Willing to Know God

Barr, Jessica

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As I have argued in the preceding chapters, successful visionary knowing—the effective communication of knowledge of the divine through a vision or a dream—depends upon a number of factors. The visionary or dreamer must be volitionally united with his or her divine interlocutor and, in many cases, must engage in both passive and active epistemological practices. In addition to passively receiving the vision, that is, he or she may need to reason through and interpret it in order to fully comprehend its message. The volitional and rational orientations that make such comprehension possible are at least partly under the visionary’s control. But the dream or vision itself must also meet certain criteria if it is to meaningfully convey knowledge to its recipient. Chief among these criteria is the presence of an authoritative figure within the vision. Dante’s Beatrice, Boethius’ Lady Philosophy, and even Raison in Le Roman de la rose all assume this role, transmitting knowledge to the dreamer through demonstration and discourse. The Pearl-Maiden, who speaks from a position of divine authority to instruct the dreaming Jeweler, fulfills this function, as well; her authority is confirmed by the fact that the dream ends when the Jeweler disobeys her in his attempt to cross the stream. These figures’ messages are validated within the texts and, in most cases, the dreamers are changed by them. The presence of a clearly marked figure of authority seems to be necessary in dream vision narratives: without the validation of the dream’s merit that this figure’s presence implies, the dream is confused and the dreamer awakens without a clear understanding of its content. Such confusion occurs in Piers Plowman, where the proliferation of authorities—none of whom seems capable of granting Will the “kynde knowing” that he desires—troubles the assumption that a single figure of authority is adequate for the transmission of transcendent knowledge. But Piers continues to express the hope that visionary
experience is available and can transform the dreamer. Will’s vision of the passion at least begins the process of bringing him into a potentially transformative relationship with the divine.

Where *Piers Plowman* undercuts the authority of the visionary interlocutor, however, *The House of Fame* annihilates it. Nothing in *Fame* can be pinned down as an unambiguous source of truth. This annihilation of authority is most radically realized in the poem’s last lines, when Chaucer apparently abandons his poem immediately after the appearance of the “man of gret auctorite” (line 2158), cutting off the work’s promise of visionary revelation.\(^1\) Fame herself, the other seemingly authoritative figure in the poem, is openly fickle in her judgments, suggesting that she cannot reliably convey truth. Finally, Geoffrey’s vision is all about the uncertainty—even impossibility—of discerning the true from the false, as he witnesses “tydynges” “of fals and soth compounded” (1027, 1029) and sees both lies and true stories willingly “medle . . . ech with other” (2102). The ambiguity of all forms of visionary authority is thus a major issue in the poem. Chaucer’s satirical take on the dream vision tradition suggests the arbitrariness of dreams and the unlikelihood of their effectively revealing truth.

*The House of Fame*’s pervading characteristic is its debunking of the systems that help the individual to understand his or her world. As Kathryn Lynch has argued, Chaucer’s text “parodies the logical systems that attempt to organize and give meaning to worldly diversity.” Positing that Chaucer’s satire of these systems is related to a late medieval skepticism regarding the accessibility of divine knowledge, Lynch concludes that *Fame* “multipl[ies] rather than simplif[ies] truths, possibilities, perspectives.”\(^2\) This multiplication of truths, as I will demonstrate, has particularly disturbing repercussions for the vision, a potentially privileged purveyor of knowledge. While the implications of *Fame*’s spoofing *Le Roman de la rose* and even the *Divina Commedia* remain within the context of a literary conversation, reading the poem as a commentary on visionary texts that claim a basis in lived experience suggests a broader view of the vision as an unreliable means of gaining knowledge. In addition, *Fame* exposes the limits of the dreamer’s or visionary’s ability to successfully discern the truth-content of a vision. As I have argued, the visionary must often play an active role in the interpretation and comprehension of the vision, a role that is fundamental to its transmission of knowledge. *Fame*’s treatment of authority as an essentially unstable and

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ambiguous intermixing of truth and falsehood ultimately leaves us with no authority but the dreamer’s—and Geffrey is anything but reliable. In this chapter, I will argue that *The House of Fame* destabilizes the possibility of visionary authority and, hence, of visionary knowing itself. The only potential authorities that emerge in *Fame* are Geffrey and the reader, and the vision as a potential source of knowledge deconstructs when these voices, rather than the voice of revelation, emerge as the primary sites of textual authority. Moreover, the centrality of the reader’s role in establishing the value of the text parallels the foregrounding of the reader’s response that is apparent in many purportedly authentic vision texts, in which the value of the visionary experience is determined by the visionary’s impact and how the visionary is received by a broader audience. In Chaucer’s pseudo-apocalyptic poem, the vision emerges as a bankrupt genre in which what knowledge that can be transmitted is unreliable and the transmission itself deeply flawed.

I. Unstable Authority: The Revelation that Never Comes

*The House of Fame* is in tension with the expectations of visionary literature, promising a revelation that it never reveals and featuring an inexperienced narrator more suited to one of the Canterbury Tales than to a heavenly vision. This tension is the crux of the poem. Chaucer satirizes the visionary tradition by depicting a vision that is epistemologically meaningless and that, in fact, thematizes meaningless speech. His dreamer is a parodic figure of the visionary: he makes hyperbolic claims to having experienced marvels but is almost too heavy to be borne up into the heavens. And while Geffrey says that, like Paul, he does not know whether his vision occurred in the spirit or in the flesh (981–82), his bodiliness is made evident when the eagle accuses him of being “noyous for to care” (574). He is thus dramatically unlike those visionaries whose privileged relationship with God results in otherworldly bodily phenomena, such as Christina Mirabilis (1150–1224), whose sanctity gives her a kind of supernatural lightness that enables her to live in the treetops when the presence of other humans grows too oppressive.3 While Christina is hardly typical, Geffrey’s corpore-

3. “Christina fled the presence of men with wondrous horror into deserts, or to trees, or to the tops of castles or churches or any lofty structure. Thinking her to be possessed by demons, the people finally managed to capture her with great effort and to bind her with iron chains. . . . One night, with the help of God, her chains and fetters fell off and she escaped and fled into remote desert forests and there lived in trees after the manner of birds” (Thomas de Cantimpré, *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, trans. Margot H. King [Toronto: Peregrina
ality suggests his distance from such models of extreme holiness, and it is clear that his vision was received very much in the flesh. In the absence of any consistently authoritative frame, both the visionary experience and the visionary author are exposed as unreliable and earthbound, kept within limits that are determined by their corporeality. The wholesale undermining of any authoritative frame of reference within the poem—in the vision, in the narrator, and in the figure of authority who never quite appears—presents the vision as an unstable site of epistemic confusion.

