Nature's robe, and do not have the gift of reason or speech.[33] The fact that Chaucer's do, however, does not make them necessarily straightforward substitutes for fallen human subjects. They are a description of an ideal sinless subjectivity, in which all thought and language corresponds perfectly with the nature of the

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[33]The birds that are depicted upon Nature's robe are like real birds and the birds of Chaucer's parliament, in that there are birds of prey and birds with qualities that set them in opposition with one another. But this is how Nature, as God's agent in creation, intended them to be and is why they appear like this on her robe. In other words the qualities that seem destructive or unpleasant are not a consequence of sin or the fall, but are just what Nature originally intended. The birds and other creatures depicted on her clothing are faithful to Nature's intentions, as are the birds in Chaucer's parliament who accept her authority over them.

individual.[34] Their language is therefore a reflection of their inner self as God and Nature intended it to be. We do not therefore need to doubt it, or suspect that Chaucer is subverting their courtliness in some way.

The idealisation of the higher birds must be seen in this light. Chaucer is not simply displaying uncritical support for the aristocratic classes. He is exploring traditions and language that can structure powerful and potentially destructive feelings in a socially acceptable manner. The descriptions of sexual desire and the language of courtly love therefore function on a political level in the poem. They show how individuals with urgent needs can negotiate and debate in order to achieve a result that respects the community, or 'commune profyt'. Traditional protocols are upheld in the poem and contrasted with the primal animalistic utterances of the lower birds: the meaningless 'Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!' (499) of the goose cuckoo and duck. If we choose to disregard the premise of sinlessness and read the birds as straightforward representations of different groups in medieval society, then the poem becomes politically pessimistic. This is because the creatures who debate are intellectually determined by their natures. It is a parliament that can achieve nothing except to confirm the differences which exist between the different groups. Such a reading would certainly preclude any notion of democracy because the only values

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[34]Minnis, as an exponent of the traditional and opposing view of the birds writes 'it is rather ironic that in Chaucer's poem the birds, who appear as exemplary servants of Nature's will in the *De Planctu Naturae*, are such an unruly company. This, to be sure, may be put down to the fact that they constitute 'a feathered version of fallen man', as Fowler nicely puts it' p. 275-6 of Minnis. He quotes D. Fowler in *The Bible in Middle English Literature*, (Seattle and London, 1984), p. 165.

that enable social progress and freedom from base instinct are possessed by the higher birds. These can never be shared by a goose or cuckoo, which means the permanent exclusion of the groups that these species represent from political processes.

Although government in Chaucer's day did exclude the vast majority of society I do not believe that the *Parliament of Fowls* is meant to describe such a deterministic and elitist view of society.[35] The fact that the poem began with the *Dream of Scipio,* and its teaching (as presented by Chaucer), that all can be rewarded for behaving with regard to 'common profyt', suggests that the bird parliament should be read in that context, as upholding traditional protocols that facilitate such behaviour. Furthermore, all people possess, as rational creatures, the ability to recognise and utilise traditional codes of conduct in order to rise above their animal nature. The *Book of the Duchess* suggests Chaucer may well have accepted that the nature of a nobleman is inherently superior to that of a ploughman. But as the old hag argues in the Wife of Bath's tale:

> Heere may ye se wel how that genterye
>
> Is nat annexed to possessioun,
>
> Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
>
> Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.
>
> For, God it woot, men may wel often fynde
>
> A lordes sone do shame and vileynye. (1146-51)

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[35]Except in so far as it is aimed at a courtly audience, or an audience with courtly aspirations.

People deviate from their nature unlike 'fyr, lo, in his kynde' which has no mind to go against what it is. They can formulate intentions that go against their nature because of sin, as in the case of a 'lordes sone' who does 'shame and vileynye'. Reason, however, can help to enable the lower classes to deviate in a positive manner, and rise above their nature and station in life:

> Al were it that myne auncestres were rude,
>
> Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
>
> Grante me grace to lyven vertuously.
>
> Thanne am I gentil, whan that I bigynne
>
> To lyven vertuously and weyve synne. (1172-76)

This raising of the individual above their social circumstances is enabled by virtue which is derived from 'God allone' who gives 'oure verray gentillesse of grace' (1163). A combination of personal agency ('lyven vertuously') and God's power ('gentillesse of grace') guarantees the faithful individual the capacity to rise above their original status and assume a position beyond anything in the world. This teaching, as it appears in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, demonstrates that Chaucer's consciousness of social hierarchy could be tempered by a Christian thinking which sees the potential of all allied to Christ to achieve the very highest ideals intimated by courtliness. In achieving this individuals can fulfil the requirements of 'common

profyt'. The *Parliament of Fowls* upholds courtliness in this sense, as a set of secular traditions that help the individual conform to high ideals. It is therefore left to the reader to determine whether he be a cuckoo or an eagle.

How successful, however, is Chaucer's attempt to revise the language and traditions of *fin amor* according to political principles? Arguably the result is confusing and pessimistic unless great care is taken in appreciating the nature of the birds who speak. But, is it reasonable to expect Chaucer's audience to interpret these birds in the same way as their original models in Alanus's poem? The fact that the narrator refers us to that text at the outset of his description of the parliament ('And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde, / Devyseth Nature of aray and face', 316-7) suggests that he wants his audience to hold it in mind. However, his birds exhibit such obviously human characteristics that it is easy to read them more readily as a representation of Chaucer's own society, rather than as an un-fallen alternative society that presents useful political lessons. Chaucer's dilemma in the *Parliament of Fowls* is that, although he seems to want to give credit to the 'lewed' as well as the 'lered', the poem itself is a highly refined piece of courtly literature. The idiom of the courtly dream vision, which presents us with the contents of a courtly individual's consciousness, is going to appear confused if the narrator attempts to incorporate the 'lewed' in terms of courtly ideals. The majority of readers, as well as critics, seek to avoid any confusion by projecting a rigid, and politically pessimistic, social allegory onto the parliament. But if such a reading contradicts Chaucer's expressly non-elitist interpretation of the *Dream of Scipio*, then surely it is more likely that the problem is

merely formal. I think that the *Parliament of Fowls* is an ambitious poem that attempts much more than its form, limited within the conventions of the courtly dream vision, can accommodate. Presenting political issues in the form of concepts that reside in the mind of one courtly individual produces an inevitable sense of bias in the narrative. To successfully democratise courtly narrative space other narratorial perspectives must be included, in a way that does not automatically subjugate non-courtly discourse to courtly ideals. Chaucer's ultimate solution to this dilemma is the *Canterbury Tales*, in which there is a much more genuine debate, even though political concerns are still confined within the demands of an entertaining fictional narrative. The fact that Chaucer is so conscious of the primary demands upon his narrative to fulfil the recreational demands of his courtly audience, is one factor that prevents him in the *Parliament of Fowls* from making the kind of unreserved political commentary in a dream vision that Langland feels able to.

Medieval Political Theory and the Figure of Nature.

So far I have considered the dream vision as a manifestation of the individual narrator's consciousness. I have explored some of the ways in which his reading of the *Dream of Scipio* has led to the revision of other literary experience according to a new political consciousness. I now want to consider how the description of Nature relates to medieval political thought more directly.

The figure of Nature in Alanus's *Complaint of Nature* is an awesome figure. She is a spiritual being whose authority is not questioned by any element of the natural realm except man. She is not, therefore, a figure that is particularly conducive to political exploration.[36] When she appears before the narrator she does not come to debate but to lecture. Chaucer's Nature, however, presides over a parliament. She encourages the members of that parliament to make free choices concerning the seeking of partners, and to debate when required. She is not so constrained by moral and spiritual concerns that she is unwilling to embrace political ideals of a democratic kind where the different species are concerned. This creates an impression of a figure who is powerful, but who exerts that power in a select and careful manner, giving freedom to her subjects where that freedom does not compromise the good of the community. She is much less severe than the figure in Alanus's poem, who simply rules all creatures except sinful man, whom she rebukes and lectures. It has been suggested by critics that the reason for Chaucer placing Nature at the heart of a recognisable political institution is because of medieval political theories that saw such institutions as the natural outcome of man's nature.[37]

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[36]By this I mean that her mission is so urgent because of the extent of social decay, that there is no time for any debate or re-consideration of political systems, or the language and traditions associated with them.

[37]See for example B.K. Cowgill, 'The Parlement of Foules and the Body Politic'. *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 74 (1975), 315-35, and P.A. Olson, 'The Parlement of Foules: Aristotle's Politics and the Foundations of Human Society', *Chaucer Review*, 24 (1990), 53-69. Both offer good accounts of the way in which political theory based on Aristotle can further our understanding of

Such theories stemmed ultimately from Aristotle, specifically his *Politics*, and were Christianised by a number of medieval thinkers, most importantly Thomas Aquinas. Professor Walter Ulman stresses the revolutionary change in political thought brought about by the renewed knowledge of Aristotle's *Politics* in western Christendom. He gives a useful summary of the main contributions that the *Politics* made to medieval political thought. Aristotle's political doctrine, according to Ulman,

culminates in the view of the State, the supreme community, as the product of nature. The State is, according to him, an issue of the law of nature - and not an issue of any convention or agreement. This law of nature that brings forth the State is proper to man himself. Man is born with the natural law which determines him to live in the State; neither civilised life nor the attainment of man's aspirations is possible outside the State.[38]

Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*. Cowgil attempts a useful explanation of the unity of the poem in terms of political theory, though his interpretation of the royal eagle as being responsible for the breakdown of order in the parliament is questionable. Olson considers the parliament as 'a picture of how people discover civic charity through institutions for "speaking together"', with specific reference to Aristotle's thought, 'and the implications of those institutions for deliberation which existed in Chaucer's own time', p. 56.

[38]Walter Ulmann, *Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages* (London, 1961), pp. 232-4. Ulman is commenting upon Bk. I ii of Aristotle's Politics (see *Aristotle: The Politics* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 55-61).

Ulman goes on to stress the 'naturalist' dimension of Aristotle's thinking:

> This naturalist feature pervades the whole thinking of Aristotle.
> 'Nature does nothing in vain'; 'Nature does nothing superfluous';
> 'Nature behaves as if it foresaw the future'; and so forth, statements of
> Aristotle which show the overriding importance he attaches to the
> working of nature in his system.[39]

These remarks reflect the importance of nature to Aristotelian political thought. The political institutions that man participates in are not inventions, created purely on the basis of a rationality that is divorced from natural sentiment. They are pre-determined by the nature of what man is, a creature with various physical needs that can only be met in a stable and just organic community. It is the rational capacity of man that enables him to discern what nature dictates for him:

> The further essential feature of Aristotelian doctrine is that the thinking
> and reasoning capacity of man is determined by the law of nature.
> Blind obedience to the natural proclivities is the hallmark of
> animalistic creatures and their communities; the reasoned
> transformation of the laws of nature into a common will is the

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[39]Ibid., pp. 232–4.

hallmark of man's State. Conscious willing, the reasoned *voluntas* of man is the expression of the law of nature.[40]

Reason and language are the tools by which men in discussion with one another are able to discover what nature demands of individuals as part of the community. The human individual, unlike other animals, is able to discover rationally, and consciously acknowledge, that which is naturally expected of him. The socially responsible individual is capable of rationally informed acts of will. Ulman explains this in terms that are particularly relevant to the *Parliament of Fowls*:

> The natural urge of animals to congregate, and the natural urge of men
>
> to form the State, stand in the same relation as the uncouth natural
>
> sound expressing pleasure and pain to language which expresses good
>
> or evil: the fixation of right and wrong is the result of human reasoning
>
> capacities, and right and wrong are determined by the human insight
>
> into, and understanding of, what nature itself demands. The *voluntas* of
>
> man is therefore intrinsically linked with the nature of man.[41]

It is natural for man to congregate and debate in order to determine what is best for the community, just as it is natural for certain animals to group together. This

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[40]Ibid., pp. 232-4.

[41]Ibid., pp. 232-4.

political theory can help us in our understanding of the relation of Nature to the language of the birds in the *Parliament*. Nature is the structuring principle of their language and their debate. First of all she instils in them the desire to mate. Secondly she facilitates their congregation by presiding over their parliament. Thirdly she gives them language that is appropriate to their particular natures. As I have stressed before, these birds are not straightforward substitutes for medieval human subjects, and their debate falls far short of the ideal for man because they are limited by their respective natures. They are like the animals on Nature's robe in Alanus's poem: unfallen and obedient to Nature, and their language is a direct expression of their inner selves. But Nature nevertheless enables some of their language to be elevated: she gives the most refined language to the birds that clearly represent the best in society. This is an ideal that is elitist, but which has a democratic function, in that it is something to which all rational subjects should aspire. Nature brings what Ulman calls 'uncouth natural sound expressing pleasure and pain', the 'Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek!' of the lower birds, into a direct contrast with the refined courtly discourse of the higher birds. It is their refined language that contains the best traditions of *fin amor*, and these traditions, specifically the respect for the free choice of the female and the ideal of long suffering of the suitors, that enable the three eagles to act with regard to 'commune profyt'. They consent to wait for another year so that all the other birds can choose a mate. This is their act of what Ulman terms 'reasoned *voluntas*'.

The *Parliament of Fowls* therefore presents a political lesson by showing how a parliamentary forum and debate is born out of the government of Nature. To this

extent it demonstrates the influence of Aristotelian political theory: transforming Alanus's Nature from a transcendent Platonic archetype to an immanent caretaker of the commonwealth, directly involved in the political life of her subjects. Her direct control is what enables the baser language of the birds ('murmer of the lewednesse') to be incorporated into a debate, structured along principles of a democratic kind:

> Nature, which that alwey hadde an ere
>
> To murmur of the lewednesse behynde,
>
> With facound voys seyde, 'hold youre tonges there!
>
> And I shal sone, I hope, a conseyl fynde
>
> Yow to delyvere, and fro this noyse unbynde:
>
> I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle
>
> To seyn the verdit for yow foules alle'. (519-25)

Political Practice: The Good Parliament of 1376.

Chaucer's decision to set his debating birds in the context of a parliament can, then, be seen as a direct reflection of his sense of political theory, drawn from Aristotle and combined with his reading of Alanus's *Complaint* and the *Dream of Scipio*. It might also, however, have had a more direct and immediate prompt as well, in his perception of the Parliament of his own time and culture. Specifically I want to

consider the Good Parliament of 1376, in which issues directly relevant to Chaucer's poem - including the sexual activity of the monarch - were actually the subject of debate and negotiation. The impact of this Parliament and its successful, though temporary, challenge to royal power, was profound, and signalled the growing power of the national Parliament in Chaucer's time.

The Good Parliament was called for the usual reason of raising money for war via taxation. It was the norm for this request to be put before the Commons on the behalf of the Lords, who would wait for the Commons to deliberate and approve the request as a matter of course. In this Parliament, however, the Commons decided to deny the request unless certain demands were met. Their principle contention was that the requested funds would not have been necessary if the king had not been so badly advised in his military campaigns.[42] Edward III, who was very ill at this time was represented by his son, Chaucer's patron John of Gaunt, who sat in his place. Sir Peter de la Mare was chosen as spokesman for the Commons and along with other members he was admitted into Gaunt's presence in order to present their objections. These initial meetings were unproductive and Peter de la Mere insisted that the entire Commons be admitted with him at further meetings. In the course of the subsequent meetings the Commons expressed their dissatisfaction with the royal court and its policies. Various courtiers were accused of corruption and of abusing their position and the Commons demanded their dismissal. The King's Chamberlain, William Latimer, and the Steward of the Household, John Neville, were both dismissed from

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[42]See George Holmes, *The Good Parliament* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 4-6.

office, and Richard Lyons, a powerful merchant, was imprisoned and stripped of his property. The other important dismissal was that of Alice Perres, the king's mistress, and it is here that the matters of the Good Parliament impinge upon issues considered in Chaucer's text.

Alice Perres was perceived by de la Mare and his group to be at the heart of the corruption of the royal court. At this point in his reign the once great Edward III was a shadow of his former self. His death mask, with one side of the mouth turned down, may provide direct evidence that he had suffered from one or more strokes. We are told by one chronicler that 'for more than a year before he died in 1377 he had a mind not much stronger than "a boy of eight"' and that 'He tended in his last years to agree with whatever those around him suggested'.[43] In this condition Edward was vulnerable to manipulation, and Alice Perres was allegedly exploiting his weakness for her own gain.

Since, too, those who needed to make their deeds official needed the King's consent, they can have had no choice but to approach him through the lively and acquisitive Alice. She therefore became not only powerful but rich, intensely unpopular and the subject of every kind of rumour.[44]

[43]Michael Packe, *Edward III* (London, 1983), p. 286.

[44]Ibid., p. 287.

In the course of the Good Parliament it was alleged that Perres's self-aggrandisement was costing the nation three thousand pounds a year. Her influence over the king was common knowledge, and was spoken of in sermons, tracts and other public discourse.[45] In 1374 her pretensions resulted in an outrageous apotheosis. Decked in royal jewels, some of which were Queen Philippa's, she was driven in a chariot as 'Lady of the Sun' from the tower to a tournament at Cheapside. Such a state of affairs was more than the Commons could bear and their request that she be dismissed from the royal court was successful.

The Good Parliament, then, took upon itself unprecedented powers to discuss matters which had hitherto been the personal, and indeed private, concerns of the king. It claimed the right to comment upon, and ultimately to determine, the sexual activities of the monarch, if they were perceived to be detrimental to the common good. In so doing it was exploring in the harsh glare of contemporary politics, the same issues which Chaucer was to discuss in the fictive realm of his avian assembly, where the 'common' birds took it upon themselves to offer advice to the royal eagle on how he should conduct his courting of the Tercel. In what sense, then, might Chaucer's poem be connected with the events of the Good Parliament? It may well have been the case that the events of the Good Parliament impressed themselves upon Chaucer, as a court poet, and suggested the form of a debate in which the sexual needs of individuals are measured against a wider social framework. In support of this idea we have already seen that Chaucer's father John was directly involved with

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[45]See G.R. Owst. *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1933) pp. 579-80.

