

RE-WRITING THE CLASSICS:
CHAUCER AND *THE HOUSE OF FAME*

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The notions of fiction and imagination were highly problematic in the Middle Ages because they implied a confusion between creation and lies. Thus, poets often had to authenticate their work by relying mainly on religious teaching and cultural transmission. However, this incessant anxiety of storytelling led some writers to question the human tendency to re-enact, re-write and interact with elements of our past. Few of them deconstructed the act of remembering like Geoffrey Chaucer in *The House of Fame*.

Written shortly after Chaucer's journeys in Italy in 1373 and 1378, during which he discovered the poetry of Dante and, a few years later, of Boccaccio, *The House of Fame* represents a major landmark in the history of English literature. Often considered as Chaucer's first "Italian" poem, *Fame*, undoubtedly his most Dantean creation, and corresponds to the inception of the cultural paradigm shift that would lead to the English Renaissance. However, adapting Dante's creation and the beatitude of his vision was not an easy task. Unlike Boccaccio, who failed to understand his relation to the Classics and to Dante in his *Amorose Visione*, Chaucer, already had the experience required to deal with such a heritage. Indeed, like most poets of his generation, he was familiar with the narrative devices of French courtly poetry and therefore decided to develop his poem in a genre of which he mastered every code. *The House of Fame* is accordingly a dream vision narrated in the first person by Chaucer's narrative persona, Geoffrey, a man whose knowledge of love is more bookish than based on personal experience. Hence we are told that, on the tenth day of December, he fell asleep in his bed and woke up in the Temple of Venus, from which he was afterwards taken by an eagle that led him to the House of Fame as a compensation for his devotion to Love.

But as soon as Geoffrey wakes up, we understand that Chaucer is dealing with something new. Unlike what is usually expected of such a beginning, the poet does not use the dream vision in order to transport his dreamer into an allegory of love, but in a world of books. The poem, consequently, takes place almost entirely in the realm of literature. In Book I, for instance, the Temple of Venus is covered with illustrations and statues relating the main events of Virgil's *Aeneid*; whereas in Book III, the House of Fame itself is supported by

the gret Omer;
And with him Dares and Tytus
Before, and eke he Lollius,
And Guydo eke de Columpris,
And Englyssh Gaufride eke, ywis;
(III, l. 1466-1470)

Even the eagle supposed to pull Geoffrey out of his contemplation has a literary origin, since it comes from Dante's *Commedia*. Indeed, when Dante is transported to the sixth sphere of Paradise, he encounters several souls floating in the air, who start to design before his eyes the signs "of our language" ("nostra favella", *Par.* XVIII, v. 72). The spirits gather and form, as they sing, letters and then words that Dante instantly recognises as the first verses of *The Book of Wisdom* ("Diligite iustitiam [...] qui iudicatis terram"¹, *Par.* XVIII, v. 91-93). And just as he is reading the words depicted in the sky, additional lights are drawn to the final letter of the word *terram*, **M**, which then starts to take the shape of an eagle.

Although the eagle remains the most obvious element borrowed from the *Commedia*, Chaucer does not conceive of the motif as a device to get his story moving. On the contrary, as Karla Taylor notices, "Chaucer borrows not words, but an image and the process by which it is formed".² Accordingly, when he resorts to Dante's eagle, he simultaneously borrows the motif of visible speech with its theological implications.³ Without reproducing Dante's most subtle creations, such as the acrostic in the twelfth canto of the *Purgatorio*, the concept allows Chaucer to think about his own position and responsibilities as an artist (see for instance *Paradiso* I, l. 13-18 and *Fame* III, l. 1091-1108) and to question the limits of the human mind and its implication in the creative process.

One of the first examples of Chaucer's use of the *Commedia* can be found in Book I, when Geoffrey finds extracts and illustrations from the *Aeneid* in the Temple of Venus. Yet, despite the fact that Chaucer is here dealing with the Classics, his reaction as an artist remains guided by the tenth canto of the *Purgatorio*. His narrator discovers, for instance, the first words of the *Aeneid* carved on a brass tablet (I. l. 143-148). However,

¹ "Love justice [...] you that are the judges of the earth"

² Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 22.

³ Dante notices after the apparition of the eagle: "Quei che dipinge li, non ha chi il guidi" ("He who paints there has no one as His guide"; *Par.* XVIII, l. 109).

his description, in which he repeats the phrases “First sawgh I”, or “And next that sawgh I” (I. l. 151, 162, 174, 193, 198...), seems to indicate that he is contemplating wall paintings or stone carvings. But if that were true, how could Geoffrey see dialogues? He tells us, after all, how he saw Venus comforting Aeneas, telling him to go to Carthage (I. v. 224-238), and even refuses to spend too much time on Dido’s encounter with Aeneas and “How they aqueynteden in fere” (I. v. 250). Chaucer thus willingly confuses our perception of these forms of representation. For if images can be painted or carved, why not speech? As the poet tells us himself:

What shulde I speke more queynte,
Or peyne me my wordes peynte⁴
To speke of love? Hyt wol not be;
I kan not of that faculte.
(I. l. 245-248)