The opening lines of *The House of Fame* forecast the epistemological ambiguity that will become a running current throughout the poem. In the Proem to Book 1, Geffrey expresses the difficulty of differentiating between truth-bearing and somatic dreams:

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For hyt is wonder, be the roode . . .
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;
Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
I not. . . . (2, 7–12)
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In this passage, Geffrey questions the perceived boundaries between “visions” and “dreams,” between “phantoms” and “oracles.” The categories of dreams articulated by Macrobius—for example, the hypnagogic *visum* and the prophetic *oraculum* (“fantome” and “oracle,” 12)—are shown to be indeterminate, difficult if not impossible to tell apart in actual practice. Geffrey’s confusion might not be simply the result of his own obtuseness; in fact, it points out a very real tension within the Macrobian categories that were so often used to organize and assess dreams. As Stephen Russell confirms, Macrobius’ categories can seldom be kept discrete; for example, an apparent *visio* might also be a wish-fulfillment dream and hence an *insomnium*. Even within Macrobius’ parameters, Russell argues, “the possibility that a dream might have originated in the waking concerns of the dreamer is, in and of itself, sufficient to raise questions about its authenticity.”

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5. These categories, which Macrobius describes in his *Comentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, were highly influential throughout the Middle Ages. For a more detailed discussion of the Macrobian categories, see chapter 1, footnote 31.

Although Geffrey does not tell us about his “waking concerns” prior to the dream, his musings underscore the permeability of Macrobius’ seemingly discrete categories. While the theoretical distinctions between a nightmare brought on by overeating and a prophetic dream of future catastrophe are well and good, then, such distinctions are hard to make in practice. Geffrey’s interrogation of the boundary between “authentic,” externally granted visions and meaningless, internally generated ones hints at the breakdown of the categorical distinctions between the different kinds of vision.

The narrator’s blurring of the boundaries between truth-bearing and somatic visions also serves as an upfront declaration of this vision’s ambiguous status. Although the epistemological status of the dream vision was a “much-debated topic” in the Middle Ages, Katherine Terrel notes, “the narrator’s disparagement of dreams sheds doubt on the credibility of this work—and, indeed, of the entire genre of literature which claims to be based upon a dream or vision of the author.” Geffrey’s questioning of the status of his vision contrasts with the corresponding declarations in Piers Plowman and Le Roman de la rose, where discussions of the problems of dream interpretation are coupled with assurances of the validity of the particular dreams described in the narratives. The House of Fame goes further than both of these works in its effacement of the boundaries between the different kinds of dream: as far as Geffrey is concerned, at least, it is impossible to know whether a dream will be truthful, and the reasons that one person has a prophetic dream while another does not are obscure.

Despite his ignorance of what makes one dream true and another false, Geffrey is nonetheless invested in his dream’s capacity to convey knowl-

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8. Compare, for example, Will’s remarks in Piers Plowman, where he draws from Cato to explain his uncertainty about the usefulness of interpreting dreams but then cites Biblical examples to provide evidence of prophetic dreams: “Ac I have no savour in songewarie, for I se it ofte faille; / Caton and canonistres couseillen us to leve / To sette sadnesse in songewarie—for sompnia ne cures. / Ac for the book Bible bereth witnesse / How Daniel divined the dremes of a kynge . . .” (William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt [London: Everyman, 2001] B.7.149–53). Because the latter examples (he provides several more) draw from the Bible, they are by implication more authoritative than Cato’s dismissal of the dream’s potential. Guillaume de Lorris expresses the conviction that his dream is true even more strongly in the opening lines of the Rose: “Maintes genz cuident qu’en songe / N’ait se fable non et mençonge. / Mais on puet tel songe songier / Qui ne sont mie mençongier, / Ainz sont après bien aparant. / . . . / Quiconques cuit ne qui que die / Qu’il est folece et musardie / De croire que songes aveigne, / Qui ce voudra, por fol m’en teigne, / Car androit moi ai ge creance / Que songe sont senefiance / Des biens au genz et des anuiz, / Que li plusor songent de nuiz / Maintes choses covertement / Que l’en voit puis apertement” (Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, Le Roman de la rose, ed. Armand Strubel [Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992] 1–5, 11–20).
edge. This investment in his dream’s potential is first hinted at in his understanding of prophecy. Geffrey’s discussion of prophetic dreams implies a kind of backwards causality whereby the dream becomes prophetic once it has come true rather than foreshadowing a predestined event by virtue of being prophetic. He wonders “why th’effect folweth of somme, / And of somme hit shal never come” (5–6): why, he asks, are some dreams followed by the actual events that they foretell, and others not? While his question introduces the ambiguity of dreams—it is hard to know ahead of time whether a dream is prophetic—it also implies that a dream only becomes “true” after the fact, when what it has foretold has come to pass. On this understanding, the truth value of a dream can be changed—perhaps even manipulated—depending on what happens after the dream has taken place. This understanding implicitly places a high priority on the events that follow the dream: It is these events that determine the vision’s value. If its prophetic nature cannot be apprehended in anything within the dream itself, but only in its consequences, then Geffrey will need to concern himself with the way that the dream is treated and interpreted following its narration. Already in the first lines of the poem, Chaucer suggests that the vision might draw its authenticity from something outside of itself and, as we will see, that Geffrey’s vision’s authority is similarly dependent upon external events for its validation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Geffrey is deeply concerned to control the consequences of his dream, and this concern is revealed in his anxiety over its interpretation. In the Proem and Invocation to Book 1, he expresses two convictions: first, that a dream can be meaningful, and second, that his dream may not be. The tension between these convictions is apparent in his uncertainty about what makes a dream true and in his general wish that all dreams might yield positive results (“God turne us every drem to goode!” (1); “the holy roode / Turne us every drem to goode,” 57–58). But Geffrey is specifically concerned with the reception of his own dream. In spite of his uncertainty regarding prophetic dreams, he believes his dream to be of tremendous importance, remarking that it is as wonderful a dream as any man has ever had (59–62). And he is intent on conveying that wonder to his readers: despite his admission that he does not know what makes one dream true and another false, he is deeply invested in his dream’s merit. But Geffrey sees the dream’s value primarily in terms of its effects, rather than in any worth inherent in the dream itself. Those effects arise from the reader’s response to the dream-narrative.9

