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**Keywords**

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Cecilia Stuart

Written earlier than most of his other works, Chaucer’s *The House of Fame* recounts a fantastical journey through the sky that begins when a golden eagle picks him up and carries him up to the palace of the goddess Fame. This eagle acts as both physical guide and divine teacher for Chaucer, carefully explaining all the curiosities they witness throughout the dream and the reasons they are witnessing them. Chaucer’s description of this revelatory experience is so packed with sense imagery that it almost overwhelms its readers. His world in the sky is full of stimulating sights and sounds that imbue meaning into the text in various ways, often to relay otherworldly knowledge in terms understandable to humans. Chaucer gives vision in particular special importance, and dream-Chaucer’s<sup>1</sup> experience is so replete with visual imagery that sight at times becomes synecdoche for sensory experience as a whole (for instance, Chaucer often describes transmitters of sound, such as the trumpet Aeolus blows into and the houses of Fame and Rumour, in great visual detail, and these visual descriptions are crucial to our understanding of the transmitters’ functions in the story). One of the recurring visual markers we encounter throughout the poem is the gold that adorns the various spaces and figures dream-Chaucer interacts with.

This imagery, though frequent, is not random: its presence enriches our ability to learn from the poem by evoking medieval optics theories that emphasize the relationship between sight and divine knowledge. Chaucer works with this concept on two levels. Not only does the gold imagery play a metaphorical role within the poem itself by relating light and knowledge, but it also evokes the metal’s material significance in the medieval practices of illumination and metallurgy, effectively blurring the line between physical objects and symbolic meanings within the dream world. Chaucer’s strategic use of gold transforms the poem into an almost-tangible “object” that helps readers think through the liminal space in which the dream occurs, placing *The House of Fame* within a tradition of literature that uses the material realm, especially its link with vision, to create and share knowledge about the immaterial by

<sup>1</sup>In this essay, “dream-Chaucer” refers to the fictional narrator of *The House of Fame*, while “Chaucer” remains its historical author.

dissolving the distinction between the two.

David Lindberg asserts that medieval optics relied on an interdisciplinary approach to investigation that included not only mathematics and physics, but also theology and the epistemology of seeing (338). Since antiquity, theorists and scholars have linked seeing and knowing, especially divine or spiritual knowing. Often, sight is conceptualized as the most palpable link between humans and God; in the *Timaeus*, Plato writes that “God devised and bestowed upon us vision to the end that we might behold the revolutions of Reason in the Heaven and use them for the revolvings of the reasoning that is within us” (qtd. in Akbari 3). Here, sight is construed as a tool that allows us to interpret the world with a view to understanding God’s presence in it and apply that knowledge to our own development as enlightened beings. Because of this link to God, vision was often represented by medieval writers, artists, and philosophers as the most important sense, and visual imagery was understood as an apt way of representing the divine (Camille 34).

Since light is clearly visible, visual and literary art use light to signify divine presence, often depicting God himself to be too bright for humans to look at directly (Jackson 101). This imagery has biblical origins; in Exodus 33, Moses is unable to look directly at God because he is so bright (Akbari 4). Light imagery gives us a concrete visual metaphor to aid our understanding of the relationship between sight, knowledge, and God. Light becomes a transmitter of divine knowledge, and its shining on us allows us to learn about God as it makes physical contact with our eyes (Lindberg 340). If we accept Aristotle’s understanding of metaphor as the visual rendering of the abstract we can think about physical objects (such as paintings, metalworks, or illuminated books) as metaphors that link us to the divine by relating God and his teachings in visual terms. This can be applied to literature as well, which makes use of visual metaphor through symbolism. Suzanne Akbari asserts that allegorical works of medieval literature often engaged with optics to position seeing as knowing, since they relied so much on the “figurative representation of knowledge in terms of vision,” often through representations of light that had some relation to God (43).

