SPEAKING WALLS:
EKPHRASIS IN CHAUCER'S *HOUSE OF FAME*

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The use of ekphrasis has a long history in Western literature. The term at once calls to mind the shield descriptions in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* and the description of Dido's Trojan War wall painting in the latter. These exemplify a tradition which has had a strong influence on succeeding writers, including Chaucer. His work has a number of ekphrastic passages, and for the most part they follow the classical tradition in the ways they use words to depict fictional works of art. Chaucer's use of ekphrasis in the *House of Fame*, however, is radically divergent from the traditional uses of the trope and from Chaucer's other ekphrastic passages in the way that it at times seems to abandon the role of mediator between the work of art and the reader for more direct communication, as though the wall were speaking instead of picturing. This unusual treatment of a traditional trope offers a comment on the nature of words and images, demonstrating the instability of their forms, and this concept resonates with a general theme of metamorphosis throughout the *House of Fame*.

Traditional Ekphrasis

James Heffernan defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3). While this definition is fairly broad, the term in its present usage is usually limited to descriptions of works of art—paintings, drawings, or sculpture. The seeming simplicity of the definition conceals a complex set of ideas and oppositions concerning the very nature of writing and illustration. One of the most familiar of those works which deal with the topic is G.E. Lessing's *Laocoön* in which Lessing claims a spatial, mimetic nature for art and temporal, arbitrary nature for poetry, and this is the traditional understanding of the relationship. However, while he does not point out the distinction, Lessing establishes his polarity between only the plastic arts and the

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spoken word, omitting writing altogether. Other writers seem to conflate the spoken and written word, claiming temporality for both forms, or they ignore the spoken word and forget the plastic nature of writing, confusing a difficult issue even further.

In this tradition of spatial/temporal polarity, as W.T.J. Mitchell observes, the task of ekphrastic writing seems to be an impossible one. How can one accurately represent a picture by writing if the two operate in such different ways? "Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects" (152). "Ekphrastic poetry," writes Mitchell, "is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic 'others,' those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or 'spatial' arts"(156). However, close examination reveals that the boundaries are anything but stable, and more recent critics have rejected the binary opposition. Mitchell claims that "Semantically, there is no difference between images and texts," and argues that pictures are quite capable of expressing subtle and complex concepts (160). Mitchell locates the differences between texts and pictures "at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions," claiming that "we make the obvious practical differences between these two media into metaphysical oppositions which seem to control our communicative acts, and which then have to be overcome with utopian fantasies like Ekphrasis" (161). Although the polarity of word and image is a matter for contention, the issue for this study is not whether the verbal can represent the visual, but rather the ways in which the binary expectation has informed ekphrastic poetry and the critical positions of those who write about it, and where Chaucer fits in the larger scheme.

Critics who accept the spatial/temporal opposition tend to believe that ekphrasis can never be part of the narrative flow—it can be only an ornament or a digression. To enter into the ekphrastic moment is to commit to the spatiality of the described object. Murray Krieger carries the idea further:

> The spatial work freezes the temporal work even as the
> latter seeks to free it from space....I see [ekphrasis]
> introduced in order to use a plastic object as a symbol of
> the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which
> must be superimposed upon literature's turning world to
> 'still' it. (265-66)

But Krieger, while grounded in the binary expectation, also recognizes that ekphrasis does much more than portray images; in discussing Homer's shield of Achilles and Keats's Grecian urn, he writes that they share "a word-ridden and time-ridden attempt not only to portray visual representations but to create verbal 'pictures' whose complexity utterly resists their being translated into visual form" (265-66). Both the shields of Achilles and Aeneas are made by gods and have magic properties. These properties cannot be pictured in a single image as they are described. "We must concentrate on the symbolic," writes Krieger, "for the material dissipates into the airiness of words" (xv).

Heffernan believes that while ekphrasis conflicts with narrative, the tension between the pictorial and the verbal prevents stasis:

> Although the ekphrastic passage may work against motion…it is anything but submissive. It is the unruly antagonist of narrative, the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental" (5). "Because it verbally represents visual art, ekphrasis stages a contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrative word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image." (6).

