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Voys Lessons: Whirling Words in Chaucer's "House of Rumour"

Abstract

"Voys Lessons: Whirling Words in Chaucer's 'House of Rumour'" examines the lability of sound and its use in the dissemination, transposition, and authorship of stories within The House of Fame , a text exemplifying the mobility and flexibility of misused or unhinged words, as expressed through sound as opposed to text. By engaging the use and interpretation of sound in contrast to words, this new reading concentrates on the idea of narrative as material artifact with limited stasis. Geffrey's pseudo-authorship, through his voyeuristic stance, engages the textuality of sounds and shows the related subtlety, elasticity, and democratic sociohistorical aspect of narrative construction. Chaucer's dreamscape and use of authorial characters allows this argument to reposition the mobility and nature of sound, emphasizing its critical importance in the formation and corruption of stories, both written and oral.

Keywords: sound, narrative, medieval, authorship, bricolage, authority, transposition, dissemination, context, Chaucer

The dreamscape of The House of Fame provides access to poetic process while warning against poor poetic proliferation. The poem is incomplete, drawing scholarly attention to the identity of the "man of gret auctorite," and whether the incompleteness is intentional. However, few critics have evaluated the full scope of Chaucer's subtle representation of hearing as a performed narrative gesture, linking the lability of sound to the dissemination, transposition, and authorship of stories. To reveal, challenge, and begin to fill this void in scholarship, my argument traces the following: the narrator's engagement with the sound and word landscapes of the House of Rumour; the

presentation of sound as a literary device producing narrative; Chaucer's postulation and use of the pseudo-author; the question of authority; and the sociohistorical context in which narrative is formed. This analysis adds several critical components to the discussion, namely, the function of sound in transmitting a multiplicity of sources, voices, and characters, all of whom operate in the construction of a variegated narrative forcing engagement with the dynamic realities of people and spaces reflected in the poetic process. Democratic subjectivity, then, questions the authority of authorship and complicates the nature of narrator and narrative, through the expansiveness, echo, and formulation of sound.

The poem itself does not overtly focus on these topics, and critics have widely examined and criticized the unrefined gestures of the narrator and pseudo-author Geffrey. Alfred David suggests that by choosing "the character of an ignorant imitator of the courtly school of writing," Chaucer produces "exactly what we are led to expect from such an unsophisticated pen" (339). While David credits the moments where the dream vision is enlivened by the narrator's awareness of parody, he believes the writing is lopsided (333). David Bevington comments, "the comic perspective . . . allowed Chaucer . . . to inform his audience on a series of interesting topics, and at the same time to view all realms of knowledge with humorous detachment, by the device of a befuddled pedant" (291). Leslie K. Arnovick, who focuses on the process and signifiers of telling, the "mark of human speech," sees Chaucer's anxiety as centered on the "ephemeral, mutable substance" of oral culture (326, 325). Ebbe Klitgard considers the lack of an ending as a reflection of a lost audience, truncating the narrative voice by not providing a receptive ear ("Chaucer as Performer" 265).[1] Similarly, Elizabeth Buckmaster is disappointed with the disjointed inconsistency in the text (279). Steven Kruger also asserts that "the poem's complex trajectory tends to collapse on itself and turn back inward, back into self-exploration" ("Imagination and the Complex Movement" 117). Insightfully, these theorists all treat allegory as a dynamic process, challenging the popular notion of allegory as a static form of signification, rather like a roman a clef with precise correspondences. My argument elaborates beyond this view by invoking the complex malleability of narrative construction, authorial roles, and context.

Though A.J. Minnis includes The House of Fame within the poetic tradition of Cicero's Somnium Scipionis, Martianus Capella's De nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae, and Dante's Comedia, as the

work evokes "the arts subjects [of] physics, metaphysics, astronomy/astrology, grammar, music, rhetoric, poetics," he claims that "Chaucer's account of flight to Fame is [quite] unique" (183). The position of the House of Fame "[b]etwixen hevene and erthe and see" (l. 715; also l. 846) captures "what so cometh from any tonge" (l. 721).[2] For Robert Edwards, "House of Fame gives a relatively greater weight to memory both as a category of aesthetic speculation and a formal system of representation. Poetic emblems and mnemonic techniques dominate the poem, and poetry itself emerges as an act of memory" (94). In fact, even the deliberately shaky "construction and geography of Fame's palace, its 'hous and site' (1114 [sic]), express these questions in a rich and evocative poetic emblem of memory and image-making. As imaginative space, the palace is that region where abstract concerns about the truth value of language and poetry take literal shape" (111-112). The House, like the middle vision, is located in a suspended "realm" that looks upward and downward simultaneously. This suspended quality is the nature of artistic language, constructed of elements in search of their "kyndely stede" (l. 731).

As thus: loo, thou maist alday se
That any thing that hevy be,
As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte,
And bere hyt never so hye on highte,
Lat goo thyn hand, hit falleth doun.
…

Or smoke or other thynges lyghte;
Alwey they seke upward on highte,
While ech of hem is at his large:
Lyght thing upward, and dounward charge.
…

Thus every thing, by thys reson,
Hath his propre mansion
To which hit seketh to repaire,

Ther-as hit shulde not apaire. (Ll. 737-56, emphasis mine)

However, the intention of locating this “propre mansyon” and the processes that enable language to find its “kyndely stede” are problematic because language proliferates. As Chaucer shows, it does so in unpredictable ways. Throughout this article, the term ‘lability’ aptly describes the multi-directional, nonlinear mobility of sound despite its ironic etymology (Lat. labi, to slip, err, fall). This terminology stresses the continuum of movement between flight and falling that characterizes sound throughout the text.