Unlike Dante, Chaucer, however, was more concerned with our earthly actions than with Heavenly bliss. As a result, he draws from Augustinian thought the main characteristics of visible speech and exploits its limitations. In his *Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, Saint Augustine states that the human mind does not react the same way when it is confronted with an image or a written text: the simple act of looking at a visual work of art suffices to understand its message, whereas a written text requires a specific ability that is not necessarily shared by all, namely reading (XXV, 2). Augustine also adds in his *Confessions* that when events from the past are told, we do not extract from our memory the facts as they truly occurred. On the contrary, the words we hear will produce images in our mind standing for these experiences (XI, 18). There is, as we can see, a difference between events and their representation in the human mind, and that is precisely the weakness that Chaucer takes advantage of in *The House of Fame*.⁵

The scenes imaged in the Temple of Venus become, in this respect, problematical, for, when Geoffrey starts reading the words carved on the tablet, he does not render Virgil’s words as faithfully as we might expect it. The words enter Geoffrey’s mind and leave it transformed by his voice. Thus, whereas Virgil writes “Arma virumque cano, Trojæ qui primus ab oris / Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit”⁶ (v. 1-2), Geoffrey says:

⁴ The phrase “my wordes peynte” here has, of course, a double meaning since it can refer to a circumlocution but also, if understood literally, to a visual representation of his words.

⁵ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 27.

⁶ “I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate, first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to Lavinian shore.”

“I wol now synge, yif I kan,
The armes and also the man
That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
Fugityf of Troy contree,
In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
Unto the strondes of Lavyne.”
(I. l. 143-148)

The translation itself is almost perfect. Yet the element “yif I kan” does not come from Virgil’s text, but from Chaucer’s usual *topos* of modesty. And it is only the first of a long series of changes that will increasingly diminish Virgil’s own voice. When Geoffrey tells us the story of Dido and Aeneas, the legend has accordingly very little to do with the version he found in the *Aeneid*, since he transforms the main character into a self-obsessed villain whose only interest is glory. Upon discovering his treason, Dido even starts describing a polygamist who “wolde have fame / In magnyfyinge of hys name” (I. v. 305-306). The queen of Carthage herself is, as a result, no longer the treacherous woman tradition had immortalised, but well and truly the victim of a man’s dishonesty. After all, Dido’s myth is nothing but a poetical reinvention of a historical character: her relationship with Aeneas and her supposed betrayal of her late husband are both parts of this rewriting. Whether the author of this revision is called Ovid (*Heroides*), Boccaccio (*De mulieribus claris*) or Chaucer (*The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*) does not change the fact that they all turned to Virgil’s poetical re-imagination of this event. Virgil’s strength lies in his having imposed his own vision as a-historical account.⁷ Chaucer’s approach to the myth is apparently quite similar. Yet, he refers for the first time to the fictitious dimension of Dido’s encounter with the heir of Troy by enriching his story with details for which “Non other auctour alegge I”⁸ (I. v. 314). Even so, Chaucer does not simply blend his sources since he shows by juxtaposing them that they are quite often contradictory. In other words, he demonstrates that those recent additions to the myth are just as artificial as those included by his predecessors. Virgil, Ovid and the others had re-imagined the original story just as Geoffrey has re-imagined the first lines of the *Aeneid*.⁹ As a consequence, the transmission of the story is inevitably altered by the passage through the mind of a new transmitter. It is never as pure and close to the original as the author intends it to be. And when Chaucer reproduces a text with his own words, he

⁷ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.

⁸ See for instance I. l. 293-310.

⁹ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 29.

challenges the fictitious dimension of the story and the responsibility of the artist and of literature in general. This is something he manages to illustrate through his assimilation of the notion of visible speech.

Of course, such a strategy forces us to question the origin of the images described in the Temple of Venus. When Geoffrey finally gets out, he is blinded by the beauty of the surroundings, but feels nonetheless completely lost (I. v. 468-488) and starts praying to Jesus Christ to save him from “fantome and illusion” (I. l. 493). He is not particularly scared by his physical situation and was quite happy in the Temple, where he recognised every word and illustration. Deprived of the comfort of his literary world, however, he suddenly starts doubting his senses. Everything he has seen might just be, in the end, a trick of the mind without any foundations in the real world.¹⁰ And just as Geoffrey is pondering the implications of his situation, the eagle arrives and takes him to the House of Fame. According to his new guide, the “tydynges” (a word repeated more than twenty times in the rest of the poem) Geoffrey will hear in the House of Fame might even benefit him. However, if the arrival of the eagle implies a return of the motif of visible speech, the very nature of those tidings remains obscure.¹¹ Geoffrey himself is not quite sure what he is seeking in the House of Fame and answers an inquisitive spirit:

The cause why y stonde here:
Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
Somme newe thynges, y not what,
Tydynges, other this or that,
Of love or suche thynges glade.