Michael Putnam, on the other hand, sees ekphrasis as a different type of narrative which "confronts" the main narrative producing a "generative moment" (3).

Another development informed by the traditional polarizing of words and pictures is the gendering of text and image. Writers who offer this kind of interpretation see the work of art as passive, static, penetrated by the male gaze of the poet; the silent feminine is vivified by the enlivening words of the male text.[1] As Jas Elsner points out, the gaze is "a potential metaphor for reading" (21). Because the image is seen as primarily spatial, it must be feminine and therefore limited in its ability to communicate in a direct and dynamic way, while the text must be associated with the active, effective, affecting male—the poet who not only "reads" the image, but mediates between it and the reader, providing a "correct" interpretation. Certainly the poet has some influence on the ways in which the audience perceives the image; Simon Goldhill writes, the gaze "creates and regulates the viewing subject—both by a selection of what to look at and how to look" (2). In the case of *The House of Fame*, as with the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the

creation of the image in the poet's imagination and its mediation occur simultaneously, so it is problematic to posit a silent static artifact waiting for the animating gaze.

Andrew Sprague Becker avoids the conflicts related to temporal and spatial or gendered understanding altogether, rather choosing to delineate the kinds of operations which ekphrasis performs. He finds four types of ekphrastic function dealing with the referent, the relationship to the medium, the relationship to the artisan and artistry, and the effect on the viewer of the image (41). The first (*Res Ipsae*) involves narration, naming, dramatizing, and interpreting; the second (*Opus Ipsum*) surface appearance—color, texture, shape, arrangement, size, and material; the third (*Artifex* and *Ars*) the name of the artisan, workmanship, and process of manufacture; the fourth (*Animadversor*) the relationship between poet, artifact, audience, referent, artistry, and object. For Becker, ekphrasis is "a description of a more complex experience of images, not just their physical appearance" (42-43).[2] The relationship of the poet to what is depicted in the image determines how it is mediated, and the relationship of the audience to the image determines how the poet's representation is received.

Not all of these ekphrastic levels will necessarily appear in any one poem, but one usually finds more than one, sometimes in overlapping functions. The work of ekphrasis, then, is not always concerned with mimesis, materiality, and spatial/temporal relationships.

We can find examples of Becker's categories in the classic ekphrastic passages. In Homer, for example, all four levels can be identified in the description of a scene on Achilles's shield:

> *Res Ipsae:*
> On it he set also a king's estate, in which laborers were reaping, holding sharp sickles in their hands. Some handfuls were falling in rows to the ground along the swath, while others the binders of sheaves were binding with twisted ropes of straw. Three binders stood by, while behind them boys would gather the handfuls, and carrying them in their arms would continually give them to the binders. (18.550-56)

Opus Ipsum:
And on it he made a herd of straight-horned cattle: the
cattle were fashioned of gold and tin, and with lowing
hurried out from stable to pasture beside the sounding
river, beside the waving reed. And golden were the
herdsmen who walked beside the cattle. (18.573-77)

Ars and *Artifex:*
So saying, he left her there and went to his bellows, and
he turned them toward the fire and commanded them to
work. And the bellows, twenty in all, blew on the
melting vats, sending out a ready blast of every force,
now to further him as he labored hard, and again in
whatever way Hephaestus wished and his work went on.
And on the fire he put stubborn bronze and tin and
precious gold and silver; and then he set on the anvil
block a great anvil, and took in one hand a massive
hammer, and in the other he took the tongs. (18.468-77)

Homer's reaction to the shield allows him to animate some of the
scenes to a greater extent than would have been indicated on a real
shield (an example of *Animadversor*):

In their midst, a boy made pleasant music with a clear-
toned lyre, and to it sang sweetly the Linos song with his
delicate voice; and they beating the earth in
accompaniment followed on with skipping feet and
dance and shouting. (18.569-72)