Alice. He was one of a number that stood surety for Richard Lyons who was ordered 'not to harm Alice Perres or prevent her going about her own and the King's business'.[46] It is not unreasonable to suppose that the reason for this action revolved around Alice's ability to control the king. Lyons was a powerful merchant who profited from his association with the court, and Alice seems to have become an obstacle to his ambitions, presumably because they conflicted with her own. The details of this case, then, may also have helped to encourage Chaucer's interest in the events of the Good Parliament.

On a universal level the story of Alice Perres represents a situation common to numerous real governments. Many a king, minister or president has had their ability to govern questioned due to sexual impropriety. This is perhaps why Chaucer gives us the temple of Venus in the middle of the poem. He presents what is, in political terms, the dead end of costly and illicit sexual relations. The temple is an enclosed space of limited possibilities. All desire is self-consuming, running around the interior of the temple in the 'swogh' of 'sykes hot' without end. This sexual desire will not project life into the future, in contrast to the procreative effect of the desire that the fowls of the parliament experience. The figures who succumb to the temptations of Venus are presented as static, such as those who are painted on the temple walls (lines 284-92), and also Priapus.

The god Priapus saw I, as I wente,

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[46]Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), p.14.

Withinne the temple in sovereyn place stonde,

In swich aray as whan the asse hym shente

With cri by nighte, and with hys sceptre in honde.

Ful besyly men gonne assaye and fonde

Upon his hed to sette, of sondry hewe,

Garlondes ful of freshe floures newe. (253-59)

In describing Priapus, Chaucer departs from his otherwise faithful translation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, the source text for the temple scene. Firstly, Chaucer refers to Priapus as a god which Boccaccio does not. Instead of highest place he says 'sovereyn place' - the word 'sovereyn' introducing connotations of excellence as well as royalty. The euphemistic description of the god 'with hys sceptre in honde' further reinforces this intimation of royalty, at the same time as introducing a comic dimension that is not found in the *Teseida*. Emerson Brown Jr. states that the association of the sceptre with Priapus occurs in some iconographic traditions, but it is, nevertheless, a noteworthy departure from the literary source that Chaucer is generally faithful to.[47]

(G. Boccaccio. *Teseida*, trans. S. Battaglia (Firenza, 1938) v. 50- 66.)

Whatever the reasons for these innovations, the result is that Priapus is a much more significant figure here than in Boccaccio's text.

Venus and her immediate entourage are also stationary, as are the couple that plead on their knees (278). The sighs and the flames they inspire are the only dynamic elements in the temple, along with the activity that surrounds Priapus. All else is

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[47]Emerson Brown, 'Priapus and the *Parlement of Foulys*', *Studies in Philology* 72 (1975), 258-74.

arrested, cut off from the flow of life that surrounds the temple but which is very much part of the avian parliament. Succumb to desire as a political leader and you may well jeopardise the state by negating reason and exposing yourself to public shame: this is the moral of the temple for those who govern, and Paris, Cleopatra and Troylus are all examples of leadership compromised by desire. In the avian parliament the sexual needs of the royal eagle and his rivals are also in danger of jeopardising the common good. The three eagles all desire the same mate, a situation that must be resolved in order for the other birds to choose their partners. But, fortunately they respect the protocols of courtly love and the government of nature, enabling them to rise above the immediate demands of desire. This is at the very least an endorsement of the idea of parliament, as an institution that facilitates communication between different groups with different needs and different values.

Another significant variation between the temple description in the *Teseida* and Chaucer's poem is in Chaucer's description of a 'materialistic' Venus who is very much associated with finery. When we initially encounter Venus in Boccaccio's text she is naked, lying on a great bed, and we are told that she is beautiful. Her hair is golden and is fastened around her head without any tress. Minnis comments upon Chaucer's transference of the adjective 'golden' to apply to 'inanimate objects, her bed and the thread which binds up her hair'.[48] The effect of this is to make Venus seem more materialistic, especially since she is in much closer proximity to the figure of 'Richesse', and also with the addition of the 'coverchef of Valence' (272). It does

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[48]Minnis, p. 286.

not seem very godlike to have such concern for man-made luxuries. Specifying 'Valence' as the source of fine French cloth serves to tie Venus into a specific semiology of wealth that would have made her more real to a courtly audience. The nearest Chaucer comes to recognising anything like the perfect beauty of Boccaccio's Venus is when he describes her as 'noble' and 'hautayn of porte'. But the word 'noble' has connotations of rank, or superiority and does not necessarily accord with physical perfection. Also it is applied to her porter, which serves to rob her of any unique attributes. Boccaccio in contrast to this stresses that Venus's face is more beautiful by far than anyone else's. The overall effect of these changes is to make Venus more human than godlike, which means that she is less removed from the real world than is Boccaccio's goddess.

Having established that the *Parliament* has a universal applicability to the themes of politics and sex in the real world, it now becomes possible to see how a contemporary courtly audience might have interpreted Chaucer's Priapus and Venus as a direct allusion to Edward III and Alice Perres. Priapus is a significant figure in Chaucer's poem and the description of Venus herself follows on directly after him. In terms of presence these two are on a par with one another, although Priapus is primarily an image of embarrassment and failure, whereas Venus is a figure of influence in the affairs of erotic love (lines 278-9). Priapus is subject to Venus and her ways just as the decrepit King was. The use of the words 'sovereyn' and 'sceptre' could be allusions to his royal person. More specifically the reference to crowning with 'Garlondes' could be metaphorical. Chaucer may be talking about debate over

Edward's reputation. This would make some sense of the words 'assaye' and 'fonde' in line 257. Rather than being tautological in meaning this line and the next could be interpreted as 'they investigated and strove to put the garlands on his head'. The 'Garlondes' which are of 'sondry hewe' would therefore be the different stories that make up a reputation. This would also establish a thematic continuity with the *House of Fame*, which is a concerted exploration of the nature of reputation. Also, if Chaucer's Venus is interpreted as Alice Perrers (and her materialistic associations make this possible) the contradiction that lines 265-6 seem to present ('And on a bed of gold she lay to reste, / Til that the hote sonne gan to weste'), can be resolved.[49] Again the meaning may be metaphorical. We have already noted that Edward publicly paraded Alice through the streets of London as 'the Lady of the sun'. To refer to a monarch as the sun is a common enough metaphor. Thomas Walsingham does so when writing about the high point of Edward's reign in the *Historia Anglicana* 'Then folk thought that a new sun was rising over England'.[50] What Chaucer may therefore be saying in lines 265-6 is that Alice enjoyed her great privilege - lying on the 'bed of gold', until Edward's death, signified by 'the hote sun gan to weste'. Certainly the adjective 'hote' is used by Chaucer elsewhere to mean sexual passion (Knight's Tale

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[49]See R.A. Pratt, 'Chaucer's Use of the Teseida', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 62 (1947), 598-621. Pratt says that the idea of Venus not being able to cope with the 'hote sun' (266) contradicts the earlier statement that there was never 'grevaunce of hot ne cold' (205) in the the garden, as well as the assertion of perpetual daylight there (209-10).

[50]Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, ed. H.Riley, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 1863-4. I, p. 272.

l.1735, for example and Man of Law's Tale 1.586), and could be a reference to the passion of the king for his mistress, which he retained right until his death.

The *Parliament of Fowls*, then, offers a special lesson for later royal audiences. On the one hand it presents the resource of courtliness in matters of love as being the natural possession of the nobility. In this sense the poem affirms the elitism of the traditions of courtly love. But it also holds up to the nobility an example of what sexual desire, unstructured by traditional protocols, makes the individual look like: a duck, or worse still, a cuckoo. The representation of different attitudes to love in the form of different species, some noble and some ignoble, allows those at either end of the social spectrum to locate themselves somewhere on the scale, not by virtue of birth, but by virtue of conduct.

The poem therefore presents the highest ideals of *fin amor* in a positive light through the figures of the eagles. But, just as in the *Book of the Duchess*, the poem describes the potentially destructive outcome of a complete subjection to courtly love traditions through the descriptions of the temple of Venus. Chaucer's use of the impressionable narrator again has this time enabled him to revise the conventions of courtly love in terms of a political paradigm. The purpose of this is again to affirm the paramount importance of reason, this time directing the individual to act in accordance with the principle of 'commune profyt'; and Chaucer presents the courtly language and conduct of the higher birds as protocols that are conducive to this aim. This is in marked contrast to the example of 'synguler profit' (310), or personal

pleasure, encountered by the narrator in the temple of glass at the outset of the *House of Fame*. The emphasis upon reading and texts there led to the isolation of the narrator (and correspondingly negative social metaphors like the house of Rumour) because of his inability to know the truth of what they describe. The stress upon this epistemological dilemma precludes the possibility of any genuine integration of individuals, because language, which is fundamental to such an aim, could always be at variance with what people actually mean or intend, as Dido discovers through Aeneas's pursuit of 'synguler profit'. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, the narrator's reading has enabled the potentially subjective experience of love to be revised according to a politically informed ideal of social harmony. Consequently, just as the *Parliament of Fowls* is aesthetically more elegant than the *House of Fame* in terms of its form - the rhyme royal stanza enabling Chaucer to augment his narrative with a richer verbal pattern - it also offers a more decorous arrangement of visual metaphors. The avian parliament is presented to the reader as both a delightful innovation upon the traditions of *fin amor*, whilst also offering a political ideal of a more enfranchised courtly discourse; one that is socially beneficial, enabling the likes of geese and even cuckoos to comment upon the affairs of eagles. This ambitious attempt to integrate the concerns of royalty (eagles) with that of commoners (waterfowl) means that Chaucer is using courtly literary conventions in a very demanding way: requiring that his audience recognise which aspects of them are beneficial and which are not, as he extends the range of these conventions beyond the exclusive confines of the social elite. However, in Chaucer's next dream poem we

find the poet narrowing the range of these conventions once more to produce what is arguably the most courtly of all his dream visions: the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women.*

4.

The Legend of Good Women.

The late medieval nobleman, suggests Richard Firth Green, 'was not content merely to experience the ennobling power of love through the poet's imagination, he had himself to play the lover, to join with his fellows in an elaborate game of romantic make-believe.'[1] This 'love-play' was a social practice that helped provide cultural markers to further distinguish the aristocratic elite:

> The popularity of this game and the seriousness with which it was played probably owed quite as much to the general importance of ostentation and outward appearance in aristocratic circles as it did to any kind of heightened romantic sensibility...the ability to experience elevated emotion was seen as one of the differences between gentle and churl, so that it was very much in the interest of all who pretended to gentility not to be thought incapable of love.[2]

The Legend of Good Women is a poem that is more exclusively concerned with this elite and their 'play' than is the *Parliament of Fowls*. In that poem Chaucer

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[1]Richard. F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980), p. 115.

[2]Ibid., p. 115.

introduced the concept of 'commune profyt' through the narrator's reading of the *Dream of Scipio*, and then used courtly love conventions to suggest how society as a whole could achieve this political ideal. These ideas are still pertinent to the *Legend of Good Women*, but here Chaucer's political observations are more intimately connected to the way in which those who are of the court read and relate to the conventions of *fin amor*. It is therefore a poem very much engaged with what Green identifies as the way in which the aristocracy allowed literary conventions to inform their actual behaviour.

This blurring of literary and social conventions underlies what has been a central tenet of this thesis: that for Chaucer, writing the poetry of *fin amor* was in part to engage in a commentary upon actual social practices. The strict division between literary fiction and social reality would not have made sense to Chaucer and his audience: the boundaries between the two would only have become obvious if the poet set about making them so. Equally, the idea that the ideology of courtly love poetry could have an influence upon the way in which people thought and acted would have been a live issue for any poet writing within a courtly context, and conscious of the tenets of orthodox Christian morality. It is precisely to draw attention to the influence of literary conventions upon courtly behaviour, I would argue, that Chaucer develops a narrator, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, who is influenced by what he reads to an obviously absurd degree. The Marguerite poetry which provides him with the idea of devotion to the humble daisy is lived out in the Prologue to the point of excess. Then, in the course of the poem, specifically through

the device of the dream, the narrator is able to distance himself from the ideology of courtly love, before going on to write legends that further question some of the fundamental traditions of *fin amor*. As in the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer is conscious of the way in which literary forms provide paradigms that can condition both the behaviour and the view of reality of the courtly subject. By stressing the subjection of his narrator to literary ideals Chaucer offers his audience an opportunity to re-consider certain conventions of *fin amor*, and the way in which the individual might conform to them.[3]

The Courtly Narrator.

We derive our initial impression of the narrator from his rumination upon the limits of human experience and the authority of texts.

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[3]The notion of a 'narrator' requires some consideration with regard to the *Legend*. This is because in the course of the narrative the 'god of Love' seems to equate the narrator with the person of Chaucer by identifying him as the author of a number of Chaucer's works. What I want to maintain is that this association of the narrator with Chaucer's works does not necessarily mean that the narrator is a serious representation of the poet himself. Indeed it is quite the opposite, and if Chaucer is presenting himself in the poem, then it is only a version of himself - one that was sufficiently different to the author that was known to his audience, to have been perceived as such by them. This assuming of a mask or a role in the course of the poem is in itself akin to the courtly ideal of presenting one's self in a carefully cultivated and selective way. I therefore use the term narrator to indicate that what we are being presented with is still very much a literary construct, despite any direct links with the person of Chaucer.

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle

That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,

And I acorde wel that it ys so;

But, natheles, yet wot I wel also,

That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree

That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,

Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen

But as he hath herd seyd or founde it writen;

For by assay ther may no man it preve. (F, 1-9)

These thoughts establish clear thematic links with the *House of Fame* and alert us to the philosophical aspect of the narrator's personality. The narrator is conscious of the degree to which his knowledge is constituted by texts ('as he hath herd seyd or founde it writen'), as opposed to direct empirical experience. This is precisely the nature of the human condition that Fame was seen to exploit in the *House of Fame*, by determining how that which lies beyond empirical experience is made known to the individual. However, the narrator, having alerted us as to the extent to which our knowledge is dependent upon the authority of texts in the broadest sense, withdraws from a position of complete scepticism:

But God forbede but men shulde leve

Wel more thing then men han seen with ye!

Men shal not wenen every thing a lye

But yf himself yt seeth or elles dooth;

For God wot, thing is never the lasse sooth,

Thogh every wight ne may it nat ysee.

Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee! (F, 10-16)

The truth or falsity of things *per se* is not determined by their relationship to human observers. And our only access to any genuine but remote truths, especially those of the past, is through texts:

Than mote we to bokes that we fynde,

Thurgh whiche that olde thinges ben in mynde,

And to the doctrine of these olde wyse

Yeve credence, in every skylful wise,

That tellen of these olde appreved stories

Of holynesse, of regnes, of victories,

Of love, of hate, of other sondry thynges,

Of whiche I may not maken rehersynges.

And yf that olde bokes were aweye,

Yloren were of remembraunce the keye. (F, 17-26)

What the narrator is talking about here is a collective knowledge and collective 'remembrance', in the sense that these books are part of the individual's cultural inheritance. This knowledge is, as the narrator has previously stated, distinct from individual knowledge based upon personal empirical experience. Indeed these books are instrumental in binding individuals together by providing a common cultural resource. They help constitute the language that is the fabric of the narrator's culture: 'olde aproved storyes' suggests those texts that contain truths and lessons that are socially beneficial, apart from providing the individual with aesthetic pleasure.

The solipsistic implications of the *House of Fame*, then, are re-stated in lines 1-9 of the *Legend*. At first sight these lines might seem to define the limits of an individual's knowledge in a manner that opposes authoritative discourse, by saying in effect that what one has not seen is not to be regarded as true. This anticipates a modern view, in which the individual becomes conscious of the way in which authoritative discourse integrates separate selves into a society by establishing shared beliefs and values in relation to various 'unseen' truths. Seen thus the narrator's withdrawal from a position of extreme scepticism with regard to 'olde aproved storyes' might be taken by modern readers, to be a compromise of his individuality: by allowing himself to be conditioned by texts that are fundamental to the collective identity of society, and conducive to its aims, rather than to the aspirations and experience of the individual.[4] This would perhaps be true if the acceptance of the

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[4]Such a view is of course anachronistic in that no medieval subject would wish to subscribe to such an individualistic agenda in this abstract sense. But on the level of the particular, where certain desires or

status of these texts impoverished the individual intellectually; by prescribing ways of thinking and behaving, as well as prescribing dominant ideological forms that negate individual creativity and intellectual freedom. However, this does not seem to be the case with regard to the narrator. He finds that in accepting these texts on the terms that he has previously set out - 'Yeve credence, in every skylful wise' (i.e. read with discernment) - he finds a means of expressing his own individuality, in terms of a personal creative application of what he reads (in the context of a dream), whilst also acquiring a language and protocols that enable individuals who value 'olde appreved stories' to recognise the worth of approved social relationships, as described in the legends. It is just such a personal creativity that is presented in the Prologue. This is disguised, however, by the narrator assuming conventional characteristics that are derived from courtly literature, prior to the beginning of the dream.

The narrator, having begun the poem in a manner that demonstrates an inquiring and critical approach to reading, then goes on to display an uncritical and unreserved subjection to his 'bokes':

And as for me, though that I konne but lyte,

On bokes for to rede I me delyte,

And to hem yive I feyth and ful credence,

And in myn herte have hem in reverence

---

needs were felt to be compromised or resisted by 'authority,' then what appear to be individualistic desires were no doubt expressed, giving rise to the creation of such characters as the Wife of Bath.