(III. l. 1885-1889)

The eagle eventually explains—that those tidings are sounds (“Soun ys nocht but eyr ybroken”, II. l. 765), words uttered in our world, which reach the Houses of Fame and Rumor where they take the shapes of their speakers. The House of Rumor is thus described by the narrator as a whirling wicker cage where gossip is filtered. In that place, the living and the dead whisper rumors and tidings into each other’s hears, deforming the news and stories as they are passed along from one spirit to another, to the point of being unrecognisable. Accordingly, if the rumors are free to come and go in the House, they seldom leave it without changing shape. Truths and lies are often entangled and have no other alternative than to mingle:

¹⁰ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'*, 30-31.

¹¹ David Wallace, “Chaucer’s Continental Inheritance: the Early Poems and Troilus and Criseyde,” in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 21.

We wil medle us ech with other,
That no man, be they never so wrothe,
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe
At ones, al besyde his leve,
Come we a-morwe or on eve,
Be we cried or stille yrouned.
(III. l. 2102-2107)

Stories and tidings, whether true or false, are consequently altered by their transmission and combined in the House of Rumor before spreading to the world with Fame's blessing. In presenting a particularly corrupt chain of transmission, Chaucer thus calls into question once again the creative and distorting functions of the imagination by a through the use of visible speech that echoes echoing his treatment of Dido's legend in Book I.¹² But he also forces us to wonder if the story we are reading is as ambiguous as he seems to indicate.

Indeed, the need to authenticate a work of fiction was paramount in the Middle Ages. Whereas Dante used visible speech as one of the narrative devices protecting his work from any spurious misreading, Chaucer exploits this medieval distrust for fiction and does very little to authenticate his own story. He rather accumulates the devices supposed to ensure the truthfulness of his narration and then suddenly turns away from them. For instance, the fact that the story takes place in a dream should have a particular meaning; according to medieval tradition, only morning dreams were prophetic and allegedly true. However, the narrator clearly indicates that he went to bed at nightfall and "fil on slepe wonder sone" (I. v. 114). We should therefore read his vision as a simple dream, but Geoffrey himself seems puzzled. He asks himself why one man would dream of phantoms and another of prophecies ("Why this a fantome, why that a sweven", I. l. 11) and cries out in the first line "God turne us every drem to goode!" Later he tells us that no man ever lived "So wonderful a drem as I" (I. v. 62), without necessarily confirming if the dream is prophetic. Chaucer, in other words, offers devices proving the authenticity of his vision, and then disrupts his reasoning with contradictions and doubts that inevitably frustrate our desire to know whether the story is real.

Far from resolving this impasse, "[t]he journey of tidings through imagination and memory [...] seems rather to magnify its troubling suggestion that reading and writing result in nothing but 'fantome and illusion'".¹³ For if

¹² Taylor, *Chaucer Reads The Divine Comedy*, 32.

¹³ Taylor, *Chaucer Reads The Divine Comedy*, 33.

the tidings issuing from the House of Rumor are a combination of truth and lies, how, then, can we be sure that the famous stories told in our world are not themselves partly untruthful? This fallibility is further intensified by the fact that most medieval poems were read aloud in public. In that situation such a context, if we are to believe Saint Augustine, the author loses control of his creation since his words, once uttered, are assimilated by the listeners only to take different shapes and meanings in their minds. Chaucer's use of visible speech in Fame's domain is thus defined by orality. Indeed, the notion of stories taking the physical shape of their speakers makes visible the idea that human beings cannot help but speak in their own voices, no matter what the universal truth they claim to utter is. It comes therefore as no surprise that Geoffrey should encounter figures related to the spoken word before entering the House of Fame. Not only does he see Orpheus, Orion and other legendary harpists playing music, along with musicians of lesser rank, but he also meets magicians, illusionists and soothsayers (III. v. 1201-1281). Besides, even though the inside of the temple is dedicated to written literature, Chaucer keeps reminding us that the two forms of expression are complementary. Geoffrey hears, for example, the poets who immortalised the Trojan War argue about the *Iliad*, with some spirits defending Homer, while Trojan supporters accuse him of having favoured the Greeks (III. v. 1477-1480). For one supporter in particular, Homer's version of the story is nothing but a fable. In other words, the story behind the myth is lost and the fragments that we possess are only rumors and tidings. It is the juxtaposition of points of view that allows Chaucer to emphasise that every story, once transmitted, is gradually altered to the point of becoming an unrecognisable association jumble of rumors and tidings.

Truth in literature a highly personal notion. For generations, poets considered the Classics as artifacts of a distant past, and accordingly, as a sacred part of our cultural heritage. They relied on those scraps of information to define their own world and their art. And it is no coincidence that it is Virgil who appears in the middle of the road of Dante's life, in a dark wood, where the true way was lost.

For Chaucer, however, the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad* remain nothing more than stories, transmitted from generation to generation, stories which cannot possibly reflect any sort of truth. As an artist, he contributes to this transmission and deformation. Chaucer consequently decided to acknowledge, in *The House of Fame*, the artificial dimension of those artifacts and more generally of story-telling and history-making. They are, in the end, largely based on a re-writing and re-enactment of the same old stories, and should only be taken for what they are, namely expressions of a human, thus fallible, mind.

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