The sound of the lyre, the loveliness of the tune, the kind of song he
sang, the quality of his voice, and the rhythmic beat of the dancers' feet
must be the response of the poet to his imagined work of art. It is as
though the shield produces the sounds, because in representing the
visual, the poet calls upon both his own experience of the aural
accompaniments to such a scene as well as the experience of his
audience.
    Virgil's use of ekphrasis in his description of the temple of Juno
(Chaucer's model for the Temple of Venus) is still different from the
above examples in that it generates narrative (*Res Ipsae*), and in that the
viewer of the artifact is Aeneas, who has experienced the events

depicted in the mural (*Animadversor*). Aeneas and Achatēs, shipwrecked on the Carthaginian shore, come upon Dido's temple dedicated to Juno which is under construction. Within is a mural depicting the war and the fall of Troy. Aeneas weeps as he is reminded of the death of many of his countrymen, family, and comrades. As he describes the scenes depicted, Virgil presents them through the eyes of Aeneas, responding to each with a shock of recognition:

> He recognized the snowy canvas tents
> Of Rhesus, and more tears came: these, betrayed
> In first sleep, Diomedes devastated,
> Swording many, till he reeked with blood,
> Then turned the mettlesome horses toward the beachhead
> Before they tasted Trojan grass or drank
> At Xanthus ford. (640-45)

Narrative belongs to Becker's first level (*Res Ipsae*), but when the viewer is familiar with the events (either through experience or reading), it also fits the fourth category (*Animadversor*), since the narrative is drawn forth unbidden from the memory of the viewer, informed and contextualized by the cultural milieu in which it is formed. Michael Putnam has shown also how the ekphrastic passages in the Aeneid become metaphors for themes of the whole work; they are

> foci where smaller synecdoches suggest ways in which
> the larger text can be interpreted and reinterpreted, where
> the imaginative power, ambiguity, and deceptiveness of
> visual art play off against, and illuminate, the multivalent
> richness of the grand verbal artifact for which they also
> operate as metaphor. (10)

For example, the fall of Troy prefigures the fall of Dido and Carthage (Putnam 42). Even when Virgil describes the appearance of the mural, he moves rapidly from scene to scene so that the momentum of the narrative is not interrupted, but, in fact, with the condensation of ten years' activity into about fifty lines, the Trojan mural narrative seems to rush headlong to its conclusion and the appearance of Dido. Even though the description digresses from the main narrative (Aeneas's

affair with Dido) it is not spatiality which impedes its progress, for the digression rather offers a contrapuntal narrative to the main one.

Chaucer

Chaucer's use of ekphrasis in *The House of Fame* diverges from the traditional in interesting ways. The description of the Trojan War mural resonates strongly with Virgil's description of Dido's mural. However, Chaucer's use of ekphrasis is so different from Virgil's use that we might question whether it is ekphrasis at all. It is radical for Chaucer himself, whose other ekphrastic passages follow the classical tradition more closely. We find significant use of the trope in three of Chaucer's other works. *The Book of the Duchess* refers to the illustrations in the dreamer's bed chamber:

> And sooth to seyn, my chambre was
> Ful wel depeynted, and with glas
> Were al the wyndowes wel yglased
> Ful clere, and nat an hoole ycrased,
> That to beholde hyt was gret joye.
> For hooly al the story of Troye
> Was in the glasynge ywroght thus,
> Of Ector and of kyng Priamus,
> Of Achilles and of kyng Lamedon,
> And eke of Medea and of Jason,
> Of Paris, Eleyne, and of Lavyne. (321-31)

The narrator adds that the walls were painted with the "text and glose" of the *Romance of the Rose*. While short and providing no visual description, the ekphrasis seems fairly traditional.

Again in *The Parliament of Fowls*, the narrator describes figures sculpted before and inside a temple of brass; for example:

> The god Priapus saw I, as I wente,
> Withinne the temple in sovereyn place stonde,
> In swich aray as whan the asse hym shente
> With cri by nighte, and with hys sceptre in honde.
> Ful besyly men gonne assaye and fonde
> Upon his hed to sette, of sondry hewe,
> Garlondes ful of freshe floures newe. (253-59)

The passage calls upon the audience's memory of the image of Priapus; the ekphrasis is descriptive, and again traditional.