> So hertely, that ther is game noon
>
> That fro my bokes maketh me to goon. (F, 29-34)

The narrator now seems to be describing a different orientation to 'bokes' on his part, by emphasising the pleasure that he derives from them. In doing so he seems to be abandoning the critical attitude that he had previously prescribed in the injunction to 'Yeve credence, in every skylful wis'. It is as if the narrator has outlined an ideal relation to texts, and then gone on to enact its opposite: a passive subjection to them. This is demonstrated by the fact that, even when he leaves his books, he is still very much subject to their influence in terms of his behaviour:

> ...whan that the month of May,
>
> Is comen, and that I here the foules synge,
>
> And that the floures gynnen for to sprynge,
>
> Farewel my bok and my devocioun! (F, 36-39)

Rather than abandon literary conventions for direct experience, he goes on to behave in the 'real world' in a manner explicitly drawn from literary examples. His language and behaviour are typical of the courtly lover as exemplified at the beginning of the *Romance of the Rose* (lines 45-102) - the prototype for many subsequent versions of this figure in French courtly literature. There the narrator dreams that he has just woken and prepares to go outside to listen to the singing birds, declaring that 'Hard is

the hert that loveth nought / In May whan al this mirth is wrought' (85-86 Chaucer's translation). As J.D. Burnley shows, there is more to the phrase 'hard heartedness' in fourteenth-century usage than is conveyed today, and understanding what is meant by this provides a valuable insight into the 'passive' attitude to literary conventions now being demonstrated by the narrator in the Prologue.[5] The term then carried implications for the intellectual faculties, which were, according to certain authorities, located in the heart. The relevance of this to Chaucer's narrator in the Prologue is that the critical intellect - that part of the mind that is capable of reason, and which is so ably demonstrated at the beginning of the poem - must give way to the receptive intellect, the passive aspect of the mind, in order for it to be completely open and receptive to the sights and sounds of Spring. If the narrator of the Prologue is to adopt the conventional role of the courtly lover as established in the *Romance of the Rose*, then he cannot retain a predominantly critical or rational attitude to the things that he describes, as this would subjugate sensual experience to rational thought. By suspending his critical attitude he allows himself to be governed by certain courtly literary ideals. And it is the influence of French Marguerite poetry that now comes to the fore, providing the imaginative focus of the Prologue in the form of the daisy:

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[5]See J.D. Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosopher's Tradition* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 102-8. Burnley surveys some of the theories of psychology and cognition that have an influence upon the meaning of the phrase 'hard heartedness' in the late fourteenth century. He then contrasts the figure of the tyrant in Chaucer's works with that of the lover, showing that the heart of the former is resistant to impressions from without, unlike the lover, whose heart is ultimately deeply impressed and governed by its impressions.

> Now have I thanne eek this condicioun,
>
> That, of al the floures in the mede,
>
> Thanne love I most thise floures white and rede,
>
> Swiche as men callen daysyes in our toun. (F, 40-43)

Marguerite poetry, developed by French poets, especially Machaut, Froissart, and Deschamps, constitutes a tradition in which the daisy is used as a central device, to present and explore various themes of *fin amor*. The narrator of the Prologue uses language in conformity with this tradition, and is unreserved in his panegyric of the daisy,

> To seen this flour, how it wol go to reste,
>
> For fere of nyght, so hateth she derknesse.
>
> Hire chere is pleynly sprad in the brightnesse
>
> Of the sonne, for ther yt wol unclose.
>
> Allas, that I ne had Englyssh, ryme or prose,
>
> Suffisant this flour to preyse aryght! (F, 62-67)

As he praises the daisy he demonstrates an acute awareness of his relation to the language that he is forced to use. It is a used or borrowed language, and the narrator

must follow in the footsteps of those earlier 'lovers' with whom that language originated:

> For wel I wot that ye han her-biforn
>
> Of makyng ropen, and lad awey the corn;
>
> And I come after, glenynge here and there,
>
> And am ful glad yf I may fynde an ere
>
> Of any goodly word that ye han left. (F, 73-77)

This metaphor expresses the poet's consciousness that he is working within a definite tradition, and because of this he recognises that the language that he uses is largely determined by others. The metaphor of 'glenynge' in an already harvested field and occasionally finding an 'ere / Of any goodly word that ye han left'. makes it clear that the writer follows in the footsteps of others. He is a later imitator of previously established forms, and the tradition within which he now operates is already well used:

> And thogh it happen me rehercen eft
>
> That ye han in youre freshe songes sayd,
>
> Forbereth me, and beth nat evele apayd. (F, 78-80)

The etymology of the word 'rehercen' is itself related to the previous metaphor of fields by virtue of the Old French root of the word. The word *hercer* means 'to harrow': to rake over soil in order to break it up.[6] For Chaucer, then, 'rehercen' still carries the sense of raking over language that has already been developed by others as his harvest metaphor demonstrates. Conceiving of his relation to language in such agricultural terms emphasises the narrator's subjection to previously established literary forms. This is appropriate for him when he wants to suggest that he is dependent upon the language of others, either as an author here in the Prologue, or as a reader in the *Parliament of Fowls*.[7] Indeed in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* the significance of the word 'reherce' is used by the narrator explicitly to divorce himself from the language that he relates, by asserting that it originates with the other pilgrims and not himself:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,

He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan

Everich a word, if it be in his charge,

Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,

Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,

Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe. (G.P., 736)

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[6] See *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. s.v. 'Rehearse'.

[7] 'For out of feldes. as men seyth, / Cometh al this newe corn from yer to yere, / And out of olde bokes, in good feyth, / Cometh al this newe science that men lere' (*Parliament of Fowls*, 22-25).

Where the word 'reherce' appears, then, especially in relation to metaphors that treat language as a field, or a crop, then the narrator is expressing his posterior relation to an original language. This pre-existing 'language field' constitutes the ideological territory within which the narrator of the Prologue operates. Given that he has already argued for the importance of books in determining our knowledge of things we cannot have experienced, he now seems to be surrendering himself to the influence of literary forms unreservedly. This means that it is not only our knowledge of history or the supernatural that is conditioned by texts, but the immediate and the real also. The narrator demonstrates how his consciousness is conditioned like this by transforming a humble daisy into an ideal that exceeds reality, in the tradition of Marguerite poetry. Pearsall provides a useful comment upon this process:

The movement seems to be from books to reality (nature, experience), but it becomes clear that the worship of the daisy (the personal experience of love and life) is truly communicated and understood only through what has been written of it.[8]

The narrator is allowing the language of French courtly poetry to condition his view of reality so that he demonstrates a passive subjection to the conventions that the language contains. This is similar to the description of the Black Knight in the *Book*

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[8]Pearsall, p. 194.

of the Duchess. His emotions were seen to be conditioned and reinforced by the language of French courtly poetry. Ultimately, however, because this situation merely confirmed the sin of *accidia* on the part of the Knight, the narrator in that poem offered some resistance to his subjection. In the Prologue here it is the fictional court of the god of Love and his reference to the narrator's own writings that encourage him to give up this degree of subjection to the poetry of *fin amor*. There are, however, differences in the degree to which the narrator is subject to convention in the F and G versions of the Prologue, which need to be addressed before we proceed further.

A Different Voice: The F versus the G text.

The contrast that is apparent between the more considered, philosophical tone of the narrator in the opening lines, and a figure whose behaviour is driven and shaped by literary experience, is particularly apparent in the F version of the text, when the narrator again refers back to his earlier thoughts on the authority of 'olde stories':[9]

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[9]The *Legend* exists in the form of twelve manuscripts and Thynne's printed edition. Only one of the twelve manuscripts, Gg (Cambridge University Library Gg 4.27, fol. 445-480v) is the 'revised' version of the Prologue (see *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 1178-79). In considering the differences between F and G I accept the widely held view that G is a later version revised by Chaucer himself. 'Some of the claustrophobically "court quality" of the Prologue can be illustrated from comparison with the later revision (Prologue G) that Chaucer did after the death of Queen Anne in 1394. Chaucer omits the lines referring to the Queen, but her death was not the occasion of the revision. Prologue G demonstrates

But wherfore that I spak, to yive credence

To olde stories and doon hem reverence,

And that men mosten more thyng beleve

Then men may seen at eye, or elles preve. (F, 97-100)

Instead of making plain the purpose of these thoughts, the narrator displays an apparent inability to pursue thought of a rational kind,

That shal I seyn, whanne that I see my tyme;

I may not al at-ones speke in ryme.

My besy gost, that thursteth alwey newe

To seen this flour so yong, so fressh of hewe,

Constreyned me with so gledy desir. (F, 101-105)

Whatever the daisy might represent to the narrator, it is an object that appeals to his 'busy gost', and which excites the feelings that spur on his narrative. 'Constreyned me with so gledly desir' gives the impression that the narrator is compelled to act as he does and cannot concentrate for the time being on other things. In the G text, by

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clear dissatisfaction with the looseness of structure of the original Prologue F and eliminates some of its more extravagant poetic posturing' (Pearsall, p. 192). Also see Quinn, p. 23-26 for a good review of the arguments for the priority of F and the *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 1060.

contrast, the narrator *is* able to return to his thoughts at the beginning and explain their significance with regard to the overall direction of his work:

> But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence
>
> To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
>
> Is for men shulde autoritees beleve,
>
> There as there lyth non other assay by preve.
>
> For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
>
> The naked text in English to declare
>
> Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
>
> As autours seyn; leveth hem if yow leste. (G, 81-88)

This narrator demonstrates a definite authorial intention, and a degree of control over the narrative which the narrator in the F text seems to lack. Whatever the reasons for a later revision of the poem, the narrator of the earlier F text is more obviously 'Constreyned' by 'desir', and therefore displays less rational control over his narrative. The narrator's subjection to the conventions of Marguerite poetry is so extreme in the F text that it might even be interpreted as a parody of the French models:

> And doun on knes anoon-ryght I me sette,
>
> And, as I koude, this fresshe flour I grette,

Knelynge alwey, til it unclosed was,

Upon the smale, softe, swote gras. (F, 115-18)

The narrator keeps his place, beside the daisy for the whole of the day, shifting a little

to assume a degree of comfort,

Adoun ful softely I gan to synke,

And, lenynge on myn elbowe and my syde,

The longe day I shoop me for t'abide

For nothing elles, and I shal nat lye,

But for to loke upon the dayesie,

That wel by reson men it calle may

The 'dayesye,' or elles the ye of day,'

The emprice and flour of floures alle. (F, 178-85)

This description, which drives home the impression of the narrator's captivity to the

flower, is absent in the much reduced account of devotion in the G text, where only

forty lines of panegyric are presented, in comparison to roughly a hundred and twenty

in F. These lines in F contain subject matter and themes of an especially courtly

significance, that further emphasise the narrator's subjection to the literary ideals of

the court. The first major difference between the F and G texts comes when the

narrator of the former begins to express a pseudo-religious devotion to the daisy:

To seen this flour ayein the sonne sprede,

Whan it upryseth erly by the morwe.

That blisful sighte softneth al my sorwe,

So glad am I, whan that I have presence

Of it, to doon it alle reverence. (F, 49-52)

Just as the flower is effected by the sun so that it opens, the narrator is effected by the flower, so that feelings of 'sorwe' give way to his being 'glad.' Having previously stated that the advent of the new season makes him give up his devotion to books, there is the sense of both daisy and narrator being moved within the great cosmic mechanism. And within it the narrator's actions are determined by affections, rather than by rationally informed choice. The narrator of the G text, in contrast, seems much less effected by the daisy, although he states his admiration for it. He, instead, goes out to see it without reporting any direct effects upon himself as a consequence. It is rather his relation to the language that he uses that he is concerned with - as expressed by the harvest metaphor, which is more prominent in G by virtue of the reduction of the text. Where the narrator of G states that 'Fayn wolde I preysen, if I coude aryght' (59) the narrator of F does not hold back - he asks simply that 'lovers that kan make of sentement...forthren me somwhat in my labour' (F, 69, 71). He thus identifies himself with a community of like minded persons, and also seems to enter into the courtly game of assuming allegiance to either the 'lef' or the 'flour,' two

separate parties in issues of love, (though he later attempts to deny any particular allegiance: 188-89):[10]

> Forbereth me, and beth nat evele apayd,
>
> Syn that ye see I do yt in the honour
>
> Of love, and eke in service of the flour
>
> Whom that I serve as I have wit or myght. (F, 80-83)

In G the narrator does not take sides, and refrains from becoming part of this particular game.

The subjection of the narrator of F to French literary forms is most clearly expressed by his claim to be 'nothing' without the daisy:

> She is the clerness and the verray lyght
>
> That in this derke world me wynt and ledeth.
>
> The hert in-with my sorwfull brest yow dredeth
>
> And loveth so sore that ye ben verrayly
>
> The maistresse of my wit, and nothing I. (F, 84-88)

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[10]The ballads that Eustache Deschamps sent to Chaucer with Sir Lewis Clifford were 'contributions to the fashionable courtly debate of the Flower and the Leaf, and may have played a part in encouraging Chaucer to introduce allusion to the cult in the Prologue' (Pearsall, pp. 130-31).

He then goes on to emphasise his passivity and his dependence upon the flower as the initiator of his thought and writing, through the metaphor of a musical instrument:

> My word, my werk ys knyt so in youre bond
>
> That, as an harpe obeieth to the hond
>
> And maketh it soune after his fyngerynge,
>
> Ryght so mowe ye oute of myn herte bringe
>
> Swich vois, ryght as yow lyst, to laughe or pleyne. (F, 89-93)

The daisy is the 'maistresse' of the narrator's 'wit'. He is 'nothing' in terms of agency, and must instead give voice to what is impressed upon him from without. Such extreme deference, although it might be explained as a parody of the Marguerite tradition, might also be explained in terms of the poet desiring to please a powerful patron, figured symbolically as the inspirational daisy. Whether or not this is so, however, I do feel that Chaucer wants the narrator of the F text to demonstrate the profound effect of courtly literature providing paradigms that condition his view of reality - something that is reduced in G by these passages being removed. Another major difference between F and G is the treatment of the song of the 'foules.' The narrator in F reports the words of a song that he hears the birds singing,

> This was hire song: 'The foweler we deffye,
>
> And al his craft.' And somme songen clere

Layes of love, that joye it was to here...

In hire delyt they turned hem ful ofte,

And songen, 'Blessed be Seynt Valentyn,

For on his day I chees yow to be myn,

Withouten repentyng, myn herte swete!' (F, 138-40, 144-47)

The idea of birds singing 'Layes of love' is by no means exceptional according to the conventions of courtly love poetry. However, in the G text the narrator hears the birds singing in the dream, rather than prior to it, which effects our impression of the narrator. We are aware that the narrator of F is being overtly literary and is conforming to a particular set of literary ideals in his conscious state. so that what he reports is obviously divorced from reality. In G, however, because this song is reported in the context of a dream, some element of realism is retained, because dreams by their very nature are able to incorporate the fantastic. The experience of the birds in F also involves more of the recognisable conventions of *fin amor*:

Al founde they Daunger for a tyme a lord,

Yet Pitee, thurgh his stronge gentil myght,

Forgaf, and made Mercy passen Ryght,

Thurgh innocence and ruled Curtesye. (F, 160-63)

The obstacle of 'Daunger' (disdain) on the part of the beloved, towards the designs of the lover, and the remedy of the work of 'Pitee' and 'Mercy' are typical of the personifications of courtly literature.[11] Again, such characteristically courtly conceptions are removed in G. There the narrator reports their song, focusing upon the naturalness of their physical union, and concluding with the remark 'This song to herkenen I dide al myn entente, / For-why I mette I wiste what they mente'. (G, 139-40). To say 'I listened carefully to this song because I dreamed that I could understand it' begs the post-script 'but of course such understanding only occurs in dreams'. And it is precisely this distinction between the stuff of literary fantasy and the stuff of reality that the narrator of the F text sees no need to distinguish, as he submits unreservedly to the conventions of courtly literature. The alterations in G have the effect of making the narrator seem both less irrational and a little more distanced from the conventions of courtly love poetry. Chaucer has lessened the difference in tone between the voice of a narrator who can wax philosophical upon the significance of 'olde bokes', and then suddenly appear to be so overtly 'constreyned' by 'desir'. These changes may be born out of a change in the poet's actual relation to his courtly audience.[12] When the dream actually begins in the Prologue, and the narrator's precise relation to the ideology of courtly poetry is scrutinised, it is the narrator of F who

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[11]See *Troilus* 2.1376 and *Romance of the Rose* B, 3130 and 3509.

[12]See William Quinn. *Chaucer's 'Rehersynges'* (Washington, 1994), p. 23-59. Quinn argues that the revisions in G represent a move away from the reading of the poem to a courtly circle by the poet, to the written dissemination of his work to a diverse audience.

seems to have departed the most from the critical poet that the god of Love remembers so well.

Self-focusing in the Court of 'Love,': Remembering One's True Self.

When the dream vision begins, the narrator finds himself at the court of the god of Love, and it is here that the business of writing and imaginative creation is finally brought to the fore. The narrator now encounters a fictional court that forces a recognition and consideration of his relation to the values and themes of courtly love literature. It emerges that he is in fact the author of texts that are an offence to the values of Love. This alters the narrator's relation to those values once more. This level of awareness of the narrator's relation to the ideology of courtly love is something that he previously seemed to lack, as he demonstrated the profound influence of literary conventions upon his thought and behaviour. There is the sense, therefore that the narrator had forgotten himself, and that the 'bokes' that he has written prove to be the 'keye' 'of remembraunce' of his former self. In the course of the dream this prior self, that is potentially critical of the ways of Love (and therefore of the conventions of courtly love poetry) re-emerges. This critically aware narrator is then related to the legends that follow, in such a way as to invite the reader to ask what exactly his intentions are: is he affirming or questioning the ways of Love as he carries out his prescribed penance?