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9. For the sake of simplicity, I am using “readers,” here, to designate Chaucer’s audience in general: not just those who physically read the words on the page, but also those who heard it performed or had it read to them.
Early in the poem, Geffrey indicates the importance of the reader’s properly appreciating his dream, declaring his hope that those who interpret it favorably will be rewarded:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\ldots\text{shelde hem fro povertie and shonde,} \\
&\quad\text{And from unhap and ech diseise,} \\
&\quad\text{And sende hem al that may hem plese,} \\
&\quad\text{That take hit wel and skorne hyt noght,} \\
&\quad\text{Ne hyt mysdemen in her thought} \\
&\quad\text{Thorgh malicious entencion. (88–93)}
\end{align*}
\]

This prayer could be nothing more than a courtly gesture towards his readers, expressing the hope that they will find favor with his poem. The next few lines, however, make it clear that something else is going on. In this hyperbolic passage, Geffrey expresses the wish that those who interpret his dream poorly or regard it with disfavor may be punished with every awful fate imaginable:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{And whoso thorgh presumpcion,} \\
&\quad\text{Or hate, or skorn, or thorgh envye,} \\
&\quad\text{Dispit, or jape, or vilanye,} \\
&\quad\text{Mysdeme hyt, pray I Jesus God} \\
&\quad\text{That (dreme he barefoot, dreme he shod),} \\
&\quad\text{That every harm that any man} \\
&\quad\text{Hath had syth the world began} \\
&\quad\text{Befalle hym therof or he sterve. \ldots (94–102)}
\end{align*}
\]

In these two passages, the narrator produces a paradoxical situation for his readers, at once enjoining them to interpret the vision and severely limiting the interpretations that they are allowed to make. He essentially threatens the readers in an attempt to ensure that his dream will be well received—and, as Karla Taylor points out, he neglects to tell them what would constitute an acceptable reception.\(^\text{10}\) Moreover, the passage’s stress on the reader’s inner state implies that there is a morally correct way to read and interpret the dream. Those who “take [the dream] wel” are those who do not misunderstand it as the result of “malicious entencion”; those who arrive at an unfavorable judgment of the poem do so through presumption, hate, scorn, or envy. Immoral readers, lacking in virtue, read badly, and good readers—

that is, virtuous readers—are the only ones who are capable of properly understanding the dream. The narrator creates a bind for the reader, who cannot help but “take hit wel”; to do otherwise would be to admit to immorality and bad interpretive practice.

Implicit in Geffrey’s threat to the reader is the assumption that the dream’s effects constitute its meaning—a view that reflects medieval methods of assessing the origins of apparently divine visions. His concern with the effects of the vision are similar to the criteria used in discretio spirituum, or the discernment of spirits, a process that medieval clerics used to determine whether a vision was divinely inspired, demonically inspired, or simply fraudulent. The criteria for assessing a vision’s legitimacy usually centered upon enquiries into its consequences, and in most accounts of the principles of discretio, the vision’s effect is one of four major categories of evidence used to determine its validity. As Rosalynn Voaden notes, these four categories are typically “the virtue of the recipient, the circumstance of the apparition, the orthodoxy of the revelation, and the ‘fruits’ of the experience—that is, striving after goodness or succumbing to temptation.”

For example, Alfonso de Jaen, whose treatise on discretio, the Epistola Solitarii ad Reges, was translated into Middle English, lists seven criteria for determining the authenticity of a vision. Two of Alfonso’s criteria concern the vision’s effects: first, the visionary’s soul must be inflamed by love for God following the vision, and second, the vision’s “fruits” must be to the increase of God’s glory. That these “fruits” are largely undefined is consistent with the rather vague understanding of how discretio worked; some of its major medieval theorizers, such as Peter d’Ailly, expressed doubts that inquisitors could determine the veracity of visions at all. Further evidence of a vision’s authenticity could be found in the status of its prophecies, but this, too, was an uncertain method. If a prophecy came true, it was probably divinely inspired; however, the devil could also prophesy truthfully. In his remarks on the differences between divinely and demonically inspired visions, Augustine notes that visions brought on by evil spirits make their recipients “into demoniacs or fanatical enthusiasts or false prophets” while a good spirit “makes them faithful speakers of mysteries or true prophets.”

12. Ibid., 159.
13. Ibid., 50.
At the same time, however, Augustine notes that demons are perfectly capable of granting true visions and prophecies.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, only false prophecies can really contribute to the determination of a vision’s truth, as prophesying incorrectly is proof that a vision was demonically, not divinely, inspired.\textsuperscript{17} Geffrey’s meditation upon the different kinds of dream and vision mirrors the ambiguity contained in the doctrines of \textit{discretio spirituum}, echoing the links between effect and authenticity that arise in hagiographic and mystical literature. Although it was uncertain whether any particular outcome could definitively prove the authenticity of a vision, the vision’s effect nonetheless contributed to the determination of its validity, and hence of the perceived truth of its content.

With a poetic text, the “effect” is, in large part, its reception. Geffrey makes it clear that he wants to secure a favorable reception for his dream, and his interest in controlling its interpretation suggests that his vision is valuable not for its intrinsic content but for the response that it receives. Like divine visions, whose effects are seen as a manifestation of their origins, the dream relies upon its aftereffects for its validation, and Geffrey’s command shifts his vision’s importance from its content onto the reader’s interpretive responsibility. The problem is that Geffrey is concerned more with the reader’s intention than with the correctness of his or her interpretation. As Frank Grady points out, “The effect of a dream is . . . tied not to correct interpretation but to the moral state and intention of the reader.”\textsuperscript{18} Framing the validity of the reader’s interpretation in terms of his or her moral state also glosses over the question of whether the dream is of divine or somatic origin. Its significance “is not to be traced to the predispositions, obsessions, or digestion of the dreamer but to the ways in which readers are moved to respond and to act.”\textsuperscript{19} The vision itself ceases to be the site of authority, as the reader is made to bear responsibility for its meaning.

