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In his 1602 edition of Chaucer's *Works*, Thomas Speght attempted to create a unified reading of Chaucer's *House of Fame* by providing marginal manicules to point out pithy sentences, and by attaching the following "Argument": "In this book is shewed how the deedes of all men and women, be they good or bad, are carried by report to posterity."<sup>1</sup> These pointing fingers and vague argument fell far short, of course, of giving a unified account of the work; for the past four hundred years at least, *The House of Fame* has remained a challenging poem for readers. The challenge of (and failure to) provide a clear, unified treatment of the poem has led some critics to consider it to be a work that is inherently skeptical of the truth-value of signs, both those found in poetry and those found in language itself. One of the more extreme versions of this skeptical view is Shelia Delany's *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, but this kind of reading is far from atypical.<sup>2</sup> Robert O. Payne calls Chaucer's attempt to develop the poem as "a futile struggle"; John M. Fyler characterizes the work as an example of Ovidian deconstruction; and Piero Boitani articulates the problems of fame and truth in the poem.<sup>3</sup> Katheryn Lynch reads the poem as an explicitly nominalist work that expresses anxiety over the ability of anyone to achieve knowledge, and indeed the *House of Fame* is required reading for anyone undertaking nominalist readings of Chaucer's poetics.<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown has given an excellent treatment of Chaucer and the *ars perspectiva* that nevertheless gives *The House of Fame* short shrift and repeats a skeptical reading of the work.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, *The House of Fame* does appear to accord with this skeptical view: Fame is utterly arbitrary in her pronouncements (1575-80), and by the end of the poem

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<sup>1</sup> Speght's 1602 *Complete Works*, fol. 262<sup>r</sup>. For a thorough reading of Speght's manicules in another text in his edition, see Clare Regan Kinney, "Thomas Speght's Renaissance Chaucer and the *solaas of sentence* in *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Refiguring Chaucer in the Renaissance*, ed. Theresa M. Krier (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 66-68.

<sup>2</sup> Shelia Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (University of Florida Press, 1994 [original University of Chicago, 1972]).

<sup>3</sup> Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance* (Yale University Press, 1963); John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (Yale University Press, 1979), 23-64; Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Katheryn Lynch, "The Logic of the Dream Vision in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," in *Literary Nominalism and the Theory of Reading Late Medieval Texts: A New Research Paradigm*, ed. Richard J. Utz (Lewiston, N.Y. and Queenston, ON: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 179-203. For more on nominalism in Chaucer, see also *Nominalism and Literary Discourse: New Perspectives*, ed. Hugo Keiper, Christoph Bode, and Richard J. Utz (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), and Peter W. Travis, "Heliotropes and the Poetics of Metaphor," *Speculum* 72.2 (Apr. 1997): 399-427.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space* (Berlin and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 173-75.



truth and falsehood are compounded together (2108-9).<sup>6</sup> I do not, however, think that this poem ultimately rejects the ability of language and poetry to communicate true knowledge, even if this communication is often imperfect. The answer to the epistemological problems in *The House of Fame* can be found in how Chaucer treats the embodiment of texts. Chaucer's poem embodies language in two distinct ways. In the first place, Chaucer portrays audible speech as visible shades of the speakers, seen most clearly in Book III. In the second place, more subtly, he calls attention to the spoken word embodied in writing, no longer "broken air," but a visual sign. The implications of these two kinds of embodiment help illuminate a passage that has caused scholars to assume (not argue) quite different facts about the text of *The House of Fame*. More importantly, Chaucer's treatment of embodiment shows that *The House of Fame* portrays greater confidence in the truth-value of language and literature, provided that it partakes in the visual and synesthetic epistemology of embodiment.

#### THE AIRY BODIES OF WORDS

Book III of *The House of Fame* is perhaps most memorable for its noise: the clamor of the suppliants to Fame (1520-37), the blasts of Eolus's trumpets (1572-82), and the "gygges" and "chirkynges" of the House of Rumor (1942-3). Critics who have read the work as skeptical of the ability of language and literature to communicate accurately or truthfully have tended to focus on this noisy cacophony of the work, connecting it to the Eagle's rather nominalist treatment of language in Book II. Chaucer's long-winded, scholastic bird spends much time discoursing on the nature of speech, which he considers only in terms of *material* causality.<sup>7</sup> The Eagle first defines speech as nothing but sound: "Thou wost wel this, that spech is soun" (762). Sound, however, "ys noght by eyr ybroken" (765) and "his substaunce is but of air" (768); later in his lecture, the Eagle continually conflates sound and speech as being essentially the same thing (771-7). "Or voys, or noyse, or word, or soun" (819); "Speche or soun" (824)—these formulations characterize the Eagle's teaching on speech, which is understood as *only* broken air, the *flatus vocis* of the nominalist tradition stretching back to Roscelin of Compiègne.<sup>8</sup> This understanding of speech is devastating to its epistemological value, since it is divorced from any treatment of conceptual or transcendent meaning. Air may well be the material cause of speech, but without a formal or final cause, speech is literally *in-significant*: it does not clearly refer to anything outside of itself, either to concepts or to things, the two most common referents

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<sup>6</sup> Line numbers throughout are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle describes his so-called "Four Causes" in *Physics* II.3 and *Metaphysics* V.2: the material cause (what a thing is made of), the efficient cause (how a thing comes to be), the formal cause (what gives the material its shape), and the final cause (the purpose for which the thing exists). After the popularization of Aristotle's works in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, these categories of thought were givens.