As the dream begins the narrator describes the god of Love and his queen. The different appearances of these two figures correspond with the different feelings that they ultimately come to inspire in the narrator. The queen is an imaginative development of impressions made upon the narrator in the day by the daisy:

> For al the world, ryght as a dayesye
>
> Ycorouned ys with white leves lyte,
>
> So were the flowrouns of hire coroune white.
>
> For of o perle fyn, oriental,
>
> Hire white coroune was ymaked al;
>
> For which the white coroune above the grene
>
> Made hire lyk a daysie for to sene,
>
> Considered eke hir fret of gold above. (F, 218-225)

This imaginative extension of daytime experience into the realm of dream is both aesthetically effective and also realistic. The fact that what is now described occurs within the context of a dream has the paradoxical effect of making what follows seem closer to our experience of reality, despite the fantastic nature of what is reported. The highly affected reporting of the narrator prior to the commencement of the dream was obviously artificial. However, we the audience know what it is to encounter fantastic transformations of the common and familiar in our own dreams. The dream device thus enables the author to adopt a pro-active attitude towards those conventions that

he was previously subject to. The daisy is transformed into a figure through whom the narrator can clearly express his relationship to the conventions of *fin amor*, as embodied in the person of Love. The god of Love is described by the narrator as an awesome figure:

> Yclothed was this mighty god of Love
>
> In silk, enbrouded ful of grene greves,
>
> In-with a fret of rede rose-leves,
>
> The fresshest syn the world was first bygonne.
>
> His gilte heer was corowned with a sonne
>
> Instede of gold, for hevyness and wyghte.
>
> Therwith me thoghte his face shoon so bryghte
>
> That wel unnethes myghte I him beholde. (F, 226-33)

The brilliance of this figure makes it uncomfortable for the narrator to look upon his face, and it is a brilliance that is ambiguous when it comes to be associated with angelic properties a little further on:

> And in his hand me thoghte that I saugh him holde
>
> Twoo firy dartes as the gledes rede,
>
> And aungelyke hys wynges saugh I sprede. (F, 234-36)

There are various biblical associations that pertain to this description. First of all the idea of a face shining brightly is found in Matthew (Ch.17 v.2) where the author tells us that Christ's 'face did shine as the sun'. This brilliance signifies divinity and is the light of God's holiness. However, brilliance in the Bible is also associated with angels generally and Satan specifically, his name Lucifer meaning 'bright one'. In 2 Corinthians (Ch., v.14) Paul writes of the deceitfulness of those who mislead with special reference to Satan's brilliance: 'And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light'. These particular biblical associations of brilliance with evil, are reinforced by the description of the 'firy dartes' in the god of Love's hand; since in Ephesians (Ch. 6, v.16) Paul writes of the faithful 'Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked'. If one bears in mind the great amount of harm and destruction that befalls those who come under the influence of Love in the legends that follow, it is not hard to see how these Satanic overtones might come to be applied to the god of Love in Chaucer's mind. If this is so, then the unease that the narrator feels in his presence is morally justified:

> And al be that men seyn that blynd ys he,
>
> Algate me thoghte that he myghte se;
>
> For sternely on me he gan byholde,
>
> So that his loking dooth myn herte colde. (F, 237-40)

I believe that Chaucer is expressing the opposition between the god and the narrator in terms that alert the Christian reader to the ultimate destruction that this god can bring about. It is true that Love need not necessarily cause tragic death, but in the legends that follow this is often the case. Seen thus the opposition between the narrator and Love is a crucial element in the process of his emergence from the influence of this god and the ideology that pertains to him. It is in fact Love himself who articulates the nature of this opposition in the course of the poem, by reference to the narrator's works.

The narrator reverts his attention to the more comforting sight of the queen. There are few ambiguities in his description of her appearance. She is 'So womanly, so benigne, and so meke' that 'Half hire beaute shulde men nat fynde / In creature that formed ys by kynde' (F, 243-46). The narrator of F then performs a 'song in preysyng of this lady fre', (F, 248-269). In G this song is performed by the women that accompany the god and his queen, which again makes the narrator of G seem a comparatively more reserved figure, less swept along by what he sees. However, the narrator's passionate admiration for the queen in F is in part a consequence of his feelings toward the god of Love, since her presence is a remedy to that fear,

> For, nadde comfort ben of hire presence,
>
> I hadde ben ded, withouten any defence,
>
> For drede of Loves wordes and his chere. (F, 278-80)

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The great procession ('swich a traas') of women that accompany the god and his queen surround her and sing her praises. After this they sit down and maintain silence. The narrator then joins them, 'I, knelying by this flour, in good entente' (F, 308). His presence is then acknowledged by the god of Love:

> This god of Love on me hys eyen caste,
>
> And seyde, 'Who kneleth there?' And I answerde
>
> Unto his askynge, whan that I it herde,
>
> And seyde, 'Sir, it am I,' and com him ner. (F, 312)

As the god of Love continues we realise that the narrator's fear of him is not unfounded:

> ...Quod he 'What dostow her
>
> So nygh myn oune floure, so boldely?
>
> Yt were better worthy, trewely,
>
> A worm to neghen ner my flour than thow.' (F, 315-18)

The narrator is clearly unwelcome at Love's court, and though there is a humorous dimension to Love's description of him as a 'worm', the sense of alienation, that the narrator had already expressed in terms of his dread concerning the appearance of Love, is enhanced. This sense of alienation and fear is essential in opening up a divide

between the two which is conducive to critical distancing on the part of the narrator. Love himself makes clear the reason for his dislike of the narrator:

> And thow my foo, and al my folk werreyest,
>
> And of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyest,
>
> And hynderest hem with thy translacioun,
>
> And lettest folk from hire devocioun
>
> To serve me, and holdest it folye
>
> To serve Love...   (F, 322-27)

The 'translacioun' in question is the *Romance of the Rose*, and Love's interpretation of this text provides us with a clear picture, from Love's perspective, of where the narrator stands in relation to the ideology of courtly Love. It seems that the conventional submission of the narrator to the ideology of courtly love, prior to the start of the dream, was a strategy employed by Chaucer, in order to underline his previous relation to that ideology as described by the god of Love.

> ...Thou maist yt nat denye,
>
> For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose,
>
> Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,
>
> That is an heresye ayeins my lawe,
>
> And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe. (F, 327-31)

Questions might be asked at this point concerning the god of Love's ability to interpret texts. After all, is it not characteristic of Chaucer's writings that they defy the kind of reductive interpretations that are here being offered by Love? Lisa Kiser, for example suggests that the god is not capable of interpreting Chaucer's writings.

> The God of Love's specific comments and judgements about Chaucer's poetry reveal him to be an incompetent literary critic, with assumptions so confused that they interfere not only with the correct interpretation of Chaucer's own corpus but, more seriously, with the accurate perception of human experience itself.[13]

I disagree, however, with such a view, and regard Love's interpretation of the narrator's writings as establishing very clearly where they stand, in broad terms, in relation to the ideology of courtly love. This is an ideology that Love is interior to, and although he is of course ignorant of the place of that ideology in the context of medieval thought generally, (in terms of its ultimate moral significance) he is in a position to evaluate how these texts treat that ideology on the most immediate level. His interpretations therefore, can be taken as a kind of touchstone in interpreting the Prologue and the legends as a whole. The god of Love also regards *Troilus and*

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[13]Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca and London, 1983), p. 71.

Criseyde as an affront to his ways, and here he is quite specific about the way in which this text offends him:

> And of Creseyde thou hast seyd as the lyste,
>
> That maketh men to wommen lasse triste,
>
> That ben as trewe as ever was any steel. (F, 332-34)

The idea that Chaucer simply wants to defame women in *Troilus* is clearly a misreading of the poem. In the epilogue Chaucer makes it clear that it is not only women whose constancy is to be doubted: 'N'y sey nat this al oonly for thise men, / But moost for women that bitraised be / Thorugh false folk - God yeve hem sorwe, amen! (1779-81). If Love interprets the poet's opposition as primarily an attack on women's constancy, then, he has missed the more fundamental way in which the poem opposes his ways. This is expressed in the epilogue, in the form of a rejection of worldly vanities in general, as realised by Troilus's ghost upon its ascent into the heavens:

> And in hymself he lough right at the wo
>
> Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste,
>
> And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
>
> The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
>
> And sholden al oure herte on heven caste;

And forth he wente, shortly for to telle,

Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle. (V, 1821-27)

It is clear that 'al oure werk that foloweth so / The blynde lust' includes much of what Love stands for; and it is in this broad sense that the *Troilus* is an affront to the ideology of courtly love. It would perhaps be a complete disruption of the Prologue if Chaucer were to restate this opposition in such blunt terms here in Love's court. In a sense such an opposition is obvious and can therefore seem prosaic when it is presented in the context of *fin amor* poetry. Instead the carefully managed tension between the god of Love and the narrator affords an opportunity for sustained courtly debate. By having Love focus upon the portrayal of women, Chaucer is able to maintain an opposition between the narrator and Love, in such a way as to sustain the courtly nature of the discourse. The protagonists can therefore argue finer points in a framework of courtliness, rather than being polarised by the unbridgable oppositions that exist between Christian moral philosophy and the ideology of courtly love. The exemplar of this courtliness is the figure of Alceste.

The 'ryghtwis lord': Alceste's Courtly Counsel as a Remedy to Love's Anger .

Love is incensed at the narrator's writings and swears 'If that thou lyve, thou shalt repenten this / So cruelly that it shal wel be sene!' (339-40). He is barely able to contain himself and the previous sense of calm and harmony in his court is

profoundly disturbed. It is now that Alceste restores certain principles of courtliness to the narrative. She appeals to the fundamental principle of 'curtesye' in order to contain the anger of Love:

> ... God, ryght of youre curtesye,
>
> Ye moten herken yf he can replye
>
> Agayns al this that ye have to him meved.
>
> A god ne sholde nat thus be agreved,
>
> But of hys deitee he shal be stable,
>
> And therto gracious and merciable. (F, 342-47)

Alceste is encouraging temperance on the part of her spouse. This is a quality that is essential for both courtiers and their ruler if reasoned debate is to take place in the court. In the *Book of the Courtier,* for example, Lord Ottaviano, speaking of temperance, states

> Thus this virtue does not compel the mind, but infusing it by very gentle means with a vehement belief that inclines it to righteousness, renders it calm and full of rest, in all things equal and well measured,

and disposed on every side by a certain self-accord which adorns it with a tranquillity so serene that it is never ruffled.[14]

Ottaviano goes on to say that 'This virtue, then, is very perfect and especially befitting to princes, because from it spring many others'. Love is by no means a conventional ruler by virtue of the fact that he is a god, but he is nonetheless presented as a recognisable princely figure (Alceste later equates him with the figure of a 'kyng'). It is possible, then, for us to see just how far his manner departs from the ideals of courtliness by virtue of Castiglione's appreciation of temperance. Although it is perhaps no surprise that a god who inspires the complete overthrow of reason in lovers is himself predisposed to be passionate rather than rational, we are still able to appreciate the exemplary nature of Alceste's courtliness by comparison. The principles that she appeals to are the fruits of temperance that enable some form of debate to take place. She initially ascribes the qualities of being 'stable', 'gracious', and 'merciable' as proper to the 'deitee' of a 'god'. However, in the course of her speech it becomes clear that her counsel to Love is of the kind that a courtier might give to a king or prince. Alceste advises Love by introducing some possible reasons for the narrator's intentions being unfairly represented by the texts in question. As she does so she demonstrates a knowledge of the realities of courtly experience, and also of its culture. First of all she draws attention to the prejudice that might have been

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[14]*The Book Of the Courtier By Count Baldesar Castiglione*, trans., Leonard Eckstein Opdycke (New York, 1903), Bk. IV, pt. 17. p. 257.

encouraged by those seeking to promote their own advancement to the detriment of the poet:

> This man to yow may falsly ben accused
>
> That as by right him oughte ben excused.
>
> For in youre court ys many a losengeour,
>
> And many a queynte totelere accusour,
>
> That tabouren in youre eres many a sown,
>
> Ryght after hire ymagynacioun,
>
> To have youre daliance, and for envie. (F, 350-56)

What Alceste is drawing attention to here is something that has already been touched upon by Chaucer in the *House of Fame*. In that poem the uncertainty and instability of courtly life, that are a direct result of texts being divorced from the individual's experience of reality, is represented by the instability of the society contained in the whirling house of Rumour, the source of the 'tydynges' that fly up to Fame's palace. The truth concerning events and people is divorced from what is spoken about them, so that they can become misrepresented. Such concerns were of obvious concern to any courtier that might come to be misrepresented to his lord. The effect of misinformation upon the government of princes is consequently another chief concern of Castiglione:

...among the many faults which to-day we see in many of our princes,

the greatest are ignorance and self-esteem. And the root of these two

evils is none other than falsehood: which vice is deservedly hateful to

God and to men, and more injurious to princes than any other; because

they have greatest lack of that whereof they most need to have

abundance - I mean of someone to tell them the truth and to put them

in mind of what is right...[15]

Walter Map provides an earlier example of such concerns about the ability of the head

of the court to know the truth, making his point through a witty inversion of the

presumed hierarchical relation of the members of a household:

The truth is that every house has one servant and many masters. The

head serves everyone; those by whom he is served are to be reckoned

as masters. Our court, I take it lives in a more perilous whirl than other

households, fluctuating and variable. Yet I dare not in any wise lay this

to the charge of our king, for in a hall (palace) that holds many

thousand diverse minds there must be much error and much confusion;

neither he nor any other man can remember the name of each

individual, much less know their hearts; and no one can entirely

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[15]Ibid., Bk. IV. pt. 6. pp. 247-8.

control a household whose thought and speech - I mean the speech of
their hearts - he knows not.[16]

Map draws attention to the epistemological limitations of the ruler in a manner that is
synonymous with Chaucer's concerns in the *House of Fame*, where the limitations of
personal experience coincide with the boundaries of truth. This leads to descriptions
of instability that emerge in the writings of both Map and Chaucer. The concerns that
are being expressed by Alceste therefore relate to the general epistemological
observations made at the start of the Prologue: knowledge is very much dependent
upon texts in the context of the court. The words of a 'losengeour' may also provide
knowledge of what the individual can never empirically verify, but in a way that
might jeopardise the standing of courtiers and the harmony of the court. Alceste then
quotes Dante on the subject:

> Envie ys lavendere of the court alway,
>
> For she ne parteth, neither nyght ne day,
>
> Out of the hous of Cesar; thus seith Dante;
>
> Whoso that gooth, algate she wol nat wante. (F, 358-61)

Alceste here demonstrates that she is in touch with the philosophy of real courts,
which is another example of her function as a bridge between fantasy and reality in

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[16]Map, Dist.i, c.10. p. 25.

the text. Just as she is an imaginative extension of the narrator's experience of a real daisy, seen through the paradigm of Marguerite poetry, she is also a point of contact with the real practice and concerns of courtliness: demonstrating a knowledge of what real commentators have written on the subject. She is therefore attempting to bring the literary court of Love into line with real courts. Alceste then goes on to point out that the narrator may have written the texts in question 'gessyng no malice, / But for he useth thynges for to make; / Hym rekketh noght of what matere he take' (F, 363-65). This particular defence would only be relevant if the texts were indeed an offence to Love's ways, rather than their contents being twisted in interpretation by Love's advisors. This is also true of her next two points: 'Or him was boden maken thilke tweye / Of som persone, and durste yt nat withseye; / Or him repenteth outrely of this' (F, 366-68). These are both versions of the same 'yes they are an offence, but...' type of argument. She then states that, where translations are concerned the poet is not to be held accountable for the implications of the subject matter:

> He ne hath nat doon so grevously amys
>
> To translaten that olde clerkes writen,
>
> As thogh that he of malice wolde enditen
>
> Despit of love, and had himself yt wroght. (F, 369-72)

Alceste, then, demonstrates a versatile and reasoned approach to the problems of interpreting courtly literature. She is aware of context, and the particular

consequences that context has for the interpretation of courtly narrative. Her reasoned counsel is, I believe, a clue to the particular pressures that Chaucer was conscious of when writing for a courtly audience. In particular this last point suggests the obligation that a poet has to treat of subjects that his audience are interested in, even though he may in fact have reservations about that subject matter. The poet is not free to express his personal intentions without conforming to some very specific and real demands of his audience and their social context. The unfavourable interference of scheming courtiers in interpreting his work, the demands of working within established conventions (using 'thynges for to make'), and patronage, are all major factors that the poet is forced to take into account before he can establish his own artistic agenda. By having imaginary figures debate the intention and reception of his works in the context of a dream court, Chaucer is able to raise some awareness of this situation on the part of his audience.

Alceste now goes on from her defence of the narrator, to a more general consideration of the 'ryghtwis lord.' As she does so, her counsel grows more akin to the mirror of princes genre:

> This shoolde a ryghtwis lord have in his thoght,
>
> And nat be lyk tirauntz of Lumbardye,
>
> That han no reward but at tyrannye. (F, 375)

It is at this point that the advice given by Alceste may well have had special historical significance. David Wallace reminds us that 'In late fourteenth-century England, the destructive power of Lombard tyranny was more real, more apparent and intelligible as a political phenomenon, than the incipient promise of Florentine humanism'.[17] Alceste's advice therefore represents an engagement with actual historical circumstances that would have been especially pertinent to a courtly audience at that time. Her advice is clued into the real world of fourteenth-century politics, and it may well be the case that Chaucer felt a need for such advice to be transmitted through the poem to certain elements of his courtly audience. This may have been directed at either the king himself, or more likely to other associates of the court as a model for their role in encouraging an atmosphere of temperance. If they should be called upon to advise in any capacity, then Alceste could provide an example of how this might be done. However, it should be noted that there is an element of wifely intimacy in the way that she drives certain points home:

> For he that kynge or lord ys naturel,
>
> Hym oghte nat be tiraunt ne crewel
>
> As is a fermour, to doon the harm he kan. (F, 376-78)

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[17]David Wallace. *Chaucerian Polity, Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford, 1997), p. 32.

