The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages

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Chapter Eleven

Chaucer’s *House of Fame*

Tho saugh y stonde in a valeye,
Under the castel, faste by,
An hous, that Domus Dedaly,
That Laboryntus cleped ys,
Nas mad so wonderlych, ywis,
Ne half so queyntelych ywrought.
And ever mo, as swyft as thought,
This queynte hous aboute wente,
That never mo hyt stille stente.

Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, 1918–1926

This book has examined many examples of labyrinthine literature: works that discuss labyrinths, explore their metaphorical potential, use them as central images, or entail a labyrinthine experience by hero, narrator, and reader. We have seen how three masterpieces—Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—represent a self-consciously continuous expression of the idea of the labyrinth in western literature. Chaucer’s *House of Fame* is slighter than its three self-avowed labyrinthine models, but this sparkling tour de force may be the most comprehensive (if not comprehensible) and creative culmination imaginable of the medieval labyrinth tradition, and hence a fitting conclusion to this book.¹

¹. I continue to cite the Riverside Chaucer; *The House of Fame (HF)* is edited by John M. Fyler, whose notes list most studies that have appeared in the past twenty or so years, when the work has finally been taken as seriously as it deserves, although it still remains a kind of cult classic. There are also numerous useful Chaucer bibliographies, two recent selective examples being John Leyerle and Anne Quick, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Introduction*, Toronto Medieval Bibliographies 10 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), and Mark Allen and John H. Fisher, *The Essential Chaucer: An Annotated Bibliography of Major Modern Studies* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987).

Since these bibliographies and others are easily available, and since my own labyrinthine reading of the poem, first conceived in 1969, has developed independently of other secondary studies, my bibliographical notes generally mention works that provide useful background or important alternative views on specific topics, works actually quoted, stud-
Chaucer probably knew both visual and verbal labyrinth traditions well. Even before he wrote *The House of Fame* (ca. 1378–1380), he had had many opportunities to become familiar not only with the unicursal diagrammatic labyrinth design but also with its extensive metaphorical significance. He seems to have known medieval English turf-mazes: glossing the Cretan labyrinth in the *Legend of Ariadne*, he notes, “For it is shapen as the mase is wrought” (*LGW* 2014), apparently assuming that his audience would be familiar with these indigenous secular labyrinths so often linked with Troy and Julian. His interest in Gothic architecture is reflected in *The House of Fame* and in his eventual appointment as Clerk of the Works at Westminster; a man of such sensibilities would have seized the chance to visit French cathedrals and their labyrinths, and when he did he might well have learned about their associations with the art and fame of the architect (at Reims, for instance) or with the *rota-rosa* of fortune and providence and the guiding footsteps of Christ-Theseus (at Chartres). Chaucer traveled to northern Italy two or three times, and the translator of Boethius's *Consolation* would surely have made a pilgrimage to Pavia, where Boethius died and where San Michele Maggiore boasts a pavement maze. Nearby is Piacenza, with another labyrinth whose moralistic inscription identifies the Cretan maze as the world, in which sinners return to true doctrine with the greatest difficulty. And on the way from Genoa to Florence, Chaucer might have visited the cathedral at Lucca, with its labyrinth relief and its purely explanatory gloss (“This is the Cretan labyrinth, built by Daedalus, which no one who entered could leave except for Theseus, aided by Ariadne's thread”).

He had studied important literary labyrinth texts, too, some of them possibly illustrated with illuminations of the maze. He knew the *Aeneid* and the *Consolation*, as well as some commentaries; perhaps his readings...
of these works, and of the Divine Comedy, corresponded in some degree
to the labyrinthine readings I have just offered. Ovid's Metamorphoses,
another treasury of labyrinth lore, is called Geoffrey's "oune bok" in The
House of Fame (712), and Chaucer based his Legend of Good Women on the
Heroides, with its complaint of Ariadne. Chaucer's direct knowledge of
the historical-geographical tradition of Pliny is less certain, but Pliny
was well-known in England, and it seems likely that the Natural History
reinforced Chaucer's association of labyrinths with fame, elaborate
architectural artistry, noisiness, and inexplicability; it may also have
alerted Chaucer to the discrepancy between diagrammatic and three-
dimensional labyrinths, a discrepancy that may inform The House of
Fame. Among mythographical works, Chaucer was familiar at least with
Bersuire and the Ovide moralisé; and what is intriguing in this context is
the secularity of his use of the labyrinth, his avoidance of traditional
moralistic interpretations.4 The Song of Troilus (Troilus and Crisseyde
1.400–420) translates Petrarch's Sonnet 88; did Chaucer also know the
labyrinths of Sonnets 211 and 224? or the Liber sine nomine's identifica-
tion of Avignon, so like the meretricious world of Fame, as the fifth
labyrinth of the world? Did he know the Corbaccio? Or the many works
linking labyrinths with literature, with complex language, with logic?
Did he ponder the labyrinth's ambiguous etymology, labor intus? Even if
he did not, Chaucer could have gleaned enough about the medieval idea
of the labyrinth from works he mentions in The House of Fame alone to
weave his own elaborate variations on the theme, ingeniously blending
literary, intellectual, metaphorical, visual, and popular labyrinth tradit-
ions.

Many readers have sensed the poem's labyrinthine qualities: for in-
stance, A. C. Spearing notes its "bewildering uncertainty of direction,"
Alfred David its "planned chaos" (a perfect definition of a maze), B. G.
Koonce its "air of deliberate obscurity," and Robert Burlin that "the
poem is all process, and we can only speculate on the ultimate goal."5
Such comments reflect the labyrinth's intentional confusion and com-
plexity, its disorienting turnings back and forth, its paradoxical in-
particularly labyrinthine patterns and images, in and out of Virgil, Boethius, and Dante; in a
greater stress on the poem's epistemological implications; and in a greater focus on the
work's enunciation of a labyrinthine poetic. Nevertheless, I have learned more from
Baswell's work on the poem than from all other studies combined.

4. For Chaucer's knowledge of Bersuire's Ovidius moralizatus and of the Ovide moralisé,
see the many references cited in Lynn King Morris, Chaucer Source and Analogue Criticism

5. A. C. Spearing, Medieval Dream Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
339 (here, 333); B. G. Koonce, Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame, p. 3; and Robert B. Burlin,
could be greatly augmented from recent scholarship.
corporation of order and disorder, its emphasis on process rather than product, on path rather than pattern. A few readers—Donald R. Howard and, most recently, Piero Boitani—have noticed the particular importance of the House of Rumor as “Domus Dedaly.” But the full extent of Chaucer’s use of the idea of the labyrinth remains unexplored.

It is generally agreed that *The House of Fame* is an eclectic, complicated, thoroughly engaging dream vision featuring a comic authorial self-portrait and a bizarre cosmic journey. But to what end, and with what coherence? Is it “Daunte in Inglish,” a rewriting of the *Divine Comedy*, as Chaucer’s follower Lydgate seems to imply? Is it a thoughtful yet light-hearted commentary on the *Aeneid* and the *Consolation*, as Christopher Baswell argues? Is it a serious philosophical expression of “skeptical fideism,” as Sheila Delany proposes? Or, despite its disavowal of “art poetical,” is it an art of poetry, a book about literature and language and the writer’s relationship to his authoritative predecessors and his craft? I believe that the poem contains all these elements in varying degrees and that they, and other themes, are explored, expressed, and unified through the controlling image of the labyrinth, which becomes the

6. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, pp. 330–332, and “Chaucer’s Idea of an Idea,” *Essays and Studies* 1976, n.s. 29, 39–55; Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, Chaucer Studies 10 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer and Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1984), chap. 6. There are inevitably a few parallels between Boitani’s and my development of the idea of the labyrinth: e.g., we agree that the confusion of *signa sequendi* is an important theme, that the labyrinthine nature of the House of Rumor is crucial, and that Daedalus is in some ways a figure for the poet; but we treat these topics in different ways. In general I see a far greater importance for the labyrinth as image, structure, and theme throughout the whole poem, and finally there is little overlap between our discussions: Boitani, after all, is focusing on Fame, and I on labyrinths.

work's iconographic center and a *signum sequendi* through the poem's complexities. Labyrinthine characters, though far less important than in the *Comedy*, are mentioned throughout *The House of Fame* as a teasing clue: Theseus and Ariadne in Book 1, Daedalus and Icarus in Book 2, and Daedalus and Perdix in Book 3. Labyrinthine places and images recur continually: Geoffrey goes nowhere that is *not* in some way labyrinthine. Authors of labyrinthine works—Virgil, Ovid, Boethius, Dante—are named, quoted, and imitated. And the subjective labyrinthine experience, the frustrating and disorienting path of ignorance, consistently afflicts both the reader and the dreamer-narrator Geoffrey.

Certainly *The House of Fame* is a commentary on its labyrinthine models, the *Aeneid*, the *Consolation*, and the *Comedy*. It shares with them its general story line: the protagonist's attempt to pass safely through the *errores* and *labores* of a bewildering series of metaphorical labyrinths in order to transcend confusion and doubt by attaining the privileged perspective that brings certain and stable understanding of the divine plan and its justice. Chaucer also develops traditional labyrinthine themes found in his predecessors, from the significance of fame to the epistemological limitations imposed jointly by the human mind in its comparative incapacity and by the *ambages* and deceptive *signa sequendi* of the worldly labyrinth. But *The House of Fame* involves imitation with differences so great that they amount to a radical shift in perspective, and Chaucer's poem becomes a serious parody, if not a perversion, of its predecessors: it humorously and lovingly retraces some of the paths they defined in order to show that these paths break down and finally become impassable, at least for Geoffrey. One major difference is the tone of *The House of Fame*.