<sup>8</sup> Valerie Allen, *On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 5.

considered in medieval semiotics.<sup>9</sup> Chaucer's Eagle at least practices what he preaches, being comically long-winded, but, in the end, his conception of speech raises the question of whether *any* speech is trustworthy.

In the world of *The House of Fame*, however, Geoffrey the Dreamer is far more oriented towards sight than he is to sound. When a stranger somewhat ironically inquires whether Geoffrey has gone on this journey to seek fame (1871-2), Geoffrey responds in the negative. Following the Eagle's language, Chaucer characterizes the goal of his journey in terms of speech—"tydynges"—but, vitally, his learning will not simply be aural but also visual: he will "bothe here and se" wonders in the House of Fame. Geoffrey desires to *see* the House of Rumor (1995) and *sees* the whispering that takes place therein (2043). Geoffrey's visual orientation has significant epistemological implications. Sight was, of course, considered the highest and most certain sense in the Middle Ages. Even if Alhacen's understanding of sight as determined solely by rays *external* to the eye introduced the possibility of visual error, Bacon, Grosseteste, Witelo, and other scholastics writing in the tradition of *perspectiva* grant a high truth-value to realities encountered through sight.<sup>10</sup> No less a source than Aquinas says of sight, "Vision . . . is more spiritual and more subtle than all (other) senses," and "it appears as if vision is more dignified among (the other) senses."<sup>11</sup> By choosing sight over sound, Geoffrey the Dreamer seeks an epistemological certainty that is not available to sound alone.

*The House of Fame* vindicates Geoffrey's epistemic orientation by presenting words as clearly embodied; because they appear visually, not merely aurally, they partake of the surety of sight and give Geoffrey accurate knowledge of themselves. When they arrive at the House of Fame, Geoffrey the Dreamer conjectures correctly to the Eagle that "there lives body nys / In al that hous that yonder ys" (1063-4), and the Eagle explains the nature of the characters he will encounter:

Whan any speche ycomen ys  
 Up to the paleys, anon-ryght  
 Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight  
 Which that the word in erthe spak,  
 Be he clothed red or blak;  
 And hath so verray hys lyknesse  
 That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse  
 That it the same body be,  
 Man or woman, he or she. (1074-82)

The airy bodies of the utterances give Geoffrey an accurate depiction of the person who spoke them. William Quinn is correct to note that "this revival of each speech

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<sup>9</sup> On medieval semiotics and signification, see Umberto Eco, "From Metaphor to *Analogia Entis*," in *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 116-170.

<sup>10</sup> See Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space*, cited above.

<sup>11</sup> "Sensus visus, qui est spiritualior et subtilior inter omnes sensus" and "apparet quod visus est altior inter sensus," Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, Book II, Chapter VII, § 417. Accessed on <https://isidore.co/aquinas/DeAnima.htm>

as the phantom of its speaker seems Chaucer's own fantastic invention,"<sup>12</sup> but it would be a mistake to downplay its literary inspiration. Both Mary Carruthers and Karla Taylor have written eloquently on Chaucer's use of Dante's *visibile parole* (*Purgatorio* 10) and hylomorphic embryology (*Purgatorio* 25) as major sources of embodied speech.<sup>13</sup> Even so, they do not draw out the full implications of embodied speech for claims of the truth-value by that speech. In Dante's *Commedia*, embodiment is not merely the natural state of human beings; it is what allows for perfect communication between people.

As a careful reader of Dante, Chaucer knew that in *Purgatorio* 25, Statius gives a short lecture on hylomorphic embryology to explain a phenomenon that Dante the Pilgrim has been encountering throughout the epic. From canto 1 of *Inferno* Dante the Pilgrim has been seeing dead souls as though they were living bodies, and now, through Statius, Dante the Poet finally answers the question of why disembodied souls still appear to be physical bodies:

When Lachesis runs short of thread, the soul  
 unfastens from the flesh, carrying with it  
 potential faculties, both human and divine.  
 The lower faculties now inert,  
 memory, intellect, and the will remain  
 in action, and are far keener than before.  
 Without pausing, the soul falls, miraculously,  
 of itself, to one or to the other shore.  
 There first it comes to know its road.  
 As soon as space surrounds it there,  
 the formative force radiates upon it,  
 giving shape and measure as though to living members.  
 And as the air, when it is full of rain,  
 is adorned with rainbow hues not of its making  
 but reflecting the brightness of another,  
 so here the neighboring air is shaped  
 into that form the soul, which stays with it,  
 imprints upon it by its powers.  
 And, like the flame that imitates its fire,  
 wherever that may shift and flicker,  
 its new form imitates the spirit.  
 A shade we call it, since the insubstantial soul  
 is visible this way, which from the same air forms  
 organs for each sense, even that of sight.  
 Through this we speak and through this smile.  
 Thus we shed tears and make the sighs  
 you may have heard here on the mountain.  
 And, as we feel affections or desires,  
 the shade will change its form, and this

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<sup>12</sup> William A. Quinn, "Chaucer's Recital Presence in the 'House of Fame' and the Embodiment of Authority," *The Chaucer Review*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2008): 171-96, 192.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Carruthers, "Italy, *Ars Memorativa*, and Fame's House" *Studies in the Ages of Chaucer*, No. 2 (1986), 179-88; Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads "The Divine Comedy"* (Stanford University Press, 1989).

is the cause of that at which you marvel. (*Purgatorio* 25.79-108)<sup>14</sup>

All these references taken together provide a pattern of exploring the hylomorphic nature of the human person. Embodiment is so vital to the human person that a disembodied shade (“ombra”) naturally makes a body out of the air around it. The significance of embodiment for communication is profound. The shade-body created by the formative powers of the soul displays perfectly the disposition of the person’s mind and soul; the body was designed for communicating knowledge to others and integrating knowledge with our selves. In Dante’s afterlife, people are not able to misrepresent themselves—their true identities are built into their temporary bodies. Oliver Davies has noted that Dante’s source for the perfect communication of the bodies of the dead relies on Aquinas’s understanding of angelic knowledge, in which the shades of the dead present true knowledge to one another in as unmediated a manner as humanly possible:

[I]n *Summa Theologiae* I, question 57, Thomas draws an analogy between the communicative luminosity of the angelic mind and our own resurrected bodies of the future. He says of the latter: “the brightness of the risen body will correspond to the grace and glory in the mind; and so we serve as a medium for one mind to know another.” In other words, in our ultimate corporeal state, we will communicate as the angels do, but of course we will do so through the transparency of

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<sup>14</sup> Quando Lâchesis non ha più del lino,  
 solvesi da la carne, e in virtute  
 ne porta seco e l’umano e ’l divino:  
 l’altre potenze tutte quante mute;  
 memoria, intelligenza e volontade  
 in atto molto più che prima agute.  
 Senza restarsi, per sé stessa cade  
 mirabilmente a l’una del le rive;  
 quivi conosce prima le sue strade.  
 Tosto che loco li la circunscrive,  
 la virtù formative raggia intorno  
 così e quanto ne le membra vive.  
 E come l’aere, quand’ è ben piorno,  
 per l’altrui raggio che ’n sé si riflette,  
 di diversi color diventa addorno;  
 così l’aere vicin quivi si mette  
 e in quella forma ch’è in lui suggella  
 virtualmente l’alma che ristette;  
 e simigliante poi a la fiamella  
 che segue il foco là ’vunque si muta,  
 segue lo spirto sua forma novella.  
 Però che quindi ha poscia sua paruta,  
 è chiamata ombra; e quindi organa poi  
 cianscun sentire infino a la veduta.  
 Quindi parliamo e quindi ridiam noi;  
 quindi facciam le lagrime e’ sospiri  
 che per lo monte aver sentiti puoi.  
 Secondo che ci affliggono i disiri  
 e lei altri affetti, l’ombra si figura;  
 e quest’ è la cagion di che tu miri.

Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

the now glorified human body (glorified through the glorification of Christ's own body).<sup>15</sup>

The dead throughout the *Commedia* possess this perfect communication of inner disposition and outer appearance, and even Dante the Pilgrim's body communicates more clearly in his progress, as illustrated by one of the few genuinely funny moments in the *Commedia*, Dante's inability to keep from communicating Virgil's identity to Statius, the Roman poet's avid admirer (*Purgatorio* 21.103-111). Because the sanctified body provides an unmediated vision of the person (both the person's thoughts and deeds), the body joins the signifier and the signified; in Eco's terms (relating to medieval theories of universal grammar), "the *modi essendi* of things [are] identical with the *modi significandi*."<sup>16</sup> For Dante's bodies, form and content are perfectly joined, leading to clear, unambiguous knowledge.