And thus fro roundel to compas,
Ech aboute other goynge
Causeth of othres sterynge
And multiplyinge ever moo,
Til that hyt be so fer ygoo
That hyt at bothe brynkes bee.
Although thou mowe hyt not ysee
Above, hyt gooth yet alway under,
Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder. (Ll. 798-806)

In the poem, sounds and words create ripples, like stones thrown into water (Irvine 866), enabling the “[exponential] power of the imagination to multiply phantasms” (Watson 16). The rippling of “voys,” “noyse,” “word,” or “soun,” their upward and outward movement into the House of Fame, figure the narrator as one whose ear must be receptive to not only the movement of sound, but also its arbitrary arrangement into a hierarchy by those claiming authority over its expression, Fame and Fortune (Irvine 862, 868). Chaucer thus tackles the innate difficulty of sign and referent to become wholly unified, a problem not only of sound’s mobility, but also of allegory and signification.[3]

The lability of sound is intimately connected to the contemporary practices and understanding of grammar as reflected in The House of Fame.[4] Minnis posits that for Chaucer, sound’s origin is

similar to that in De musica of Boethius, and to Macrobius' remark: "sound is produced only by the percussion of air." In his Institutiones grammaticae, the Latin grammarian Priscian identifies "spoken utterance [vox] as very thin struck air or its property perceptible to hearing" (Minnis 203-204; Irvine 855). Martin Irvine succinctly defines vox as being "the vocal utterance as linguistic signifier and the vehicle of discourse," highlighting both the aural and linguistic, while also implying the allegorical components thereof (854). Moreover, he indicates these "utterances" are concrete: "a corporeal substance – air," a debate about the character of sound in which Chaucer's House of Fame actively participates (855, 867). In the poem, vox is simultaneously mobile and palpable, in a way that air does not automatically connote for the modern reader. As in music, the literal breaking of air as a precursor to words is a physical, real act, which shows Chaucer's stance that indeed, the nature and "substance of sound was air" (Minnis 203). According to Irvine, "the grammatical doctrine of the substance of vox is easily parodied in a reductio ad absurdum" (864). In fact, Minnis comments that Chaucer "seems to relish . . . reducing sound, the speech of men, and literature (as visible and recorded speech) to a lot of broken air" (204).

Vulnerability and Infinity: Sound as Writing

Like sound, Chaucer treats the written representation of sound as volatile. Sound resists stasis, multiplying and moving instead. The narrator, a progenitor of sound, attempts to restrict language's explication to the intended signification – the creative thrust that espouses meaning. Laurel Amtower notes that such "speech genres[,] so powerful in their ability to shape and homogenize behavior[,] are as arbitrarily established by the laws of chance and human intervention as the canonical texts that make it into The House of Fame" (279). For Robert Clifford, the narrative instability Chaucer creates through "question[ing] the truth of [the very] texts" on which "Fame's foundations are based," is the crux of his narrative choices. In fact, he argues that "if Chaucer questions the possibilities of those texts and . . . authorities through his narration, then Fame's power is considerably weakened … [T]his is when we get close to understanding [how] Chaucer wishes to portray fame, and his purpose in having the narration disrupted by instability" (161). Minnis plainly states that "speech is utterly necessary for the very existence of fame," and links this to etymology known to medieval grammarians: that fama stems from fando, for "speaking" (204;

Irvine 861, 873).Therefore, through the narrator and pseudo-author's navigation of sound, speech, and writing, Chaucer explores his interest in the processes that capture meaning and somewhat limit the infinite gestures of language.

In The House of Fame, Chaucer references the science of sound:

That speech is soun,
Or elles no man myghte hyt here;
Now herke what y wol the lere.
"Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken;
And every speche that ys spoken,
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
In his substaunce ys but air;
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke.
But this may be in many wyse,
Of which I wil the twoo devyse,
As soun that cometh of pipe or harpe.
For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe
The air ys twyst with violence
And rent – loo, thys ys my sentence.
Eke whan men harpe-strynges smyte,
Whether hyt be moche or lyte,
Loo, with the strok the ayr tobreketh;
And ryght so breketh it when men speketh. (Ll. 762-80)

Here, the mention of philosophical texts is structurally juxtaposed to the illustration of how sound functions: its transformative nature. Although sound and text are not the same, Chaucer relates the flexibility of sound to the staged fixity of texts. The lability of sound profits from multiplication while the comparative fixture of textual narrative represents stasis. In other words, though textuality concretizes the gestures of poetics, it remains vulnerable to the volatility of sound (sonus),

becoming an analogy to its productive multiplication. As voces are channeled through sound, from which they are distinguished by their "ability to signify" (Irvine 856), they are memorialized. Irvine discusses an "encoding process [that] represents the origin of narrative and textual forms of memory: Rumor represents perpetuated or repeatable discourse in a chain of utterances at the level of the spoken report." In a second stage, the voces are transcribed into a "literary discourse, over which Fame presides, [that is] fragmented, incomplete, selective, and neutral to the conditions of the truth" (874). Fama, like Fortuna, is whimsical and "possibly arbitrary" (Watson 14), rather than methodical in her ordering of linguistic legacy (Ruffolo 325-341).

This mobility is a formidable threat to the perceived fixed character of texts, and further, challenges pretensions of immortal constancy. While the past "remains inseparably entangled with the present and [therefore] will not and cannot cease to exist in reconfigured forms" (Watson 5), rendering the text vulnerable to improper dissemination, erasure, or physical damage, offers a different type of immortality: the cosmic engagement of the narrator with "tydynges" as moving the "alderfastest" in the House of Rumour (l. 509). Lee Patterson sees these endeavors as procedures of literary historiography. He asserts that the structures within The House of Fame are falsely presented as stable, while the wicker frame and whirling landscape negate that stability. The static metallic pillars in Fame's house are like textual prison-fortresses under siege by subsequent and rival writers. Narrative history here is a reiteration of itself, existing through its own vocalization (Patterson 99-101). For Irvine, this is the exertion of a tenuous power: out of the barrage of sounds, words, speech, and stories, Fame ultimately chooses what is recorded and what is discarded, thus manipulating the emerging text (873-74). Emphasizing the highly social implications of this process, Nicholas Watson contends that "the historical understanding of noteworthy deeds and the nature of their place in the collective memory . . . is determined by the unpredictable, possibly arbitrary, decisions of Fame, fama herself" (14, emphasis mine).