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9. One could argue that each of Chaucer's models dominates one of the poem's books: Virgil and the *Aeneid* provide the labyrinthine story, and the labyrinths of love and of ambiguous texts, for Book 1; Boethius and the *Consolation* suggest the labyrinthine argu-
of Fame: its models treat metaphorical labyrinths with high seriousness and somber respect, but Chaucer's deceptively facetious poem veils its profound sentence—and it has a great deal of that—with the most playful solas. In keeping with this bright, comic approach to grave matters, *The House of Fame* shifts levels by turning its primary focus away from the moral tradition stressed by its models—the labyrinth is the world, in which choosing the right path is a matter of life and death—and highlighting instead the issues raised by labyrinths of words, of texts, of complex and sometimes misleading artistry: the labyrinth every writer and reader necessarily inhabits as writer and reader. Labyrinthine errors in *The House of Fame* are not moral but epistemological; they may ultimately have profound spiritual consequences, but Chaucer does not let us see them. This focus on a superficially unthreatening labyrinthine microcosm, however, should not blind us to the broader implications of Chaucer's errand into the maze: the poem speaks seriously, if obliquely, to denizens of the mundane maze, for the epistemological problems that beset the poet/reader as crafter/interpreter of labyrinths of words equally beset Everyman as treader of the world-labyrinth. Thus Chaucer covertly addresses some of the grand philosophical issues that preoccupied Virgil, Boethius, and Dante, but his focus on labyrinths of words means that *The House of Fame* overtly plays with the *Aeneid*, the *Consolation*, and the *Comedy* as texts, auctorites, and literary models. However deft its touch, then, *The House of Fame* means business, and it differs from its models in being far more pessimistic about the possibility of escaping any kind of labyrinth.

This pessimism emerges when the narrative patterns of Chaucer's models are compared with that of *The House of Fame*. The *Consolation* and the *Comedy* trace their protagonists' difficult passage through a variety of multicursal mazes: the confusions and choices and limited vision of a morally labyrinthine world, the ambiguities of prophecy, the bewildering complexity of labyrinths of words, the labyrinths of dialectic—Aristotle's labyrinth. But the heroes have careful guidance in these seemingly inextricable mazes of the literary tradition: they have the thread of good counsel and instructive argument and philosophical or spiritual wings for Daedalian flight. With these aids, they transcend many confining labyrinths, though not all of them; and they achieve a privileged—and an accurate—overview of the world, whose random confusion is revealed as
the perfect physical and moral order of a divine architect. These heroes' perceptual framework shifts, with labyrinthine convertibility: what seemed inextricable when experienced from inside becomes a symmetrical, beautiful, teleological arrangement of concentric circles when seen from above, laid out like a diagrammatic cathedral maze. It is as if the three-dimensional literary model is supplanted and corrected by the two-dimensional visual model, which lets us see as God sees. Aeneas is less favored than Dante's and Boethius's narrators, and in this regard a closer model for Chaucer's alter ego Geoffrey: Aeneas's moments of accurate vision are few—the show of heroes in Hades, the future of Rome empaneled on his shield—and his understanding is imperfect. But even he is luckier than Geoffrey, for Geoffrey, though repeatedly promised a goal, new knowledge, and reward for his labors, escapes one maze only to land in another, with nary a moment of transcendent vision. The clarity implied by the diagrammatic visual model of the labyrinth is never achieved; there are no conversions from chaos to order, only the reverse. He may imitate his labyrinth-conquering predecessors all he likes, but all flights above the maze are aborted, and there is no access to transcendence—at least, not for Geoffrey, who will never know whether there is a pattern or, for that matter, an architect. More knowledge than this is impossible because we live—as people, as poets—in a world of ambiguity, duality, multiplicity, where there are no clear signa sequendi because texts, words, and perceptions are all made of "fals and soth compounded" (1029, 2108). And the best emblem of this sort of world with its inextricable mix of truth and falsehood? It is the inextricable three-dimensional multicursal labyrinth, which is also compounded of true and false paths. If we could rise above them to experience the change in perspective represented by the diagrammatic visual maze, then we could see a pattern and tell which path was true and which false. But although Chaucer's labyrinthine masters believe in the possibility of achieving that vision, however fleetingly, Chaucer does not: in this world there is only confusion and doubt. The functional inseparability of truth and falsehood caused by our imperfect perspective and perceptions is the central epistemological theme of The House of Fame, and it is explored through the vehicle of the labyrinth, which becomes an emblem of the limitations of knowledge in this world, where all we can finally do is meditate on labor intus. If this sounds profoundly depressing, oddly enough it is not; so let us follow Geoffrey, who is neither Boethius nor Dante, on his bewildering peregrinations through one disorienting labyrinth after another until he reaches the chaotic "domus Dedaly" (1920) in which the poem ends so anticlimactically.

Boethius's baffled narrator thought that verbal mazes, like visual ones, were places where "thow . . . entrist ther thow issist, and . . . issist ther
thow entrest.” The House of Fame emulates this labyrinthine structure, for it begins and ends in labyrinths of words. The Proem is an intellectual maze inaugurated by a prayer—“God turne us every dreem to goode!” (1). That line hints at the labyrinths to come, for it suggests the endless turnings of mazes and indicates the need for supernatural guidance if one is to escape: if God can’t turn things to good, no one can. After this cheerful yet faintly ominous beginning, the Proem plunges headlong into a minimaze of dream lore and terminology (2-52). I quote just a little to give the flavor:

hyt is wonder, be the roode [cross],
To my wyt, what causeth swevenes [dreams]
Eyther on morwes [mornings] or on evenes [evenings],
And why th'effect folweth of somme,
And of somme hit shal never come;
Why that is an avision
And why this a revelacion,
Why this a drem, why that a sweven,
And noght to every man lyche even [the same];
Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
I not [don’t know] (2-12)

The causes and kinds of dreams are catalogued in an extended dubitatio mimicking the repeated choices of a multicursal labyrinth as the reader is offered a series of randomly ordered options marked by “why . . . and” and “or . . . or.” This turning back and forth from one alternative to another—is it this or that? this or that?—is the essence of the multicursal maze and induces labyrinthine confusion. Transcendent understanding of dream theory is anticipated but never delivered; Chaucer the poet enumerates the important options of medieval dream lore, but the narrator Geoffrey refuses to choose, leaving resolution of these dark questions to absent guides, “grete clerkys” (53), and he exits the maze of questions where he came in: may “the holy roode / Turne us every drem to goode!” (57-58). With these repeated lines, he returns us to the beginning of the maze without penetrating its mystery or tracing a true path among false alternatives.10 Thus The House of Fame begins with a multicursal intellectual labyrinth leading nowhere.11 The experience of the

10. Joyner (“Parallel Journeys”) also notes the first two sets of echoing lines in the Proem and Invocation and suggests they delay Geoffrey’s accomplishment of his mission just as Aeneas was delayed; however, he does not link this delay with the labyrinth, nor does he see how the pattern of repetition—of entering and leaving at the same point—continues throughout the poem.

11. And reminiscent of Boncompagno da Signa’s labyrinths of prolixity and of definitions, Ralph Higden’s paralyzingly labyrinthine profusion of data, and Aristotle’s Labyrinth: see chap. 7 above.
Proem reflects in little the experience of the whole poem: wildly eclectic, its random order creating chaos, offering choices whose merit is impossible to determine. There are no reliable guides, for if "grete clerkys" created ambiguous and conflicting dream categories in the first place, they can hardly be trusted to resolve them. Thus the Proem exits where it entered and anticipates the whole poem's eventual closure—with another exit at point of entry—in a garrulous House of Daedalus as full of unreliable opinions as the Proem.

We move from dreams to two of their possible divine causes. The Invocation rings further changes on labyrinthine themes as the narrator who refused to choose in the intellectual maze of dream lore now selects two guides who evoke respectively Daedalus the crafter of lifelike moving statues and Daedalus the architect. Preoccupied with his own poetic making, Geoffrey calls first on the God of Sleep (he really means Morpheus, God of Dreams) to help him tell his dream properly, something this Daedalian artificer of deceptive fictions may not be best qualified to do if "properly" means "truly." In any case, Geoffrey backtracks quickly: he has only read about this god (77) and suddenly wonders "Yf every drem stonde in his myght" (80, my italics). The reader's doubts, if not Geoffrey's, increase as the narrator appeals to God "that mover ys of al" (81). Although this cosmic artifex no doubt has the power to reward everyone who likes Geoffrey's dream and punish anyone who spitefully misinterprets it, as requested, Geoffrey has unwittingly raised a dangerous issue: if the interpretation of dreams is as dicey as the Proem suggests, so is the interpretation of dream poetry, and there are more serious modes of misinterpretation than those arising from hate, scorn, and envy. The Invocation thus carries us further into the realm of ambiguity; texts are as multiplicitous in meaning as dreams, and just as unreliable. The theme of erroneous interpretation, of misreading textual or visual signa sequendi, continues in Book 1, but structurally the Invocation, like the Proem, is neatly end-stopped, for it too is framed by a set of echoing lines giving the enigmatic date of the dream (63, 111). Again, the reader exits where he or she entered, as if a digression has been completed or as if two paths have circled back to the same point, raising new doubts but progressing no closer toward a center.

The narrative continues with another allusion to the need for escape: just before his dream, Geoffrey has made a pilgrimage to Saint Leonard, patron saint of prisoners, asking him to make "lythe" (easy) what is "hard" (118). It matters little what particular metaphorical prison Geoff-

12. Ironically, despite his association with sleep, as shaper of indiscriminately true and false dreams Morpheus may well be the right tutelary spirit for this poem with its theme of the indistinguishability of truth and falsehood. On the relationship between Morpheus and Daedalus as artificers, and a structural implication for the poem, see Boitani, Imaginary World of Fame, p. 206.
frey has in mind: the point is that he, like Boethius, wants relief from difficult confinement, and therefore his waking world is a kind of prison, a labyrinth. If the dream is in fact Leonard's answer to Geoffrey's prayer, the reward for enduring a waking prison-labyrinth is yet more mazes, a frustrating pattern that recurs throughout the poem.