It would be quite something for any courtier to warn his prince of the undesirable nature of tyranny, and it would certainly be going too far to then compare the office of a kyng to that of a tax collector ('fermour'), even if only as a cautionary reference. Alceste continues her advice by telling the god how he should think about his subjects:

> He moste thinke yt is his lige man,
>
> And is his tresour and his gold in cofre.
>
> This is the sentence of the Philosophre,
>
> A kyng to kepe his liges in justice;
>
> Withouten doute, that is his office. (F, 379-83)

Here she displays acquaintance with political philosophy by quoting Aristotle, and also, makes the link between the fictional court of Love and courts in reality, when she compares Love to a 'kyng' who should 'kepe his liges in justice.' We recognise that she is an exemplar of courtly prudence with regard to the theme of good government. Her advice to the head of the court involves an appreciation of his relationship to his lords,

> Al wol he kepe his lordes hire degree,
>
> As it ys ryght and skilful that they bee
>
> Enhaunced and honoured, and most dere

For they ben half-goddes in this world here. (F, 384-87)

By comparing lords to gods, Alceste further blurs the distinction between the fictional

court of a god of Love, and the real courts of lords and kings. This exhortation by

Alceste that the status of lords be respected may well be inspired by recent political

events in England at this time. Chaucer sat in the 'Wonderful Parliament' of October

1386 as Knight of the Shire for Kent.[18] Here he saw at first hand the tensions that

were developing between the royal court and some of the great magnates of the realm.

The grievances had been mounting on the part of nobles such as the Duke of

Gloucester, who saw privileges being given by Richard to those who, in their view,

did not deserve them. The ennobling of Michael de la Pole, a commoner, and the

granting of the title of Duke of Ireland to Robert de Vere were two such cases in

point. Richard's autocratic manner and reliance upon a small number of chosen

advisers, to the annoyance of other lords, coupled with his lack of appetite for war,

something that the aristocracy regarded as crucial to both their wealth and self-image,

led to a direct confrontation in the Wonderful Parliament. There lords seeking reform

of the royal court and the removal of its most unpopular member, de Vere, achieved

some success. It is possible to see Alceste's remarks concerning a king's relation to

his lords as being directly born out of the situation that Chaucer's witnessed in this

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[18]See Pearsall, pp. 198-202.

parliament. If we accept the possible date of composition as some time between 1386 and 1388, then these events would certainly have been fresh in Chaucer's mind.[19]

Alceste continues and includes other members of society in her guidelines for the 'ryghtwis lord':

> Yit mot he doon bothe ryght, to poore and ryche,
>
> Al be that hire estaat be nat yliche,
>
> And han of poore folk compassyoun.
>
> For loo, the gentil kynde of the lyoun:
>
> For whan a flye offendeth him or biteth,
>
> He with his tayl awey the flye smyteth
>
> Al esely; for, of hys genterye,
>
> Hym deyneth not to wreke hym on a flye,
>
> As dooth a curre, or elles another best. (F, 387-96)

What Alceste means by 'poore folk' is not entirely clear, and it may signify commoners in general including Chaucer's own class, the members of which were considerably better off than most. But, again the bluntness of her teaching at times -

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[19] 'If it is granted that Queen Ann is being referred to in F Prologue 496-7, then the poem must post-date her arrival in England in early 1382. Alceste's allusion to Troilus and Criseyde would seem to indicate that the Prologue could not have been earlier than 1385, though as M.C. Shaner and A.S.G. Edwards note, it is perfectly possible that some of the legends themselves were composed before that date. These editors would place the F Prologue between 1386 and 1388.' Minnis. p. 328.

'Hym deyneth not to wreke hym on a flye, / as dooth a curre, or elles another best' (F, 395-96) - is suggestive of a wifely intimacy. This means that she can go further in her desire to curb the anger of her husband, which in turn serves to demonstrate the extent to which he departs from the ideal that she describes. She concludes her thoughts upon the court and government by reminding her husband of his true nature - or at least the ideal to which he should aspire:

> In noble corage ought ben arest,
>
> And weyen every thing by equytee,
>
> And ever have reward to his owen degree. (F, 397-99)

As an exemplary wife Alceste is an ideal figure to stress the qualities that her 'ryghtwis lord' should possess. The fact that she needs to do so implies that he is lacking in them. She is an exemplar of true courtliness and a critic of 'tyrannye.' The legendary figure of Alceste, who offered herself as a sacrifice so that her husband might not die at the appointed time, is suitably qualified - in terms that come as close to the Christian ideal as is possible for a figure of the classical past - to lecture the head of this fictional court at length. And because of the nature of this fictional court she is able to do so in a manner that is more concerted, and with more freedom than might otherwise be appropriate. Thus Chaucer is able to utilise the narrative strategy of a fictional court in the context of a dream, to offer some choice advice to anyone in his audience who might also be in a position of authority.

As in the *Parliament of Fowls,* then, there is a political element embedded in the framework of a courtly dream vision. Chaucer is able to recognise the latent political content of the literature of *fin amor,* and develop its significance as an ostensible theme, echoing the mirror of princes tradition in the counsel of Alceste. This political dimension is born out of the fundamental issues of power and freedom in the relationship between lover and beloved, and the social context of their relationship. If the lover or beloved have become subject to the power of Love, then all of the other relationships that they are part of are effected. This is because certain relationships, such as the individual's responsibility to a governing body or monarch, involves principles of reason and consent on the part of individuals; and these are inhibited or denied by the passion of erotic love. In political terms the challenge to the autonomy of the individual, which is the net effect of Love's influence, has implications for society as a whole. In *Troilus and Criseyde,* for example, this is made most apparent when Troilus is prepared to jeopardise the security of his own city, because he cannot accept the decision made by the parliament that Criseyde should go to her father. The representation of a recognisable political institution - the parliament - and the inability of the lover to consent to be subject to it, is a consequence of the primary subjection of the individual to the authority of Love, which inhibits reason and makes the lover subject to desire. Troilus is still able to reason, but his reasoning is governed by the question of what is best for his relationship with Criseyde in light of the parliament's decision. He will willingly disobey its ruling, provided that this does not cause her to turn against him:

Love hym made al prest to don hire byde,

And rather dyen than she sholde go;

But Resoun seyde hym, on that other syde,

'Withouten assent of hire ne do nat so,

Lest for thy werk she wolde be thy fo,

And seyn that thorugh thy medlynge is iblowe

Youre bother love, ther it was erst unknowe.' (IV, 162-68)

That this is 'Resoun' made subject to passion becomes clear when Troilus concludes

that, if his beloved will consent, then he will go against the authority of any

parliament:

And whan that she hadde seyd hym hire entente,

Therafter wolde he werken also blyve,

Theigh al the world ayeyn it wolde stryve. (IV, 173-75)

In the *Parliament of Fowls* the parliament is a successful mechanism in providing a

peaceful solution to a situation of deadlock amongst the eagles. But it is juxtaposed

with the temple of Venus, where rationally informed actions and debate are not to be

found. The temple contains characters such as Cleopatra and Dido who will reappear

in the Legends, and who are depicted in them as politically unwise. What Alceste

promotes in the Prologue, then, is an exemplary courtliness that encourages an atmosphere of temperance, within which there is space for reason to operate. By encouraging an adherence to courtly ideals of government she is able to restrain the natural effect of Love, which is to elevate passion over reason. To the eyes of a modern reader issues that pertain to gender might be the most obvious source of political debate in the poem. But for Chaucer's audience any powerful emotive force, such as that which Love encourages, inevitably has political consequences. This is because medieval society demanded deference to authority on the part of its members in many instances, at the expense of individual desire. In the legends that follow characters such as Cleopatra, Dido and Thisbe might appear to be exercising individual freedom, by pursuing the goal of personal happiness and acting in opposition to the powers that be. But when the events have run their course they are seen to have been made subject to the tyranny of Love.

It is in this sense that the narrator can be seen to have outmanoeuvred Love. Love (like a number of modern critics) has focused upon the issue of gender as a prime political theme. But Chaucer is concerned with the much broader picture politically. It is not who has been faithful or unfaithful that is the real issue at stake. Rather it is the ultimate consequences of being subject to Love - which precludes the possibility of being properly governed by reason and therefore subject to social authority - that is the real object of study in the *Legend*. Seen thus Alceste's remark concerning the ultimate effect of the narrator's offence becomes most significant:

> For, syth no cause of deth lyeth in this caas,
>
> Yow oghte to ben the lyghter merciable;
>
> Leteth youre ire, and beth sumwhat tretable. (F, 409-11)

Although the poet is innocent of anyone's death, such a charge could not so easily be denied by Love. Seen thus Alceste's remark is pointed, and in the Legends that follow Chaucer provides ample historical evidence to question the wisdom of being governed by him. The legend of Alceste, that she offered her own life to Death to prolong that of her husband, makes her love symbolic of the Christian ideal and the love of Christ. She is therefore ideally qualified to negotiate an opportunity for the narrator to describe the consequences of Love's government. When Love is reined in by the Christian ideal, as represented by Alceste, then, a balance is maintained, but in a pagan context the influence of Love can spell disaster for both the individual and society, as the Legends themselves describe.

Having discussed the sense in which Alceste is, at the very least a source of balance in Love's court, it is possible to detect some elements of criticism of Love and his ways in her language. What for example does she mean by referring to those who follow Love as 'lewed'?

> Al be hit that he kan nat wel endite,
>
> Yet hath he maked lewed folk delyte
>
> To serve yow, in preysinge of your name. (F, 414-16)

Here she may mean that those who were previously uninitiated have been encouraged to follow love by the poet's work - 'lewed' in this sense meaning layfolk not familiar with Love's ways.[20] This would presumably only be appropriate if it referred to a non-aristocratic audience or non-courtly audience of some kind, because the former would surely have considered themselves learned in the ways of *fin amor*. Similarly it could mean persons of little or no learning, but this would again be a major affront to the principles of *fin amor*, since the tradition pertains to the aristocratic class, or at least to those with aristocratic pretensions. Essentially this is a confusing word to use of aristocratic or courtly followers of Love, and Alceste may be suggesting that those who submit to courtly love traditions as a result of what poets write, are foolish to do so. Such a criticism would also apply to the narrator as we find him earlier in the Prologue prior to the start of the dream, living out the conventions of Marguerite poetry.

Alceste also forbids the narrator the opportunity of denying Love's charge outright. 'For-why a trewe man, withouten drede, / Hath nat to parten with a theves dede' (F, 464-65) says the narrator: 'Why should I go without being acquited?' To which Alceste answers

...Lat be thyn arguynge,

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[20]See H. Kurath and S. Kuhn, et al., The *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1956-), s.v. 'Lewed', "'Lewed folk'': the ignorant, the uneducated; laity, non-clerics; common people.'

For Love ne wol nat countrepleted be

In ryght ne wrong; and lerne that at me! (F, 475-78)

Here Alceste is expressing her personal experience of Love's reluctance to submit to any form of judgement or ethical system other than his own. And when she says 'lerne that at me!' it implies that she is weary of constantly having to counsel Love and act as his conscience. It could be, then, that she wants the narrator to further the 'theves dede', and criticise Love even more, by showing how destructive his influence can be under certain circumstances - this time from the perspective of male infidelity and female suffering. It is her idea, after all, that the narrator should write a legend of faithful women:

But he shal maken, as ye wol devyse,

Of wommen trewe in lovyng al hire lyve,

Wherso ye wol, of mayden or of wyve. (F, 437-39)

Such a work must inevitably beg the question of what exactly Love's influence has meant to the lives of these women, irrespective of the intentions and failings of their men. It is, after all, the influence of Love that has robbed certain of them of the ability to question the wisdom of their choice of lover. If it is the case that Alceste is a principle through which Love is not only counselled but also criticised, Love at least is ignorant of this. His description of her, and of what she represents, fails to take into

account the fact that she is a challenge to his ways where certain principles of *fin amor* are concerned.

> And wost so wel that kalender ys shee
>
> To any woman that wol lover bee.
>
> For she taught al the craft of fyn lovynge,
>
> And namely of wyfhod the lyvynge,
>
> And al the boundes that she oghte kepe. (F, 542-46)

Given that Alceste represents a self-sacrificing love for one's husband it is unlikely that the notion of 'wyfhod' that she represents would be able to include one of the traditional principles of 'fyn lovynge': an adulterous context. Alceste attenuates 'fyn lovynge' to include something more of reason and Christian virtue and wisdom. This inevitably calls for the influence of Love to be resisted in certain situations, and therefore requires a different concept of Love from that found in both the *Romance of the Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. When Love talks about Alceste's love he is discussing something that is different to his nature, because there is a rational dimension to her character, as expressed in her counsel. This means that he cannot fully understand her, and trusts that the narrator will perceive for himself what is to him an intrinsically mysterious nature - hence his remark 'she kytheth what she ys' (F, 504) in response to the narrator's question as to her identity.

That Love's judgement is questionable is demonstrated by his brazen encroachment upon the territory of theologians: 'But er I goo, thus muche I wol the telle: / Ne shal no trewe lover come in helle' (F, 552-53). This remark is meant to be taken in the context of a dream and made by a character whose influence is seen to be in question. The narrator's thoughts at the beginning of the poem make it clear that such statements can be made, but never verified. It is therefore wise to measure them against the weight of well informed opinion. This includes the knowledge contained in old 'bokes,' and few of these would support Love's confident assertion against the weight of orthodox Christian writings. The fact that Chaucer seems to have eliminated these lines in his revision, suggests that his reservations grew about his readers' capacity to interpret them correctly. However, Alceste, as a symbol of Christ's love, could be taken as an exemplar of a way of loving that can defeat the claims of hell, and achieve the joys of heaven. But such a 'trewe lover' is transcendent of the principles of 'fyn lovyng' as understood by Love. This may be one reason why we have no legend of Alceste amongst the collection. Perhaps Chaucer felt that her example was ultimately out of place in a work that is designed to describe the destructive consequences of subjection to Love. It would be very difficult for Chaucer to develop this figure as a martyr to love, by virtue of the Christ-like dimension to her character. At the same time, since she is a pagan figure, it would be impossible to bring to the surface those Christ-like qualities, without forcing his audience to address other important questions concerning the issue of salvation and pagan virtues. What we are left with is an Alceste who is sufficiently different to Love

to be able to facilitate a carefully managed criticism of his ways. This criticism is in part expressed in the political language of courtliness, advising Love on how a 'ryghtwis lord' should behave, and also by virtue of the Christian love that she is able to symbolise. She is therefore able to negotiate the narrator's relation to Love, in such a way as to prevent him from having to concede any real respect for Love. There is nothing like the swearing of fealty that we find in the *Romance of the Rose*. The narrator has not said anything that suggests that he is a committed servant of Love in the course of the vision, and in the course of the legends that follow quite the reverse appears to be the case. The narrator never has to prove to the court that he is not 'now a renegat' (G, 401).

The narrator, having initially presented himself as being highly influenced by French courtly poetry, has, in the course of the Prologue, detached himself significantly from what Love represents through the device of the dream and the intervention of Alceste. The dream enables a fantastic encounter with a god whose influence is not apparent to the narrator in his waking state. In the context of the dream, however, Love demands that the narrator justifies himself, and in the process inadvertently encourages him to adopt a particular critical relation to himself, which is established according to the narrator's earlier writings. The narrator was only allowed to forget himself for a time, and the legends that follow encourage further degrees of detachment from Love, and a critical examination of his ways. The ideal that underlies Chaucer's experiment in the Prologue is that of autonomy: the freeing of the individual from an unconscious submission to practices that compromise his or her

capacity to reason, and therefore to choose freely. This is the political issue at stake since social harmony requires the consent of individuals, informed by reason, to act with regard to 'commune profyt' rather than 'syngular profit' and accept their role and place in the social order. I now want to consider those Legends that most clearly describe the opposite of this ideal: individuals whose actions are determined, both by their particular historical circumstances, and especially by their submission to Love. In describing such subjectivities Chaucer provides a further warning for those who would submit themselves uncritically to the traditions of *fin amor*.

Loss of Autonomy and Destruction in the First Two Legends: Evidence Against Love.