Just because embodiment works this way in Dante's *Commedia* is not, of course, to assume that this is how Chaucer is using it, but attention to Geoffrey's visual experience suggests that the airy bodies in the *House of Fame* give a similarly accurate depiction of speech and speakers. While the broken air of Clear Laud or Slander may distort the reputation of these embodied words, Chaucer the Dreamer, who is *seeing* them, easily understands their nature and can discriminate between them. It is hard to deny how disturbing it is when Geoffrey witnesses "a lesyng and a sad soth sawe" (2089) intertwine with one another as "sworen brother[s]" (2101): "Thus saugh I fals and soth compounded / Togeder fle for oo tydyng" (2108-9). These half-true tidings then make their way to Fame (2111), who gives them their "name[s]" (2112), surely a blow to accurate representation through language. John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary, reflects on the double nature of speech in his *Confession Amantis*, but he fails to provide a clear means of discriminating between truth and falsity: "That word above alle erthli thinges / Is virtuous in his doings, / Wher so it be to evele or goode. / For if the wordes semen goode / And ben wel spoke at mannes Ere, / Whan that ther is no trouthe there, / Thei don fulofte gret decepte; / For whan the word to the concepte / Descordeth in so double a wise, / Such Rethorique is to despise / In every place, and forto drede."<sup>17</sup> But Geoffrey is able to identify truth from falsehood in this case, seeing what they really are, even if they are intertwined. Relying on his sight of their physical forms, not the sound of tidings about them, the Dreamer can accurately discern truth from falsehood.

Furthermore, what he sees on his journeys confirms his previous knowledge derived from reading. In Book II, the Eagle chides Geoffrey for his literary method, opining that poets should spend time in conversation to provide material for their works, listening to "tydings." In a contrast that comports with the bookish

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<sup>15</sup> Oliver Davies, "Dante's *Commedia* and the Body of Christ," in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, ed. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 161-79, 170.

<sup>16</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Confessio Amantis*, 1547-57, in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475*, ed. Rita Copland and Ineke Sluiter, Oxford University Press, 2009), 840.

narrators of Chaucer's other dream visions, Geoffrey simply heads home to study. For the Eagle, embodiment of empty language, this is a mistake:

[T]hou hast no tydynges  
 Of Loves folk yf they be glade,  
 Ne of noght ells that God made;  
 And noght oonly fro fer contree  
 That ther no tydyng cometh to thee,  
 But of thy verray neyghbores,  
 That duellen almost at thy dores,  
 Thou herist neyther that ne this;  
 For when thy labour doon al ys,  
 And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,  
 In stede of reste and newe thynges  
 Thou goost hom to thy hous anon,  
 And, also domb as any stoon,  
 Thou sittest at another book  
 Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;  
 And lyvest thus as an heremyte,  
 Although thyn abstinence ys lyte. (644-60)

By now it should be clear that in *The House of Fame* simply listening to rumors or gossip is a dubious practice if one wants to write something accurate. Geoffrey the Dreamer prefers the intertextual method of the dreamer in *The Parliament of Fowls*, turning to old books for material for his own writing: "For out of olde felde, as men seyth, / Cometh al this newe corn from yeer to yere, / And out of olde bokes, in good feyth, / Cometh al this new science that men lere" (22-25). This method is vindicated by the fact that the embodied words of old authors are recognizable to Geoffrey the Dreamer: if he did not receive accurate knowledge about them from their books, he would not be able to identify them in *The House of Fame*. Because of his bookishness, he recognizes Plato's "eyryssh bestes" (932) and the embodied words of Homer (1466), Virgil (1483), Josephus (1433), and Statius (1460), who bear up the fame of their respective nations and subjects. The very fact that Geoffrey *recognizes* these authors indicates an epistemological clarity between their outward, visible form and the speech of which they are embodiments. Chaucer's reading of their works has prepared his mind for a visionary experience of their embodied forms, reminiscent of how religious in the Middle Ages were trained to experience visions of heavenly realities, as Barbara Newman has demonstrated: "Over a period of centuries, monastic writers developed a sophisticated art for the construction of inner experience, involving the disciplines of memory, perception, reading, and attention."<sup>18</sup> This link between prior reading and visionary sensation further highlights a point that it may be easy to forget when reading the work, that Geoffrey is experiencing these sensations in a dream vision, not in waking consciousness. On a generic level, this detail might strengthen even more the claims he is making about the epistemic

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara Newman, "What Did it Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture." *Speculum* vol. 80, no.1 (Jan. 2005), 3.

clarity of vision,<sup>19</sup> but even on an experiential level, this rings true: the experiences of sensation in dreams are felt to be real by the bodies dreaming them. The fact that these sights are occurring in Geoffrey's (and the reader's) mind is not accidental or problematic, but rather points to the reality of the second way in which words are embodied in *The House of Fame*.

#### THE INKY BODIES OF WORDS

When the Eagle says that the words that arrive at the House of Fame are "clothed red or blak" (1078), this is a clear reference to the ink used to inscribe and rubricate written texts. Many critics cite Carruthers as an important observer of this reference: "The figures are clothed in red or black, according to the ink in which the letters forming these words were written. Chaucer has peopled his House of Fame with literature that is both *painture* and *parole*."<sup>20</sup> This detail bends the reader's imagination a bit, for she is to keep in mind not only the airy human bodies seen by Geoffrey, but also the physical inky bodies of letters on a page. This effect is particularly pronounced if one imagines the experience of reading *The House of Fame* in one of its manuscripts, such as MS Bodley 638, in which line 1078 itself would be clothed in black ink, with red rubrics framing the text.