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer clearly works within this tradition. The poem places heavy emphasis on the importance of vision as knowledge; as Chaucer uses visual cues to make sense of his

dream, we as readers are prompted to do the same. The poem begins with an inquiry: Chaucer wonders about the nature of dreams, professing his own uncertainty and desire to know their inner workings. In the first lines of the poem, he proclaims:

God turne us every dream to goode!  
 For hyt is wonder, be the roode,  
 To my wyt, what causeth swevenes  
 Eyther on morwes or on evenes,  
 And why th'effect folweth of somme,  
 And of somme hit shal never come. (ll. 1-6)<sup>2</sup>

These questions contextualize the poem that follows as a project of knowledge-seeking concerned with, as we come to see, the spiritual world. The following dream places a great deal of emphasis on vision and seeing, encouraging us as readers to link the seeing that occurs within the dream (which is referred to by Chaucer as a *vision*) with the knowledge that dream-Chaucer gains about the relationship between the goddess Fame and sound. Chaucer uses numerous visual markers to emphasize the primacy of vision in this investigation. Almost everything dream-Chaucer encounters while in the sky is described in visual terms, and usually the images he dwells on are concerned with reflection and brightness. The temple in which he begins his dream is not only made of glass, but also filled with “moo ymages / Of gold, stongynge in sondry stages” than he has ever seen before (ll. 120-27)<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, Fame’s palace, the blocks of ice surrounding it, and the various instruments played throughout the dream are all described very carefully. Dream-Chaucer frequently reassures the reader that he has never seen such beautiful images before.

The most opulent visual descriptions are those which involve gold, the brightness and visual purity of which plays a crucial role in the poem’s linking of human and divine realms. Many of the

<sup>2</sup> God turn our every dream to good  
 For it is wonder, by the rood,  
 To my wit, what causes dreams  
 Either in mornings or in evenings,  
 And why the truth follows from some,  
 And from some it shall never come.

<sup>3</sup> “More images / Of gold, arranged in various positions”

places and objects dream-Chaucer encounters are bedecked in gold: the images in the temple, the walls of Fame's palace, and most notably, the eagle that carries him up into the sky:

Me thought I sawgh an egle sore,  
 But that hit semed moche more  
 Then I had any egle seyn.  
 But this as sooth as deth, certeyn,  
 Hyt was of gold, and shon so brygthe  
 That never sawe men such a syghte  
 But yf the heven had ywonne  
 Al newe of gold another sonne;  
 So shone the egles fethers bryghte  
 And somewhat downward gan hyt lyghte. (ll. 499-508)<sup>4</sup>

Chaucer's description of the eagle as "moche more" than any other eagle he has seen elevates it from the realm of nature; it is not a regular bird, but something more significant, as connoted by its gold feathers. The bird shines so brightly that Chaucer doubly compares it to a second sun and a second incarnation of Christ, echoing the stories of God's blinding brightness and drawing a direct connection between the eagle and the spiritual world. Chaucer's choice to describe the eagle this way significantly impacts our understanding of its role within the narrative, priming us to expect a link to optical and theological epistemologies. From the outset, we are told that the eagle is a servant of Jove, who is rewarding dream-Chaucer for his devotion to Venus and Cupid by showing him the inner workings of Fame's palace (ll. 608-09). The eagle acts as a guide to dream-Chaucer not only by physically carrying him from earth to the sky and granting him entry into each building, but also by helping him think through the

<sup>4</sup> I thought I saw an eagle soar,  
 Though it seemed much more  
 Than I had any eagle seen.  
 But this as sure as death, certain,  
 It was of gold, and shone so bright  
 That never saw men such a sight  
 But if the heavens had won  
 All new of gold another son;  
 So shone the eagle's feathers bright  
 And downwards it began to descend.

relationship between humankind and the divine through the use of visual metaphor.

The eagle frequently encourages dream-Chaucer to affirm the existence and location of Fame's house through visual cues by telling him to look up, behold his surroundings, and take visual note of what is happening around him (ll. 925, 935). It also gives dream-Chaucer a detailed explanation of the process by which sound travels up to the sky and makes its way through Fame's palace, acting as a teacher that enables him to understand how the human world is tied to the spiritual one. The eagle does this primarily through visual metaphors that take nature as their vehicle, comparing the travel of sound to the ripples in a pond when a stone is thrown into it (l. 789). Just as rivers flow to larger bodies of water and trees root into the ground, so too does sound move toward its rightful place in Heaven, the eagle says (ll. 753-55). These metaphors employ vision and nature (a creation of God that both reflects divine knowledge and is tangibly accessible to humans) to link dream-Chaucer to the spiritual world. This blending of material and immaterial enables us to understand both the eagle's words and the entire narrative as devices we can use to work through our own relationship to divinity. And the eagle's role as the purveyor of this knowledge is made more significant by its gold feathers, which makes it into a visual metaphor itself. In the same way that the eagle uses vision and nature to explain sound, Chaucer uses gold, a natural element with light-reflecting properties, to heighten the eagle's physical symbolism and reference the link between light imagery and divine knowledge. In this sense, the eagle functions as an *object* that aids us in our process of divine knowledge seeking; the importance of light in dream-Chaucer's learning about the metaphysical world gives the text a physical component, grounding our interpretation in materiality.