As the dream proper begins, Geoffrey is disoriented (128-129) inside a splendidly ornate temple of Venus whose walls are decorated with the story of the *Aeneid*. He has moved from a personal prison-maze to a labyrinth-text, though it doesn't seem like one at first. The presentation starts with deceptive simplicity: a reasonably literal translation of Virgil's opening lines (143-148), beginning “I wol now syng e, yif I kan, / The armes and also the man.” The content—a summary of Aeneas's history—gives a clear overview of the complicated story, and the verbatim citation sets up expectations that Virgil's text will be Geoffrey's guiding thread just as Virgil himself guided Dante in the *Comedy*. Moreover, the story is narrated succinctly and directly: Aeneas's circuitous *errores* are straightened out from Virgil's well-known artificial order to natural chronological order. But as Dante's Virgil proved fallible in the long run, so too here with Virgil's text: simplicity becomes complexity, and the security of translation deteriorates into a serious questioning of Virgilian authority. Even the format of the story seems to shape-shift: what was written (142) turns into pictures (151, 162, 174) and speeches (189, 300).

If the murals start off straightforwardly, in apparent harmony with Aeneas's desire to head for Italy “as streight as that they myghte goo” (197), they—or at least Geoffrey's reception of them—wander off into turbulent and delaying digression just as Aeneas’s course deviates into *errores*. Indeed, Geoffrey's passage through the story reenacts Aeneas's labyrinthine course in important ways—not least in his own disorientation, his tendency to be sidetracked by beautiful women, and his interest in poring over artistic recreations of history. Like Aeneas, Geoffrey

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13. Since most medieval retellings of the *Aeneid* likewise follow natural order, perhaps one should not make too much of it here; nevertheless, opting for natural order reinforces the movement from initial simplicity to great complexity in the narrative as presented by Chaucer. On artificial vs. natural order, see Baswell, “Figures of Olde Werk,” pp. 231–232; Hall, “Chaucer and the Dido-and-Aeneas Story”; and Dane, “Chaucer’s *House of Fame* and the *Rota Virgilii*,” pp. 63–64.

14. Geoffrey's reenactment of Aeneas (and, for that matter, of Boethius) is discussed at length by Tisdale, Joyner, and especially Baswell. Tisdale (“Virgilian Reason”) finds the poem's unity in Geoffrey's reenactment of "the moment of conscience that he has just seen Aeneas experience on Libyan shores" (p. 249): as Mercury goads Aeneas into performing his moral duty, so the Eagle, a Boethian stand-in for Mercury, carries Geoffrey off from his "moral lethargy" (p. 248), his misery in a "sterile life" (p. 256), to "a clear understanding of truth" (260). Joyner (“Parallel Journeys”) suggests that the murals remind us of crucial events in Aeneas's life so we will recognize that Geoffrey's course from the desert until the end of the poem runs parallel to that of Aeneas: both men pursue "a divinely guided journey that goes temporarily astray" but eventually achieve "a successful conclusion" (p.
dallies and delays in Carthaginian labyrinths of love: luxuriating in sympathy for Dido, he endorses—and partly invents (314)—her tirade against the tricky amatory arts of men. The biased Geoffrey switches guides in mid-poem as his sentimental amplification of Dido’s woes leads him down another passage of the textual maze of Roman quasi-history, namely, Ovid’s *Heroides* 7. He moves from the single track of his redaction of Virgil into a multicable textual conflation admitted openly in the injunction to “rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde” (378-379). Thus Dido’s labyrinth of love begets a labyrinth of conflicting texts for Geoffrey, whose preference for Ovid’s version with its maligning of Aeneas the traitor leads to further piteous amplifications on the theme of artful male deceit. The motif of difficult choice—in interpreting and following texts, in deciding which is right and which wrong, Virgil’s or Ovid’s version, this dream theory or that, this reading of Geoffrey’s dream or that—is extended into the practical moral realm: whose words or deeds can a poor woman believe in the labyrinth of this world? Are there reliable verbal and visual *signa sequendi* in art and in life, or are they all as confused and misleading as the *signa* in Virgil’s labyrinth?

Geoffrey’s poem seems doomed to circle endlessly on its digressive, repetitive path—to become an inextricable textual labyrinth—as one deceitful lover after another is named. But finally the circling path is shortcircuited by the poem’s first explicit allusion to the labyrinth myth: Theseus’s betrayal of Ariadne (405-426), the longest encapsulated narrative in these Ovidian digressions. The stories of ill-fated love and amatory arts naturally culminate in the artful labyrinth built to conceal lust and conquered through a deluded maiden’s love. Geoffrey’s Theseus, like Dido’s Aeneas, may be a cad, but as a solver of labyrinths he heralds the narrative’s escape from its Ovidian maze: as if following Theseus’s lead, Geoffrey abandons the miserable ladies of Ovid’s book (425) to return to Virgil’s (429), marking this change in authorities, this exit at point of entry, by the repetition of “book.” Theseus has been a catalyst

I find these readings unconvincing, largely because they completely ignore the humor—indeed, the parodic spirit—of many of the imitations of Aeneas and Boethius. Moreover, they assume that Geoffrey succeeds in imitating his predecessors, attaining wisdom and virtue, whereas I would argue that the point of the parallels is precisely that Geoffrey—and perhaps fourteenth-century Everyman—cannot follow where they lead; he can explore the same labyrinths, but he cannot transcend them and achieve wisdom. Baswell agrees that the point of the numerous parallels he analyzes is parodic and suggests that “witty and cynical doubt” is directed not at Virgil and Boethius but at Chaucer himself (“Figures of Olde Werk,” p. 267), who via Geoffrey becomes an “inadequate contemporary Aeneas . . . [and] Boethius” (p. 313) who finally “has learned nothing,” leaving us where we began, yearning for “truth and transcendence,” with only “a model of search” (p. 324)—a *labyrinthis* model, I would add.
for Geoffrey, just as Mercury was in freeing Aeneas from Dido and Carthage—and it is with Mercury’s intervention, his shortcircuiting of the labyrinth of love, that we rejoin the Aeneid. Virgil is once again a unicursal guide and Aeneas a noble hero who reaches his goal, but their authority, their truth, have been undermined: the conflicting attitudes toward Aeneas have shown that interpretation depends on point of view, that there is no reliable guide to truth in history or in human relations. There are only competing paths and irresolvable choices in a multicursal maze.

Having surveyed the doubtful story of Aeneas, Geoffrey remains puzzled and disoriented: he has seen marvels, “But not wot I whoo did hem wirche, / Ne where I am” (474-475). Dazzled, he wonders who crafted such artistry, but although he invokes the “Lord . . . that madest us” (470), the artificer God, he gets no response. If an answer exists, it must be multiple: Aeneas who performed these acts, Juno with her sleights and compassing (462) and Jupiter who shaped his course, Virgil and Ovid who recorded it, Geoffrey himself, the unknown temple architect, whoever caused Geoffrey’s dream. . . . The making of art becomes an infinite labyrinthine regression.

Geoffrey leaves these labyrinths only to find himself in another one, at least by medieval standards: he enters a trackless desert with no landmarks or paths or guide (486-491), the labyrinthine desert of Ambrose, Gregory Thaumaturgus, the Arabs, and Boccaccio. He is reminded of Libya (488), where Aeneas was first cast ashore near Carthage: once again, Geoffrey follows in the steps of the Trojan hero (and once again The House of Fame traces a labyrinthine course by arriving where the Aeneid began just as it abandons the Aeneid as a subject). We pass from the confusing order of Venus’s temple and Virgil’s and Ovid’s texts to the intolerable blankness of the silent desert—the desert in which Dante too found himself alone and helpless (Inf. 1). Geoffrey is

15. Here too there is a parallel of sorts between Geoffrey and Aeneas: Aeneas gazed at the Cumaean panel of Theseus and the labyrinth until the Sibyl shamed him into constructive action; Geoffrey is similarly detained by myth, but he manages to extract himself from his reverie to finish his own job: telling the story that Aeneas enacted. Geoffrey can escape some labyrinths on his own, but when he does, as here, he is likely to find himself right back where he came in.

16. Geoffrey’s précis of the Aeneid ends with a cluster of references evoking some labyrinthine Virgilian themes relevant to his own dream: the gods’ "mervelous signals," their ambiguous omens and oracles (even gods do not speak the truth clearly): Juno’s "sleight" and "compas," the trickery and contriving that create most of the labyrinths Aeneas must suffer (even gods play false, weaving deceit with compasses); Aeneas’s subjection to "aventure" and Jupiter’s "cure"—a rotav-rosa-like pairing of chance and providence that is later associated with the construction of Fame’s gate (1297–1298)—reflecting the difficulty of distinguishing between chance and fate from an earthly perspective. Chaucer’s Fame, the closest thing to God that Chaucer lets us see in this poem, also has her ambiguous signs, her sleights and contrivances. The Knight’s Tale, Chaucer’s other highly labyrinthine poem, reflects a similar view of the gods.

17. Note that Geoffrey has reversed Dante’s course: Dante meets Virgil in the desert,
right back where Aeneas and Dante began, and he must suffer yet another series of mazes with yet another guide. First, however, he prays to Christ to save him from “fantome and illusion” (493), from deceptive dreams and magic; and this prayer to Christ carries us back to the poem’s beginning, where God and Christ were invoked to deal with dreams, and where Morpheus crafted dreams both true and false. Thus Book 1, like the labyrinth, “issist ther thow entrist” and penetrates no mysteries. Instead, it establishes a pattern that will persist in the poem: artistic and intellectual order collapse into chaos, and Geoffrey advances only to find himself more or less back where he started, little the wiser. One version of the labyrinth is replaced by another, and the center is endlessly deferred.

In the tradition of labyrinthine narrative developed from the Cretan myth, escape from the labyrinth requires either a guide or wings. Aeneas had the Sibyl to guide him through the mazes of Book 6; Dante had many guides, including Virgil and several eagles; and Boethius had Philosophy’s labyrinthine arguments and swift wings. To free Geoffrey from the desert, Chaucer characteristically takes all these alternatives at once by creating an avuncular golden-feathered philosopher-eagle who turns out to be as determined as the Sibyl, as terrifying and benevolent as Dante’s eagles, and a literal manifestation of Boethius’s metaphorical wings. When the Eagle seizes Geoffrey, we expect him to transcend earthly mazes, to see the pattern of the universe as if it were laid out at his feet like the concentric circles of a diagrammatic maze, as other cosmic travelers do.

but Geoffrey has just left him behind. And, if we focus on the wicket through which Geoffrey has just emerged, we notice that where Dante entered Purgatory by a gate to pursue the path of good love, Geoffrey leaves the temple of Love by a wicket to find himself in the desert. Geoffrey is then seized by an eagle derived in part from the eagle that carried Dante to that very gate of purgatory. When Geoffrey follows in his great predecessors’ footsteps, he often gets everything backward—unless, perhaps, his sources lied.