This imaginative challenge helps clarify a factual point of the text about which critics disagree: is Geoffrey the Dreamer reading or viewing the *Aeneid* in Book I? At first glance, Chaucer's paraphrase of the *Aeneid* appears to be a classical *ekphrasis*, a description of visual art in the medium of poetic language.<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey recounts many images he finds engraved on the Temple of Glass: we learn that the Temple of Glass is full of "ymages" (121), "portreytures" (125), and "figures" (126), and that Venus' portrait is found in a prominent position (130). He then finds an engraving of the *Aeneid* in brass, and the language he uses appears to indicate that he is translating images into words. Chaucer uses the construction "I saw" (or variations thereon) fifteen times in paraphrasing the action of Virgil's *Aeneid*,<sup>22</sup> a formula he took from an ekphrasis on painted figures found in *The Romance of the Rose*.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, immediately after the conclusion of his summary of the *Aeneid*, he gives lines that suggest the ekphrastic nature of this section:

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<sup>19</sup> On the Dream Vision genre, see J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision; Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), and Hans Robert Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 76-102.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2008 [1990]), 280.

<sup>21</sup> Ekphrasis was a common exercise in grammar school rhetorical training. Aphthonius the Sophist defines it in his *Preliminary Exercises* as "descriptive language, bringing what is shown clearly before the eyes." Aphthonius the Sophist, *Preliminary Exercises*, in *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, trans. George Kennedy (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Chaucer's "seeing" of the *Aeneid* occurs at lines 151, 162, 174, 193, 198, 209, 212, 219, 221, 253, 433, 439, 451, 468, and 471.

<sup>23</sup> See John M. Fyler's notes on *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 980.



When I had seen al this syghte  
 In this noble temple thus,  
 “A, Lord,” thoughte I, “that madest us,  
 Yet sawgh I never such noblesse  
 Of yimages, ne such richesse,  
 As I saugh graven in this chirche” (468-73)

These lines appear to indicate that Chaucer has translated the images of the *Aeneid* he has seen in the temple into a narrative paraphrase of the epic. Carruthers and Brantley assume that Geoffrey is looking at a series of painted images of the *Aeneid*,<sup>24</sup> and this reading parallels the *ekphrasis* in *Aeneid* 1.446-93 quite nicely, in which Aeneas sees the fame of the Trojans recounted through a series of images. Many readers of *The House of Fame* simply leave the matter at that.

There is, however, a textual detail that makes this reading problematic. At the very beginning of Chaucer’s paraphrase of the *Aeneid*, he says, “But as I romed up and doun, / I fond that on a wall ther was / Thus written on a table of bras: ‘I wol now syngge, yif I kan, / The armes and also the man / That first cam, thurgh his destinee, Fugityf of Troy contree, / In Itayle, with ful moche pyne / Unto the strondes of Lavyne.’ / And tho began the story anoon, As I shall telle yow echon” (140-50). His very next words are “First sawgh I,” beginning the construction that he will repeat throughout this section, but it is clear from the lines above that what is engraved on the tablet (at least initially) is the *text* of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, not a series of images. Cook and Taylor assume that the Dreamer continues to read the *text* of the *Aeneid*, which the Dreamer started reading originally.<sup>25</sup> The nature of the dreamer’s experience is further obscured with another non-visual verb (the dreamer *hears* Aeneas crying out at 170 and 180), and there is a telling moment of sensory complexity further on in his paraphrase: “There saugh I such tempeste aryse / That every herte myght agryse / To see hyt peynted on a wal” (209-211). Note the trickiness of this passage: the dreamer says that he “saw” the tempest, but that every heart *might* be horrified to see it painted on a wall; although he “sees” the tempest, its description makes clear that it is not a painted image. This section is, in effect, a cheeky “pseudo-*ekphrasis*”: a text that paraphrases another text, while suggesting a series of images.

The solution to this confusing state of affairs is to consider the act of reading a text that has been embodied not in air but in letters. Nick Havely notes in his commentary to the PIMS edition of *The House of Fame* that Chaucer’s text is curiously ambiguous on what is “graven” on the wall, text or images.<sup>26</sup> From the perspective of the medieval reading experience, however, the two are inextricably linked, since reading is a synesthetic experience. The categories of aesthetic experience described by Mary Carruthers in *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* attest to a mixture of senses: clarity, sweetness, variety, journey. Carruthers has convincingly argued that rhetoric is the *Ur*-discourse for medieval arts, uniting “verbal, musical, architectural, sculptural, graphic, and the

<sup>24</sup> Carruthers, “Italy, *Ars Memorativa*, and Fame’s House,” 187; Jessica Brantley, “Vision, Image, Text,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford University Press, 2007), 315-34, 319.

<sup>25</sup> Cook, 33; Taylor, 25.