The significance of this visual cue is heightened in the context of the medieval bookmaking tradition. Just as Chaucer uses gold to symbolically link the realm of divinity to humankind, manuscript illuminators made use of natural light-reflecting materials (gold and silver) to create physical objects that allowed readers to flesh out their understanding of the divine. The illustrations within these manuscripts, for instance, were often used as devotional aids for prayer (such as in books of hours), adding a physical component to the books in a similar way to Chaucer's use of the gold (Alexander 54). John Burnam writes that, in the tradition of manuscript illuminations, "gold means perception,

knowledge, wisdom, the power to comprehend the works and words of God” (153). Although gold began to be used more liberally and less intentionally as it became more accessible in England, still its initial purpose remains the establishment of visual hierarchy (de Hamel 25). It was frequently used to represent what cannot be seen by human eyes, especially halos surrounding (or objects belonging to) divine figures (67). Because gold (which was usually applied as a leaf so it would maintain its reflectiveness) caught light, its physical qualities mirrored its symbolic ones. The readers of the illuminated books would have seen the reflection of light from the illuminations and understood the metaphoric link to divine knowledge. Chaucer’s symbolic eagle takes on a similar role to the illuminated pages of the manuscripts he would have been surrounded by, offering the reader the chance to concretely visualize their learning process.

Because *The House of Fame* is a vernacular literary text, there are very few manuscripts of it, and only one with an illumination. The three major manuscripts that contain Chaucer’s poem are very plain, with little illustration or use of colour other than the main brown ink and some red in titles and new sections (*Bodleian Library MS Bodley 638, Magdalene, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*). However, *Fairfax 16*, a fifteenth-century manuscript which contains many of Chaucer’s poems and which is regarded as the authoritative text of *The House of Fame*, has one illumination at the beginning of the book that points to the existence of a relationship between Chaucer’s works and the illumination tradition. Though the illumination specifically references two of Chaucer’s other poems included in the manuscript, *The Complaint of Venus* and *The Complaint of Mars*, it still demonstrates that gold illumination was being used in reference to Chaucer’s work. In the illumination, which depicts Jupiter looking down on Mars and Venus, gold is used to paint the stars, the clothing and accessories of the gods, and the rays of light radiating out from them. It is also used in the decorative boxes surrounding the three figures, emphasizing their importance. Venus holds a gold object that has faded away, but John Norton-Smith suggests in the introduction to the manuscript’s facsimile that it is a book (*Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16* xii). The use of gold here signifies both visible and invisible light, the importance of the gods as more-than-human figures and, if indeed Venus holds a golden book, the importance of divine knowledge. In this context, Chaucer’s choice to make his eagle gold clearly signals its purpose

within the story. Chaucer's visual metaphors are so strong that he transforms the poem into a real object—we can imagine holding it in our hands, using it as the key to the door of our understanding.

The symbolic value of gold was evident not only in its use in illuminations and its prominence in Chaucer's poem, but also in the practices of medieval metallurgy and goldsmithing. The care with which these processes were undertaken showcases how gold was valued not only financially but also for its symbolic significance in visual art as a natural reflector of light. The creative practices of goldsmiths were often regulated by guilds, which were united both by trade and a shared religious devotion (for instance, to a particular saint) (Cherry 66). Goldsmiths' guilds were particularly concerned with the purity of the metal they used, due not only to concern over reputation, but also the symbolic relationship between purity and divinity (72-73). Psalm 12 states that "The words of the Lord are unalloyed, silver refined in a crucible, gold purified seven times over" (qtd. in Cherry 6); this longstanding metaphorical link between the purity of God's word and the purity of metals was understood by goldsmiths as central to their practice, as their art was a form of divine worship. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer takes care to assure the reader that the gold plating on Fame's palace is real gold, "as fyn as ducat in Venyse" (l. 1348)<sup>5</sup>. Just like the goldsmiths, his narrative elevates the precious metal from its material existence by giving it a symbolic link to a higher realm of knowledge.

