

faceva invece composti di erbe con cui lavava i corpi dei malati, poi gettava l'acqua per strada in modo che la malattia si trasferisse sul corpo di qualche passante; ma fra le sua specialità c'era anche la composizione di unguenti fatti con il grasso umano: per esempio di un uomo annegato nelle acque di un fiume⁶⁰.

In conclusione, si può insomma osservare che il Medioevo occidentale eredita, nella concezione delle proprietà delle piante, diversi filoni: quello biblico di sostanziale apprezzamento, unito a molte pagine di acuti conoscitori come Plinio, conduceva a una considerazione positiva circa la possibilità di una medicina scissa dalla magia, o accompagnata da una forma di magia non nociva; quello della più ampia tradizione greca e romana giudicava con sospetto tale sfera del sapere per via dell'analogia, sentita come inevitabile, tra *herbae* e *venena*. Non è allora casuale che proprio in ambito legislativo, influenzato anche in epoca romano-germanica dal diritto romano-classico (magari attraverso il tramite teodosiano), si incontra più spesso il veneficio come *crimen* supremo. L'affermarsi progressivo della conoscenza della letteratura greco-romana non poté che riportare in auge il binomio *herbae-venena*, applicandolo soprattutto nella creazione del paradigma della strega, più vicina alle Canidie e alle Sagane oraziane che non alle *herbariae* medievali. In un certo senso, tuttavia, e per quanto questo processo possa sembrarci aberrante, i legislatori, gli inquisitori e i predicatori che si fecero promotori degli sviluppi «moderni» del fenomeno, nello scrutare in profondità le pratiche di manipolazione degli elementi naturali e di fabbricazione di *pharmaka* e *venena*, scorgevano con maggiore acume dei loro predecessori l'originaria e persistente ambiguità di fondo che li caratterizzava, e la conseguente difficoltà del suddividere gli aspetti positivi da quelli riprovevoli, la medicina dalla magia, la naturalità dalla ritualità.

60. Per una trattazione più approfondita dei due casi cfr. M. Montesano, *Supra aqua et supra ad vento. Superstizioni, maleficia e incantamenta nei predicatori francescani osservanti (Italia, sec. XV)*, Roma 1999.

Denis Renevey

USE AND REPRESENTATION OF THE VEGETAL WORLD
IN CHAUCER'S DREAM VISION POEMS¹

Musicologists have argued that the extant autograph copy of the *Art of the Fugue* represents the first stage of the work done by Bach in the years 1740-1745, and that further work, now lost, was carried on in 1748-1750. Only the three expositions of the opening section of *Contrapunctus XIV* have been preserved, and they were further abbreviated due to editorial intervention at the time of publication². According to some then, Bach would not have purposefully left his *contrapunctus* open-ended the way it has been passed over to us. Whatever the case may be, the open-ended *Art of Fugue* testifies to the wonderful experiments Bach was attempting with the form of the fugue. In this composition, in contradistinction to all his previous endeavors with the genre of the fugue, Bach selects for his master work a subject written in one key only for a total of fourteen *contrapuncti*. This sober and simple choice of subject, with only some changes of rhythmical patterns in the subject, will lead to the composition of one of the great masterpieces of Western art. My contention is that this sober and self-imposed thematic choice of a non-modulating subject bespeaks a piece which is characterized by self-reflexivity; it also bespeaks a piece which, by reducing its thematic content to a minimum, points to its formal construction and theorizes the genre of the fugue in the garb of a musical piece. I want to use this anachronistic reference to *The Art of Fugue* only to suggest

1. I am grateful to Valerie Allen for having made useful suggestions following her reading of the first draft of this paper. Christiania Whitehead gracefully accepted to read it at a later stage: her comments have helped me improve this piece in terms of content and style. Anything ungraceful or simply lacking in coherence is my sole responsibility.

2. See the Grove Dictionary of Music (electronic version).

that Chaucer may be showing the same degree of reflexivity when engaging with medieval literary genres in general, and the dream-vision genre in particular.