<sup>26</sup> *The House of Fame*, ed. Nick Havely (Toronto: PIMS, 2013), 168.

multimedia experiences of liturgies, religious and civic).<sup>27</sup> Medieval people, then, were trained to approach the arts in essentially synesthetic terms; a work of visual art was meant to call up sounds in the viewer's imagination, while a work of linguistic or musical art was to suggest specific images and patterns of images to listeners. What unites different sensory experiences in the perceiving subject is *imagination*. Alexandra Cook gives a particularly compelling reading of *The House of Fame* as Chaucer's memory-palace, which highlights the way in which the body of a written text becomes re-incarnated in the mind of the reader's imagination:

But reading a text and imprinting it on one's memory involves more than retention. The act of imprinting images drawn from preexisting texts so that they become personalized memory images is an appropriative one, as is the act of placing those images into a personal memory space. By staging a series of dramatic moments in which his narrator sees, hears, and senses living moments from classical texts, Chaucer introduces the dynamic of vivid physical perception that was associated with deliberate memory making, and creates for his I-personal the chance to experience a range of visual and sensory cues, to respond to these clues emotionally, and to take action based on his responses. Thus the intensely imagined visual scenes of the poem compose a kind of amplification of classical *materia*, informing and enriching a narrative about the reception of classical textual culture.<sup>28</sup>

For the purposes of this study, the key here is that a textual body leads to an imaginative body in the mind of Geoffrey the dreamer, which is then converted, by use of language, into an imaginative body in the mind of the reader. This facet links the ambiguous *ekphrasis* in Book 1 with the airy bodies Geoffrey will encounter by the end of the poem. Chaucer's written words call up airy bodies in our own imaginations. This embodiment is doubly significant, for the words he uses to embody scenes from the *Aeneid* are those of English, not Latin; Geoffrey is translating a Latin textual body into an English textual body, but this embodiment is clearly recognizable to the reader as the *Aeneid*. If one reads Book I as an *ekphrasis* of a written text, then the words participate in the surety of visual semiotics. Its words are not dependent at all on sound, broken air, but only on the vision of the reader, even if this reader is translating the visual signs back into speech for an audience. Quinn has called our attention to the fact that the current *House of Fame* is in many ways a record of Chaucer's original vocal and physical performance of the text: "The surviving text of the *House of Fame* speaks as a phantom of Chaucer's recital."<sup>29</sup> This observation only highlights the physicality of the text, embodied in Chaucer's own performance, and the fact that even in this mediated state it embodies itself in the minds of readers. Geoffrey seeks his material for poetry through reading, not gossip, a tendency his dreamers also demonstrate in two of his other dream visions, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The*

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>28</sup> Cook, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Quinn, 190.

*Parliament of Fowls*. This suggests that the written word, particularly the written word that has stood the test of time and has been put into speech by generations of readers, contains in itself more surety than the spoken word. Poets who write their poetry down thus ensure the survival of their subject for future generations. In this matter, Chaucer appears to be breaking with the usual trend in the Middle Ages of considering writing as merely a stand-in for physical speech, a trend that Constantine Marmo notes: “At the basis of the *altercatio* was the Aristotelian text of *Peri hermeneias*, chapter 1, where Aristotle argues that ‘those things which are in the spoken sound [the words, that is] are symbols of the affections [or passions] of the soul [which is to say, of concepts], and the written words are symbols of those which are spoken’.”<sup>30</sup> Written words from worthy authors produce airy bodies in the mind, whose truth value is akin to direct experience. The images Geoffrey’s fantasy has derived from reading are confirmed in his encounters in the House of Fame, thus redeeming literary fantasy from the charge of falsehood and securing for it an epistemological stability.

#### THE BODY OF *THE HOUSE OF FAME*: A CODA AND CAVEAT

Through the various ways in which texts are embodied, *The House of Fame* displays confidence in the ability of the textual word/body to communicate accurately to the reader’s imagination in a synesthetic experience. Still, medieval authors *did*, of course, experience anxiety over the state of their texts. Chaucer himself expressed frustration over his scribe and worry over how his texts would be transmitted,<sup>31</sup> and the earliest surviving manuscript copies of *The House of Fame* (MS Pepys 2006, MS Bodley 638, MS Fairfax 16) demonstrate some of the validity of this anxiety, while also providing some complex evidence to the contrary. The latest and most problematic manuscript, MS Pepys 2006, contains, in the words of A.S. G. Edwards, “over two hundred unique variations [in the *House of Fame*] which are manifestly corruptions” (xxii), and the text ends abruptly at 1843, giving the work a different kind of ambiguous ending.<sup>32</sup> This is a false embodiment of Chaucer’s words if ever there was one. In contrast, MS Bodley 638 shows evidence of careful copying and correction. Lyty, the manuscript’s scribe, made several corrections to the text of the *House of Fame*, and clearly marks the end of the poem as we have it.<sup>33</sup> Lyty demonstrates the

<sup>30</sup> Constantine Marmo, “Ontology and Semantics in the Logic of Duns Scotus,” in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, ed. Umberto Eco (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1989), 143-93, 161.