The longest and most developed example however, is in the Knight's Tale where the poet describes the three temples constructed as part of the amphitheater. The passage uses all of Becker's types, and again the use follows tradition, as in this example describing the statue of Venus:

> The statue of Venus, glorious for to se,
> Was naked, fletynge in the large see,
> And fro the navele doun al covered was
> With wawes grene, and brighte as any glas.
> A citole in hir right hand hadde she,
> And on hir heed, ful semely for to se,
> A rose gerland, fressh and wel smellynge;
> Above hir heed hir dowves flikerynge. (I.1955-62)

The "wel smellynge" garland resonates with Homer's music of a "clear-toned lyre." Sarah Stanbury observes that in this example, "the action of the gaze or attention to one sense activate[s] another, breathing life into the garland; metaphoric slips into virtual" (103).

House of Fame

Like the Knight's Tale with its three temples, *The House of Fame* features three buildings—the Temple of Glass, the House of Fame, and the House of Rumor. The Temple of Glass with its mural establishes the general theme of fame, but it also, by means of Chaucer's radical use of ekphrasis, offers a subtext on the nature of communication itself that is echoed in the other two edifices. The Temple of Glass, dedicated to Venus, is constructed on the literary site of Dido's temple to Juno, just as Chaucer would later construct another temple to Venus in the Knight's Tale (the descriptions of the statue in each are strikingly similar, even given the iconographic tradition). Each painted wall acts as a boundary marker, an entry point—in one case marking Aeneas's entry into Dido's (and Juno's) domain and the relationship in which he becomes enmeshed, and the other, the narrator/dreamer's entry into the domain of the goddess Fama and his initiation into her mysteries, since the Temple of Glass acts as an antechamber to the House of Fame. The

walls of these temples speak eloquently of the past and the people who inhabited it—in both cases, the Trojan War and its Greek and Trojan participants.

Chaucer uses several kinds of strategies in dealing with the wall: inscription, narrative using the "I saw" formula, digression, narrative independent of visual perception, and the speaking wall. The tale of Troy begins with a tablet of brass upon which is written the opening lines of the *Aeneid*. The narrator seems to see the inscription first without noticing the pictures. As he reads the lines, the pictures become visible, as though they have metamorphosed out of the words, and he is suddenly viewing familiar scenes. His descriptions follow a formula which emphasizes his visual perception. The formula is "___ saugh I ...how..." where the first term is a temporal adverb such as "then" or "next:"

> "First sawgh I the destruction / of Troye...How Ilyon assayled was and wonne..." (151-59)

> "And I saugh next, in al thys fere, How Creusa, daun Eneas wif / ...Fledden eke with drery chere /...How Creusa was ylost, allas." (174-83).

While the material is presented as a narrative experienced through representative scenes, there is little visual description. Chaucer emphasizes the visual nature of the experience through the word "saugh," but providing a visual image does not seem to be the goal. The narrator's gaze is a means of turning the artifact into the real.

In the course of describing those scenes that show Aeneas's cruelty to Dido, the narrator digresses several times on the subject of lovers—his own lack of success in love, Dido's foolishness in trusting a stranger, or the falsity of men—digressions which are not directly represented by anything he sees on the wall, but seem to be brought to mind by the narrative. For example, in castigating Dido for trusting a man whose true nature she does not know:

> Therefore I wol seye a proverbe,
> That "he that fully knoweth th' erbe
> May saufly leye hyt to his yë."—
> Withoute drede this ys no lye. (289-92)

Here the digressions do slow the momentum, but not because ekphrasis is static. They are not part of the poet's description of the wall, but digression from that digression, divergences from the ekphrastic description.