That Chaucer's oeuvre is characterized by resistance to closure has been argued convincingly by a large number of scholars in the last decade or so³. Indeed, several of the pieces which were completed by Chaucer are, despite a formal ending, open-ended, leaving the listener poised to enquire further into the matter that the book has opened up. For several of his pieces, that invitation to further question their topical significance is marked by the narrator's expression of disillusionment with the experience that he has undergone, or to which he has been a witness. For instance, some of the dream-vision poems of Chaucer end with a narrator waking up from his dream and expressing total puzzlement at the nature of the matter that has been unfolding before his dreamer's eyes. Fulfillment of the desire for additional knowledge of or experience in a specific matter, in most cases, love, is rarely reached in Chaucer. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, for instance, which tries to provide the narrator/dreamer with additional information on love, the narrator concludes:

And with the shoutyng, whan the song was do (finished)
That foules maden at (during) here flight away,
I wok, and othere bokes tok me to (turned),
To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
I hope, ywis (indeed), to rede so (so much) som day
That I shal mete (dream) som thing for to fare
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare (will not cease)⁴. (PF 693-9)

Several other Chaucerian texts position their narrators in similarly complex relationships with the matter they have just recounted, so much so that, by causal effect, the listener is bound to question the authority of the material and to engage in equally complex critical

3. See especially, R. P. McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse*, Gainesville-Tallahassee 1998. For a detailed reading of Chaucer's dream poems, see A. J. Minnis, with V. J. Scattergood and J. J. Smith, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems*, Oxford 1995.

4. References to *The Book of the Duches*, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, hereafter abbreviated following the quotes as BD, HF and PF, followed by line numbering, are to the following edition: *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson, Oxford 1987, with abbreviated title and line reference. All other Chaucerian references are to this edition as well.

conversation with it⁵. One needs to remember that this critical response to love poetry in general, and the Chaucerian dream-vision poems in particular, may have been undertaken communally in the fashionable 'cours d'amour' which gathered gentry and aristocracy to discuss love matters as social entertainment. This possible form of exchange which often followed the hearing of a love-poem may have had an impact on shaping some of Chaucer's dream poems with their particular open-endedness⁶.

The resistance-to-closure argument becomes yet more complex when applied to some other Chaucerian texts whose sense of completion lacks determinacy and is marred by editorial or scriptorial interference that remains difficult to gauge. More complex even, but more interesting also, is the application of the argument to the writings which are apparently left unfinished by Chaucer, the author. To this group belong, however, some of the most accomplished pieces of writing composed by Chaucer, such as the *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, and *The Canterbury Tales*. *The House of Fame*, the second dream-vision poem written by Chaucer, stops in the most puzzling manner:

[...]
I herde a gret noyse withalle (as well)
In a corner of the halle,
Ther men of love-tydinges tolde,
And I gan thiderward beholde (look that way);
For I saugh rennyng every wight
As faste as that they hadden might (they were able),
And everych cried, 'What thing is that?'
And somme sayde, 'I not never what (I've no idea).'
And whan they were alle on an hepe (in a heap),
Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
And clamben up (climbed up) on other faste,
And up the nose and yën kaste,
And trodden fast on others heles,

5. See, for instance, the way in which authority is contested by Chaucer's offering of a heteroglossic reading (Virgil-Ovid) of the story of Dido and Aeneas in *The House of Fame*. For a discussion of Chaucer's multiple source texts for this passage, see Minnis, *Shorter Poems*, 184-201; for a specific discussion on this ambiguous reading, see McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*, 66-67.

6. This is particularly true of *The Parliament of Fowls*, with the double irresolution of the mateless aristocratic birds and the unsatisfied narrator which would invite pleasurable discussion following the hearing of the poem.

And stampen, as men doon aftir eles (when catching eels).
 Atte laste y saugh a man,
 Which that y nevene nat ne kan (can't identify);
 But he semed for to be
 A man of gret auctorite... (HF 2141-58)

Whatever the reasons might have been for Chaucer to bring his text to a standstill, so that it ceases to be voiced at this specific moment after the word 'auctorite' is pronounced, the rupture sets off a series of resonating thoughts about the poem's overall intention. After all, when climbing towards the building itself called the House of Fame, the narrator realizes that the rock on which the house is built is made up of ice, and that the inscriptions of the names of the great authors written down on the side most exposed to the sun have thawed beyond repair or recognition. The structural disintegration of the *House of Fame* expressed in its 'concluding' lines is the logical culmination of a process which is central to all aspects of the text. It brings destabilization of the literary mode to a logical end, as it becomes silent after the use of the word 'auctorite'. Before the text's structural disintegration, it is one of its major themes, expressed with the thawing metaphor:

Tho sawgh I al the half ygrave (slope inscribed)
 With famous folkes names fele (with many names of),
 That had iben in mochel wele (great prosperity),
 And her fames wide yblowe (widespread).
 But wel unnethes (scarcely at all) koude I knowe
 Any lettres for to rede
 Hir names by; for, out of drede,
 They were almost ofthowed (thawed away) so
 That of the letters oon or two
 Was molte away of every name,
 So unfamous was woxe (had become) hir fame.
 But men seyn, 'What may ever laste?' (HF 1136-47)