Following this logic, the very reiteration Fame undertakes is subject to authorial interpretation, such as Chaucer's Theban sublimation of Trojan history. Yet an author's participation in the reiteration and reclassification of history is also subject to the fluidity of sound, especially sound that travels beyond medieval regulatory schema and bears the signifying quality of vox. The classical cosmography alluded to above is one such schema – grammar is another – though Fame cannot

wrest English from other literary traditions, nor is she invested in securing it. Similarly, neither Nature nor architecture can provide a safe haven for linguistic legacies desired by writers because natural elements, even mere sunshine, can literally warp them. The question "[w]hat may ever laste?" emphasizes the volatility of language's foundation, and situates the almost haphazard ordering of famous names throughout the poem (l. 1147).

In this view, that which is written is no more static than whirling voices, as permeable and vulnerable to motion as sound. Writing is composed, disseminated, and stored, thus becoming mobile and surprisingly flexible. Kathy Cawsey equates the encounter of Chaucer's dreamer with the names etched in ice to a modern-day reader trying to decipher an old manuscript. "In a manuscript culture," she argues, "the most popular manuscripts . . . are liable to destruction, because they are handled, torn, spilt upon, written in, exposed to the elements, recopied poorly, and textually corrupted" (Cawsey 975).[5] This description addresses the real-life erosion of material text. Although he presents it as a fixed symbol, Chaucer also signals that textual production is no more fixed than the sounds and voces escaping the frame that temporarily houses it. A poorly written text, the misinterpretation of a text by readers, the incorrect summation of a text to other readers, the misappropriated signification of symbols within a text (inappropriate allegorical indexing), the incorrect transcription of a text, fire, or bad weather, can distort what is signified. The House of Rumour, then, is an attempt to imagine a fully penetrable and labile frame, producing content as sounds whirl through the cracks and fissures of its wattle construction. Both House and the resulting text are permeable and unstable, even though one articulation is presented as a fixed product. And yet, "to be unwritten, not bound in letters against oblivion, is to be deleted from memory" altogether (Irvine 871).

The fluidity of sound channeled by Chaucer facilitates the insertion of the narrator or pseudo-author – the presence who manipulates and impacts the importance of historical symbols. These "symbols" are reflected as narrative pillars, concretized, socially accepted reference points that signify a past historical moment; whether a drawing etched on a wall or an old tale, these are semiotic objects participating in larger historical narratives. Sound is innately multiple in The House of Fame, an underlying component of the larger argument the text implies: through sound, shrewd narrators include the author's own story in this multiplication – the process of authorial self-

insertion into preexisting literary traditions. The dangers of falsely redeeming the literary past and future lie in the copious ways to disseminate language (writing, singing, thoughts, or whispers), in many tongues (French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, English), and of different qualities ("trouthe" or slander). Geffrey's demand "Now herkeneth every maner man/ That Englissh understonde kan" is an effort to stabilize just one aspect of the linguistic mode (Ll. 509-10).[6]

Reading the Narrator: the Reemergence of the Author

The connection between how texts are read, remembered, treated, and stored raises questions about authorial permanence, and the multiple roles of the narrator. The narrator in The House of Fame is a necessary figure in the attempt to capture and concretize the various vocalized facets of experience: murmurs of life, death, and what occurs in between. Through an anthropological depiction of life's details, Chaucer listens in on these "tydynges" to reveal the stories of knights, shipmen, porters, and old gapped-teeth women. Geffrey's articulation of his vision of The House of Fame is an effort to create an authored bricolage. He proclaims, "Though som vers fayle in a sillable;/And that I do no diligence/To shewe craft, but o sentence" (Ll. 1098-1100). Chaucer casts his narrator in a self-reflective mode where he is viewer, listener, reader, narrator, and ultimately writer at once:

That al the men that ben on lyve
Ne han the kunnynge to descrive
The beaute of that ylke place,
…
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.

But natheles al the substance
I have yit in my remembrance . . . (Ll.1167-82, emphasis mine)

Geffrey is the architect of narrative – an authorial stance. Instead of the invisible man to whom he gestures, Geffrey positions himself as the "man of gret auctorite," the creator of meaning through his unique description of the "tydynges" he has witnessed.

That al the folk that ys alyve
Ne han the kunnynge to discryve
The thinges that I herde there,
What aloude, and what in ere. (Ll. 2055-58, emphasis mine)

Because as stated in these lines, no other can describe or put into words what is heard, the narrator is critical to the design and explication of narrative. The "alther-fastest" moving narrator of the whirling House of Dedalus articulates the volatility and violence of the house (l. 2131). The House of Fame is a generative landscape where motion becomes form. Although the "tydynges" are presented as more embodied than the narrator, his listening ear is paramount to the articulation and visualization of the events occurring in the landscape. Geffrey participates in the volatile whirlwind to gather the experience needed to create fiction. Experiential learning is necessary for the poetic endeavor; learning, as described by Chaucer, engages the multifarious components of narrative that insist on being proliferated through sound and words:

This hous was also ful of gygges,
And also ful eke of chirkynges,
And of many other werkynges;
And eke this hous hath of entrees
…
And on the roof men may yet seen
A thousand holes, and wel moo,
To leten wel the soun out goo.
And be day, in every tyde,

Been al the dores opened wide,
And be nyght echon unshette;
Ne porter ther is noon to lette
No maner tydynges in to pace.
Ne never rest is in that place
That hit nys fild ful of tydynges,
Other loude or of whisprynges; (Ll. 1942-58)

If the several loose threads of Geffrey's flight are seen as contextualized semiotic sounds, pillars of a past history, the "thousand holes" of this narrative offers an opportunity to create coherent meaning through the critical choice and allegorical indexing of words. For Watson, "tydynges" have the potential to set fire to cities – they are "dangerously capable of helping to create what is done and said, destroying mighty civilizations through mere reportage, then carrying the news of that conflagration, outrageously varied" and subject to being reimagined (16).