By foregrounding the interpretation of the vision, Chaucer highlights the importance of cognitive and interpretive work to the proper understanding of its content. In \textit{Fame}, however, this work is to be performed not, as we have seen in texts such as Julian’s \textit{Showings}, by the dreamer, but by the reader. This emphasis on the reader’s role stresses the importance of interpretive activity, but suggests further that the dream’s meaning—its status

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., XII.13, 28, p. 478, and XII.17, 34, p. 482.
\textsuperscript{17} Elliott, 262; see also Nancy Caciola, \textit{Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003) 290.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
as “good” or “bad”—is malleable and subject to the shaping influence of its audience. Yet his threat indicates his determination to maintain control over his vision even after its written transmission takes it out of his hands. The poem thus takes an ambivalent stance on the intersection of interpretation and authority, as well as on what finally takes precedence: the reader’s interpretation or the dreamer’s authority as the dreamer of his dream and the author of his tale. On the one hand, the reader’s response is acknowledged to be the locus of authority: the reader determines the text’s value and meaning. On the other, Geffrey is unwilling to relinquish his controlling influence over its reception. And finally, the repeated prayer that God “turne us every drem to goode” suggests that the real determinant of the dream’s value lies with neither the reader nor the dreamer-narrator but with the divine, and that it may ultimately be beyond anyone’s control. In its construction of a triad of potential authorities—the dreamer-narrator, the reader, and God—The House of Fame presents the locus of visionary authority as indeterminate, shifting between the dreamer and the interpreting reader, with a nod to the final authority of the divine. But God never makes an appearance in the poem, and Geffrey’s acknowledgement that some dreams are meaningless implies that the divine simply may not be relevant to his dream. The triad is more accurately seen as a dyad: authority lies with the reader and/or the narrator, neither of whom is necessarily objective or even equipped to properly understand the vision.

Consistent with its shifting locus of authority, the poem alternates between promising revelation and disavowing its possibility. Both implicit and explicit connections between this vision and the mystical visionary tradition are made throughout the poem. First, despite Geffrey’s uncertainty about the provenance of his dream, he implies that his vision will convey marvels when he says, “no man elles . . . / Mette, I trowe stedfastly, / So wonderful a drem as I” (60–62). The eagle who sweeps Geffrey up into the heavens also indicates the dream’s supernatural provenance. The eagle is sent from Jupiter, a god—albeit a pagan god—and the vision is therefore endowed with supernatural promise (608–09). Geffrey’s lament that he is neither “Ennok, ne Elye, / Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede” (588–89) further implicates him within the revelatory tradition: while his comparisons are negative, his anxiety about his unlikeness to these Old Testament and classical figures, all of whom were granted glimpses of the heavens, suggests that his vision is comparable to theirs. In spite of these thematic links with
the eschatological vision tradition, however, Geffrey’s moment of revelation never arrives. The poem itself is apparently unfinished, and its concluding lines—“Atte laste y saugh a man, / Which that y [nevene] nat ne kan; / But he semed for to be / A man of gret auctorite” (2155–58)—terminate the vision at the precise moment when its visionary potential seems about to be fulfilled. Yet even if Chaucer had finished the poem, it is not certain that the unnamed man would have fulfilled the dream’s revelatory promise. Geffrey cannot name the man, who only *seems* to be “of gret auctorite.” While the poem toys with the expectations of visionary literature, then, its defining moment never arrives and perhaps never would have arrived at all.

The blurred boundaries between somatic and truth-bearing visions and the poem’s ambiguous, unfulfilled promise of revelation undermine the authority of Geffrey’s vision as *a vision*. Whatever implicit claims to authority it may have had by virtue of its belonging to the dream vision genre and its similarity to divine visions have been seriously troubled by the narrator’s professed uncertainty regarding the provenance of his vision (and visions in general), as well as by the unstable relationship between the dreamer’s control over his text and his audience’s interpretation of it. By undermining these aspects of the dream vision, Chaucer also troubles the genre of vision literature more broadly. If the line between somatic and divinely inspired visions is called into question, and if the power to determine the merits of a vision might lie either with the reading audience or with the dreamer’s ability to control that audience’s interpretation, then what possible truth-value can the vision have? Both the origin and the reception of the vision are called into doubt.

The similarities between *Fame* and eschatological visions implicate the vision tradition more broadly within Chaucer’s satirical take on the dream vision genre. In his appropriation and subversion of the characteristics of eschatological vision texts, the poet undermines the authoritative status of the genre itself. A number of scholars have examined *The House of Fame*’s satirical relationship to traditional eschatological visions like Revelations and the *Visio Paulli*, which detail otherworldly matters such as the Second Coming and the punishment of sinners in hell. Geffrey’s startling ascent in the claws of an eagle, the appearance of Fame, and the apocalyptic fervor of Fame’s court lend themselves to such a comparison. In his appropriation of the eschatological vision, however, Chaucer reinterprets the tradition in a way that divests it of its revelatory authority. Eschatological tropes are rearranged and misrepresented, thwarting readers’ expectations for a

II.31–32). Numerous scholars have commented on the relationship between the *Commedia* and *Fame*; see note 29 below.
conventional visionary text. Robert Boenig notes that, while many of the “apocalyptic details” from Revelations appear in *Fame*, they are “arranged oddly, almost as if Chaucer had cut them out and put the fragments together in the wrong way.”

One such “apocalyptic detail” is Lady Fame herself, whose seven lamps are the seven stars of Revelations 1:16 and who is covered with the multiple eyes that, in Revelations, belong to the worshipers. Other details that Chaucer plays with include the trumpet of Eolus as a substitution for the trumpet of the last judgment, the smoke that emerges from both the Apocalyptic and the Eolean trumpets, and the scattering to different sections of the poem of the four beasts that symbolize the evangelists.

Through this rearrangement, Boenig argues, *Fame* suggests that reading—that is, interpretation—is fragmentation, as the interpreting readers “set themselves up as authors, as critics, as gods.” In addition to the elements that Boenig describes, the structure of *Fame* encourages the poem’s identification with the eschatological tradition while simultaneously undercutting it. David Jeffrey notes that its tripartite structure, by hearkening to the “three-stage ascent toward understanding” common in eschatological visions, “invites careful reading according to that traditional framework, and in almost every respect encourages the reader to anticipate such an intellectual journey as he or she might find in Augustine, Bonaventure, [or] Dante.” Yet, Jeffrey argues, the narrator’s actual “ascent” thwarts such a reading, as his trajectory does not lead in a smooth arc towards the knowledge that he is presumably intended to acquire. In both its details and its overall structure, *The House of Fame* invokes the traditional elements of the otherworldly vision but ultimately plays with those elements in a way that distances it from the tradition that it purports to mimic.