Even in its disintegrating state, *The House of Fame* is full of references to the classical and medieval authors: Aristotle, Plato, Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Claudian, John, writer of the Book of Revelation, Josephus (b. AD 37/8), author of works on Jewish history, Boethius, Dante, Dares and Dyctis, Lollius, Guido delle Colonne, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the poet Lucan. So much name dropping is unheard of in Chaucer's other writings; suffice perhaps to mention Chaucer's reshaping of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* into his own rendering of the

love-affair between Troilus and Criseida in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, with no acknowledgement made to either the Italian text *Il Filostrato* or to its author Boccaccio. Another first in *The House of Fame* is the use of Chaucer's first name, 'Geffrey' (HF 729), for the naming of the narrator. This first name is used nowhere else in his oeuvre⁷, and also nowhere else is Chaucer's persona placed in such close proximity to the authoritative figures of the past. At a point later on in the poem, Geffrey's attention is distracted from the spectacle of the court of Fame by an unknown intruder who asks him about his own relationship with, and search for, Fame. Geffrey then replies:

'Nay, for sothe, frend,' quod y;
 'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy (thanks very much),
 For no such cause, by my hed (I swear)!
 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.' (HF 1873-82)

With a good sense of humor the narrator superficially eludes a question which, despite his attempts, remains a central feature of this text, i.e. the relationship the author/narrator of *The House of Fame* entertains with authority, the Latin tradition and the use of the vernacular as historical and poetic medium.

Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and several of his other compositions, beg serious questions about the effect of their reception in their extant form. Those questions are far more complex and deserve more attention than questions about what is authorial, editorial or scribal in the versions in which they have been preserved up to now. Both in the cases of Bach and Chaucer, the pieces as left to us reflect a high degree of self-reflexivity about the form in which they are couched, and the fact that they are left open, whether intentionally or not, suggests a further refined, intense and overarching reflexive moment in both of them⁸.

7. 'Chaucer' is used once only, in the Introduction to 'The Man of Law's Tale', l. 47.

8. In addition to the Art of the Fugue, Bach seems to have borrowed intensely from one piece to another, opening his pieces, extracting and inserting, therefore leaving an opus which the composer himself left open for musical scavenging.

Following my brief consideration of the overall, overarching structure of *The House of Fame*, I want now to focus my attention on some of its microscopic details, with a view towards arguing that concern with form is also reflected in the way those details are confectioned in this piece. I will focus my attention on the representation and use of the vegetal world in *The House of Fame*, contrasting its use in this poem with two other dream-vision poems by Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*.

The vegetal world's presence and significance as part of the dream-vision poetry conventions is well attested in the numerous dream-vision texts that preceded Chaucer's own compositions. *Le Roman de la Rose*, whose more than 300 extant manuscripts attest to its wide popularity, became the model for dream-vision texts. As likely translator of at least 1700 of its lines, if not of the whole poem (22000 lines), Chaucer knew the text from the inside and was familiar with its use of the dream-vision conventions. Trees and flowers are part of the larger 'May setting' convention which usually marks the beginning of the dream, and which is a hallmark of almost all dream-vision poems:

That it was May me thought tho —,
It is fyve yer or more ago —
That it was May, thus dremed me,
In tyme of love and jolite,
That al thing gynneth waxen gay,
For ther is neither busk nor hay
In May that it nyl shrouded ben
And it with newe leves wren (cover).
These wodes eek recoveren grene,
That drie in wynter ben to sene,
And the erthe wexith proud withalle,
For swote dewes that on it falle,
And the pore estat forget
In which that wynter had it set.
And than bycometh the ground so proud
That it wole have a newe shroud,
And makith so queynt (elegant) his robe and faire
That it hath hewes an hundred payre
Of gras and flouris, ynde and pers,
And many hewes ful dyvers —
That is the robe I mene, iwys,
Through which the ground to preisen is. (RR 49-70)

Renewal and regeneration mark those spring — more particularly, May — beginnings. In Chaucer, they often mark a sharp contrast with the sombre mood of the narrator prior to his falling asleep, perhaps in contrast to the Spring opening of the *reverdie* and some secular lyrics where the narrator's mood is congruent with the vitality and vibrancy observed in the world of nature at this time of the year. In *The Book of the Duchess*, the first dream-vision poem written by Chaucer, the narrator introduces his material by complaining about the insomniac state which he has suffered for the last eight years, a state which he claims to be due to an unspecified illness. As in *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Book of the Duchess* makes reference to book reading as a sleep-inducing activity. The dreamer/narrator of this part of *The Book of the Duchess* is led by a whelp into a clearing characterized by the lively growth of its grass and flowers:

And I hym folwed, and hyt forth wente
Doun by a floury grene wente (path)
Ful thikke of gras, ful softe and swete.
With floures fele (many), faire under fete,
And litel used; hyt semed thus,
For both Flora and Zephirus,
They two that make floures growe,
Had mad her dwellynge ther, I trowe;
For it was, on to beholde,
As thogh the erthe envye (contend) wolde
To be gayer than the heven,
To have moo floures, swiche seven (seven times as many),
As in the welken sterres bee. (BD 397-409)

Attention to the vegetal word is striking in this text, with further attention paid to the particular arrangement of gigantic trees in the clearing:

Hyt ys no nede eke for to axe
Wher (whether) there were many grene greves (branches),
Or thikke (or whether the branches were thick on) of trees, so ful of leves;
And every tree stood by hymselfe
Fro other wel ten foot or twelve —
So grete trees, so huge of strengthe,
Of fourty or fifty fadme (fathom) lengthe,
Clene withoute bowgh or stikke (twig on the trunk),
With croppes (crown, tree tops) brode, and eke as thikke —
They were nat an ynche asonder —
That hit was shadewe overal under (everywhere beneath). (BD 416-26)

Abundance and neat arrangement of the trees symbolize perfection in the pre-romantic period⁹. These lines, an echo of *Le Roman de la Rose* (1363-84), perhaps set the tone for the idealized portrait of a lady which a man in black describes later on to the dreamer/narrator on the occasion of their brief encounter.

The narrator of *The House of Fame* seems from the start to want to shatter the comfortable conventions of dream-vision poetry. The dream setting, so important to the narrative, is put into question by his questioning of the dream categories which Macrobius circulated to the West in his commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*¹⁰. Elsewhere in the Chaucerian corpus narrators show competent familiarity with the different dream categories: they make an important contribution to some of the finest hermeneutic moments in Chaucer's oeuvre. But here in *The House of Fame*, the initial questioning of the validity of the dream categories destabilizes the premises necessary for any constructive debate. This initial subversive quality contributes importantly to the self-reflexivity of the text previously discussed in the first part of this paper.

Deviation from established literary norms bespeaks a strong authorial claim. Summer or, more specifically, May-morning, beginnings are conventional to most dream-vision poems, even in the non-courtly dream poem like *Piers Plowman* and the courtly-influenced but religious poem *Pearl*¹¹. In *The House of Fame* instead the change of date is signposted twice in the space of a few lines:

For never sith that I was born,
Ne no man elles me beforne,
Mette, I trowe stedfastly,
So wonderful a drem as I
The tenthe day now of Decembre,
The which, as I kan now remembre,
I wol yow tellen everydel.

9. See Chaucer's *Dream Poetry*, 70. For a study of medieval gardens and Chaucer's garden in *The Book of The Duchess*, see L. L. Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens and the Language of Convention*, Gainesville-Tallahassee 1997, 15-54.

10. For an English version, see Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, tr. W. H. Stahl, New York 1952.

11. The narrator in *Pearl* sets the moment of falling asleep in August, whereas the narrator in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* makes initial reference to the summer season, before speaking more specifically about May five lines further. See *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. M. Andrew and R. Waldron, Exeter 1987; see also William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, London, 1978.

[...]

Of Decembre the tenthe day,
Whan hit was nyght to slepe I lay
Ryght ther as I was wont to done,
And fil on slepe wonder sone,
As he that wery was forgo (was all exhausted)
On pilgrimage myles two
To the corseynt (the shrine of) Leonard,
To make lythe (soft, easy) of that was hard. (HF 59-118)

Not only have the listener/reader assumptions about the nature of dream as a whole, and hence dream reports, been put into serious question, but the genre in which those dreams are reported is ironically and deviously handled here. Whatever 10 December may signify, it overtly avoids the conventional spring setting which usually calls for the panegyric of the world of nature, vegetal and animal¹². The reference to the more sober qualities of December, a time when the vegetal world is in a state of dormition, points to a subtle understanding and demonstration of skillful artistic handling of the dream-vision conventions.