The grammatical concept of litterae (letters, understood as both "graphic and phonetic unit[s]") can usefully frame this connection (Irvine 857). For Isidore of Seville, as cited by Minnis, litterae are "the indices of things, the signs of words, in which there is such a great force that they speak to us without spoken sound [vox], things said by those absent (205)."[7] The ordering of sounds parallels the ordering of words in phrases, then sentences, then verses, creating an organized textuality that is simultaneously an alternate mode of authorship, inviting current, sociopolitical impact through communal participation in its reading, and an exercise in historical memory. Litterae, then, act as a sort of memorial, since endemic within each written word are memories of the past, transmitting thoughts and ideas to posterity (Minnis 205). Chaucer points out how problematic the act of composing can become when words are written on unstable surfaces, as evidenced by the molten words on the ice mountain. Reflecting "the intricate mental space of the 'higher' imagination[,] images rise up thickly from the storehouse of the memory or are admitted anew by way of the senses" (Watson 13). In the case of The House of Fame, the narrator's wish to hear new "tydynges" is a precursor to writing within a text that is already written.

The frailty of textual production as a fixed symbol of the poetic process does not limit the innovative energies of the author-bricoleur. Chaucer's innovations seize a potentially fatal flaw in textual production and sound mobility to create a social situation for his text, or in the words of Robert Edwards, "memory as a form of theater" (100). This productive endeavor figures Chaucer as a crafty "auctorite." After all, as Watson would have it: "the past exists in the collective imagination" (6, emphasis mine). Although these intonations are subtle in The House of Fame, Frederic Jameson's ideas on language as a socially symbolic act are useful when considering Chaucer's poetic description of how narrative produces effects, how it functions, and how the author and narrator must perform in the face of sound's genetics. Jameson refers to the self-reflective mode of narrative's symbolic gesture; he articulates the work of narrative bricolage that responds to a pretext, but is presented as the innovative crafting and renewed interlacing of narrative threads. He writes,

> *[t]he whole paradox of [this] subtext [is] that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also . . . a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. (Jameson 81-82)*

That the "I," the architect of fiction, must capture context and subtext only to show the power of text to retroactively generate them conveys the restorative power of narrative – language literally creates the historically situated fields in which it performs. Through the dream narrator's self-reflective process, readers explore the crafting of poetry and its concern with the ambiguities of literary art. These ambiguities are not individuated psychological responses; they also include the sociopolitical language of possibilities.

Jameson argues that producing symbols is intertwined with transformative emergence by continual rearticulation – the narrator navigates language through participation, offset by a detached, voyeuristic stance. The narrator shifts agency continually between the voyeuristic static narrator, the listener who hears the vox, which "properly strikes the ears" (Irvine 855), and the pseudo-author, who struggles to collect and capture narrative "tydynges" on behalf of the author and

himself. These narrative roles provoke reader participation and the democratic, collective creation of meaning. As the voyeur hears and transmits the sounds and voces encountered, readers order the images that flash before this narrator while also processing and engaging the meaning presented by the pseudo-author. David Lyle Jeffrey argues that, “Chaucer presents his protagonist-persona as a fictive ‘reader’ engaged in reflective exegesis of a text commonly held by ‘actual’ readers, allowing them, in turn, to ‘over-hear’ the fictive reader struggle toward interpretation and meaning” (209). The fictive readers are both narrator and audience; both make meanings. Chaucer’s narrator must surrender to the poetic process and accept the inevitable motion of language as too fluid to be reconstituted, even momentarily.

Beyond the Conscious Narrator

Within the suspended, whirling, architectural landscape of The House of Fame, language interacts with authorial voice and self. In parallel processes, poets become historians (creators of context) while narrators – the personified authorial subconscious as depicted in the dream-vision genre – become captors of the subtext (guides, architects, and agents of motion). This subconscious narrator is a component of the dream-vision genre, elaborating the vision as the text of the narrative. The genre consistently structures the narrator’s role in the text as dreamer, often presented as afflicted by an emotional condition that leads to the dream state. What Maureen Quilligan describes as “the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor” exemplifies the texture of the Macrobian somnium – a dream space that enables and exacerbates the materialization of fiction (64). Therefore, narrators are very much conscious literary actors, whose “dreams [function] as dislocated signs” (Edwards 99). Indeed, the dreamers themselves are the semiotic agents who work to thread together the moving allegorical symbols to capture or craft the subtext of the referent in relation to what the author wants signified within the context of the instability in the House of Rumour. In the words of Edwards, “[t]hroughout the ekphrasis of the narrator’s dream Chaucer subtly interweaves sound and speech” (101), leading to a document overflowing with contested, multi-faceted, and multimedia meanings. Nevertheless, as the poem progresses from Book One to Book Two, “the attention of the narrator is redirected from his preoccupation with poetry-as-dream to a consideration of the narrative materials for new poems

and the linguistic status of literature itself," thus a shift from exploration to construction "in grammatical, not psychological terms" (Irvine 859). The subjective, participatory process through which grammar is interpreted is the underlying essence of the contested narratives in The House of Fame.