18. Fyler also notes a general pattern of “expansion and collapse” in the poem: Chaucer and Ovid, p. 58.
19. See Purgatorio 9 (where the eagle provides transportation within a dream), and Paradiso 18 and 26.
20. The identification of the Eagle with Philosophy’s wings, Dante’s eagles, and even Beatrice has become a critical commonplace; however, John Leyerle (“Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” UTQ, 40 [1971], 247–265—here, 253) and Baswell (“Figures of Old Werk,” pp. 286, 311–312) usefully emphasize Chaucer’s tendency to reify what is metaphorical in his sources: thus the feathers of philosophy become a palpable eagle. Similarly, Philosophy’s labyrinthine argument becomes a series of real labyrinths, most notably the domus Dedaly of Rumor.
21. Geoffrey wonders queasily whether he is a new Ganymede (589–592), a reaction that may call to mind the reward given to Cloanthus in Aeneid 5 after he has won the labyrinthine boat race: a woven cloak with a double meander border and a depiction of Ganymede and the eagle. If Geoffrey’s Eagle is the reification of Boethius’s metaphor, perhaps his flight is the living enactment of Cloanthus’s cloak: a Jovial ride surrounded by mazes.
But again we are thwarted: the Eagle's soaring spirals are circuitous, his digressive discourse even more so. Disoriented in the temple and the desert, Geoffrey remains disoriented (547-553) in a flight that will carry him into more mazes. Claiming to be Geoffrey's friend, the Eagle announces that this educational celestial tour is Jupiter's idea of a reward for Geoffrey's thankless poetic labors (666) in Venus's honor and will free Geoffrey from the constraints of his waking life: his indoor labors (652) in the Customs House and the headaches of reading and writing poetry in his study, perhaps the very prisons from which Geoffrey asked Saint Leonard to liberate him. Geoffrey may be promised relief from his labores intus, his waking labyrinths of words, but he faces yet another verbal maze as the Eagle lists the kinds of tidings Geoffrey will hear (674-699) in a catalogue whose profusion, speed, random order, and cumulative rhetorical patterning ("moo . . . moo . . . moo") recalls the Proem's chaotic dream catalogue. When Geoffrey is told he will hear of more deceptions "then greynes be of sondes" (691), we may wonder whether we are to end up back in the desert again. The beginning of the flight, then, recapitulates the settings of Book 1—the labyrinthine catalogue, Geoffrey's personal prisons, the love-deceptions of Venus's temple, the desert. Has Geoffrey actually left those labyrinths at all? And if so, is he any better off?

As if to still such fears, the Eagle announces that Geoffrey, like Dante and Boethius and other respectable cosmic voyagers, is going to the center of things, or at least to the center of all speech: the House of Fame, placed "evene in myddes of the weye / Betwixen hevene and erthe and see" (714-715). This journey to the center may sound like a real penetration of the cosmic labyrinth, but it is already an anticlimax: Dante and Boethius flew into a clear realm of cosmic order, complete with a vision of the concentric cosmic circles that God-Daedalus drew with his compasses. Geoffrey will never fly above the moon, let alone into the region of celestial spheres, and his flight will take him through more intellectual mazes. On this quasi-Boethian journey, he will suffer Boethian labyrinthine arguments: the Eagle's multiple proof of the laws of sound is just the kind of complex syllogistic argument medieval texts refer to as labyrinths (see Chapter 7). In this prolix disquisition on sound, two images—both of them traditional in this context—play an important role. First, the Eagle repeats three times that sound is really broken air (765, 770, 779); second, he compares soundwaves to concentric circles caused by a rock thrown in a pool (788-815). So Geoffrey does encounter the concentric circles one expects on celestial voyages, and they are even associated with compasses (798) and with the wheels (794) that characterize the grandeur and perfection of the heavens in the

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Divine Comedy. But these Chaucerian circles have little in common with the cosmic artistry of a divine Daedalus: they are at best the ephemeral product of fallible human speech and at worst the consequence of breaking air (or wind). Put together the two visual images in the Eagle's discourse, moreover, and the result is the broken circles characteristic of mundane medieval labyrinths. No cosmic circles these, and no music of the spheres in the Eagle's gabble or Fame's cacophony! Thus Geoffrey's escape from the desert-labyrinth lands him in the Eagle's labyrinths of prolixity and logic, which evoke not merely Boethius's textual labyrinth but also the visual image of the maze: in ironic contrast, Lady Philosophy's labyrinthine argument led Boethius to a perception of the circles of divine simplicity. If the Eagle sees himself as a latter-day Lady Philosophy, then, he is wrong: true, he does incorporate both means of escape from the labyrinth: he is a pair of wings uttering labyrinthine argument. But he is ineffective: he doesn't fly high enough for Geoffrey to have a true cosmic vision, and his argument is no guiding thread. Geoffrey's Jovian reward for unceasing labor is nothing more than free passage through laborinti, not least the Macrobian difficulty of "coping with this labyrinth of words"—first from the Eagle, then in the houses of Fame and Rumor.

Failing to achieve a Boethian or Dantean cosmic vision, Geoffrey sees little else. His downward glances, understandably brief in such tenuous
circumstances, show him nothing of any import, and soon the earth is a mere pinpoint (895-909). For Boethius (2m7) the vision of earth's insig-
nificance occasions meditation on the negligibility of earthly fame, but all the Eagle wants to discuss is whether Geoffrey can recognize any city (911-913). As for looking up bravely like Dante and Boethius, Geoffrey fears for his eyesight and prefers to learn astronomy from books. His flight on "fetheres of Philosophye" (972), then, teaches him only the physics of sound, which he could have learned just as well from grammatical treatises or indeed from Boethius's *De musica*; he stubbornly avoids any cosmic vision, any transcendence of the worldly labyrinths of life and texts. The heavens, or what he sees of them, merely confirm his beloved authors (985-990, 1012-1013). His mental and imaginative lim-
itati ons create an epistemological labyrinth that would remain inextrica-
able even if the Eagle were as effective a guide to cosmic realms of glory as Lady Philosophy or Beatrice.28

Book 1 described a pattern of movement from intellectual uncertainty (the dream-maze) to an ordered building (the Temple of Venus) to a place of disorder (the desert), and Book 2 initiates a repetition of that pattern: rescuing Geoffrey from the desert, the Eagle carries him through intellectual mazes to a new destination, another textual palace of apparent order that, like the Temple of Venus and the multicursal maze, is "of fals and soth compounded" (1029). There is an end to flight, if not to labyrinths, as the Eagle announces their impending arrival: "Seynt Julyan, loo, bon hostel! / Se here the Hous of Fame, lo!" (1022-
1023), he cries as they approach their goal, that house at the center of sound but of nothing else. Julian is normally invoked as the patron of hospitality, but Chaucer may have another aspect of Julian's respon-
sibilities in mind: a common name for English turf-mazes was "Julian's Bower," and near Lincoln were examples Chaucer might have known.29

encounter broken circles, for Dante the circles of Malebolge. In a poem that privileges vision, Dante flies on a human-faced monster; in a poem about words and sound, Geoffrey is in the claws of an eagle with a human *voice*. The point of this parallel, as usual, is that Geoffrey is a comically failed Dante and operates in a very different world: the best illuminating upward flight Geoffrey can manage is no better than Dante's infernal down-
ward flight. Both flights end in mazes.


27. See Irvine, "Medieval Grammatical Theory," p. 866; Boethius is particularly respon-
sible for the image of sound-circles.

28. Contrast Dante's constant willingness to transcend the perceptual and intellectual labyrinths that bind him in Paradise.

29. Chaucer's wife Philippa was closely associated with Lincoln, where her sister Kath-
If Julian is the unofficial patron saint of English mazes, the Eagle may be pulling Geoffrey's leg in more ways than one, for rest, certain knowledge, and the transcendence of mazy labors and errors are hardly in prospect, and both the House of Fame and the House of Rumor turn out to be labyrinths.

Although modern readers may not recognize the maziness of the House of Fame, the resemblance would have been clear to many medieval readers. Elaborate and complex as any Daedalian construction or Gothic cathedral, the House of Fame is most obviously a memorial building as described by Frances A. Yates—a niched, statued, decorated establishment in which those who preserve the poetic memory of the famous are themselves preserved in some semblance of mnemonic order: outside those who sound off with instruments and spells decorate the building in organized groups, and inside great authors of the various poetic "matters" stand on pillars whose metallic composition reflects this subject matter. As a memorial building, the House of Fame is theoretically a place of order and a splendid work of complex artistry. But precisely because of its dazzling complexity and its commemoration of great art, the House of Fame resembles the admirable but confusing labyrinths described by Pliny and others in the historical-geographical tradition (see Chapter 1). Those ancient labyrinths were vast, intricate, galleried stone buildings, and among their more prominent internal features were pillars and statues. Their complexities induced inextricable and inexplicable error; but they were meant to function as ornate monuments to the glory of architect and sponsor. The first labyrinths, then, were ambiguous houses of fame, simultaneously memorial and mazy. They were also, like Chaucer's, very noisy—a detail in Pliny found as late as John Mirk (ca. 1450), who complained that in his day the church had become "an hous of dadull, and of whisperyng and rownyng, and of spekyng of vanye and of ope fylthe." The deceptively realistic speaking images of supplicants in Chaucer's palace of fame (1074-1082) also express a labyrinthine connection: they recall the life-

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31. Pliny uses both terms (*Natural History* 36.19.88, 91). Inexplicability, with its hermeneutic implications, is particularly suggestive of mental labyrinths, just as inextricability connotes physical ones.