The poem’s reconfiguration of its eschatological content has important implications for the work’s meaning. Lisa Kiser argues that one of the major differences between *The House of Fame* and eschatological visions is that *Fame* deals, not with the afterlife of souls, but with “the afterlife of words.” Instead of describing the specific rewards and punishments that

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22. Ibid., 187.
23. Ibid., 184.
24. Ibid., 197.
25. Ibid., 197.
27. Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Hanover: University Press of
individual souls undergo after death, Chaucer focuses upon the ultimate fate of language. In concerning himself with words rather than souls, he disclaims the visionary tradition while also establishing it as a source: “he clearly avoids the normative theological content of the religious vision, yet he nonetheless depends heavily on the conventions of the genre.” By borrowing from the eschatological tradition, Chaucer is able to underscore the difference between his text and the traditions inhering in both purportedly authentic visionary writing and literary dream visions, which are invoked throughout the poem.

Chaucer’s appropriation and reconfiguration of the eschatological vision tradition enables him to propose a radically different understanding of his poem’s subject. Chaucer plays upon the characteristic elements of eschatological material in order to create new meanings, focusing on words rather than souls and using the revelatory mode to undermine the authority of language. The subversion of authoritative source material is a part of Chaucer’s method of appropriation. By simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing his source material—as he does openly in his retelling of the Dido and Aeneas myth in Book 1, which I discuss in the next section—Chaucer problematizes the very genres to which his poem belongs. His satire of the eschatological tradition invests that tradition with new meaning, deliberately shifting it away from its customary implications.

II. Uncertain Meanings: The Power of the Reader

By investing traditional literary structures with new meaning, Chaucer subverts the basis of authority in his poem. Far from being an authorizing technique, the narrator’s emphasis upon his own meanings—rather than traditional, received authority—calls into question the poem’s ability to convey truth. While the interpretive instability that the poem highlights justifies Geffrey’s concern with the reception of his dream, at the same time his own reading practices point out the difficulty of controlling a wayward reader and makes his preoccupation with the reader’s judgment of his text all too appropriate. Geffrey’s retelling of the story of Dido and Aeneas par-
allel Chaucer’s reconfiguration of the apocalyptic tradition and illustrates how narrative appropriation can undermine the narrator’s credibility as a truthful, authoritative speaker: his fluid reworking of the myth demonstrates the reader’s ability to effectively re-author his source material.

Early in his vision, Geffrey finds himself in Venus’ temple, reading the story of Troy that is inscribed upon its walls. He initially collapses Virgil’s and Ovid’s mutually incompatible interpretations of Aeneas’ abandonment of Dido: where Virgil praises Aeneas’ actions as an inescapable part of his heroic fate, Ovid emphasizes the dishonor of his leaving the woman who loved him. Instead of focusing on one of these interpretations, Geffrey blends the two together, using elements from both in his narrative. In doing so, he points out the conflict between them without privileging one interpretation over the other: Aeneas cannot be both heroic and dishonorable, but Geffrey seems to be trying to include both readings in his narration. Faced with this contradiction, he ultimately provides his own reading of the tale. His original additions to the story are signaled rhetorically by the sudden absence of references to the text that he has been reading. While the bulk of his account is peppered with variations of the phrase “I saw,” Geffrey’s contribution to the narrative lacks these authorizing claims. Instead, it includes such editorializing asides as, “Allas! what harm doth apparence, / Whan hit is fals in existence!” (265–66) and “browke I wel myn hed, / Ther may be under godlyhed / Kevered many a shrewed vice” (273–75), and even explicit references to his authorial originality, as when he adds, “Al this seye I” (286). By shifting from “saw I” to “say I,” the narrator installs himself as an author of the legend. Writes Terrel, “Geffrey usurps interpretive control of the story from both sources and instead forges his own account of Dido’s situation, ostensibly relying solely upon his own imaginative powers,” as he himself implies when he declares, “Non other auctour alegge I” (314). Terrel sees this proclamation as Geffrey’s “tak[ing] full responsibility for this portion of the tale,” but the shift from received


31. See Delany, 57.

32. “First sawgh I” (151); “next that sawgh I” (162); “And I saugh next” (174); “Ther sawgh I” (193); “Ther saugh I” (209); “Ther saugh I” (212); “Ther sawgh I” (219); “Ther saugh I” (221); “Ther sawgh I” (253). Following his interjection, he resumes the authorizing technique of the earlier part of his telling: “Thoo sawgh I” (433); “also sawgh I” (439); “When I had seen al this syghte” (468).

33. Terrel, 284.

34. Ibid.
authority to individual interpretation also suggests the breakdown of any stable point of reference. Even his introduction to his retelling of the tale—“I wol now synge, yif I kan” (143)—indicates Geffrey’s departure from accepted authority, as the qualification of his abilities opens up the possibility of inaccuracy.\(^\text{35}\) Given multiple possible interpretations, no one perspective can be fully embraced—especially when (as in this case) we are given no particular reason to favor any single interpretation. As Taylor notes, “he does not attempt to reconcile his sources, but instead stitches them together with such obvious seams that they are shown to be irreconcilable.” This juxtaposition, she argues, suggests that the conventional versions of the story and his invented additions are “equally fictive.”\(^\text{36}\) Geffrey’s retelling of Dido’s story, like Chaucer’s reinvestment of the eschatological tradition, ultimately authorizes neither the tradition nor its reinterpretation. Instead, it points out the multiplicity of possible meanings and interpretations latent within the original tradition without providing the basis for selecting any one over another.

When Geffrey confronts the conflict between Virgil and Ovid with a detour through his own interpretation of the Dido myth, he posits himself as a co-author of the text that he is purporting to reproduce. Significantly, the myth appears in the poem as a text, and Geffrey is in the role of the reader. By moving away from the story as it is told in that text—“alleg[ing]” “non other auctour” but himself—Geffrey suggests that the reader can narrate with as much credibility as the poets whose works he or she reads. But Geffrey is not only a reader: he is also the dreamer and the author of his account, subject to the vision that he receives but controlling its representation in his narrative. His imaginative retelling of the Aeneas and Dido story implies that he might be treating his vision with imaginative fluidity, as well. How are we to know whether he is accurately relating the events of his dream or, alternatively, investing them with original interpretations and adding details to his narrative? But while this incident might undermine Geffrey’s authority as a reliable narrator, it also recalls the concern about interpretation articulated in his threat to the reader. For if Geffrey, as the reader of the story of Troy, is free to craft his own interpretation of that story, then the reader of his vision may be equally free to interpret it as he or she chooses, as well. Geffrey’s attempt to control the reader’s interpretation of his dream-narrative is a response to the flexibility of interpretive authority, which he enacts in his retelling of the myth.