To capture or create meaning is to gain a vantage point that enables the writer, narrator, and viewer to stand on '"the fringes of 'content,' at the points of intersection between object and subject, between the world and the viewer, where the fundamental energies of fiction are registered" (Jordan 102). This conceptual description of narrative engagement is actualized in The House of Fame as an authorial and narrative "borderland" (Kruger 131).[8] To use Nicholas Watson's words, the poem functions as a "[radical] account of the disruptive power of unregulated imaginative activity" (17). The narrator's actions are invested in deciphering and constituting allegorical meaning, hardly a smooth endeavor. The whirling landscape of the text provides an impossible but useful place where false and true tidings are spliced together, and meaning is generated from this fictive possibility (Watson 17). This is evidenced by the fight between the lie and the truth at the window, where both intermingle and swear brotherhood to each other:

And, when they metten in that place,
They were achekked bothe two,
And neyther of hem moste out goo
For other, so they gonne crowde,
Til ech of hem gan crien lowed,
"Lat me go first!" "Nay, but let me!
And here I wol ensuren the,
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,
That I shal never fro the go,
But be thyn owne sworen brother! (Ll. 2092-101)

Concretized allegorical symbols come together to form language: the dispute over their order certainly informs and complicates the structure of the allegory, hence of meaning. Language's regenerative thrust calls attention to the interpretation and synthesis of "tydynges" as processes

involved in deciphering meaning (Jameson 81). Chaucer shows the cacophony of language, its congruence, and its potential to denigrate truth through rearticulation: “Fayled” verses “Of every speche, of every soun,/Be hyt eyther foul or fair,/Hath hys kynde place in ayr” (Ll. 832-34).[9] Geffrey witnesses and relays the use of unfiltered, labile language:

And every wight that I saugh there
Rouned everych in others ere
A newe tydynge prively,
Or elles tolde al openly
Ryght thus, and seyde: “Nost not thou
That ys betyd, lo, late or now?”
“No,” quod he, “telle me what.”
And than he tolde hym this and that,
And swor therto that hit was soth –
“Thus hath he sayd,” and “Thus he doth,”
“Thus shal hit be,” “Thus herde y seye,”
“That shal be founde,” “That dar I leye” – (Ll. 2043-54)

Chaucer’s narrator mediates the process of transcoding embedded meaning in multiple texts across structural levels of reality. In the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer further develops this technique as he presents his field of folk (the conglomeration of all classes) and his field of narrative genres (the conglomeration of various modes of representing literature and history) as examples of how language is staged, memorialized, and recast (Kordecki 76).[10]

Within the House itself, the adamant perforation of sound demands attention, and it becomes necessary to link language’s natural movement towards multiplicity with a narrator who wishes to hear new ideas. Narrative motion is not limited to the actions of an obtuse narrator as in The Book of the Duchess, where his steady questioning aggravates the Black Knight to proclaim “She ys ded!” (l.1309) (Burger 341).[11] Instead, narrative moves through engaging allegorical fissures, stabilizing, and ultimately salvaging fragmented discourse as a sort of redaction and bricolage – the threading together described earlier as the work of narrators and narrative. This is an alternate

mode to the mystified stabilization of the linear anagogic pulse – impossible in The House of Fame. The notion of one transcendental truth is problematic, especially when we see falsehood and "trouthe" forming a brotherhood based purely on transportability rather than content (Watson 17). As expressed by words, falsehood and "trouthe" are one and the same, a whirlwind subject to ordering by the pseudo-author, who can assign meaning to that which is signaled through sound. Both textual production and sound have innate volatility, giving rise to a collusion of meaning. Both true and false statements can gain precedence within Fame's house, pointing to the dangerous allocation of linguistic meaning and legacy by Fame (Watson 14-16); this collusion also calls into question a reader's subjective interpretation of written sound.

Authorial Authority: Reading the Narrator

While only subtly concerned with which narratives get written and transported, Chaucer's poetics are preoccupied with notions of access and authority. The concretization of the story is not the object; rather, authors and readers must pay attention to poetics as process. In examining the works of canonized poets, Kruger reminds us to focus on the process whereby "authoritative traditions [are] questioned and finished poems themselves unmade and reinvented" ("Imagination and the Complex Movement" 118). J. L. Simmons argues that by choosing "Vergil for this exemplum . . . Chaucer picked what was the most obvious example of a work written expressly to celebrate a country, an age, a particular sovereign" (129). In support of the idea that the textual authority of canonical works can be subverted, Clifford claims that the tale of Troy destabilizes the text. "There is no full presence for authority to appeal to, [sic] it will always slip away into undecidables because language is not fixed" (Clifford 163). David Lyle Jeffrey indicates that juxtaposing the Aeneid and The House of Fame offers a "historicist lens afforded by Roman culture," intermixed with the "vagaries of human history" – cosmology, philosophy, and mythography (211-16). Jeffrey evaluates Chaucer's gestures toward the Aeneid in terms of the creation of a new literary document:

> *Whereas Dante had used his national poet, Vergil, as an irrefragably 'authoritative' interlocutor, Chaucer uses the 'intellectual' but more ambiguous eagle. For Dante, the point is that poetic history and its historicist schema becomes . . . a guide to the truth of the theological, or of*

revelation. For Chaucer, . . . a revelation – far beyond the sight of the intellect – would be needed as a guide to the truth value of history or the historical 'authorities' one reads. (220)

Poetic malleability ensures the gesture of creativity. But, as discussed, this engagement is not the simple folding of neatly framed creative gestures, but also the construction of authority through the experience and perception of the pseudo-author.