32. Pliny mentions that the Egyptian labyrinth produced "a terrifying rumble of thunder"; the Etruscan labyrinth made noise when the wind blew. Chaucer picks up both images: see 1041-1042 and the trumpeting forth of fame by "Eolus the god of wynde" (1571). For Mirk, see the *Festial*, ed. Th. Erbe, EETS, c.s. 96 (1905), p. 279; partially cited in Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, p. 167. If the House of Rumor specializes in whispers, the House of Fame is more interested in vanity. One wonders whether Mirk had been reading Chaucer.
like moving statues created by Daedalus, that artist extraordinary "with his playes slye" (Book of the Duchess 570), who, like the "smale harpers" outside the palace, tried with craft to imitate nature (1209-1213). The House of Fame, then, is a magnificent multiplex domus that is also, by medieval standards, a kind of labyrinth. "So wonderlych ywrought" (1173), built to commemorate artists, it shares both the purpose and the perverse effect of the ancient mazes: with typically labyrinthine convertibility, its very artistry (and certainly the artistry of its writers-in-residence) begets confusion even as it compels admiration.

Initially Fame herself resembles Virgil's Sibyl and Boethius's Lady Philosophy: like them, she varies in size from the length of a cubit to an immensity spanning the distance from earth to heaven (1368-1376). We might hope she would be as useful a guide to labyrinths as these literary ancestors. But as usual we are disappointed: a shifting size is itself an ambiguous signum sequendi, and although it might point to the Sibyl and Philosophy, here it points rather to Virgil's Fama (Aeneid 4.173-197) and reflects her guiding principle, amplification—the very principle that informs medieval poetry, the expansion of sound-circles, and the re-duplicated circles of the labyrinth. Like Virgil's, Chaucer's Fame specializes in multiplex sermo (4.189), in mingled truth and falsehood (4.188, 190), and she is as monstrous as the Minotaur: part woman, part beast, with as many ears, eyes, and tongues as there are hairs and feathers on animals and birds. She transcends duality to incarnate labyrinthine multiplicity. On her feet, in an apt mistranslation of Virgil's "swift wings," are the partridges' wings that link her subtly with Daedalus and Perdix, inventor of compasses he never lived to use but which, usurped, enabled Daedalus to construct the labyrinth. So too Fame's magnificent palace with its "compasses" (1302), its beauty that no mortal men have skill to "compace" (1170), is parasitically built on the works of others,

33. Daedalus is thus an appropriate archetype for poets: his labyrinth is a prototype for the grand structure of their verbal compositions, his moving statues a prototype for the characters they create.

34. Were we in any doubt on the point, this Fame welcomes fawning muses (1399–1406), whereas Philosophy banishes them (1p1), and this Fame welcomes poets and fiction, whereas the Sibyl tears Aeneas away from his perusal of Daedalus's poetic fictions (as pseudo-Bernard Silvester interprets them) at the Cumaean gates (J&J, p. 37).

35. Chaucer makes Fame more womanly—and thus more dual-natured—than Virgil's Fama: Fama is purely monstrous, covered with feathers, eyes, tongues, mouths, and ears, but Chaucer's is a "femynyne creature" with golden hair, her numerous eyes, tongues, etc., compared to beasts' feathers, hairs, and so on.

36. See Francis X. Newman, "Partriches Winges: A Note on the Hous of Fame, 1391–92," Medievalia, 6 (1980), 231–238. Following medieval commentators, Newman sees the reference as suggesting "the vanity and fraudulence of art"; I see it as part of a pattern of labyrinthine imagery, linking Fame to Daedalus, and as a reference to medieval practices of plundering other writers' work for one's own creations. For other references to the partridge, see Fyler's notes, Riverside Chaucer, ad 1392.

37. On possible readings of "compace" in 1170, see Fyler's notes, Riverside Chaucer.
the artists of word and sound. But unlike Daedalus's construction, the
gates (and presumably the house) of Fame are erected haphazardly by
"aventure" as well as "cure" (1297-1298): there is no single architect of
this palace, then, no brilliant shaping consciousness to make order domi­
nate chaos.38

The association of the House of Fame with labyrinthine chaos is strength­
ned when Fame randomly assigns praise, blame, or no fame at all to her
petitioners. Her judicial process is orderly, but her bewildering illogic in
ruling on people's eventual fame creates an experiential maze of diale­
tic with its intermittent and inextricable error, leaving Geoffrey clawing
his head in amazement.39 In its Chaucerian context, Fame's inscrutability
is comic; but at the same time—and who can say how seriously?—she is a
parody of that finally impenetrable labyrinth in the Divine Comedy, the
mystery of God's justice. With Fame's judgments, then, order once again
deteriorates into chaos and incomprehensibility.40

Like mistress, like dwelling place: the House of Fame as a whole does
not necessarily reflect the true merits of its components. If some medi­
eval cathedral mazes witness the glory of their builders, this maze of
memory confirms Geoffrey's pragmatic judgment of its icy foundations:

This were a feble fundament
To bilden on a place hye.
He ought him litel glorifye
That hereon hilt, God so me save! (1132–1135)

These lines might have been a Boethian or Dantean statement on the
flimsiness of worldly fame, but to Geoffrey they describe a literal archi­
tectural fact. The House of Fame may be a valid memorial building, but
it is deeply flawed: like Pliny's mazes, it is built to commemorate, but its
effect is to confuse. As ancient writers disagreed about who was memori­
alized in the labyrinths, so here the stuff of the palace is dubious: how
can Homer, Dares, and Dictys with their strongly divergent biases coexist
on the same pillar of the Matter of Troy (cf. 1475–1480)? And what
about Fame's efficacy to promulgate her peremptory judgments if she

38. As with men's reputations and writings, so with their fates: in Book 1, Aeneas's
career is based on Juno's compassing, "aventure," and Jupiter's cure. Again, a dilemma
emerges: who's in charge? Is there an architect of men's fates?
39. Fyler, Riverside Chaucer, ad 1702, notes that this is "Chaucer's only use of the strong
preterite of clawen, 'claw, rub'; elsewhere he uses clawed." Might this aberrant preterite,
"claw," be an in-joke, suggesting Geoffrey's need for a clue to escape this maze of illogic? In
the "Legend of Ariadne," he repeatedly uses the noun "clewe": 2016, 2140, 2148.
40. Although our modern fascination with an Ockhamist God whose absolute power
permits him to reward anything and everything as he wills was not matched by similar
interest among medieval poets, I remain struck by how accurate a portrait Chaucer's Fame,
with her random disbursement of prizes, might be of such a God.
grants the unnamed villain who burned the Athenian temple of Isis true fame, but that “true fame,” as it is known in the real world outside Chaucer’s poem, identifies him as Herostratus, who burned Diana’s temple at Ephesus?41 The textual quarrels of Venus’s Temple, which is recognizable in retrospect as another memorial building/maze, resurface in the House of Fame, whose collection of literary texts, orderly in their categorical division by pillars, become “a ful confus materie” (1517) when taken as a whole.

Thus Fame’s palace initially represents magnificent (if occasionally unjust and certainly ill-founded) order; but as author attacks author and company after interminable company begs a boon, and as each is dealt with arbitrarily by Fame, order dissolves into chaos. Just as in the digression on wronged ladies in Book 1, we go round in circles in need of extrication, abandoned in the continuing confusion of which the maze is the best emblem. As in the desert, so too here a “frend” who speaks “goodly” to Geoffrey appears (cf. 582 and 565 with 1870–1871). Another guide, another potential instructor for the bewildered Geoffrey who once again has learned nothing of value, another misleading if well-intentioned promise of escape from the labyrinth, another repetition of lines and of established patterns that go nowhere, mocking transcendedence.

In the valley below the castle Geoffrey sees the poem’s final maze: the chaotic House of Rumor, more wonderfully intricate and “queyntelych ywrought” than “Domus Dedaly, / That Laboryntus cleped ys” (1918–1985).42 It is probably highly significant that Chaucer uses both Domus Dedaly, with its connotations of artistry, and Laboryntus, with its polysemous implications of toil, struggle, and artistry, to describe this maze of words. The pairing—found also in Higden (see below)—is extremely rare: even in translating Boethius’s laborintus, presumably for an audience rather more learned than that of The House of Fame, Chaucer relies only on “the hous of Didalus” (Boece 3p12.156). His use of laborintus in The House of Fame suggests he had its ambiguous etymology very

41. For medieval references to Herostratus, see Fyler, Riverside Chaucer, ad 1844. I assume that the temple-burner is telling the truth—none of the postulants seems to lie—and that history’s pronouncement that a different temple in a different place was burned would cast doubt even on “true” fame, at least for people in on the joke; cf. Bennett, Chaucer’s Book of Fame, pp. 162–163. Boitani believes the supplicant is Herostratus and that he lies to Fame: Imaginary World of Fame, p. 188.

42. In describing the houses of Fame and Rumor, Chaucer draws on Ovid’s House of Rumor (Metamorphoses 12.39–63). Chaucer’s House of Rumor shares several labyrinthine attributes with Ovid’s, notably its noisiness, its complex structure with many apertures, and its blending of truth and falsehood; but only Chaucer compares his house to the labyrinth, and he adds other labyrinthine features to his edifice.
much in mind, as one would expect if he were consciously developing
the idea of the labyrinth throughout the poem.

There is a great deal to be said about this complicated labyrinthine
place.\textsuperscript{43} It spins perpetually, emitting a deafening noise: ironically,
Geoffrey has at last found a \textit{visible} circle of sound, but it is hardly a
Dantean or Boethian cosmic circle contributing to the perfect harmony
of the spheres; it remains a labyrinth, a perverse parody of cosmic cir-
cles, just as the broken circles of the labyrinth parody the perfect circles
of the cosmos.\textsuperscript{44} The house spins “as swyft as thought” (1924): presum-
ably it is as dizzying and disorienting as a maze. Through this simile,
the House of Rumor becomes a composite image of the poem’s physical and
mental labyrinths: it is both an architectural maze, like the temple and
the palace of Fame, and an intellectual one, like the labyrinths of dream
lore or Fame’s logic. The intense energy evident outside is also present
within: “Ne never rest is in that place” (1956), we are told, recalling
Hugh of Saint Victor’s opposition of “requies” and “labor intus”; this is
no ark of divine tranquillity.