Having avoided a description of the natural world with a December setting, the narrator of *The House of Fame* dreams about the temple of Venus in which he will see and read the story of Dido and Aeneas¹³. That the temple is made of glass bespeaks its immaterial nature, its insubstantiality, and is therefore a refiguration of the unstable nature of the foundation of another architectural building, the house of fame, which is made up of ice. The general picture that the text aims to convey is by now, I hope, largely clear: in its dialogic exchange with convention and tradition, *The House of Fame* makes absence (be it of conventional setting, authorities, authorial figures, structural frame) its principal object of investigation. By doing that it also questions the ways in which a text can manoeuvre its way through Western medieval culture without being strongly anchored within a tradition. The latter is not fully endorsed by the text which

12. For a discussion about the possible meaning of 10 December, see L. D. Benson, 'The "Love-Tydynges" in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. W. Quinn, New York-London, 1999, 221-41.

13. For a discussion about Chaucer's perception of the interaction between man and nature, see S. Stanbury, 'EcoChaucer: Green Ethics and Medieval Nature', *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004), 1-16.

therefore places itself in a position of creative instability. After the enriching visit in the Temple of Glass, the narrator finds himself in the following setting:

When I out at the dores cam,
 I faste aboute me beheld (gazed intently).
 Then sawgh I but (just) a large felde,
 As fer (far) as that I myghte see,
 Withouten toun, or hous, or tree,
 Or bush, or grass, or eryd (cultivated) lond;
 For al the feld nas but of sond (was just sand)
 As smal (fine) as man may se yet lye (still see lying)
 In the desert of Lybye.
 Ne no maner creature (kind of being)
 That ys yformed be (created by) Nature
 Ne sawgh I, me to rede (advise) or wisse (direct me). (HF 480-91)

The passage is unequivocal about what it aims to describe, i.e. a desert landscape, like the one of 'the desert of Lybye'. But the way in which it suggests this absence of all vegetal life (and also animal and human life) is conveyed with implicit reference to the luxurious vegetation of the landscapes and gardens of the traditional dream-vision poems. Scholars have debated the various implications of the description of this barren landscape¹⁴. Considering the larger structural premises of this poem, which I have tried to draw in parallel with Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, I believe the passage points to a new literary 'spaciousness' which the narrator Geoffrey opens up for this dream-vision poem¹⁵. It is a space which allows for constant dialogue with tradition and conventions¹⁶. This particular moment in fashioning a barren landscape does not in my view bespeak authorial disillusion-

14. See *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, 145.

15. In that respect I offer a view that does not oppose the desert landscape to the one of the vegetal world, so that I do not want to draw a dichotomy between the sterility of the desert landscape against the fecundity of the vegetal, natural world, as found for instance in Alan of Lille's *De planctu naturae* and the circle of the violent in Dante's *Inferno*. See Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, tr. J. J. Sheridan, Toronto 1980; see Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, tr. J. D. Sinclair, New York 1961. For books discussing Nature's role in medieval culture, see G. D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*, Notre Dame, Indiana 2002; H. White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition*, Oxford 2000; B. Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry and Belief in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia 2003.

16. I am grateful to Valerie Allen for having pointed out the way in which my interpretation of the barren landscape moves away from more traditional readings.

ment with this specific literary genre, but is rather the premise for a new start, the creation of a new landscape still to come, one into which Chaucer's creative energies will find room for inscription¹⁷.

The alignment of Chaucer's *House of Fame* with Bach's *Art of the Fugue* makes a daring authorial claim for *The House of Fame*. Yet, even if 'Geoffrey's' keeping company with some of the great classical and medieval authors must be read comically and ironically, the authorial claim is perhaps not that far-fetched. One difference which should be noted between those two marvellous artistic productions, as a way of concluding this paper, is the self-derision and humor of the Chaucerian composition, especially present in Book Two and Three, which Bach's piece lacks. This creates a piece which, in addition to its elaborate exploration and possible subversion of the dream-vision genre, is permeated by a strong sense of human limitations. The manipulation of the vegetal world against the expectations set up by literary conventions, alongside the structural instability of the piece itself and the most significant architectural composition it describes, contributes to the creation of a piece that, although not cut off from traditional topoi, intentionally misaligns itself in order to participate experimentally in the opening of new horizons for literary creativity.

17. The desert is of course a place of rejuvenation and purification, one which allows anchorites and monks, like Christ and other biblical figures, to reflect upon their self and start a new life with a set of new values. I believe that Chaucer borrows this metaphorical potential of the desert to formulate his own views about a new literary beginning. For a broad discussion of the desert-wilderness image, see J. Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, tr. A. Goldhammer, Chicago-London 1985, 47-59.