There are larger contextual implications when an author figures himself or is figured as an authority on the designed literary bricolage. Then, the author and bricoleur is engaged in crafting the incoherent threads of allegory, rendering visible gaps and fissures to illustrate authorial prowess. But he is also involved in creating a patchwork of historical and literary context alongside his current articulation of that which is signed and re-signified. As Irvine puts it, "history and fiction are collapsed into one category – narrative . . . reveal[ing] that all writings are necessarily rewritings and that new texts rewrite the old" (875). In these fissures, authorial gesturing is made visible in the allegorical phenomenologies of reading. Using these fissures and gaps enables Chaucer to respond to the fecundity of textual and allegorical instability and dissemination.

Language's reproductive energies are presented as prolific, yet its scope is problematic because proliferation is not governed by "man of gret auctorite" and leaves no porter to manage output and classify content. Chaucer's narrator tirelessly navigates this environment, breaking down symbols and context to engage the poetic process. Geffrey consciously quarries for new "tydynges" – cultural treasures of the past, present, and future – in order to look forward while remaining cognizant of the ever-shifting literary and historical landscape. The whirling house made of twigs is all-encompassing in its dichotomous "tydynges," echoing war and peace, love and marriage, voyages and victory, death and life, hate and praise, health and sickness, trust and doubt, wit and folly, and good and bad government, among them (Ll. 1959-76). "[B]y juxtaposing so many terms, . . . Chaucer [shows his desire] to get between the simple opposites and [to delve] into the area of undecidables, neither [presence] nor [absence] but everything" (Clifford 160). In this way, Chaucer's narrator-bricoleur seizes narrative opportunity and authorship.

The poet writes; but writing is not merely writing. The endeavor of documenting "tydynges" enlists an anthropological approach: the narrator writes about his experiences in the context of those

sharing and creating the physical space that forms the unhinged landscape – a linguistic marketplace of shipmen, pilgrims, and couriers. By showing Geffrey in Rumour's whirlwind, Chaucer posits that a narrator, a pseudo-author, can partake of experiential learning through hearing and seeing and therefore inform the creative process. Through experience, the narrator becomes aware of the multiple realms of writing and expression, interiority, the social and political climate, the problems of semantics and allegory, history, linguistic sound. Through faulty interpreters, authors, expenders of language, and the Gods, the twist of Fortune can take a seat in Fame's domain. Chaucer recognizes that awareness does not necessarily negate these processes, but it does allow the narrator to relay to his readers that his participation is occurring in the face of both visible and invisible linguistic whirlwinds.

The House of Fame creates a physical representation of the dilemma of listening and writing, making visible the authorial landscape. The narrator values the excavation of new narrative landscapes, though he is never seen writing; listening for "tydynges" becomes the precursor to writing, while writing is figured as a method that can close the rift between self and society – Kruger's "borderland". The narrator's journey is muddled and complicated by the multiplicity of voces, the "corporeal entity" which "has the [distinctive] property of being heard by various people in different places at the same time" (Irvine 866). This particular characteristic provides access to the information that sparks the imaginative creation and rehearsal of memories, opening the possibilities for the insertion of perspectives and voices beyond that of the pseudo-author. On the one hand, this contributes to the narrator's challenge – ultimately draining both him, and arguably, Chaucer himself. But more importantly, the reconstruction of history is enabled through popular and highly democratic participation: multiple, even contradictory sources, voices, experiences, and stimuli present events, texts, memories, and history, forcing the narrator to engage this befuddling multiplicity. In the potential for confusion, this analysis has honed in on the room for participation in the creation and elaboration of meaning – history-making – that is not limited to the narrator, the pseudo-author, or the author himself. Because of the infinite ways meaning can be articulated, the landscape of volatile language is ripe with authorial opportunities, a terrain Chaucer also shows as treacherous.

The author-bricoleur intermingles the role of the poet's personal journey with his political and sociohistorical context. Chaucer is aware that partaking in the poetic process as a creative endeavor involves altering literary history, specifically through the involvement of the realm beyond the narrator's person or views. That remaking is devised through experiential learning, the engagement with sights and sounds, not merely through the evaluation of texts. For Chaucer, the poetic process includes exposure to all facets of life, including the mundane, in order for poets to generate new stories with the participation of their collaborators within the text as well as their audiences. Chaucer's problems with textual transmission, dissemination, and interpretation do not limit the process of transporting or communicating meaning; he does not fail to generate a complete narrative. Instead, he wants participants to exert some responsibility when they engage in the process of making meaning.

In this vein, "Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn" provides binding instruction to all "auctores" who establish themselves through the words and works of "olde bookes:"

Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe;
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
And al is thorugh thy negligence and rape. (Ll. 1-7)

Chaucer is well aware of the palpable nature of both text and sound, in keeping with the former's seeming stability and the latter's flexibility. Chaucer's ideas of authorship included written texts where he directs the utmost care in transposing words and sound; for him, authorship must engage readers to understand that the unwritten, the whirlingscape outside of posed textual fixity, is also prone to lability.

Socially Circumscribed: Narrator in Context

Through his befuddled narrator, Chaucer stretches across the "borderland" of sign and referent to create an historical allegory (Boitani 72-77).[12] By presenting a soaring Geffrey as a narrator who witnesses new "tydynges" through new experiences, Chaucer also engages the reader in the perceptive qualities of the narrative, namely seeing and hearing. Voyeuristic exploration gives way to all-hearing – experiential learning takes place during real encounters, rather than through concepts (Finlayson 51-57).[13] The reader is "an observer of another's observations," participating in deciphering history, philosophy, and science (Finlayson 48). Yet this "kaleidoscopic approach," the barrage of sound and visuals in an untamed landscape, complicates the very notion of direct access to "philosophic-visionary authorities." Although the narrator personally engages this whirlingscape, creating a reality for both himself and the reader, Chaucer undercuts his experiences as comical and dubious, unlike the "careful processive vision of Dante or Alanus" (Finlayson 50-54).