Chaucer's narrative method in the legends themselves is a contrast to that of the Prologue. The dream-like fusion of motifs and images indicates the idealist aspect of the latter: what is being described is removed from the world of empirical experience, and is instead the product of poetic imagination. In the first two legends, however, Chaucer explores the material realm that his characters inhabit in considered detail, and in a manner that indicates his commitment to providing a convincing and faithful account of the real world. Such a treatment has implications for themes that have already been treated in the Prologue, and which will now appear in a different light, Specifically the themes of personal autonomy and courtly love, that have proved to be recurrent subjects of interest in Chaucer's dream visions as a whole. In this section I shall begin by examining a form of that much discussed concept 'Chaucerian

Realism,' with regard to the first two legends. I shall do so in order to understand its function, primarily in terms of the mode of subjectivity it implies for the characters, and also in relation to the type of description already established in the Prologue. In short I shall contrast the essentially liberating effect of the dream device in the Prologue for the narrator, with the deterministic account of historical subjects as they appear in the legends.[21]

The account of the naval battle in the *Legend of Cleopatra* is a good example of the way in which Chaucer's description of the real world in the legends, is part of a general description of the nature of the freedom of his characters. I regard this scene as particularly important since it is generally accepted to be an original creation on the part of the author, and because it clearly forms the centre-piece of the narrative. As

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[21]See Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London, 1991). In his introduction Patterson articulates the basic dialectic between the 'autonomous individual' and 'determinative historical processes' with regard to reading descriptions of the self by medieval writers. Patterson asserts that '...the antagonism between the desires of the individual and the demands of society provided one of the great topics for literary exploration throughout the Middle Ages' and 'the dialectic between an individual subjectivity and an external world that alienates it from both itself and its divine source provides the fundamental economy of the medieval idea of selfhood' (p. 8). It is just such a tension that the first two legends deal with, within a historical pagan context. Like Patterson I intend the term 'historical', with regard to the legends, to refer to an established historical order that forms the substance of the lover's immediate social context. It is how the presence of the 'historical' leads to particular aesthetic effects in the legends, as it limits the freedom of the characters, that is my particular interest.

such I believe it focuses the deterministic aspects of the narrative and brings them to a dramatic point of collision, with the individualistic decision by Antony to go against Rome. Chaucer begins by locating the battle within its specific historical and political context. It takes place 'After the deth of Tholome the kyng' (580), when 'Octovyan' (Octavius) is emperor of Rome. It occurs because Antony has become a 'Rebel unto the toun of Rome' (591) through his rejection of his wife, Ceaser's sister Octavia, in favour of Cleopatra, whom he marries also (616),

> Octavyan, that wod was of this dede,
>
> Shop hym an ost on Antony to lede
>
> Al uterly for his destruccioun,
>
> With stoute Romeyns, crewel as lyoun. (624-27)

Antony's unfaithfulness is therefore the prime reason for the downfall of both himself and Cleopatra. This means that although the 'god of Love' might be satisfied with Cleopatra's constancy as described in the story, one of the basic conventions of *fin amor* - that love is irresistible and therefore legitimate in an adulterous context - is here under attack. The love that Antony feels for Cleopatra is such 'That al the world he sette at no value' (602), and since Rome is accustomed 'To han the world at hire obesaunce' (587), it is as if the world is now turned against him.

Having established the historical and political context of this battle, in such a way as to attack one of the traditions of *fin amor*, Chaucer now goes into specific

detail in order to realise as fully as possible the consequences of Antony's actions in

full:

> Up goth the trompe, and for to shoute and shete,
>
> And peynen hem to sette on with the sunne.
>
> With grysely soun out goth the grete gonne,
>
> And heterly they hurtelen al atones,
>
> And from the top doun come the grete stones.
>
> In goth the grapenel, so ful of crokes;
>
> Among the ropes renne the sherynge-hokes.
>
> In with the polax preseth he and he;
>
> Byhynde the nast begynnyth he to fle,
>
> And out ageyn, and dryveth hym overbord;
>
> He styngeth hym upon his speres ord;
>
> He rent the seyl with hokes lyke a sithe;
>
> He bryngeth the cuppe and biddeth hem be blythe;
>
> He poureth pesen upon the haches slidere;
>
> With pottes ful of lyme they gon togidere;
>
> And thus the longe day in fyght they spende,
>
> Tyl at the laste, as every thyng hath ende,
>
> Antony is schent and put hym to the flyghte,
>
> And al his folk to-go that best go myghte. (635-53)

This passage is a fascinating account of a medieval sea battle, since Chaucer is here conceiving of the classical past anachronistically, according to contemporary experience. And what is important is the contrast between this 'high resolution' description of the material world, which issues out of the historical information that precedes it, in contrast to the imaginative forms of the Prologue. This is the first place in the narrative of the *Legend of Good Women*, since the initial description of the daisy, that we feel we are in close contact with the real world.[22] We are presented with the noise of trumpets and guns, the sight of falling stones, grappling hooks hitting the decks and blades shearing through rigging. The rhythm of the verse maintains the momentum of the conflict, and the alliteration encourages a sensual awareness of the instruments of sea warfare and their effect: 'He rent the seyl with hokes lyke a sithe'. This goes into detail as minute as the image of the peas being poured out on the decks of the ships. The author has directed our attention from the grand image of the sun behind the ships at the start of the battle, to the sight of a myriad of peas, raining down on wooden decks, and adding to the noise and chaos of battle. The reason for this great range of detail is to indicate fully the extent to which the desire of Anthony is now opposed by the might of the Roman empire. By submitting himself to the dictates of his lust he now finds the material world either indifferent to his designs or set against them: from the realms of the heavens, as

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[22]Although Chaucer goes on to immediately dissolve the particularity of the daisy in universal qualities, 'Fulfilled of al vertu and honour' (54, F).

represented by the sun, which fails to give him the decisive initiative in attack, to the smallest pea frustrating the efforts of his crewmen. The way in which Antony's desires are now frustrated by the world, and all that it contains, is a result of his submission to his desire, which happens despite the fact that he is a fundamentally noble character:

> Natheless, for sothe, this ilke senatour
>
> Was a ful worthy gentil werreyour,
>
> And of his deth it was ful gret damage.
>
> But love hadde brought this man in swich a rage
>
> And hym so narwe bounden in his las,
>
> Al for the love of Cleopatras,
>
> That al the world he sette at no value. (596-602)

The author is making plain the fact that submitting to 'love' results in a loss of freedom: 'so narwe bounden in his las.' And in the case of this 'ful worthy' 'senatour' it has resulted in him alienating himself from the authority of the empire, so that rather than enjoying freedom within the jurisdiction of a Rome whose aim is 'To han the world at hire obesaunce' (587), Antony is now frustrated by the world that the Empire commands. Rome is the world, and he cannot overcome it.

The historical and political context of the story is therefore being used to indicate a pre-existing order of custom and values, against which Antony rebels by

submitting to the law of 'Love.' The real status of this established order, and the world it governs is affirmed by the author's statement that this is not a fictional account: 'And this is storyal soth, it is no fable' (702). There is in this remark the sense of history being something that we cannot escape from, even if we should wish to do so. If the account were fictional, then Cleopatra, as a supposed martyr of love, could be dismissed as a poet's idle creation, which would limit her significance as an example. But as a historical person she has a status that precludes such a dismissal. As a historical subject she, along with Antony, is also subject to the full force of historical circumstances that precede them. The choices that they make are seen to be defeated by a Rome whose authority and power pre-exists them. It is this conflict between individualistic desire and an established historical order, that the sea battle dramatises in a spectacular manner. It brings the world, as a material presence, to bear upon the lovers directly, at the point of 'the grapnel', 'sheryng-hokes', 'the polax', 'speres', and 'hokes'.

In the *Legend of Thisbe*, Chaucer again expresses the presence and force of history in concrete terms, as he presents us with the scenery of a story which he models closely upon Ovid's *Metamorphosis* (IV, 55-169):

> At Babiloyne whylom fil it thus,
>
> The whyche toun the queen Semyramus
>
> Let dychen al aboute and walles make
>
> Ful hye, of hard tiles wel ybake. (706-9)

Babylon, like Rome, represents an established order that pre-exists the individuals described in the story. The expression of this historical presence, symbolically in the form of the walls, is the very substance of the barrier that separates the young lovers, 'This wal, which that bitwixe hem bothe stod' (737).[23] The concreteness of this particular thematic device is again the material manifestation of traditions and practices that are at odds with the individualistic demands of love. This is how I believe Chaucer interprets Ovid's account, and how he intends us to read his version of it, as it is placed in relation to the previous legend and the Prologue. The wall stands between the houses of their fathers,

> There were dwellyng in this noble toun
>
> Two lordes, whiche that were of gret renoun
>
> And woneden so nygh, upon a grene,
>
> That there nas but a ston-wal hem betweene,
>
> As ofte in grete tounes is the wone. (710-14)

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[23]What I mean by this is that for Chaucer the walls symbolise Babylon. They are a feature that conjures up the notion of customs and practices that constitute Babylon in his mind, and, as he intends, in the minds of his audience. The particular wall which separates the two lovers therefore represents the barrier that traditional Babylonian authority presents to their relationship.

Being 'lordes' 'of gret renoun' they are ideal guardians of an established order, and therefore supporters of the traditions and customs of Babylon. They are consequently deeply implicated in the traditions which prevent the union of the lovers:

> For in that contre yit, withouten doute,
>
> Maydenes been ykept, for jelosye,
>
> Ful streyte, lest they diden som folye. (721-23)

These lines represent a significant departure by Chaucer from the Ovidian source text which he generally follows faithfully. They serve to draw attention to the theme of tradition and its influence upon the lovers. When these traditions are concretised in the motif of the wall they form a barrier that will admit nothing of individualistic desire, save only whispers

> This wall, which that bitwixe hem bothe stod,
>
> Was clove a-two, ryght from the cop adoun,
>
> Of olde tyme of his fundacioun;
>
> But yit this clyfte was so narw and lyte
>
> It nas nat sene, deere ynogh a myte.
>
> But what is that that love can nat espye?
>
> Ye loveres two, if that I shal nat lye,
>
> Ye founden first this litel narwe clifte;

And with a soun as softe as any shryfte,

They lete here wordes thourgh the clifte pace. (737-46)

The idea that the wall is a motif embodying the ideology of an historical order is compatible with the way in which the lovers address it as if it were a person:

...Alas, thow wikkede wal!

Thorgh thyn envye thow us lettest al.

Why nylt thow cleve or fallen al a-two?

Or at the leste, but thou woldist so,

Yit woldest thow but ones lat us mete. (756-60)

This could easily be a plea against authority *per se*, to some form of social institution. Again, as in the spectacular conflict between individuals and historical forces described in the sea battle in the Cleopatra story, Chaucer sets about conveying the manifestation of these forces in terms of the concrete objects of the world that they command. This is done with a high degree of dramatic awareness:

And whan these ydele wordes weren sayd,

The colde wal they wolden kysse of ston,

And take here leve and forth they wolden gon. (767-69)

In these first two legends, then, Chaucer employs various devices to present us with a sensual awareness of the material world. The concreteness of the world thus described stands in contradiction to the desires and intentions of the lovers involved. Their desires give rise to decisions that make them go against the historically established orders that pre-exist them and which ultimately defeat them. In submitting to 'love' individualistic intentions arise which result in the destruction of the lovers. As historical figures these characters are seen to be held in the grip of history. They occupy a particular place in the order of things, in much the same way that Dante's condemned souls occupy an eternal place in the material realms of the *Inferno*.[24] The attempt by Chaucer's characters in these legends to escape from the historical forces that pre-exist them fail, in such a way as to imply the kind of fatalism that is outlined by Theseus at the end of the *Knight's Tale*. As a pagan his is a fatalistic world view that observes the strictly determined position of all things in the material realm according to 'The Firste Moevere':

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[24] See Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality In Western Literature* (Princeton, 1953), Ch.8, pp. 174-202. There are some parallels here between my argument and that made by Auerbach concerning Dante's realism and the imprisonment of souls in the *Inferno*. When Chaucer's characters submit themselves to love, the material world as it is described in the poem stands at odds with their desires and intentions. Similarly Auerbach identifies the realism of the *Inferno*, its concreteness, with the individual being imprisoned within the worldly reality they chose to value above the higher reality of heaven. They fail to realise any higher potential for themselves. Chaucer may have been influenced by Dante's realism in describing individuals who cut themselves off from the spiritual for the sake of the carnal and are consequently bound by the harsh realities of material existence.

'The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond

In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.

That same Prince and that Moevere,' quod he,

'Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun

Certeyne dayes and duracioun

To al that is engendred in this place,

Over the whiche day they may nat pace'. (2992-98).

This statement is an attempt to counsel and comfort those who cannot hope to go against what is thus determined for them. In the light of such a reality, Theseus suggests that it is best to accept all that is to come willingly:

And heer-agayns no creature on lyve,

Of no degree, availleth for to stryve.

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,

To maken vertu of necessitee,

And take it weel that we may nat eschue,

And namely that to us alle is due. (3039-44)

It is precisely this ability to 'maken vertu of necessitee' that the lovers in the legends lack. When Love visits them, Chaucer makes it clear, in the case of Antony

especially, that they are completely unable to accept the established order of things, and seek instead to shape their own future, with disastrous results for themselves. This attempt is governed by the desire that Love (as opposed to reason) inspires. It seems, then, that what limited autonomy Chaucer's pagans are allowed to posses according to the *Knight's Tale*, 'To maken vertu of necessitee,' is itself lost when Love takes hold. Because of this they are tightly bound by their historical circumstances which are expressed in concrete terms by Chaucer. The ability of Theseus to consider the nature of his own freedom within his own particular historical circumstances and the metaphysical context of those circumstances, is shared only with the narrator of the legends. At the beginning of the *Legend of Philomela* there is a brief instance of such thought on his part:

> Thow yevere of the formes, that hast wrought
>
> This fayre world and bar it in thy thought
>
> Eternaly er thow thy werk began.
>
> Why madest thow, unto the slaunder of man,
>
> Or, al be that it was nat thy doing,
>
> As for that fyn, to make swich a thyng,
>
> Whi sufferest thow that Tereus was bore,
>
> That is in love so fals and so forswore. (2228-35)

The rhetorical aspect of this speech must be acknowledged. But the rhetorical effect is based upon the fact that the content of the narrative of the legends themselves is almost exclusively concerned with the immediate experience of the characters. Their circumstances circumscribe their experience to such an extent that when the narrator wishes to inject new tones into the narrative he naturally turns to the spiritual realm beyond. As he does so, he, like Theseus, is inquiring into the ultimate nature of human freedom. Given that all the creation has existed eternally in the mind of the perfect creator, how can it be that so much of human behaviour, especially in the case of Tereus, is so obviously imperfect? Does this mean that we are free to act and that the creator sees what is to be without necessarily making it so, or does it suggest that all thought and action is simply pre-determined in the mind of the creator?[25] Whatever the answer, such philosophical inquiry is a direct result of the narrator's having read of the experience of particular lovers. And it demonstrates the serious matter that is contained in them in terms of their account of human experience.

In the first two legends, then, the idealism of the dream vision in the Prologue gives way to concrete accounts of the immediate experience of the characters. The purpose of this is to show that when individuals submit to 'Love' they loose their capacity to reason. They then find themselves at odds with an established historical order, which is expressed in terms of concrete imagery in the poetry. The material effect of the motifs I have considered in these legends is an effective aesthetic contrast to the idealism of the dream vision. It is also a serious description of how the

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[25]See the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, lines 3234-48, for a succinct Chaucerian statement of this point.

individual who submits to Love, is overcome by a deterministic reality that defeats their individualistic desire.[26] In these tales Love is being implicitly criticised for his role in the destruction of the lovers, irrespective of the faithfulness of the women. This means that in carrying out his penance the narrator is able further to criticise Love's influence, and the values and traditions that he embodies.

Further Evidence Against Love.

Apart from the criticism of Love that is implicit in the first two legends, there are other criticisms that emerge in the course of the narratives that follow. These criticisms are latent in the description of *fin amor*, and are again made without compromising Alceste's demand for an account of faithful women. In the *Legend of Dido* Chaucer introduces the idea that the traditions of *fin amor* offer a set of devices that enable deceitful lovers to manipulate the feelings of 'sely wemen,' who are themselves irreproachable, 'ful of innocence, / Ful of pite, of trouthe and conscience' (1254-55):

> Tak hede now of this grete gentil-man,
>
> This Troyan, that so wel hire plesen can,
>
> That feyneth hym so trewe and obeysynge,

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[26]Individualistic in the sense that the lovers are prepared to pursue a course of action that puts them at odds with the norms of their society.

>So gentil, and so privy of his doinge,
>
>And can so wel don alle his obeysaunces. (1264-68)

The narrator goes on to list various aspects of the courtly love tradition. To 'wayten hire at feste', to 'fasten til he hath his lady seyn', to 'beren in his devyses', to make 'songes', to 'don of armes', and to 'Sende hire lettres', are familiar acts of homage to one's beloved that are chosen by the narrator because they are familiar to his audience. The problem is that these acts give an objective status to feelings and intentions that are in no way stable. When Aeneas 'Is wery of his craft withinne a throwe' and 'The hote ernest is al overblowe' (1285-86), Dido is left contemplating the extent to which she has misread the signs as evidence of a true, or permanent love. Having considered herself to be effectively a 'wif' in his eyes, she is forced to confront the fact that her status, 'I am a gentil woman and a queen' (1306), has now been severly compromised ('Allas, what woman wole ye of me make?') and her 'name is lost' (1305). In this story the traditions of *fin amor* are seen to have provided a means for Aeneas to cause Dido's downfall. Erotic desire on his part was brief, and on her part irresistible: 'But finaly, it may nat ben withstonde; / Love wol love, for nothing wol it wonde' (1186-7). Love and his ways have provided the impetus and the mechanisms for Dido's destruction. And, although her integrity in the story is not in any doubt, the wisdom of her submitting to the service of such a god of Love certainly is.