\(^{35}\) Taylor observes that this line “is distinctly un-Virgilian; indeed, it is characteristically Chaucerian” in its “almost personal signature of new authorship” (28).

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 29.
Interpretive authority is presented as a problem throughout the text. The eagle who carries Geffrey to Fame’s house observes that all speech, once it has left its speaker’s mouth, becomes essentially the same phenomenon, suggesting that no particular speech act is any more authoritative than any other. Explaining how sound reaches Fame’s palace, he tells Geffrey,

Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken:
And every speche that ys spoken,
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
In his substaunce ys but air;
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke. (765–70)

That he is speaking of language as well as noise is clear in his explanation of the shared fate of all sounds: “every speche, or noyse, or soun . . . Mot nede come to Fames Hous” (783, 786), he says. Sound, in other words, is radically democratized: each utterance, no matter how meaningful (or meaningless) it might seem, is ultimately reduced to the same physical phenomenon. These sounds mix and blend together, “fals and soth compouned” (1029)—and indeed, even the tidings of love that the eagle has promised Geffrey will be “Both sothe sawes and lesinges” (676), calling into question the legitimacy of the promised visionary message itself. This democratization of sound, argues Suzanne Akbari, “underlines the contingent nature of all knowledge, as coherent images give way to noisy confusion.”

No speech act is inherently authoritative; no utterance retains its privileged place in the “afterlife.” In contrast to Dante’s hierarchically arranged paradise, in the House of Fame, even the loftiest statements are on the same plane as the meaningless squeaks of a mouse (785).

The democratization of speech undermines the notion of a single, privileged source of authority. In addition, the fallibility of all speech is highlighted by the fact that at Fame’s house some words are represented by the forms of their human speakers (1076–77). By reincarnating speech in the image of its speaker, the disembodied authority of a given utterance is reduced to its human, and hence imperfect, source. Laurel Amtower sees the presence of commonplace speech within Fame’s palace as evidence of “humanized authority, authority granted by humanity itself,” as words achieve “immortality and grandeur” from having “traveled so far from their fallible source.”

37. Akbari, 209.
But humanized authority threatens to be no kind of authority at all. In the world of Fame, a word’s “fallible source” reappears as its representative, reducing even the esteemed authority of Homer’s speech to the utterance of a subjective human being: an unnamed bystander asserts that Homer was too partial to the Greeks to be considered reliable (“Oon seyde that Omer made lyes, / Feynynge in his poetries, / And was to Grekes favorable; / Therefor held he hyt but fable,” 1477–80). This anonymous accusation meets with no rebuttal: it is left on its own, as a possible truth, and Chaucer’s reader is given no further basis upon which to assess Homer’s poetic virtue. Taylor argues that this indicates “a radically different means of truth: not the imaged truth of historical events . . . but the truth of the teller.” Authority is the authority of the reporter, not of the events themselves. As a result, the hearer has no immediately discernible way of discriminating historically true tales from false ones or of weighing the merits of one teller against another’s. When language is represented by its human speaker, it becomes as fallible as that speaker and its authoritative status dissipates. In contrast to divinely authorized speech, human speech is subject to interpretation, bias, and misunderstanding. The democratization of the clamoring sounds in Fame’s house yields no coherent basis for choosing one utterance over another, and the hierarchy inherent in the very notion of authority is dissolved.

The proliferation of conflicting meanings is further reflected in Lady Fame’s judgment of her petitioners. Her treatment of the nine groups that petition her illustrates the seeming arbitrariness of her judgment, which apparently hinges only upon her own fickle preference and is at least twice determined merely by her inclination, as she freely admits when she gives “me lyst hyt noght” (1564) and “for me list” (1665) as the reasons for her verdicts. The first three groups comprise people who have performed good deeds and desire the appropriate measure of renown; to the first group she gives no fame, to the second, good fame, and to the third, a bad reputation (1527–1665). The fourth and fifth groups also performed good deeds, but want these to be hidden; she grants the fourth group’s request, but not the fifth’s, commanding her servant Eolus to make that group’s goodness known (1690–1721). The sixth and seventh groups are both made up of idle people who wish to have good fame; she grants the request of the sixth group but accords the seventh evil fame (1727–99). The last two groups of petitioners comprise people who have performed evil deeds; the eighth group wishes for good fame, and the ninth wants a bad reputation that accurately represents its wickedness. Fame grants the ninth group’s request

but denies the eighth’s (1811–38). The result of her vacillating favors is an unpredictable hodgepodge of decrees that lacks any discernible order. “In her arbitrary responses,” remarks Carolynn Van Dyke, “Fame flaunts her absolute power like a would-be nominalist god”: 40 her arbitrary judgments defy any possible link between reality and merit. The implicit consequence of her “system” of judgments is to cast doubt upon received constructions of authority, as we are given no basis for distinguishing merited from unmerited fame.

Yet Geffrey still tries to control the kind of fame that he will receive. He responds to the indeterminacy of Fame’s judgment by proposing an alternate course, one that lies outside of the predetermined routes that are before him. He will avoid petitioning Fame altogether, he says, being satisfied with his own judgment:

I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, by my hed!
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde.
I wot myself best how y stonde;
For what I drye, or what I thynke,
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as I kan myn art. (1874–82)

Denying that he is seeking any kind of reputation from Fame’s palace—and, indeed, he came there for knowledge, not personal glory—Geffrey insists that he is the best judge of his own actions and that he will be content to keep that judgment to himself. Ironically, this expressed desire for anonymity is written into a text in which Chaucer explicitly names and describes himself. 41 By framing his commitment to remaining anonymous within a text that clearly references the author, Geffrey/Chaucer maintains the illusion of control over his narratorial/authorial persona. Like his request that his dream be interpreted by its readers—but only if this results in a favorable interpretation—the narrator’s stated wish for anonymity in a poem that


41. See Helen Cooper, “The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour,” in New Medieval Literatures III, ed. David Lawton, Wendy Scase, and Rita Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 60. See also Lynch, Chaucer’s Philosophical Visions; remarking on the paradoxical nature of this moment in the text, Lynch argues that while this moment “brings us closest to Chaucer ‘the man’” it also “snatches away the cozy confidence that had existed between Dreamer and Eagle” (65).
contains a self-conscious representation of its author reveals the tension between authorial self-representation and the reader’s interpretive freedom. Geffrey’s ostensible decision not to seek fame reflects the narrator’s authority; he is free to represent himself however he chooses within the confines of his own narrative and can refuse to participate in the petitioning of Fame that makes up the central action of his dream. Nonetheless, within this assertion lies an obvious contradiction. Can we take this claim at face value? Or is Chaucer deliberately undermining his own narrative self-representation? It is an odd moment in the text, as Geffrey appears to be declaring the very opposite of what he is, in fact, doing.