Geffrey's longing for the correction of Lady Fortune – the realization of a good narrative that is not at the mercy of her whimsy – is an individualistic attempt at literary process as a refuge, a transcription aimed at closing narrative rifts, yet the contextualization of Geffrey's indulgences can include a larger audience. Jameson notes that there can be no true individual indulgence:

> *The only effective liberation from [blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge] begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political (20).*

Therefore, poetics, policy, and politics act as particulars of the collective commonplace. On the one hand, Chaucer never asserts that governing documents (laws, treaties, and constitutional papers) are susceptible to the same types of vulnerability, corruptibility, and misappropriation as artistic articulations (poetry and narrative). Instead, The House of Fame engages ideas of legacy and authority. In the Legend of Good Women, Chaucer illustrates his cognizance that writing can provide restitution by vindicating individuals that history or artistry presented poorly. Writing is subject to rewriting; interpretation is subject to reinterpretation. Rewriting a past narrative with new rhetorical flourishes involves subversion, or as Jameson observes, allegorical interpretation lends itself to the impoverishment of one narrative through the rewriting and assuming of a master code

or Ur-narrative. Its imposition as the unconscious meaning of the narrative in question suggests a poetic process engaged in multiplicity and subversion (Jameson 22). “Tydynges” move, subverting bygone tropes:

And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones
A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,
That gonne of aventure drawe
Out at a wyndowe for to pace;
And, when they metten in that place,
They were achekked bothe two,
And neyther of hem moste out goo
For other, so they gonne crowde,
Til ech of hem gan crien lowde,
“Lat me go first!” “Nay, but let me!
And here I wol ensuren the,
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,
That I shal never fro the go,
But be thyn owne sworen brother!”
…
Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
Togeder fle for oo tydynge. (Ll.2088-109)

This section of the poem focuses on the transposition and mobility of words. Mounting “tydynges” push to squeeze through fissures, showing the particular articulation of stories and the subtle competition to recast and reconstitute the literary frames that preceded the contextualized reading in question. Chaucer’s investment in allegory is suspect because, as Jameson puts it, “allegory is here the opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings . . . generated as so many levels and . . . supplementary interpretations” (29). Jameson and Quilligan outline historical totality to include isolation and privilege interpretation. These elements are

recognizable in the House of Rumour, where each sound attempts to outrun and subvert competing sounds, pointing to the potential for narrative tensions (Jameson 28).

The idea of linguistic distance, allegorized sign and referent, is further confounded by spatial distance as "[u]ndifferentiated discourse becomes objectified, reified into things that travelers stuff into their bags and take away" (Kordecki 74). Language is located on the ground, where laymen like shipmen, pilgrims, pardoners, and messengers, participate in its appropriation and transposition. It is not only the learned society that has access to the rewriting and recasting of narrative; perhaps Chaucer is indicating that the people in the trenches, the "workers" who are embedded within the community, also participate with and create narrative as,

> *[e]very topic or genre of discourse used in human speech – gets turned about and formulated by the work of common, every-day people . . . the makers of texts, . . . composed of truth or fictions. They are authors in the sense that they, too, use discourse and transform it until it takes on narrative and meaning of its own; they are readers in that they listen and transmit themselves the stories that they hear from others. (Amtower 278)*

For Chaucer, to take part in the poetic process is to join the field of folk engaged in the work of creating and enriching a social subtext, namely the people on the ground, those listening and interpreting the narrative as it is co-created. The collection of sounds, words, and pillars is not only a physical gathering of ideas by the narrator or author. The very act of reading or sounding out the narrative involves the reader in making meaning from the symbols and interpretations presented. Narrative emerges from the author's interior space; however, this privacy is interrupted as reader and narrator co-write and co-create. This generative act is confounded by the fact that the interior script from which the author writes is not a unified document; unity cannot be expected from its explication, nor is to be received and digested as a unit by the reader.

> And, Lord, this hous in alle tymes
> Was ful of shipmen and pilgrimes,
> With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
> Entremedled with tydynges,
> And eek allone be hemselve.

O, many a thousand tymes twelve
Saugh I eke of these pardoners,
Currours, and eke messagers,
With boystes crammed ful of lyes
As ever vessel was with lyes.
And as I alther-fastest wente
About, and dide al myn entente
Me for to pleyen and for to lere,
And eke a tydynge for to here,
That I had herd of som contre
That shal not now be told for me –
For hit no nede is, redely;
Folk kan synge hit bet than I;
For al mot out, other late or rathe,
Alle the sheves in the lathe … (Ll. 2121-40)

Here, literary and sociohistorical narratives are sung, signified, rehearsed, and produced by rote, depicting the voices of a singing nation. Although Chaucer illustrates this act of rehearsal somewhat whimsically, these songs escape through textual holes, demanding authors, readers, and listeners to attentively heed and disseminate labile sound. The songs represent the idea of "collective commonplaces," spaces where cultural beliefs are deposited and retrieved. Chaucer highlights the frailty of these "commonplaces" because of how muddled they get as their contents are transported (Arnovick 332-39). Though supremely messy, Chaucer acknowledges that the dissemination of language allows the discovery and revelation of new experiences, as expressed in the caravan of stories, the Canterbury Tales. In The House of Fame, Chaucer figures authorial and reader participation as paramount to personally judging which storyline and storyteller gets represented, an exercise in democratic subjectivities, as well as arbitrariness, transportability, and the transformative properties of sound.