These guilds were not only concerned with the quality of metals their members used, but also with the apprenticeship of new members to a craft knowledge that was heavily intertwined with faith practice. It was important that the knowledge they possessed was understood as belonging to God, not to individual craftsmen (Long 6). Theophilus's *On Divers Arts*, a treatise on painting, glassmaking, and metallurgy thought to be written by a Benedictine monk working around 1100, emphasizes this lack of ownership of the knowledge he is sharing. Theophilus understands these arts, especially metallurgy, his own specialty, as human ways of interacting with God through nature and vision, and therefore deserving of respect (xv). In the introduction to the treatise, Theophilus writes

I, an unworthy human creature, almost without name, offer freely to all who desire in humbleness to learn the gifts that God, who gives abundantly and

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<sup>5</sup> "As fine as a ducat in Venice"

undemandingly to all, has deigned to grant freely to me....For just as it is wicked and hateful for a man through evil ambition to grasp at a forbidden thing that is not his due to or take possession of it by theft, so it must be ascribed to laziness and to folly if he leaves without trial or treats contemptuously a rightful inheritance from God the Father. (12)

Throughout the treatise, he makes many references to his work as a payment of honour to God, writing “I have given aid to many men in their need and have had concern for their advancement to the increase of the honor and glory of His name” (13). He understands the sharing of his knowledge as a fundamental component of his craft work, as it enables others to honour God in the same way (in this case, through visual and light metaphor). Pamela Long suggests that, at the time Theophilus was writing, people were already beginning to propound the idea of intellectual property and ownership of craft knowledge, and that his text is a defense against that line of thinking (88).

*On Divers Arts* also discusses how metalwork specifically relates art to God. Theophilus asserts that “God delights in embellishment” with luminous metals and explains in great detail how to best refine them, focusing on how proper workshop lighting aids in this task (78). This emphasis on craft knowledge as divine knowledge, and the rules surrounding goldsmithing guilds, demonstrate what Chaucer’s poem does too: gold is a tool that links artisans and readers to God, and its use imbues many projects or things with the capacity to reflect God’s works. Just as the products of these metallurgists can be conceptualized as devices that link us to divine knowledge, *The House of Fame* functions as an allegorical device that lets us cultivate our relation to the divine by rooting it in vision and nature.

The craftsman as a symbolic figure was not uncommon in the medieval period. Lisa Cooper writes that medieval authors often bridged the space between earth and the divine with the image of the artisan, using the link between craft labour and God as a metaphor that positioned their own text as doing similar work (3). This connection helps explain the frequent association between the poet and artisan, or poet as scop, in medieval literature, a phenomenon that is present in *The House of Fame* (7). Chaucer positions dream-Chaucer as an artisan poet, being rewarded by Jove for the devotion to Venus and Mars he exhibits through his writing practice. The eagle praises Chaucer for his commitment to

making “bookys, songes, dytees / In ryme or elles in cadence, / As thou best canst, in reverence” (ll. 622-24)<sup>6</sup>. His reward is that he gets to be privy to the inner workings of the spiritual world, because of his material demonstrations of godly devotion. This relationship showcases Chaucer clearly thinking about the role of the artisan (especially the metallurgist or the goldsmith) in bridging the material and immaterial worlds. This concept can be extended onto the golden eagle, who does the same work as the poet/artisan by using nature as a visual metaphor to help dream-Chaucer understand Fame’s role. In this sense, the eagle is both object-maker and object. The distinctions between Chaucer, the eagle, and the text begin to break down as the material and immaterial collapse into one another.

Daniel Miller writes that “the more humanity reaches toward the conceptualization of the immaterial, the more important the specific form of its materialization” (qtd. in Cooper 7). Chaucer saw the way that light imagery was used to link humans to the divine world, and how gold, as a tangible manifestation of this symbolic relationship, functioned as an apt mechanism for representing it in literature. His golden eagle, and the role it takes on as a physical and metaphorical conduit between the material and immaterial worlds, engages in this rich and complex tradition of melding the two as a component of divine knowledge-making. This practice allows readers (including us today) to interpret *The House of Fame* as a teaching tool that, through Chaucer’s work with visual symbolism, takes on a physical component.

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<sup>6</sup>“books, songs, ditties / In rhyme or else in cadence / As best you can, in reverence”

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