The House of Fame points out the limits of the narrator’s interpretive control over his tale. On the surface, Geffrey appears capable of determining his course of action, opting not to petition Fame, penning his own interpretation of the Dido and Aeneas story, and trying to force his readers to interpret his dream favorably. In the final analysis, however, his agency is only partial. Not only are his actions constrained by the events of the dream—the eagle’s unceremoniously sweeping him up into the sky is a vivid illustration of Geffrey’s lack of control—but even the interpretive authority that he seeks to command eludes him, as his hyperbolic threat to the reader reveals. Geffrey’s alternation between control and powerlessness is echoed in Chaucer’s relationship to his text and readers. Geffrey’s attempts at poetic self-determination ultimately expose the limits of Chaucer’s control over his self-representation. To the extent that Geffrey functions as the author’s mouthpiece, his professed desire for anonymity is obviously a sham. But Chaucer seems aware of this irony, constructing a satirical self-portrait that allows him to control, to some extent, the terms of his authorial persona. And yet, full control of that persona is impossible. It is only within the text itself—as Geffrey, who refuses to engage with Fame—that Chaucer is able to control his self-representation. Just as Fame metes out her judgment on no other basis than her own whims and as Geffrey cannot truly control the interpretation of his dream, the reception of the poem is out of its author’s hands. In the end, the readers are left to determine the outcome and interpretation of the text, both in how they respond to Chaucer and in how they choose to interpret Geffrey’s dream. Authority over the text is elusive, constantly slipping into and out of authorial control and threatening to become wholly subject to the readers’ interpretation. Like Fame, readers can dispose of the poem and its author as they wish. Geffrey’s anxiety about his dream’s interpretation highlights the importance of the reader’s response, and Fame’s seemingly arbitrary judgments emphasize the impossibility of an author’s exerting control over his text’s
reception. Ultimately at issue in the poem’s emphasis upon interpretive and authoritative instability is the afterlife of the text itself.

III. Anxieties of Interpretation in *Fame* and the Visionary Tradition

In the first two sections of this chapter, I argued that *The House of Fame* is a poem about interpretation and authority: about how an author might seek to control the reception of his text but also recognize that it is the audience’s interpretation that finally determines its afterlife. I would now like to suggest that a similar tension can be found in medieval mystical literature and hagiography, whose authors were often very concerned with the reception of their texts. Geffrey’s uncertainty regarding the future of his narrative echoes contemporary mystics’ and hagiographers’ concerns about the possibility of communicating divine messages, and these writers respond to their texts’ uncertain futures by stressing the appropriate ways of reading them, often explicitly seeking to control their works’ reception by stipulating that they should only be read by individuals who have the proper spiritual and emotional orientation. Thus, for instance, the author of the fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* includes a prologue that describes the work’s proper audience in terms of how well they love and follow Christ:

I charge þee & and I beseche þee . . . neiþer þou rede it, ne write it, ne speke it, ne 3īt suffre it be red, wretyn, or spokyn, of any or to any, bot 3if it be of soche one or to soche one þat haþ (bi þi supposing) in a trewe wille & by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parfite folower of Criste, not only in actyue leuyng, bot in þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuing þe whiche is possible by grace for to be comen to in þis present liif of a parfite soule 3īt abiding in þis deedly body. . . . For elles it acordeþ nōping to him.42

The author’s detailed delineation of exactly what kind of audience is suited to his text emphasizes the importance of the reader’s moral state to the reception of the work: the work will be meaningless—it will “acord[] nothing”—to a reader who is not striving to be a perfect follower of Christ. In a

sense, the text’s intended message is safeguarded by the restrictions placed upon who may or may not understand it, as it will only be comprehensible and useful to someone who is spiritually prepared to encounter the work.

Many hagiographies include similar admonitions to their audiences. These prefatory remarks tend to construct the reader as devout and faithful, thereby enforcing a particular kind of interpretive practice. The prologue to the Vita of Beatrice of Nazareth provides a striking example of an author’s seeking to construct a particular kind of reader. Her hagiographer writes,

> the devout reader may expect that our whole story has flowed, not from some dark mendacious hiding place, but from the bright shining font of truth. Who would be so insane as to think that the venerable Beatrice would proffer or write something false or fabricated by herself, for she read and learned in the book of experience everything which she later wrote with her own hand in a manner as truthful as it was faithful?43

This passage clearly constructs the “good” reader of Beatrice’s vita as devout, sane, and accepting of the text’s authority. Indeed, it is a necessary outcome of the reader’s sane devotion that he or she will accept Beatrice’s word and recognize her sanctity. More typical are instructions that aim to increase the reader’s devotion through an encounter with the text, such as Mechthild of Magdeburg’s direction to “read [her book] through nine times in faith, humility, and devotion.”44 These prefaces make it clear that only readers who are prepared to engage with the texts in the proper spirit of devotion should read them. Like Geffrey’s threat, such caveats alert the reader to the proper interpretation of the spiritual work and designate some readers as more suited to interpreting the text than others. By implication, these prefaces limit the possible interpretations of the text. If readers criticize its content or fail to find the work edifying, they expose their own lack of proper spiritual preparation: it is not that the text is flawed, but that the reader was not reading it in the right spirit.