At line 293, in a move that places this work well beyond the bounds of any traditional idea of ekphrasis, he abandons the fiction that he is looking at the wall, and is overcome by his own direct narrative (again interrupted by digressions):

> But let us speke of Eneas,
> How he betrayed hir, allas,
> And lefte hir ful unkyndely.
> So when she saw al utterly
> That he wolde hir of trouthe fayle,
> And wende fro hir to Itayle,
> She gan to wringe hir hondes two,
> "Allas," quod she, "what me ys wo!" (293-300)

At this point the narrator no longer mediates between the wall and the audience. What occurs when the wall disappears? Two interpretations are possible. In the first, the poet appropriates the function of the wall. The wall, which needs the poet to give it voice, ceases to exist and the text is ascendant. In the second possibility, the wall has subsumed the poet so that it speaks directly without his intervention—the pictorial becomes the verbal. But, as we shall see, this is not the final word on the issue. In either case, even by postmodern standards, Chaucer's use of ekphrasis is radical.

Throughout, the narrator has reported on sounds or speech as if the wall were itself speaking, as if in seeing the images, one could also hear the sounds, and even though the narrator is describing still scenes, the temporal nature of the uttered word undermines any impression of static images which we might expect to find. For example, one scene shows how Aeneas fled from the burning city,

> And took his fader Anchises,
> And bar hym on hys bak away,
> Cryinge, "Allas, and welaway!" (168-70)

In another, the dead Creusa appears to Aeneas and urges him to flee:

> And seyde he moste unto Itayle,
> As was hys destinee, sauns faille;
> That hyt was a pitee for to here,
> When hir spirit han appere,
> The wordes that she to hym seyde,
> And for to kepe hir son hym preyed. (187-92)

These examples push the trope further than even those examples where Virgil or Homer seemed to hear sounds relating to the scenes they described, but the most extreme example is the long speech given by Dido addressing Aeneas (reminiscent of Dido's letter to Aeneas in the *Heroides*). The narrator claims that he dreamed these words, rather than having read them in another book, but how these words were produced, whether the wall speaks the words, or Dido comes out of the wall to speak them in person, or the words emanate from the heavens, he does not say. We have in all some 56 lines of speech by Dido berating Aeneas for leaving her, such as

> "Allas," quod she, "my swete heart,
> Have pitee on my sorwes smerte,
> And slee mee not! Goo noght awey!
> O woful Dido, wel-away!" (315-18)

While the Narrator claims to have heard these words in his dream, he refers the reader to Virgil and Ovid if he or she wants to know how Dido died or what words she actually spoke.

The longest digression follows Dido's speech, and offers a list of women and the men who treated them cruelly: Phyllis and Demophon, Breseyda and Achilles, Oenone and Paris, Ariadne and Theseus, etc. Dido's speech and this list provide a long argument against Aeneas and portray him as an unfeeling boor. But having carefully built up a case against Aeneas, the narrator undercuts the whole argument in a few words:

> But to excusen Eneas
> Fullyche of al his grete trespas,
> The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,
> Bad him goo into Itayle,

> And leve Auffrikes regioun,
> And Dido and hir faire toun. (427-32)

If we accept the reading that the pictorial wall has taken over the voice of the poet, he here returns to his senses and refuses to allow that voice to have the last word. The authority for the recovery of Aeneas's good character is not the narrator's dream, nor the illustrated wall, but "the book," the text which displaces the fictional visual source. The narrator's knowledge of the book has answered the accusations, which in truth have come also from the narrator's knowledge of Ovid and other writers as well as from his constructed testimony of the wall. Page Dubois has observed that one of the uses of ekphrasis is "the possibility of difference in the representation of a viewer inside a text who can represent the poet, the listener, or reader, or not, who can be a foil for irony, for a complex set of responses to the object represented" (46). The basis of authority is just as unstable as the form of expression. When the poet wants to offer conflicting interpretations of the events, he shifts from wall to dream to book, his references metamorphosing just as Ovid's mythical characters do.