Nor is there any semblance of order. Its disreputable inhabitants ap-
pear in considerable disarray. Innumerable low-life types—pilgrims,
shipmen, pardoners—are so crowded together inside and out that there
is hardly any room for them to rush, as they do incessantly, from one
place to another, their unruly gossip magnifying the chaos within so that
this house is even noisier than ancient mazes. The tidings themselves are
disordered: in a recapitulation of the Eagle’s dismaying catalogue in
Book 2, they are jumbled together in categories linked by “of . . . of . . .

\textsuperscript{43} For complementary meditations on the House of Rumor, see Boitani, \textit{Imaginary
World of Fame}, pp. 208–216; for a radically different Marxist interpretation, see Stephen
(“Chaucer and Chalcidius,” pp. 247–250) proposes the winnowing baskets of the \textit{Timaeus}
as a source for the wicker cage.

\textsuperscript{44} Parodic allusion to Dante here is in fact quite extensive: at the end of the \textit{Paradiso},
Dante has a vision of the Trinity from within the tightly and hierarchically organized
amphitheater; in a totally disorganized crowd, Geoffrey sees, but does not hear, a \textit{man} who
merely \textit{seems} to be authoritative. Dante’s poem ends with the pilgrim whirling “like a wheel
that is equally moved by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars” (Para. 33.144–
145), in perfect accord with cosmic principles. Geoffrey too ends up spinning in a building,
that, like Dante and the stars, probably moves like a wheel: revolving on its own axis as it
moves in orbit around the earth (see Freccero, “The Final Image,” for Dante’s motion). But
once Geoffrey enters the House of Rumor, he is unaware of its whirling (2031–2032) and
deprived of ecstatic union with the cosmos; he remains very much in a terrestrial maze, a
failed visionary.

Bennett’s interpretation of Geoffrey’s lack of a whirling sensation is very different: “The
poet, that is, when divinely guided, can reach the still centre of this turning world”—
the world for what it was—a confused maze—while outside but loses that visionary perspective
when he enters it (p. 258). I would not grant Geoffrey even that much vision.
of” (1960–1976); although the list is often structured by opposition (war and peace, death and life, labor and rest), there are many unpaired elements (marriages, travel, buildings), and nothing is ranked by importance.

This uproarious building has other labyrinthine features. It is likened to a cage (1938, 1985), but if, like the Cretan labyrinth, it is a prison, it is singularly permeable, with as many entries as there are leaves on trees and more than a thousand holes in the roof (1945–1950). Yet these holes are so small that escaping tidings have to squeeze together to fit through (2088–2109), so the house, though extricable, is very difficult to leave. Similarly, it is partly, but not entirely, impenetrable—Geoffrey must be flown in (2002–2006), but shipmen apparently have no problems with access. Like ancient mazes, too, it is vast—sixty miles long (1979). Most peculiar of all—and perhaps most imaginatively labyrinthine—it is woven of multicolored twigs: it is literally textus, like Virgil’s labyrinth and like literature.45 We have met the image of cacophonous interwoven twigs before, in the House of Fame:

The halle was al ful, ywys,
Of hem that writen olde gestes [stories]
As ben on trees rokes nestes;
But hit a ful confus matere
Were alle the gestes [deeds] for to here
That they of write, or how they highte [were named]. (1514–1519)

Poets are as numerous as crows’ nests: they speak, one assumes, in as many and as raucous voices as a crow, and their texts are interwoven words. And although Geoffrey does not say that their poetic products are confused in themselves, or that the poets are all speaking as he watches, the juxtaposition of nests, confusion, and polyphony anticipates the wicker House of Rumor and explains just what Rumor’s twigs, colored perhaps with the colors of rhetoric, might be.

 Explicitly compared to the labyrinth and domus Dedaly, sharing many features with labyrinths encountered in this study and this poem, this alarming place is surely a maze, though not quite like any we have met before. It resembles some labyrinths in literature—the Sibyl’s cave in the Aeneid, for instance, with its hundred doors and voices. But it more

45. See Aeneid 5.589 and 593. From this detail, and the mention of interlace in the Boece, James Winny concludes that Chaucer thought the labyrinth “had an interwoven structure rather than an intricate ground-plan”—Chaucer’s Dream Poems, p. 102. I assume that Chaucer was not confused on this point—cf. LGW 2012–2014—but rather appreciated the possibilities of both structures, rightly emphasizing textus when dealing with labyrinths of words.
strikingly resembles some unusual labyrinths in the visual arts. The vast majority of illustrations of the labyrinth in the Middle Ages show a diagrammatic, unicursal, two-dimensional pattern, usually based on concentric circles; these illustrations highlight the maze’s artistic design, its symmetry, and its teleology—the fact that its path leads inevitably to a center—and they imply that one can (and should?) rise above the labyrinth to see it whole and thereby comprehend it (see Chapters 2 and 5). In contrast, there are very few surviving illustrations of the Cretan maze as a three-dimensional architectural construction, a mode of representation that encourages the viewer to imagine being within a multicursal building so complex that it is totally disorienting. But these illustrations are fascinating analogues to Chaucer’s House. Two illuminations from the Histoire ancienne (see plate 18 and Appendix, MSS. 4 and 5) show a huge spherical building full of doors and windows, inside which must be many passages; this is a multiplex domus very like Chaucer’s House of Rumor. Two other universal histories show the labyrinth as a cage with interwoven bars. There is no evidence that Chaucer knew these manuscripts, but that is not really the point: the illuminations confirm that individual artists imagined the labyrinth as a cage, or as something textus and interwoven, or as a disorienting sphere full of multicursal passages and confusing repeated details. It is probably typical of Chaucer that he should assemble all these divergent images into something as off-beat as the House of Rumor, whose parts come from various labyrinth traditions (as well as from Ovid’s House of Rumor) but whose whole is completely novel and thoroughly chaotic. It remains tempting to think that Chaucer knew some Histoire ancienne manuscript with a three-dimensional labyrinth and that such an illumination supported his own inclination to reject the clarity of the circular two-dimensional unicursal maze, endorsed by Boethius and Dante, and to visualize—and make his readers visualize—the three-dimensional multicursal building in which there can be no perception of order, only enduring confusion.

Whatever its sources and inspiration, Chaucer’s chaotic House of Rumor is preeminently multicursal. It may not contain physically winding and competing passages through which its inhabitants can walk, like the ancient labyrinths, but then it is not really concerned with physical disorientation. Instead, it is interwoven of textual twigs, and it encloses countless competing audible passages to bewilder the wandering mind, as the rabble of tale-tellers bewilders the eye; in short, the House of Rumor is an ingeniously appropriate and thoroughly original model of an intellectual or epistemological maze, a perfectly imagined transformation of

46. See Kern, plates 171 (Italian MS., ca. 1350–60) and 172 (French, ca. 1400). These illuminations suggest no path at all; they are neither unicursal nor multicursal.
the traditional physical labyrinth into a mental one, a metamorphosis of the structure that amazes into the psychological experience of amazement.47

Within this labyrinth, rumors spread from one man to another, amplified in content and in decibel level; and as these tidings seek an exit, they intertwine inextricably: “Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned / Togeder fle for oo tydynge” (2108–2109). Like multicursal labyrinths, tidings combine true and false passages. The different versions and voices in the Temple of Venus, the speaking Eagle, the poets thick as crows’ nests, the clamor in the twiggy House of Rumor with its dual-natured minotaurish tidings—all are competing and finally unreliable versions of truth, and all are summed up in the labyrinth of Rumor, the nest of poetry. The center of literature, this nest of language and knowledge, is a chaotic labyrinth of words, full of indistinguishable truth and falsehood.

Geoffrey’s marvelous dream begins in a quiet temple with the text of a single poem—a would-be authoritative version of historical truth, a unicursal text. That text splits into two versions, two paths, as Ovid and Virgil each challenge the other’s veracity; and these choices between true and false proliferate throughout the poem until they end not at any true center, and not with any transcendent vision of ordered circles, but inside a spinning labyrinth where the cacophony of truth and falsehood are mingled into institutionalized error—into labyrinths of words. This is truly a labyrinth of over-abundant and unreliable material like that to which Ralph Higden alluded as “laborintus, Dedalus hous, [that] hap many halkes and hurnes, wonderful weies, wyndynes and wrynkelynges, that will noost be unwarled [unraveled].”48 Whatever else one finds in the House of Rumor, it will not be the path to transcendence, and it will not be truth or stability: even true tidings (could they be recognized) risk inextricable entanglement with false ones. So much for the “o sentence” (1100) Geoffrey had wanted for his book, whether that phrase means “one meaning” or “only meaning.” The mazes of Book 3 are framed—both in poetic structure and in literal substance—with half-truths, half-lies, in yet another of the poem’s echoing lines: “fals and soth compounded” (1029, 2108).

Geoffrey ought to have known better than to invoke Apollo, god of

47. Thus Chaucer reverses the historical development of “maze” in English (see chap. 4), which progressed from signifying mental confusion to the physical structure that best creates that state.