The subject of Aeneas's culpability was a point of debate for Chaucer and his contemporaries. To what extent his actions were determined by fate depends upon whose account of his story one accepted, Ovid's or Virgil's. To the former he was a deceitful lover, to the latter an honourable servant of the gods and founder of Rome. Chaucer's depiction of his character is therefore not overtly damning. This is not the case with his depiction of Jason, however, in the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea*. Jason is a false lover who uses the conventions of courtly love to hide his true intentions. He is a 'sly devourere' of 'gentil wemen' (1369-70) who makes 'lures' out of his 'statly aparaunce,' 'wordes farced with plesaunce', 'feyened trouthe', and 'contrefeted peyne' (1372-73). The nature of what Jason feels towards women is identified by the author as 'foul delyt, which that thow callest love!' (1380). But Love is also implicated in the author's criticisms: 'But certes, it is bothe routhe and wo / That love with false loveres werketh so' (1384-85). None of the disasters in love that the legends describe could have occurred if Love had not conspired to effect the downfall of these 'gentil wemen.' The narrator goes on to address those in his audience, in such a manner as to suggest that there are plenty of Jasons around who are capable of similarly conspiring with Love, and using the devices that form part of the corpus of his art to their own ends:

> But in this hous if any fals lovere be,
>
> Ryght as hymself now doth, ryght so dide he,
>
> With feynynge, and with every subtil dede. (1554-56)

The poet is clearly addressing those who are familiar with the traditions of *fin amor*, in such a way as to suggest that these traditions are a reality of social practice, and not just literary devices.

The *Legend of Lucrece* offers a specific criticism of the barbarous dimension of Love's influence. This occurs in the context of a legend that exemplifies certain virtues that Saint Augustine - 'The grete Austyn' (1690) - recognised as admirable. In considering Lucretia's rape and her subsequent suicide, Augustine was forced to distinguish the virtuous dimensions of her actions from the non-virtuous. In doing so he effectively demonstrated the way in which her suicide, which was clearly a sin, was also in part a consequence of the ideology of her social context and its norms:

> She was ashamed of another's foul deed committed *on* her, even though not *with* her, and as a Roman woman, excessively eager for honour, she was afraid that she should be thought, if she lived, to have willingly endured what, when she lived, she had violently suffered.[27]

The words 'excessively eager for honour' demonstrate the negative influence of Lucretia's society's norms. Christian women's actions, in contrast to this, are not so determined by their social context, but rather by reference to God's holiness. They would not therefore commit the sin of suicide:

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[27]Saint Augustine. *The City of God*, trans., Henry Bettenson (London, 1984), Bk. I. Ch. 19, p. 30.

They would not add crime to crime by committing murder on themselves in shame because the enemy had committed rape on them in lust. They have the glory of chastity within them, the testimony of their conscience. They have this in the sight of God, and they ask for nothing more. In fact there is nothing for them to do that is right for them to do. For they will not deviate from the authorship of God's law by taking unlawful steps to avoid the suspicions of men.[28]

Augustine's remarks upon the rape and death of Lucretia are important because they provide a specifically Christian framework in which to locate the tale, and through which it can be interpreted. Chaucer knows this and by referring to the 'grete Austyn' he invites us to do so. Augustine identified that the rape occurred as a consequence of 'lust'. He was conscious, more than anyone else, of the extent to which 'lust' precludes the possibility of reason, and that this state of mind is characteristic of human sexuality as a consequence of the fall.[29] In Chaucer's legend Tarquin's lust is described according to the conventions of courtly love ideology:

> Tarquinius, this proude kynges sone,

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[28]Ibid., Bk. I, Ch.19. pp. 30-31.

[29]See *City of God*. Bk. XIV, Chapters, 23 and 24, pp. 585-589. Here Augustine describes the theoretical possibility of a pre-lapsarian sexuality in which the 'sexual organs had been aroused by the will, at the appropriate time and in the necessary degree, and had not been excited by lust.'

Conceyved hath hire beaute and hyre cheere...

And caughte to this lady swich desyr

That in his herte brende as any fyr,

So woodly that his wit was al forgeten...

A-morwe, whan the brid began to synge,

Unto the sege he cometh ful privily,

And by hymself he walketh soberly,

Th'ymage of hire recordynge alwey newe...

Ryght so, thogh that hire forme were absent:

The plesaunce of hire forme was present. (1745-69)

Chaucer is utilising the psychological language of *fin amor* poetry, to emphasise that it is the passive dimension of Tarquin's mind, the non-critical receptive intellect, that is in operation here. It is there that her image has been captured and is able to be recalled, at the typical time for a courtly lover, early in the morning as the 'brid began to synge'. He is then moved like a beast by the images that are stored in his heart without any critical consideration of what he is doing or why. His movement at night is like that of a beast, as the narrator tells us that 'gan he stalke' (1781) through the house. And Lucretia identifies him as such when 'hire bed she felte presse...What

beste is that,' quod she, 'that weyeth thus?' (1787-89). By utilising the language of courtly love poetry Chaucer makes it clear that Tarquin has given up his reason to lust and this results in her death. But he is still the nearest thing to a conventional courtly lover in the story, in that he alone conforms to ideals that are conventions of courtly love poetry. Lucretia is something different, in the sense that Alceste was: a figure that is derived from pagan culture but who carries associations of Christianity with her. Augustine is the source of these Christian elements of her character as he identifies her virtue in terms that are compatible with the Church: 'However, in the case of the noble example of that woman, it is enough for us to quote what was said in her praise: "There were two persons involved, and only one committed adultery."'[30] Her virtue offers us a direct contrast to the destructive and non-rational impulses of Tarquin. And since these are cast in the conventional forms of courtly love poetry, this tale, more than any other, encourages a critical view of Love and his ways.

Conclusion.

In the *Legend of Good Women* it is what the narrator has written in the past, and then what he goes on to write, that effectively divorces him from Love and his court. His writings rescue him from a passive subjection to the ideology of courtly love. These writings provide a position from which a critical appreciation of the conventions of Love can be made. In the process Chaucer presents us with two main aspects of

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[30]Ibid., Ch. 19, p. 30.

courtliness. One is the notion of courtliness as a collective body of traditions, in this case those that pertain to *fin amor*, which if submitted to uncritically, results in the loss of reason and autonomy and carries dangers both for one's self and for others. The other aspect of courtliness under examination is that expressed through Alceste. This involves protocols that promote communication, counsel and reason. The effect of the Prologue upon the texts is that the reader is similarly encouraged to engage with the conventions of *fin amor* critically. The dialectic between the narrator and Love functions as a screen through which the legends can be seen. We are alerted to the fact that they will either please or displease Love and are encouraged to discern which is the case. When the legends have been read Love is seen to be the principle that inspires the loss of reason, thereby exposing individuals to destruction. The narrator, as we saw him prior to the start of the dream, exemplified just such a submission to Love's ways in a highly literary manner, through his enactment of the conventions of Marguerite poetry. But Love himself declares that he is not one of his servants according to the terms of his own previous writings. This recapitulation of a prior self through what one has written, is then reinforced by the legends. The narrator presents us with 'storyal soth' (702), historical, hence factual stories that are a defiance of Love's court, whilst fulfilling the terms of his penance by treating 'Of wommen trewe in lovyng al hire lyve' (G, 438).

Chaucer has again explored the relation of the courtly subject to texts, and, as in the *Parliament of Fowls*, uses literary conventions of *fin amor* poetry to engage with

contemporary political issues. However, in the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer's political concerns pertain to the social elite. Unlike the *Parliament of Fowls*, where the poet extended the range of *fin amor* conventions to address a wider social picture, the *Legend* focuses upon those who are unequivocally of the court. The political issues are expressed in terms of the importance of reason as a source of counsel, embodied by Alceste. This enables the individual to act with regard to 'commune profyt' as opposed to individualistic desires overcoming reason and encouraging the pursuit of 'syngular profit', and thereby jeopardising social harmony. In the *Legend of Good Women* a passive subjection to the texts and conventions of courtly love poetry is replaced by a critical engagement with Love and what he really represents. This has been achieved by emphasising the narrator's role as a writer, and using his ability to juxtapose texts in order to stimulate critical thought with regard to the poetry of *fin amor*.

Conclusion.

We have seen, then, that in each of the dream visions Chaucer deploys literary materials and social conventions strategically, in order to explore the relationship between the mind of the individual subject, and the various dimensions of courtliness it encounters and negotiates. We have seen how, in the *Book of the Duchess*, the narrator's reading and imagination provided the substance of his dream, and how French courtly poetry influenced the thinking of the Black Knight. The use of the Boethian dialogic structure then enabled the latter influence to be questioned morally, allowing the narrator (and also his audience) to consider the beneficial, as well as the harmful implications of courtliness, as a literary and social phenomenon. The formal protocols that enable persons of different rank and experience to communicate with one another meaningfully are portrayed as undoubtedly good, but the uncritical submission to literary conventions that reinforce harmful sentiments and thereby prevent the individual from thinking rationally, is presented as unproductive and unhelpful.

In the *House of Fame* we saw an inquiry into how texts constituted the knowledge of the individual. In that poem Chaucer's concerns focused upon that epistemological question in a scientific manner, employing Aristotelian psychology as derived from Dante as their chief tool. Chaucer's experience as a courtier, encountering *trecento art* on the King's business in Florence, led to the most analytical and energetic treatment of 'syngular' experience of all of his dream visions.

That poem in particular demonstrated Chaucer's profound awareness both of how texts inform the mind and knowledge of the individual, and how they enable a self-reflexive appreciation of one's own mind through the medium of art: 'I wot myself best how y stonde / ...As fer forth as I kan myn art' (1878-1882). However, because the focus of *Fame* was so intensely upon the epistemological limitations of the individual, and the way in which language separates selves from one another (as well as from the objects of knowledge), the political implications of that poem were seen as largely negative.

In the *Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer withdrew from such a sceptical position and reinstated those protocols of courtliness, first explored in the *Book of the Duchess,* that could facilitate communication between subjects of different rank and kinds. In the *Parliament* these courtly protocols were seen to be socially beneficial and enabled the higher members of the avian society to act for the good of 'commune profyt' (47), as opposed to the 'synguler profit' (*Fame,* 310) sought by the unscrupulous in the *House of Fame.* Individual reading and experience were once again fundamental to the poem's concerns and design, but courtly language and conventions facilitated debate and reasoned judgement, and therefore helped to counter the destructive potential of personal desire, as expressed in the temple of Venus.

In the *Legend of Good Women* we encountered a narrator whose uncritical subjection to literary forms was as pronounced as that of the Black Knight in the *Book of the Duchess.* The narrator of the *Legend* was, however, more explicitly opposed to

the conventions of *fin amor* and, prompted by the censures of the god of Love, went on to perform his 'penance' in a series of legends which expose the destructive effects of Love's influence. In this poem the politically beneficial conventions of courtliness were expressed by Alceste, whose conduct enabled reason to have its place in Love's court. However, a tension was witnessed between the politically desirable ideals of courtliness which she expressed, and the character of Love. Unlike the *Parliament*, the *Legend* did not describe an ideal integration of the conventions of *fin amor* with political ideals. Where Love took hold in certain of the legends, social and political upheaval followed.

In each of the dream visions, then, we encounter a description of the courtly subject, and how the reading and social experience of that subject gives rise to a particular kind of narrative. Just as in the real experience of dreaming, where the individual has no conscious control over what he or she dreams, Chaucer's narrator is in a state of subjection to what his imagination presents to him whilst he is asleep. However, in reading and interpreting the dream text the rational faculties are engaged. Thus in each of the dream visions Chaucer sought to stimulate the critical capabilities of his audience with regard to the various aspects of courtliness, including protocols of conduct and the conventions of *fin amor*. He therefore exploited Aristotelian psychology in order to show precisely what part of the courtly identity is determined by texts and empirical experience - the receptive intellect which is the storehouse of images and ideas - and what part is transcendent of this - the agent intellect which is capable of rational thought. This is the psychological, self-reflexive dimension of

Chaucer's use of the dream device. The impact of the dream vision is not, however, wholly introspective. They are at the same time socially engaged and offer responses to very specific historic circumstances. The *House of Fame* demonstrates the poet at his most self-reflexive, focusing upon the consciousness of the individual courtly subject, and the *Parliament of Fowls* demonstrates a more socially accommodating, and politically optimistic engagement with courtliness.

It is important to appreciate just what the dream visions meant to Chaucer's contemporaries, in terms of their impressions of the kind of poet that he was. C.S. Lewis helpfully reminds us that

> When the men of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries thought of Chaucer, they did not think first of the *Canterbury Tales*. Their Chaucer was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love-romance and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine.[1]

Lewis is writing here to counter the modern view that 'the great mass of Chaucer's work is simply a background to the *Canterbury Tales*'.[2] He is right to suggest that when his contemporaries thought of his works the dream visions and translations would have been at the forefront of their minds. They would have thought of Chaucer as a courtly poet of *fin amor* who introduced many of the achievements of the French

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[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), p. 162.

[2] Ibid., p 161.

poets into English. However, as the examples of Usk and Hoccleve have demonstrated, contemporaries of Chaucer recognised something serious about his work that prevented him from writing poems that were merely allegorical abstractions, divorced from reality. There is an urgency to a poem like the *House of Fame* which the reader is always conscious of despite moments of humour in the narrative, and that urgency directs attention explicitly to contemporary moral (and political) issues.

It might, of course, be objected that this view of the dream visions as profoundly serious works aimed at prompting ethical reflections among his readers, flies in the face of the poet's own testimony. He did, after all, include them among the works rejected in his *Retractions*. Might not this suggest that he viewed them as unsound and not essentially serious in terms of Christian teaching? A close look at the *Retractions* suggests that this was not the case and demonstrates precisely in what sense their content includes doctrinally serious matter. As well as such works as *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer retracts 'the book ... of Fame; the book of the XXV. Ladies; the book of the Duchess; [and] the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes...' (*Canterbury Tales*, 1086). He describes them as 'enditynges of worldly vanitees' and it is true that these poems describe much that is of the world. However, Chaucer does not retract all his works. Some of them are not retracted because of their spiritual content, and the first amongst these which Chaucer lists is fundamental to the design of his first two dream visions and his intentions in all four of them: 'But of the translacion of Boece de

Consolacion, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies ... that thanke I .
oure Lord Jhesu Crist and his blisful Mooder, and alle the seintes of hevene' (1088).
The *Consolation* is clearly viewed by Chaucer as a text that contains sound Christian
doctrine. We have already seen its influence upon the *Book of the Duchess* and the
House of Fame, and how this influence was perceived and imitated by Usk, who also
attempted to emulate Chaucer's treatment of courtly conventions from the spiritual
perspective of the *Consolation*. This text offered Chaucer both a model for the
structure of the first of his dream visions and provided a philosophical basis from
which the conventions of courtliness, including those of *fin amor*, could be assessed
in the remaining texts. When he moves away from this model in order to write a
dream vision that focuses upon society as a whole rather than the individual, in the
Parliament, he replaces the ethical presence of the *Consolation* with that of Cicero's
Dream of Scipio, which is better suited to political exploration. The dream visions,
then, do indeed include 'worldly vanitees' such as the conventions of courtliness, but
these things are carefully considered and described so that the individual can
understand their relation to them, and reject those conventions that compromise
spiritual ideals. This moral concern in the dream visions is in no way detrimental to
their capacity to delight. Indeed the tensions that exist within the texts are what give
rise to their unique qualities as works of art. We appreciate and understand the
different aspects of *fin amor*, precisely because the narrator is never allowed to give
himself over to its conventions freely and unreservedly. He is, as the *Legend of Good
Women* describes, a transgressor in Love's court, and this is because of the Boethian

frame of mind within which the earlier dream visions are cast. Chaucer is never either exclusively spiritually minded or worldly minded. Instead the two perspectives are integrated and ultimately reconciled in the dream visions by showing those things that are impressed upon the receptive part of the mind from without, and laying them open before the rational part of the mind, which is capable of critically appreciating such experience. What the *Retractions* represent, then, are a conscientious believer's acknowledgement that ultimately, from the divine point of view, the things of the spirit and the things of the world are separate, but as long as the individual is in the world the integration of the two is both inevitable and necessary in conscientious Christian art that seeks to reflect upon experience in this life.

What we have seen in this thesis concerning Chaucer's use of Aristotelian psychology to articulate the individual identity of the courtly subject, has a direct bearing upon recent and influential discussions by critics and theorists concerning the 'essentialist humanist subject' which are usefully considered by David Aers.[3] These theorists are concerned with 'the history of how interiority and the subjectivity to which that belongs emerged in Western culture, an emergence that can, so its cultural historians maintain, be quite precisely located - the time of Shakespeare.'[4] The particular kind of 'radical' criticism that Aers is opposed to is that practised by Francis Barker, who suggests

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[3]David Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the "History of the Subject"', in *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit, 1992), pp. 177-202.

[4]Ibid., p. 177.

Pre-bourgeois subjection does not properly involve subjectivity at all, but a condition of dependent membership in which place and articulation are defined not by an interiorised self-recognition - complete or partial, percipient or unknowing, efficient or rebellious - (of none the less socially constituted subject positions), but by incorporation in the body politic which is the king's body in its social form. With a clarity now hard to recapture, the social plenum *is* the body of the king and membership of this anatomy is the deep structural form of all being in the secular realm.[5]

Barker does not believe that any medieval subject could properly conceive of his or her self subjectively (that is, as an isolated individual, alienated from others because of language's deceptive qualities and the inherent uniqueness of personal empirical experience) but only as a part of 'the social plenum' which '*is* the body of the king'. Aers points out the absurdity of such a suggestion in that it completely overlooks the many tensions and fragmentations of 'the social plenum' that existed in the middle ages and especially in the late fourteenth century. Individuals, especially courtly individuals, often had to chose between factions or different schools of religious

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[5]Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body* (London, 1984), p. 41, quoted by Aers on p. 186. As well as Barker, Aers includes Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy* (London, 1985), and Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago, 1980), as chief among the texts propagating the same view concerning the development of the individual subject.

thought, or at least think about doing so, so that to regard medieval society as a homogeneous entity requires considerable ignorance of its realities. As Aers states, 'Barker's "clarity" is "recaptured" at the cost of all we now know about late-medieval societies, cultures and polities (both ecclesiastical and secular)'.[6] Apart from attacking Barker's version of medieval history, Aers offers examples of medieval and earlier writings that do articulate an essential inner self, conceived of as separate from outer reality. He cites *Piers Plowman,* pointing out that,

> For Langland the search for God is certainly bound up with the search
>
> for a just community and a reformed Church, a search constantly
>
> engaging with specific contemporary problems and conflicts. Yet *Piers*
>
> *Plowman* includes an exploration of the divided will and the need to
>
> turn inward if the sources of salvation are to be encountered.[7]

Certainly after Passus VII the narrator's journey turns inward as he encounters the various personifications of his own mind, 'Thought' (VIII), 'Wit' (IX), and 'Ymaginatif' (XII), in order to discover from them what 'Dowel', Dobet', and 'Dobest' are. Aers also selects the example of the *Parson's Tale* for its exposition of 'private confession':

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[6]Aers, p. 187.