As soon as he has excused Aeneas, the poet returns to the "saugh I" formula and ends with praise of the artisan:

> "A, Lord," thoughte I, "that madest us,
> Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
> Of ymages, ne such richesse,
> As I saugh graven in this chirche;
> But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,
> Ne where I am, ne in what contree." (470-75)

Chaucer's notional ekphrasis allows him the freedom to use the artifact to express whatever ideas he chooses. We are always aware that the wall has no substance, that it is always at the mercy of the poet's whim. There are only the poet's words, whether he adheres to ekphrastic tradition or not; but Chaucer does not even try to maintain the illusion that there is a visible wall.

Some critics have found Chaucer's divergence from tradition puzzling because it challenges or disappoints the binary expectation. Henry Kelly has criticized Chaucer for not limiting himself to a description of the visual. He accuses Chaucer of "muddlement and

inattention to the visual arts," claiming that he has forgotten that he is translating Boccaccio into a different context (115).

Margaret Bridges argues that in *all* of Chaucer's ekphrastic passages he "has been undermining his audience's expectations that the ecphrasis will fulfill a number of traditional functions, drawing attention instead to the visual artifact's status as a narrative fiction" (157). I would argue, however, that Chaucer's other ekphrastic passages fit well within the parameters of traditional ekphrasis, and that any reader who was familiar with the *Aeneid* would have found them unexceptional in that regard. It is only in the *House of Fame* that Chaucer ignores the boundaries of traditional ekphrasis, and his doing so makes an important point about the nature of communication, verbal and visual, which is related to what the text has to say about fame, a point which is reiterated in Books II and III. The binary expectation is undermined in *House of Fame* as, in Chaucer's hands, the mode of communication becomes unstable, shifting from visual to verbal, from written to aural and back again. Neither is the gender binary subject to conclusive interpretation. In Chaucer's source, Dido's wall, while it seems passive, emasculates Aeneas, hindering his progress and bringing tears to his eyes. Geffrey the narrator encounters a wall which might be seen as a passive object with no voice, speaking only through the voice of the masculine poet; but in an equally valid reading, the visual narrative of the wall apparently consumes the narrator, appropriating his language and drawing out his emotions. Chaucer's subversion of traditional ekphrastic expectations opens the door to multiple responses to and interpretations of the text and the relationship between and among the source, the dream, the fictional wall, and the verbal description. Things which seem to be solid dissipate, and those things which seem insubstantial are liable to assume a solid form at any time.

This instability is echoed in Book II in the lengthy discussion on the nature of sound. As the eagle carries Geffrey toward the House of Fame, he gives him a lesson in the physics of sound. The quotation is long, but important, since it establishes a natural basis for the shifting nature of communication, which is the purpose for and the message of the ekphrasis:

> Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken;
> And every speche that ys spoken,
> Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,

In his substaunce ys but air; (765-68)
....
     for yf that thow
Throwe on water now a stoon,
Wel wost thou Hyt wol make anoon
A litel roundell as a sercle,
Paraunter brod as a covercle;
And right anoon thow shalt see wel
That whel wol cause another whel,
And that the thridde, and so forth, brother,
Every sercle causynge other
 Wydder than hymselve was; (788-97)
....
As I have of the water preved,
That every cercle causeth other,
Ryght so of ayr, my leve brother;
Everych ayr another stereth
More and more, and speche up bereth. (814-20)

Sounds are as insubstantial as air, but the striking thing about them is that when the sound waves have made their way to the House of Fame, they undergo a change:

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 hyt 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,
And ys not this a wonder thing? (1074-83)

The words themselves are surprisingly enduring, but their form is unstable. Once spoken they become air, but upon reaching the House of Fame, they take on a solid form. In this case it is not pictures or writing which undergoes ekphrastic metamorphosis, but the spoken word.