<sup>31</sup> *Chaucer’s Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scryveyn*: “Adam scryveyn, if ever it thee bifalle / Boece or Troyus for to wryten newe, / Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalles, / But after my making thou wryte more trewe; / So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe, / It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape, / And al is thorough thy negligence and rape.” *Troilus and Criseyde* V.1793-98: “And for ther is so gret diversite / In Englishsh and in writing of oure tonge, / So prey I God that non miswrite the, / Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge; / And red wherso thou be, or ells songe, / That thou be understonde, God I biseche!”

<sup>32</sup> *Manuscript Pepys 2006: A Facsimile*, intro. A.S.G. Edwards (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1985).

<sup>33</sup> *MS Bodley 638: A Facsimile*, intro. Pamela Robinson (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982), xxx. I also was able to work with MS Bodley 638 in the summer of 2012 during the NEH’s “Tudor Books and Readers” seminar under the direction of John King and Mark Randall, to whom I am most grateful.

importance of the scribe as an incarnator of the textual bodies of works, mediating between the author and the reader and enabling the body of the text to communicate as accurately as possible. Even more impressive is MS Fairfax 16, which, in addition to being the main exemplar for the poem, shows careful attention to transmitting the text correctly and clearly, providing evidence of how Chaucer's works were circulated during his lifetime.<sup>34</sup> The scribe is also conscious of the defects with his own embodied exemplar, and looks ahead to a more accurate embodiment by another reader or scribe by including additional space on the page for verses he knew were missing, many of which were later provided in a seventeenth-century hand.<sup>35</sup> MS Bodley 638 and MS Fairfax 16 were likely copied from the same exemplar,<sup>36</sup> and it is significant that they also contain a series of Latin glosses during Chaucer's *ekphrasis* of the text of the *Aeneid* in Book I which link Chaucer's English back to Virgil's original Latin.<sup>37</sup> These glosses, found in the best and earliest manuscripts of the *House of Fame*, prove that the authoritative characters of texts *can*, in fact, be recognized, even when translated into a different linguistic embodiment. At least one 15<sup>th</sup>-century reader and scribe recognized in the character of Chaucer's ekphrastic passage the authoritative presence of Virgil embodied in Chaucer's language. While MS Pepys demonstrates that textual bodies are fallible, the manuscript tradition in general proves Chaucer's point on the epistemic value of textuality: errors occur, but there is evidence that scribes and readers are confident that these errors can be overcome textually.

The early print history of *The House of Fame* also bears witness to the importance of textuality as a safeguard for literary truth, but illustrates the discrepancy between the attitudes of printers and their actual products. The attitude of early printers is similar to the traces of 15<sup>th</sup>-century scribes, that of improving imperfect textual bodies. Robert Copland's postscript to de Worde's 1530 edition of *The Parliament of Fowls* (STC 5092) plays up the defects of manuscript textual bodies to contrast them with the perfection that printed textual bodies bring: "Layde vpon shelve in leues all totorne / With letters dymme almost defaced clene / Thy hyllynge rotte with wormes al to worne / Thou lay that pyte it was to sene / Bounde with olde quayres for aege all hoore *and* grene / Thy mater endormed for lacke of thy presence / But nowe thou arte losed: go shewe forth thy sentence" (B6<sup>v</sup>). Older, unreliable manuscripts of Chaucer have now been put into a new, printed order that will embody Chaucer's text accurately, conveniently brought to readers by Robert Copland and Wynkyn de Worde.

The actual print history of *The House of Fame*, however, provides more of a cautionary tale on the dangers of texts acquiring false bodies. Caxton attempted to restore the wholeness of *The House of Fame* in his 1483 edition (STC 5087) by providing his own ending, which is intelligently reminiscent of the endings found in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*: "And with the noise of

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<sup>34</sup> *Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 16*, intro. John Norton-Smith (London: Scholar Press, 1979), ix and xxv.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful for the summer faculty development grant provided by Mount St. Mary's University that allowed me to check MS Fairfax 16 and MS Bodley 638 in person.

<sup>36</sup> Havely, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Fyler notes these glosses in his explanatory notes on *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 979-81, and Havely records them in the PIMS edition, 174.