[7]Ibid., p. 184.

The *Parson's Tale* stresses that contrition demands that a person search out (and show sorrow for) not only sinful actions but 'alle his synnes that he hath doon in delit of his thought'; it encourages careful self-scrutiny concerning the nature of the inward 'consentynges' given in such moments of individual consciousness. The teacher carefully emphasises that attention to external actions, to 'outward' deeds, is not remotely adequate. He warns that self-scrutiny, confession and repentance must address the most intimate movements of thought, contrition leading to a 'wonder sorweful and angwissous' response.[8]

These are certainly good examples, and, as Aers makes clear, they both point back to earlier writings such as Augustine's *Confessions* which are profoundly concerned with articulating the inner self as distinct from outer reality as perceived by the senses. However, Aers fails to mention Chaucer's dream visions, which, as we have seen, separate the essential self, in terms provided by Aristotle and refined by Aquinas, not only from all knowledge provided by the senses, but also from language, and the knowledge that is provided by it. This inner self accords with the agent intellect and it transcends that aspect of self that is determined from without, the receptive intellect, by apprehending the contents of the latter in the form of a dream text. The Aristotelian psychology that underlies Chaucer's dream visions enables the essential self to be articulated with precision, and in such a way as to provide a

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[8]Ibid., p. 185. Aers is here discussing lines 291-315 of the *Parson's Tale*.

genuine understanding of how the mind is conditioned by experience in the world.[9]

The reason, perhaps, that Aers does not recognise Chaucer's dream visions as examples of this kind of separation is because they appear *prima facie* to be so deeply implicated in courtly traditions. It is easy to see how explicitly religious texts, such as Augustine's *Confessions*, Langland's *Piers Ploughman*, and Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, demand the separation of the individual from the world. It is not so easy to see how narratives so apparently secular as Chaucer's dream visions could similarly describe the separation of the essential self from the very conventions they so elegantly describe. Yet this is, I believe, precisely what they do, and in a way that is far more sophisticated than a rigid religious denial of all things secular. Chaucer is consistently eager to show in his dream visions that when reason is subjugated to passion, then the essential autonomous self is in danger of destruction, as we find most graphically portrayed in the *Legend of Good Women*. The conventions of *fin amor* that subjugate reason to passion are the aspect of courtliness that Chaucer is unequivocally opposed to, and from which he sought to free the courtly subjects who read his dream visions.

It is not only the more recent 'radical' critics that would deny Chaucer the possibility of engaging in a sustained textual analysis of individual subjectivity. D.W. Robertson, Jr. took a similar line. Though he would be opposed to the materialistic premise that Aers as a Marxist critic adopts, he would at least have agreed with Aers's

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[9]The dream visions as I understand them are especially pertinent to Aers's argument against Stephen Greenblatt who is particularly concerned with the idea of 'self-fashioning'. Chaucer's dream visions are precise in their understanding of how the self is fashioned and which aspects of courtliness should be allowed to shape the self and which should not.

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affirmation that 'One simply cannot write the history of the subject in a culture where Christian beliefs and practices are pervasive without taking Christianity extremely seriously'.[10] Yet Robertson could not accept that any of Chaucer's writings demonstrate a genuinely self-reflexive exploration of subjective experience. He maintained that medieval consciousnesses conceived of themselves within the context of an unbroken hierarchy descending from God into the world and on through society, rather than in terms of oppositions, or dialectics, such as 'inner' and 'outer'. The former, he claimed, is 'a dominant medieval convention, the tendency to think in terms of symmetrical patterns, characteristically arranged with reference to an abstract hierarchy'.[11] When considering the 'problem' faced by Augustine, of how the mind of a fallen individual might approach the reality of God, Robertson takes the opportunity to point out that there is no opposition between the senses and reason: 'It is noteworthy that there is no opposition between the bodily senses and the understanding; they represent different ways in which the problem [understanding God] may be approached, and the way of the understanding is superior to, but not opposite to, the way of the senses.'[12] The medieval individual is, according to Robertson, an integrated entity, both psychologically and socially. *A Preface to Chaucer* is a valuable work full of genuinely useful insights into medieval culture, and Robertson is certainly a more sophisticated critic than Aers implies in his essay.

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[10]Aers, p. 196.

[11]D.W. Robertson Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1963), p. 6.

[12]Ibid., p. 7.

But Robertson's commitment to reconstructing a medieval world view devoid of 'oppositions', and therefore of conventions that can conceive of subjective experience distinct from outer reality, leads to some significant problems, especially where he discusses the device of perspective in painting. He insists that even an artist like Giotto was not concerned with seriously describing real space, instead perspective was a device for marking off a pictorial space separate from that of the observer,

> It has been pointed out that perspective is of two kinds: it may either
>
> enclose an area different from that of the observer, as in the paintings
>
> of Giotto, or it may suggest a continuation of the space occupied by the
>
> observer, as in the paintings of Van Eyck.

What Robertson wants to deny to Giotto is the desire to achieve the kind of naturalistic realism in his work that Boccaccio identified as his supreme achievement. For Boccaccio the things Giotto painted must have seemed to be in an extension of his own space if they seemed so real. The distinction between types of perspective made by Robertson is overly subtle and is designed to enable him to make the following comment: 'efforts at perspective in the painting of the period ... show the beginning of a spatial sense: but these are only beginnings, which would not have been recognised as such by their creators. Chaucer lived in a world ... in which painting was not yet an extension of the space of the observer...'.[13] The reason that

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[13]Ibid., p. 220.

Robertson does not want to regard Giotto's paintings as attempting to describe reality

as it appears according to the senses of an observer, is because this would

acknowledge the significance of empirical, and hence psychological experience of the

individual viewer. Instead of the paintings of Giotto affirming this kind of individual

psychological experience, Robertson prefers to see them still describing reality

symbolically, thereby subjugating the empirical experience of individuals in a

hierarchy that points to the supremely objective divine perspective. This is why he

limits the subjective implications of Giotto's art, Boccaccio's response to it, and also

some subjective elements of the *Divine Commedy* in the following way,

> It is undoubtedly true that this Italian tendency toward subjectivity, or
>
> assumed subjectivity, exerted an enormous influence on the art and
>
> literature of the Renaissance, when Italian fashions spread northward
>
> ... Nevertheless, in the fourteenth century it was still a form of
>
> provincialism.[14]

I hope that I have showed that, not only was this 'assumed subjectivity' well

understood by Chaucer, but it also provided him with materials for his own

exploration of subjective experience.

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[14]Ibid., pp. 239-40.

The equating of Love with tyranny in the *Legend* signalled the end of Chaucer's exploration of courtliness within the context of the dream vision. Any further treatment of courtliness was to take place in an explicitly sociological, rather than psychological, framework. Chaucer was evidently aware that the Ricardian court was increasingly at odds with the great lords and Parliament, and something of this tension is expressed in the Prologue to the *Legend*, as we have seen. He may have felt the need to show how courtly protocols could build bridges between individuals in society as a whole, as in the *Parliament*, because of the dangers inherent in the royal court's increasing exclusivity and sense of independence from the lords. This understanding of courtliness derived from his dream visions was to be explored further in his later work.

The concept of 'curteisie' that Chaucer employed in the *Canterbury Tales* is, as we have seen, a remarkably robust one. Its emphasis upon tolerance and graciousness enabled his social vision to cohere. This aspect of courtliness, which can potentially include diverse, and at times conflicting personalities and views, is employed by Chaucer with a confidence that is derived from his earlier work. After the various conventions that constitute courtliness had been examined in the dream visions, and considered in terms of their effect upon the mind and behaviour of the courtly individual, this socially beneficial convention of courtliness could be affirmed above all others. It is therefore significant that when Chaucer came to describe the pilgrims in the *Canterbury Tales*, he used 'curteisie', rather than any explicitly spiritual principle, to hold the fictive community together. This meant, *inter alia*, that

the ecclesiastical pilgrims who were obviously failing in terms of their devotion, did not have to become alienated from the group, as they might if the devotional premise of the pilgrimage were too emphatic. The result is a sophisticated text which can accommodate a broad range of satirical and non-satirical modes of narrative. The ideal of 'curteisie' facilitated the social context within which the pilgrims could tell their tales. By doing so they revealed different world views and experiences to one another, according to both the content of their narratives and also the different generic conventions governing them. This understanding by Chaucer, that the conventions that governed narrative also shape individual subjectivity, was perhaps the most abiding legacy of his dream visions.

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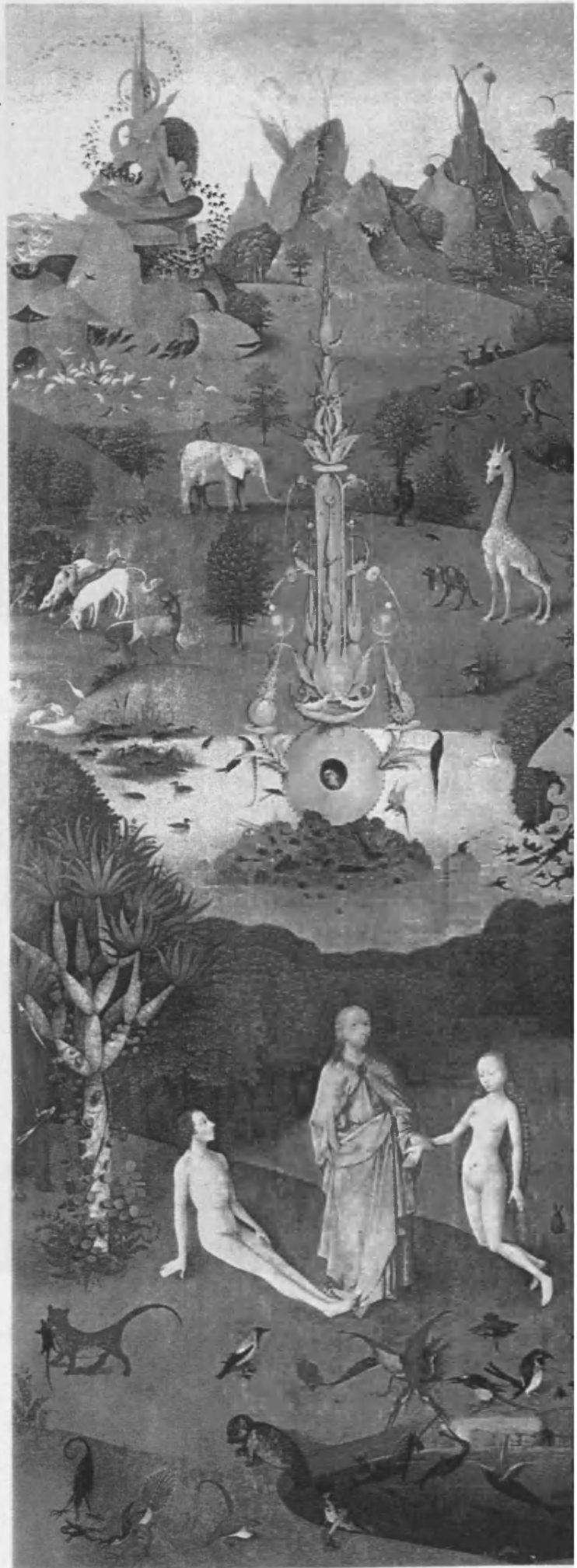
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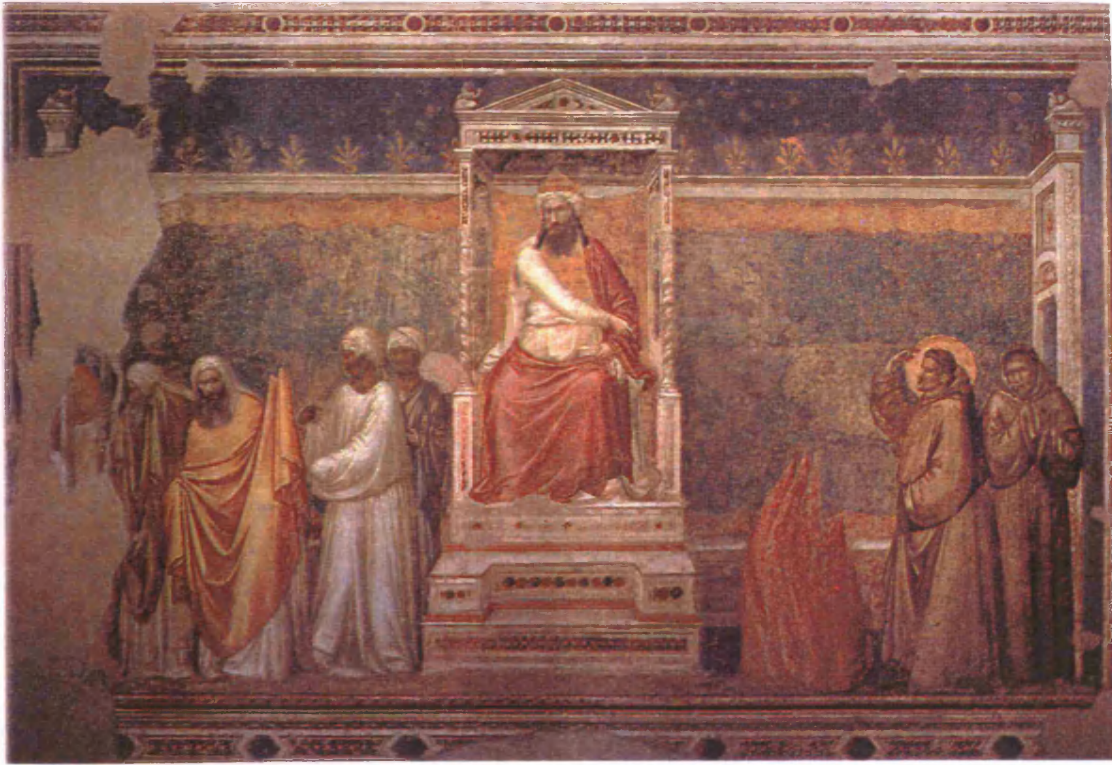Windeatt, B. A., *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Woodbridge, 1982).

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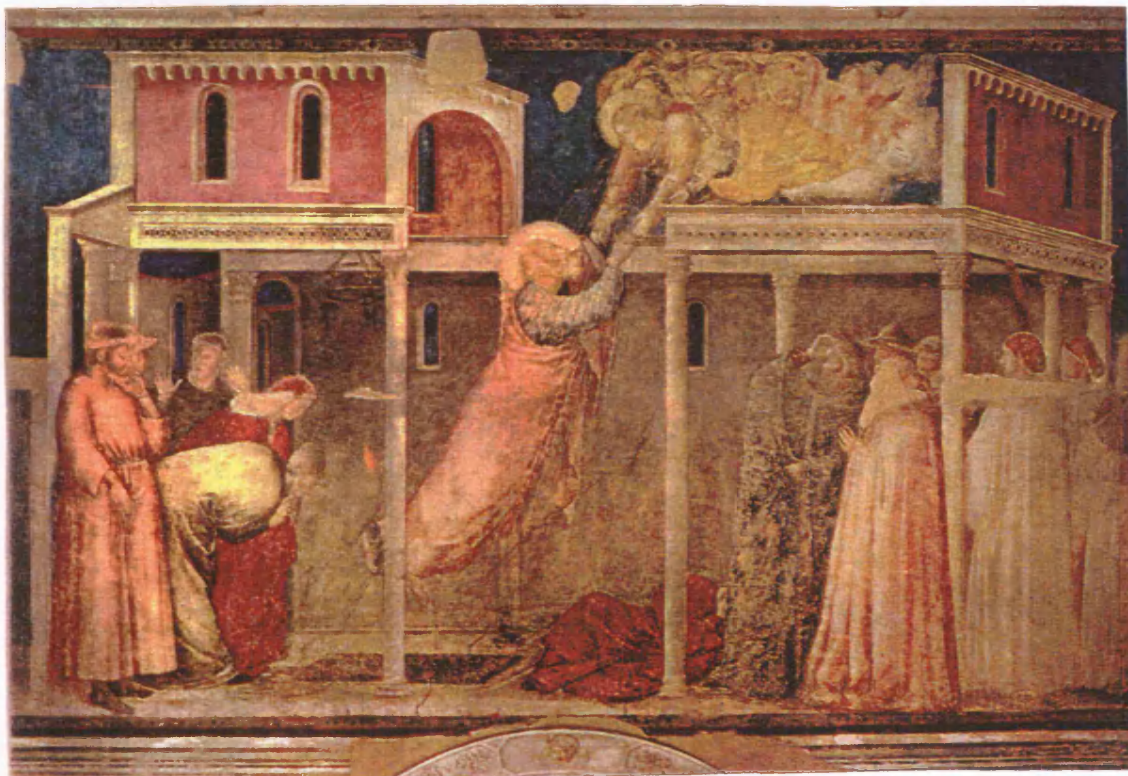3. *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata.*

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