This construction of the reader’s responsibility to the text resonates with Gertrude of Helfta’s anxiety that her mode of visionary knowing may be undertaken by individuals whose intentions are not grounded in a love
for God—of individuals who are, in effect, unauthorized. As I discussed in chapter 3, Gertrude is capable of employing her cognitive faculties to apprehend divine truth because of her volitional alignment with God. In Book 4 of the *Legatus*, she twice asks God why it is that she can trust her own reason to lead her to truth when contemplating divine matters. The second time that she does so, God responds that her desire is sufficiently wedded to his that she can wish for (and therefore conclude) nothing that he would not approve.45 Where Geffrey and the *Cloud*-author stress the relationship between the reader’s spiritual orientation and his or her interpretive practice, in Gertrude knowing itself is predicated upon devotion. In these texts, not simply the transmission but even the comprehension of revealed knowledge depends absolutely on one’s spiritual state.

The central role that one’s inner state plays in authorizing interpretation and, indeed, in knowing itself points to an instability at the very heart of visionary knowing. If the validity of interpretation and understanding is based on one’s being in a state that is not perceptible to an outside observer, how is the authenticity of the visionary’s knowledge or the reader’s interpretation to be discerned? In Gertrude’s case, the two passages from Book 4 of the *Legatus*—penned, significantly, by another nun—contribute to the authorization of her visionary experience and subsequent literary production. Gertrude’s concern reflects an awareness of her own vulnerability as a visionary authority, and the testimony of the anonymous writer of Book 4 works to legitimize that authority by implicitly providing an external validation of what only Gertrude—and God—could really know. But Geffrey, whose voice is the sole locus of authority within *The House of Fame*, is not similarly authorized. His presence within the text, both as an actor and as an interpreter, reminds us that his role is to interpret and represent his vision for his reader. But he has no discernible basis for that role, and every assertion of authoritative presence within the poem—his declaration that “non other auctour alegge l” in his retelling of the Dido and Aeneas story, his apparent ignorance of the provenance of his vision, his unwillingness to see the stars when the eagle offers to take him to them (993–95)—highlights his inadequacy as a figure of authority. While his vision is, in a sense, divine, there is nothing to lend credibility to his interpretive and mediating role. In fact, the eagle notes, Geffrey has been granted this vision precisely because he lacks prior knowledge: he has been writing about love without knowing anything about it (615–27). His apparent willingness to write on a subject about which he knows nothing significantly undermines his position as an

authoritative speaker. While the inner moral state that would guarantee Geffrey’s ability to understand and communicate his dream properly might not be accessible to the reader, all of the evidence—as well as Fame’s concern to trouble the very idea of authority—points to his fallibility.

More powerful than Geffrey, however, are his readers, whose inner state informs not just their individual responses to the dream, but the afterlife of the text itself. Like Fame, whose whimsical judgment is nonetheless absolute, the reader’s judgment of the text determines its status. *The House of Fame* effectively shifts the locus of authority from any character within the text out onto the reader, whose interpretation becomes essential to the dream’s public life. In a similar way, visionary women were actively constructed by their audiences—and their public construction was vital to how they were received, determining their status as heretics or saints.46 But, as Geffrey’s hyperbolic address to the reader points out, dreamers (and their authors) cannot control their readers. The narrator’s claim that he will not petition Fame, preferring to keep his own counsel—coming as it does in the very text in which Chaucer most explicitly names himself—underscores the paradox of self-representation within the poem: however the poet/narrator ostensibly wishes to present himself, he is always presenting himself, and the image that the reader takes away may not be identical to the one that he intends. Geffrey’s emphasis on the moral state of his readers and the arbitrary decisions of Fame herself demonstrate Chaucer’s awareness that he cannot truly expect to control the future reception of his work. Not only the effects but the very life of a text—and its author—depend upon the moral state and inner apprehension of its readers.47

The two potential sources of authority in *The House of Fame* are Geffrey and the reader. Fame is fickle, the eagle’s “proofs” are sprinkled with

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46. See Voaden, *God’s Words*. Voaden argues that women’s visionary experience itself was constructed by the discourse of *discretio*, a claim that resonates with Bynum’s examination of how women, consciously or not, used the available imagery of corporeality and food to construct their encounters with and understanding of the divine (see Bynum, *Holy Feast*). Writes Voaden, “*discretio spirituum* supplied a pattern for self-fashioning which extended to behaviour, demeanour and modes of expression. Familiarity with, and skill in, the discourse was a vital factor in the textual—and physical—survival of the visionary. Facility with *discretio spirituum* empowered medieval women visionaries and enabled them to fulfill their divine mandate to communicate revelation” (4). Whether or not one accepts the argument that experience itself was structured by *discretio*, it is very likely that many visionary texts incorporated particular discursive strategies in order to construct their subjects as divinely inspired rather than merely vain or, worse, heretical.

47. The life of the author was literally at stake in some visionary texts. In cases of canonization, the ecclesiastical reader’s response to the text determined the subject’s celestial status in the afterlife, while in heresy trials—such as in the case of Marguerite Porete—a text’s being interpreted unfavorably could mean the author’s execution.
circular reasoning and tautology, and the “man of gret auctorite” never gets a chance to speak. But neither Geffrey nor the reader provides the incontestable authority of a divine interlocutor, a Lady Philosophy, or even a Raison: both are fallible and subject to bad intentions. In the absence of a reliable figure of authority, authoritative knowledge cannot be received or transmitted through Geffrey’s dream. And because the dream is always mediated by its interpreting dreamer and audience, its epistemological potential lacks the kind of authoritative basis that visionary texts require if they are to be meaningful. The model of unreliable visionary knowing portrayed in *The House of Fame* indicates a fundamental problem with the idea of the active visionary who employs his or her cognitive faculties to understand, interpret, and fully realize the contents of the divinely granted vision. Where *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* point out the dangers of using a merely human interpreter to understand and convey divine wisdom, *The House of Fame* suggests that the reception of meaningful knowledge through the vision might never be successful. Even Homer, after all, may be too partial to the Greeks to be a reliable authority. By extension, then, Chaucer himself—as the self-conscious author of both Geffrey and his dream—highlights his own unreliability. By effectively dismantling every possible figure of visionary authority, Chaucer shows that we can rely on little more than the dreamer, the poet, and the reader for the creation of meaning. While, in the words of the eagle, this meaning may be taken “in earnest or in game” (822), it is always human, always fallible, and emerges, not from divine authorization, but from the subjective minds of human beings.

48. “From beginning to end, the Eagle’s speech relies on tautology, analogy, non sequitur, reductive simplicity, abuse of the syllogism, circular argument, and ‘proofs’ that prove nothing,” writes Sheila Delany (75).