their woe / I suddenly awoke anon then / And remembered what I had seen / And how high and far I had been / In my ghost, and had great wonder / That the god of thunder / Had let me know, and began to write / Like as ye have heard me tell / Wherefore to study and read always / I purpose to do day by day / Thus in dreaming and in game / Endeth this little book of Fame” (D3<sup>v</sup>). MS Fairfax 16, our current exemplar for critical editions, actually contains the Caxton emendation, written into the manuscript in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century hand. Caxton, however, was careful to put his own name into his edition, in the margin next to these lines, clearly delineating the work of the author from the work of the editor. Caxton’s desire to complete the text, however, resulted in false embodiments of the works ending for hundreds of years. From Thynne’s 1532 *Complete Works* (STC 5068) onward, Caxton’s name is not present next to these lines, giving the false impression of an authorial ending. The apparent fixity of textuality, the feature that gave literary works more credibility in *The House of Fame*, was turned against the text, an appropriately Chaucerian irony for a text so concerned with overcoming the epistemological problems of speech through the written word. The fact that 16<sup>th</sup>-century printers routinely claimed to be providing ever more accurate versions of medieval texts (a practice still followed by each new critical edition produced) makes this matter even more ironic, contrasted with scribal acknowledgment of limitations and hope for future improvement by other readers and writers. Text may be a surer form of knowledge than spoken language, but even it is limited by its inscribed or printed body.

Chaucer could not, of course, have known the subsequent history of the transmission of his texts, and to see in *The House of Fame* texts embodied in ink or metal allows readers to embody the texts in their own minds, as synesthetic objects that give accurate knowledge. This reading of Chaucer’s poem also helps explain its current ambiguous ending, apart from Caxton’s literary invention. In all surviving manuscript copies, the text breaks off abruptly:

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)

The poem ends with the vision of a man Geoffrey does not and cannot name; great debate, of course, has occurred over his identity.<sup>38</sup> What I take to be important, however, is that Geoffrey recognizes him *as* an authority: based on his past experience with written language, he is able to identify him as an embodiment of authoritative language. Since Geoffrey has not yet failed in his ability to recognize and interpret correctly what he is seeing, we have no reason to doubt that this man, whomever he is, is the author-persona of a great work; the man’s authority is shown forth in his appearance, an *ethos* produced by the performance of his works.

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<sup>38</sup> Havely’s scholarship review in the 2013 PIMS edition of *The House of Fame* lists these possibilities: Alan of Lille, Boccaccio, Boethius, Christ or a priest, “an image of the mature Chaucer,” and “a constructed but unrealized man of silent but unquestionably Christian authority” (221). To say that this list is diverse is an understatement!

In closing, given the centrality of rhetoric in the medieval aesthetic experience,<sup>39</sup> the embodied quality of rhetorical *ethos* may be another helpful way of articulating the connection between bodies and knowledge. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle contends that the appeal to *ethos* is not dependent on any preconceived notion of the speaker's character, but on the character found in the speech itself:

But this confidence must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker's character. (I.ii.4; 1356a).<sup>40</sup>

The most influential thirteenth-century translator and commentator on the *Rhetoric* mistranslated this section. Giles of Rome follows William of Moerbeke and renders the statement: "This should come about, not through the speech, but rather because the speaker is already considered to be a certain kind of person" (*Oportet autem et hoc accidere non per orationem, sed propter preopinari qualem quondam esse dicentem*).<sup>41</sup> Giles reinforces this misreading in his commentary: "He states the case, that is that willingness to believe should not be effected through the speech, but through opinion about the character of the speaker."<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, Giles retains the notion that the *ethos* of a speaker is performed in the speech, as Marmo explains: "The meaning that Aristotle gives to 'hypocrisis,' according to Jandun, is the one already recognized by Egidio of 'way to pronounce or to utter' and which is a sign of virtue or of the interior passions. The speaker is therefore allowed to use it because, through it, he can induce the listener to believe in the truth of what he says: it is in fact one of the three means of persuasion indicated by Aristotle, ἦθος (*ēthos*)."<sup>43</sup> The *ethos* of the speaker in the speech itself is represented perfectly by the airy bodies of speech in Chaucer's *House of Fame* Chaucer's shades, the *visibile parole*, accurate outer forms of what they are. He is able to recognize these embodied speeches through his constant reading of textual bodies, proving that textuality solves some of the vexing problems with language in *The House of Fame*.

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<sup>39</sup> Carruthers, *Experience of Beauty*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> "δεῖ δὲ καὶ τοῦτο συμβαίνειν διὰ τοῦ λόγου, ἀλλὰ μὴ διὰ τοῦ προδεδοξάσθαι ποιόν τινα εἶναι τὸν λέγοντα." Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, ed. W.D. Ross, trans. J.H. Freese (Harvard University Press, 1947), 17.

<sup>41</sup> *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 802.

<sup>42</sup> *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 803.

<sup>43</sup> "Il senso che Aristotele dà a <hypocrisis>, secondo Jandun, è quello già riconosciuto da Egidio di <<modo di pronunciare o di proferire>> e che è segno delle virtù o delle passioni interior. L'oratore è quindi legittimato a servirse in quanto, attraverso di esso, può indurre l'uditore a credere nella verità di ciò che afferma: esso costituisce infatti una delle tre fonti di persuasion indicate da Aristotele, l'ἦθος." Costantino Marmo, "Carattere dell'Oratore e Recitazione nel Commento di Giovanni di Jandun al Terzo Libro della Retorica," in *Filosofia e Teologia nel Trecento: Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994), 17-31, 27.

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