48. Higden, *Polychronicon* 1.7, Trevisa’s trans. The context of Higden’s reference to the labyrinth shares features with HF: he is defending “historia” by describing how books preserve the fame and exemplary deeds of great men, which would otherwise pass out of feeble human memory. Oddly, the one great man Higden names in this context is Lucilius, whom Seneca accused of being too immersed in the mundane labyrinth (1.3).
oracular ambages, labyrinths, and poetry, to guide his little last book, in which he encounters not one labyrinth but two.\(^{49}\) In neither place can he find reliable guidance, clear choices between alternatives, an elevated perspective to reveal whatever pattern there may be. There is a momentary glimmer of hope when he finally spies someone who “semed for to be / A man of gret auctorite” (2157-2158); after all, Boethius’s journey through labyrinths to perfect order began with the appearance of Philosophy, a “woman of imperious authority” (1p1.13). Yet this significantly nameless man, who merely seems a likely guide, never says a word; and had he spoken, what authority could he have had in such a place, in such a poem? In Chaucer’s labyrinthine world, the great guides to labyrinths (Ariadne, Daedalus) and to labyrinthine poetry (Virgil, the Eagle who resembles Philosophy and Beatrice, Fame with her Sibylline stature) all fail; transcendence and true authority alike are unthinkable. Order collapses into disorder, simplicity into multiplicity, dazzling artistry into dazed confusion, one statement into its opposite: the only world we know is a labyrinth without a center and perhaps without an end. The poem breaks off abruptly with that ironic word “auctorite,” and probably Chaucer meant it to end so: the multicursal labyrinths he describes are endless when one cannot escape them, as Geoffrey cannot, trapped in his dream of recurrent mazes. Even Daedalus’s exquisite Cretan panels at Cumae are unfinished, and the last completed panel seems to show Theseus trying to escape the maze with Ariadne’s aid. If Daedalus could not finish his labyrinthine sculptures, if Virgil left his great epic incomplete, would it not be presumptuous of Geoffrey to end his labyrinthine poem?\(^{50}\)

We have seen how The House of Fame adopts the labyrinth as a dominant image and how the text repeatedly evokes and denies the narrative pattern of its labyrinthine poetic models: the pattern of escape from

\(^{49}\) Aeneas, deceived by Apollonian ambiguities at Delos, nevertheless calls for Apollo’s guidance at Cumae, where Apollo’s Sibyl is in the habit of writing her ambages on leaves for the wind to scatter; Aeneas therefore wants her to speak, not write (Aeneid 6.56-76). Chaucer may have these events as well as Dantine precedent in mind when he has Geoffrey invoke Apollo before entering the labyrinths of Book 3, one of which issues forth ambiguities from doors as numerous as the leaves on trees (1945-1946). If so, Chaucer is as usual both more lighthearted and even more pessimistic than Virgil, and certainly more conscious of the problems of transmitting information by sound.


Moreover, the Eagle implies that there is no end to Geoffrey’s labors (652-658); hence it is fitting that there be no end to this poetic labor.
subjective confusion within the maze to a privileged overview of clarity and symmetry, analogous to the vision provided by diagrammatic labyrinths. Aeneas, Boethius, and Dante all attain such a vision, if only briefly, but Geoffrey, following in their footsteps, cannot. The question remains: why is the labyrinth the most appropriate controlling image for this poem, and the one thing that gives it coherence and unity?

Throughout the Middle Ages, as we have seen, the maze is a common metaphor for difficult, confusing, artful processes or experiences: life, love, fortune, epistemology, the creation and interpretation of texts, rhetoric, dialectic (all of them, incidentally, topics raised in The House of Fame). Most of these analogies are based on two essential features of the labyrinth:

(1) labor intus: the idea that there is toil—moral, physical, artistic—within, especially when one lacks a privileged overview. Success is problematic in a labyrinth—especially a multicursal one—because vision is limited. Only from outside and above the labyrinthine process can one understand the pattern and meaning of a maze.

(2) error: labyrinths entail many kinds of error: wandering, mistakes, circuitous paths. Error may be simply a structural feature—an elegant circumlocution or physical circuity—but often, error has pejorative overtones. Multicursal mazes involve a special kind of error in that "fals and soth" paths are "compounded" into an artistic whole whose admirably ornate pattern is defined equally by these true and false paths. In this kind of maze, error has excellent uses.

If labyrinths are about inevitable error and ambiguous labor intus, so too is The House of Fame, which focuses on these general problems as they affect the writer and reader of literary texts.

As a poet, Chaucer was at least intermittently concerned with both solaas and sentence, with "fals and soth compounded." But where can a poet find sentence and soth to write about? Some of Chaucer’s favorite books—the Aeneid, the Consolation, the Comedy—suggested where and how truth could be found. In these works, the labyrinth signifies the tortuous, convoluted, necessarily circuitous journey to knowledge; by patience and application, with the right guides, labyrinthine error and confusion can be converted to an epiphany of order, just as the mazy complexities of Philosophy’s speech finally express the circles of divine simplicity. All one needs is good guidance and a perspective above the maze—the perspective assumed by diagrammatic cathedral mazes, or that philosophical wings can give the mind. In Chaucer's poem, however, there is no way to rise above the multicursal labyrinth, no way to see whether sublime order informs it; every tantalizing flight above the maze lands Geoffrey in another one.

51. G. T. Shepherd’s “Make Believe” is a particularly thoughtful discussion of the complexity of the search for soth in this poem and the importance of truth in literature.
This is to be expected in a poem written after Ockham, after Holkot, when, as Delany notes, skeptical fideism became a reasonable response to an uncertain world. Unlike Delany, I find no fideism in The House of Fame, but I do think the poem is deeply skeptical in ways that have been appreciated and in ways that have not. The quest for soth in Chaucer's labyrinthine world is fruitless as it was not for Dante and Boethius, who were granted divine illumination merely parodied by Geoffrey's dream and Eagle. The impossibility of differentiating between truth and error within the mundane maze is considered thoroughly as all sources of knowledge and of poetry—books, logic, perception, experience, perhaps even revelation—are challenged and found wanting. If the labyrinth serves in part to represent the epistemological limitations of human understanding in the Aeneid, the Consolation, and the Comedy, it does so even more forcefully in The House of Fame, where such limitations cannot really be transcended at all.

The Proem demolishes the credibility of dreams: how can you tell a true dream from a false one even if your dream happens to be true, perhaps divinely inspired? Even if the source were reliable—and who could tell?—the interpreter might err. Literature, too, is unreliable. The story of Aeneas has conflicting interpretations and versions—Virgil's versus Ovid's, for a start. Oral literature is even trickier: the House of Rumor shows why most tales are lies. Moreover, oral literature (and poetry was often given oral delivery) consists of sound—of broken air, as the Eagle delights in repeating. For all its craft, the best poetry may be physically indistinguishable from a fart, with no greater intrinsic claim to truth. How, then, can one decide what poetry or speech is true and what is false? Every poet is in a labyrinth of uncertainty vis-à-vis his sources, be they visionary, oral, or written.

One can avoid written and spoken auctorite if Homer lies (1477) and if poetry and farts are scientifically indistinguishable. Are experience and observation more reliable? Chaucer thinks not, in ways not yet suffi-

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52. See Delany, The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism, which remains the fullest exploration of skepticism in The House of Fame. Another important study is Laurence Eldredge's "Chaucer's House of Fame and the Via Moderna," Neophilologische Mitteilungen, 71 (1970), 105–119, dealing with themes of failed transcendence.


53. Moreover, many medieval writers knew that the Dido episode on which Geoffrey places such weight was completely unhistorical: see Fyler, Chaucer and Ovid, p. 34.

54. Cf. Fyler: "the Aeneid and flatus are essentially the same thing," Chaucer and Ovid, p. 54.
ciently noticed despite the proliferation of studies of the poem’s skepticism. *The House of Fame* touches on many of the generally accepted hindrances to perception according to medieval philosophy, hindrances that create at worst a mental labyrinth and at least experimental bias.\(^{55}\)

For instance, error may be caused by submitting to faulty *auctorite*, custom, or prejudice—all encountered in *The House of Fame*. As for vision, the noblest and subtlest sense, Book II systematically destroys its credibility as a source of accurate knowledge—at least for Geoffrey, whose own observations are shown to be extremely dubious. Light that is too bright or too dim hinders perception, and Geoffrey’s eyes are “daswed” (658); he also worries that the stars would blind him (1015-1016). Faulty organs of perception create problems—and Geoffrey’s animal spirits, essential to sight, are “astonyed and asweved,” and his vision is further impaired by age (549, 995). Mental disturbance provokes error, and Geoffrey is remarkably fearful (553, 557, 604). Strong drink or a bad diet impair vision, and Geoffrey’s “abstynence ys lyte” (660). Eyestrain and headache also affect accurate sight, and Geoffrey writes so much he gets almost nightly headaches (632-633). Looking at objects “in a negligent and indifferent manner,”\(^{56}\) as Geoffrey does repeatedly on his flight, leads to error. Great distance from an object, the motion of the beholder, and an unclear atmosphere also harm perception: Geoffrey, flying through the skies, thinks the far-distant earth is “a prikke; / Or elles was the air so thikke / That y ne myghte not discerne” (907-909).

The eye must confront the visible object if it is to be seen, but Geoffrey refuses to look at the constellations (1011-1017). A moving object may be deceptive: the House of Rumor is spinning faster than thought, and the trickiness of moving objects is all the more obvious when Geoffrey, once inside, notices no motion at all (2031-2032). One could go on, but the point is clear. So much for transcendent vision, or indeed any reasonably accurate vision at all; it can hardly be coincidental that Chaucer runs the gamut of Roger Bacon’s comprehensive list of hindrances to sight. Were we tempted to consider sound a possible source of truth, what we learn in the Houses of Fame and Rumor would destroy those illusions. Perception and experience, then, are problematic, just as unreliable as contradictory old books. In addition, as the Invocation to Book 1 reminds us, the wrong mental attitude—hate, fear, scorn—causes error; and personal bias, that common hindrance to accurate judgment, fascinates


\(^{56}\) Bacon, 2, 575.
Chaucer throughout his career, as the links in the *Canterbury Tales* illustrate time and again. If perception, experience, old books, and auctorite fail, what about logic? The Eagle's logical discourse, thinks Geoffrey, is merely “lyk to be / Ryght” (873-874, my italics), whatever Plato and Aristotle (759), those old purveyors of labyrinthine arguments, might say.

Books, dreams, perception, and dialectic are thus excluded as reliable sources of truth and knowledge; however neatly shaped, all are as full of error mixed with truth as the multicursal labyrinth. Thus we labor in the labyrinth of this world, unable even to see it properly, let alone to orient ourselves or find a sure way out. Chaucer does not actually claim that Christian religious literature is equally error-prone: such literature is conspicuous by its absence in the House of Fame, despite the influence of the *Comedy* and sporadic references to the Bible, and exclusion may mean exception. Nor does Chaucer explicitly deny the validity of divine revelation. But the closest thing to revelation in the poem is the Eagle, vehicle of divine illumination in one medieval text after another, including the *Comedy*, and that illustrious bird turns out to be far less authoritative than he thinks, even if he does embody both the labyrinthine argument and the feathers of philosophy that carried Boethius to a clear understanding of world and epistemology alike. But even if the Eagle were a totally competent instructor, he proves quite incapable of extracting Geoffrey from epistemological labyrinths. Instead, he flies his reluctant tutee through labyrinths of speech into mazes of stone and wicker. One may deduce, from the unreliability of reception, that Chaucer has his doubts about revelation (especially in dreams) and didactic instruction as efficient vehicles for certain truth.