Chaucer's use of the anthropological collection of "tydynges" requires listening as a critical component of the pseudo-author. The particular academic and observant qualities of this authorial

character figures poetics as a process where the narrative is not only enriched by experience and perception, but especially through hearing. More central to this analysis, the pseudo-author's role is specifically tied to engagement with, participation in, and subjective, personally circumscribed attempts at creating meaning out of "everyday discourse" (Amtower 276). In this way, the process, construction, and dissemination of a poetic narrative bear a striking and important resemblance to the transmission, construction, and transportability of sound. Hence, the narrator's stance as listener is imperative in the creation of meaning when that meaning is presented through sound. However, involved in the interpretation of everyday sounds, and therefore, the production of alternate narratives, are other listeners, namely readers and those transporting the narrative presented by Chaucer and his pseudo-author. Both generative and destructive representations of the past are re-contextualized through the ears and life experiences of the audience, allowing for a mobile, not static, representation of textual narrative. All writing, then, is vulnerable to misuse, misreading, and misappropriation. Through the uncontrollable, rippling nature of sound, its revelatory use in Chaucer's House of Fame, and its necessary engagement with the listening and reading audience, textual narrative is forced to assume the same lability and seeming lack of authorship and authority as sound. As the whirlwind overtakes the fixed form of textual narrative, neither words nor sound may emerge fully reconstituted or stable.

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[1] See also: Klitgard “Chaucer as Performer” 101-13. Klitgard indicates that the repeated use of the first person pronoun transforms the narrator into a poet performer. This is similar to Bevington’s analysis that the use of the first person helps to create a voice or persona (288-98). He sees the proem and invocation as a defining tool in the reaction of the speaker/narrator, a good argument which would be strengthened if this notion of performance were linked to the narrator as performer and activist. This discussion shows the interconnectedness of audience to narrative performer; however, orality is not discussed in terms of transportability and the possible work that this sort of oral ripple can create. Stories do not die simply because an audience is missing. Rather, Kordecki focuses on the “orality of the natural world” – the creation of a “text ‘literally’ etched on the bodies of animals” (54). Instead of truncated orality, Kordecki notes how voices are subverted in the narrative. This is important to this reading because even in the “non-telling” or erasure much is being documented.

[2] All quotations from Chaucer are taken from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D Benson, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[3] Literary bricolage is the narrator’s counter-measure to the chaotic linguistic whirlwind presented in the House of Rumour. This whirlwind, a dream of words facilitated by the fluidity of the dreamscape, enables the oscillation between the real and the conjured, the past and the present, the writing and the performance of rewriting and rereading. Maureen Quilligan claims that “all allegorists . . . must . . . make the final focus of their narratives not merely the social function of language, but, in particular, the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor. They scrutinize language’s own problematic polysemy” (64). It is appropriate that Geffrey begins his narrative with a discussion of the value of dreams, perhaps questioning their design as a potential vehicle for revelation, and in this argument, the potential for authors to gain access to modes of fame, fortune, and new “tydynges.” Kruger’s position on allegorical usage in the dreamscape goes beyond Quilligan’s “slipperiness,” to define process (the innate texture of allegorical usage) not merely as modus operandi, but more so as a creative space. For him, “navigating a course between unambiguously upward- and downward-looking visions, the middle vision offers a way of

exploring the connections between the world in which we find ourselves and the transcendent realm for which we yearn" (Dreaming 130).

[4] See Irvine "Medieval Grammatical Theory and the House of Fame" 850-76. Irvine explores the particular study and elaboration of the artes grammaticae, which provides the basis for this article's definitions of vox and its understanding for the overt "influence of the literary grammarians – authors of commentaries, glosses, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and treatises on poetics – [that] endured outside the circle of the speculative grammarians and provided the foundation for the literary theory of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries" (851).

[5] Cawsey argues that the carvings give readers an understanding of "medieval concepts of writing and book production" while pointing to the "transience of worldly fame and fortune" (972-74).

[6] For more on Chaucer's poetics and vernacular contribution see Cooper 31-50. Cooper argues that, "Chaucer becomes a ventriloquist for a whole array of different poetic voices" (50).

[7] See also Irvine "Medieval Grammatical Theory" 850-75. "Isidore of Seville, drawing from earlier grammarians, says that 'letters' are so called from legitera, because they show the way (iter) for readers (legentes), or because they are repeated (iterentur) in reading (legendo)" (858).

[8] "Chaucer creates a borderland where he explores the burdens and potentials of humanness and of the human imagination, from a vantage point that allows him to look[ ]toward heaven, but without forgetting the limitations imposed by human beings' embodiment as individuals living necessarily among the unreliable things of the world" ("Imagination and the Complex Movement" 131).

[9] Failed syllables are referred to in Book Two: "Though som vers fayle in a sillable;/ And that I do no diligence/To shewe craft, but o sentence" (Ll. 1098-100).

[10] See also: Ryan 31. Ryan discusses how Chaucer later used the process of experiencing, distancing, and observing first expressed in the dream-vision form to more time-restricted form in his later works. On orality in the Canterbury Tales, see Zieman 70-91. A broader discussion on medieval orality can be found in Coleman 63-78.

[11] Burger suggests that the closure of the Black Knight's narrative serves as an opportunity to "open a new textualized remembering, one that may better reconstitute its participants – knight, dreamer/narrator, and reader – as interpretive subjects with room to maneuver and thus to continue the activities of desire/imagination that move a subject into consciousness through otherness" (341).

[12] Boitani investigates how Chaucer uses books to inspire his narrative. Books are figured in the composition as critical to the process of creating narrative. See also: Hanning 121-63 and Stevenson 1-19.

[13] Finlayson suggests that unlike The Book of the Duchess and the Parlement of Foules, the seeing and hearing presented in the House of Fame are presented as important "sensory perceptions of the narrator." Finlayson sees this "urgent reporting" as a proclamation that the narrator's experience, his physical and emotional reaction is tantamount to how he experiences and categorizes the whirlwind before him (47-57).

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