Thus there are no secure signa sequendi in the world of *The House of Fame*; everything is, or is indistinguishable from, error, at least from our perspective. Whether error would delineate the perfection of divine artistry if only it could be seen from a sufficiently privileged perspective is anybody's guess. Error, “fals and soth compounded,” the multicursal labyrinth—these define the limits of the poet's, and Everyman's, epistemological labor intus.

Given its available sources, poetry—an artistic labor shaped by error—must necessarily be a labyrinth, however “wonderlych ywroughte” in imitation of Daedalus. Its validity is dubious, its meaning ambiguous, its reception unpredictable. For a poem that discusses these issues, what

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57. For the possible parody of apocalyptic imagery in the poem, see Boenig, “Chaucer's *House of Fame*, the Apocalypse, and Bede.”

58. If Chaucer's poem implies anything at all about divine order, it is that that order is labyrinthine in the Vegetian sense: secret, incomprehensible, impenetrable (see chap. 3). The fact that Chaucer gives Theseus the emblem of the Minotaur in *The Knight's Tale*, where the incomprehensibility of the gods is a central theme, suggests he may have known this tradition.
more appropriate controlling image could there be than the labyrinth, on one hand the most elaborate of artistic creations, on the other a prison of error for anyone trapped within and deprived of philosophical wings? Even Aeneas penetrated the maze of Hades to achieve a clear vision of his people's destiny, however imperfectly understood; Dante and Boethius had sufficient faith and guidance to transcend the earthly maze, to see its confusing multiplicity condense into a perfect pattern of divine order, even though some parts of that order might never be comprehended. But in Chaucer's poem, clear memorial images consistently dissolve into labyrinths of chaos, for mazy convertibility is a one-way (and, transcendentally speaking, a wrong-way) street. All sources of knowledge are undercut. Even the man of (seeming) authority would probably have been as duplicitous as the Minotaur. Meaning and truth are always deferred; the quest for freedom from error—for a clear vision of the pattern in which we play a part—is as endless as the poem. The only pattern we are shown is the pattern of the labyrinth, for the poem is so structured that all progress is illusory: we may think we are getting somewhere new, but really we are retreading old patterns, circling and turning and retracing our steps until suddenly we exit right where we entered, with an echoing line or repeated pattern, and not once only but time and again.59

*The House of Fame*, then, is about the labyrinths of life and literature: grand, but ultimately futile, works of complex art and artifice that all too easily degenerate into chaos unless the viewer is granted a privileged, stable, transcendent vision; inescapable prisons for body and mind, where all guides, however friendly, prove fallible; tricky, ambiguous creations of architects, divine or human, who may or may not play fair, and who will never tell whether they play fair (if all Cretans are liars, according to a favorite medieval *insolubilium*, then all Cretan architects may be liars too); places of confusion where we cannot, or will not, gaze at the stars that end each book of Dante's *Comedy*. This is the world in which we all live, or so says *The House of Fame*; this is also the world of texts, in which the poet lives. The only hope, a slim one, is that God will turn everything to good.

But however pessimistic this vision sounds, *The House of Fame* is not finally a pessimistic poem. It asks what a person, a poet, can do when forced to live in a labyrinth. He might reduce chaos to order by an act of faith and poetic affirmation, as Dante and Boethius did, believing that special guidance leads us above labor and error to see the true pattern of the universe laid out as clearly as the maze on a cathedral floor. Like those authors, a poet might even believe that his complex text, his wit-

ness to transcendence, could serve as Ariadne’s thread to less visionary mortals. But however greatly Chaucer admired Boethius and Dante, his alter ego Geoffrey can follow them only so far, and Chaucer himself refused to fly by faith above a labyrinth he found inescapably mult cursal, built from inseparable truth and falsehood. Perhaps he felt that his masters’ order, their transcendence of the labyrinth, would be for him a false clarity, a poetic oversimplification, faith masquerading as fact: in short, no real answer at all. There is no overview of the labyrinth, at least not in this life, and nothing is clear but the uncertainties of the ambiguous maze above whose constraints we cannot rise.

Believing all this, some men might despair, but that response would never occur to Geoffrey, whose dream, after all, is wonderful: if these be labyrinths, they are enchanting ones, as full of delight as of frustration. The House of Rumor, nightmarish as it may be, is colorful, energetic, chock-full of magnificent diversity, far more beguiling than cosmic spheres. It cries out for the shaping mind and voice of the poet to give order and perspective where none exists. If that shaping is no more reliable than its material, so be it: perhaps a well-wrought poem in such a world is all the more admirable, and much more fun. The confusions and errors of the maze may be as attractive as the transcendent view. And if truth is always deferred, redefined by another twist, a fresh perspective, a different viewer, so what? Multiple voices, multiple perspectives, mult cursal labyrinths, are Chaucer’s stock in trade as a poet, most particularly in the Canterbury Tales. One must adapt to a labyrinth where transcendent vision is the exception and, like the miracles in Chaucer’s religious poems (The Prioress’ Tale, The Man of Law’s Tale, The Second Nun’s Tale), usually happens long ago or far away.

If Chaucer rejects the ordered overview that converts confusion to clarity, he substitutes something as valuable: the vibrant, chaotic, fertile, ambiguous, multiplicitous poetry of the labyrinth, poetry susceptible to an infinite variety of (mis)interpretations, poetry written within the labyrinth of the House of Rumor, with all its inescapable limitations.60 The House of Fame may well be Chaucer’s most confusing poem, weaving the labyrinths of words and concepts that medieval rhetoricians warn against and bewildering generations of readers; but it is also a poem that brilliantly satisfies what Morse Peckham describes as “man’s rage for chaos.”61 Here Chaucer declares and celebrates a labyrinthine poetic of

60. Thus the House of Rumor, with its pilgrims, pardoners, and shipmen, may well herald the unreliable but thoroughly entertaining poetry of the Canterbury Tales: see Bennett, Chaucer’s Book of Fame, pp. 180–183, and Leyerle, “Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” pp. 259–260. And, I would add, the House of Rumor is the very best place to announce a labyrinthine aesthetic as well.

61. Peckham, Man’s Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior and the Arts (New York: Schocken, 1967). Peckham argues that the best art, far from confirming the existence of order in the
Daedalian artistry. He shuns the authoritative voice of the infallible guide; and indeed most of his writings argue that there are no such guides—at least, none we are likely to encounter. The guides he offers—the narrator of the *Troilus*, say, or Harry Bailly—are as fallible as Virgil, the Eagle, and Geoffrey himself. Chaucer is not averse to the obviously Daedalian crafting of ornate poetry: *The House of Fame*, with its repeating patterns, echoing lines, and retracings of its model texts, is far more structured than it seems, and its somber labyrinthine companion piece, *The Knight's Tale*, bears witness to Chaucer's fascination with rhetorical and structural complexities, with how the careful symmetrical art of the diagrammatic labyrinth-maker attempts to control chaos. But that well-wrought tale of Theseus never fully transcends the labyrinths it describes, and it too questions the adequacy of any overview achieved by faith. Moreover, it initiates a multicursal and multivocal work with many perspectives and many internal interpretations and reinterceptions, not least the divergent alternative paths charted by the Miller and the Man of Law in their direct responses to the Knight. Even the Parson, who concludes the *Tales* with what he thinks is a privileged and true perspective, knows there are many ways to salvation, though some are better than others. In the absence of transcendent vision and truths so palpable one can shake them by the bills (867–869), Chaucer rejoices in confusion and complexity; like Alice of (beside) Bath, he relishes "wandrynge by the weye" (*General Prologue* 467) in labyrinths, and his characteristic artistic *labores* describe such *errores*. Perhaps he is simply following the advice of Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*, who had escaped at least one labyrinth (though not, for Chaucer, all of them):

> Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
> To maken vertu of necessit ee,  
> And take it weel that we may not eschue. (3041–3043)

Chaucer's need to accept the inextricability of the maze was both philosophical and artistic, if we are to believe *The House of Fame*, and he converted that necessity into a great virtue. His writings reflect typically world, disrupts normal perceptions of order so that perceivers must readjust their *idées fixes* to a closer approximation of reality.

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62. If *The House of Fame* ends in a labyrinth, it can be argued that the *Canterbury Tales* begins with one: see Margaret F. Nims, "Translatio: 'Difficult Statement' in Medieval Poetic Theory," *UTQ*, 43 (1974), 215–230 (here, 227), and F. J. Flahiff, "The Crafty Art of Daedalus." I intend to expand on the insights of Nims and Flahiff and discuss some of the labyrinths of the *Tales*, and particularly the Knight's and Franklin's tales, in a later study.

63. "Stondeth upon the weyes, and seeth and axeth of the olde pathes (that is to seyn, of olde sentences) which is the good wey .... Manye ben the weyes espirituels that leden folk to oure Lord Jhesu Crist and to the regne of glorie. Of whiche weyes, ther is a ful noble wey" (ParsT 77–80).
Daedalian arts: the creation of astonishingly life-like statues and the making of multicursal labyrinths of words whose artistry depends on ambiguity, multiple perspective, and the systematic “elusion of clarity,” even if, every now and then, that artistry (or at least our understanding of it) becomes “a ful confus mateere.” This labyrinthine aesthetic is fully if circuitously enunciated in *The House of Fame* with its mazed narrator, settings, and structure; here Chaucer reconstructs, rather than transcends, the complexity of the many labyrinths in which we live and write—labyrinths we cannot, and perhaps do not even wish to, escape.

64. Surely the finest characterization of Chaucer’s art in three words or less, the phrase is E. Talbot Donaldson’s: “Chaucer and the Elusion of Clarity,” *Essays and Studies* 1972, n.s. 25, 23–44. The structural basis of the multicursal labyrinth, of course, is precisely the systematic elusion of clarity.

For a different view of Chaucer and Daedalus, see Boitani, *Imaginary World of Fame*, p. 216.