    Again, as in the Temple of Glass, artifacts speak with their own voices. The building seems much like a gothic cathedral with pinnacles,

turrets, ornaments, and niches with statues. These statues represent musicians and bards whose music Chaucer can hear much as he could hear the voices of the people painted on Dido's wall. He uses the formula "_____ saugh I" as he did in Book I, and along with it, the formula "Ther herde I:"

> Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,
> That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,
> Orpheus ful craftily,
> And on his side, faste, by,
> Sat the harper Orion,
> And Eacides Chiron,
> And other harpers many oon. (1201-7)

> Ther herde I trumpen Messenus,
> Of whom that speketh Virgilius,
> There herde I trumpe Joab also
> Theodomas, and other mo;
> And all that used clarion
> In Cataloigne and Aragon. (1243-48)

In addition to musicians, the House of Fame honors poets with statues bearing on their shoulders the fame of those about whom they wrote: While musicians and poets are the means by which nations gain fame, they themselves achieve individual fame in the process. Statius, Homer, Dares, Dictys, Lollius, Guido della Colonne, and Geoffrey of Monmouth all of whom wrote about the Trojan War, as well as Josephus, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian are represented. Those whose words can grant fame share in the goddess's power, and they are those poets whose words survive in writing. The narrator puts himself in this company by calling attention to his profession as a poet, but at the same time, denies any desire for fame:

> I cam nought hyder, graunt mercy,
> For no such cause, by my hed!
> Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
> That no wight have my name in honde. (1874-77)

He has made similar protestations when carried off toward heaven by the eagle:

> "O God," thoughte I, "that madest kynde,
> Shal I noon other weyes dye?
> Where Joves wol me stellyfye,
> Or what thing may this sygnifye?
> I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,
> Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede,
> That was ybore up, as mèn rede,
> To hevene with daun Jupiter." (584-91)

Although the narrator denies any merit in common with the figures of Greek or Hebrew mythology, the fact that he places himself in the same textual space with them must call up a comparison of some kind. In fact, our own culture *has* stellified Chaucer in ways that he probably never could have imagined. However, lest we conclude that Chaucer is pointing to writing as a stable form of communication, we must not forget the names carved in ice which are melting away because they are on the south side of the hill,

> Tho sawe I al the half ygrave
> With famous folks names fele
> That had iben in mochel wele,
> And her fames wide yblowe.
> But wel unnethes koude I knowe
> Any letters for to rede
> Hir names by; for, out of drede,
> They were almost ofthowed so
> That of the letters oon or two
> Was molte away of every name
> so unfamous was woxe hir fame. (1136-46)

The sight causes him to ask, "What may ever laste?" (1147).

A similar form-shifting occurs in the House of Rumor, an edifice like a large whirling birdcage. The rumors fly from mouth to mouth, growing always larger:

> And whan that was ful yspronge,
> And woxen more on every tonge,
> Than ever hit was, [hit] wente anoon
> Up to a wyndowe out to goon;

> Or , but hit myghte out there pace,
> Hyt gan out crepe at som crevace,
> And flygh forth faste for the nones. (2081-87)

The spoken word grows and takes the form of a bird which tries to fly away, reiterating the instability of form. While the birds certainly point to the way in which rumors come alive, they resonate with the wall that seems to take on its own life as it speaks through the poet.

The Invocations which begin each book also address the issue of the changing form of art. The first invocation which is addressed to Morpheus, asks that the poet succeed in writing his poem. The invocations in Books II and III both make reference to the translation of thought into writing. The invocation in Book II addresses Venus and the muses, then states:

> O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,
> And in the tresorye hyt shette
> Of my brayn, now shal men se
> Yf any vertu in the be
> To tellen al my drem aright. (523-27)

The poem is written in the poet's brain (ephemeral) but must be translated into writing on the page much as the images from the wall are translated into words both seen and heard. The invocation to Apollo in Book III makes much the same point:

> And yif, devyne vertu, thow
> Wilt helpe me to shewe now
> That in myn hed ymarked ys--
> Loo, that is for to menen this,
> The Hous of Fame for to descryve—
> Thou shalt se me go as blyve
> Unto the nexte laure y see,
> And kysse yt, for hyt is thy tree. (1101-8)

Again the poem is written ("ymarked") in the poets brain and must be translated into another kind of writing; its fluidity is part of the nature of poetry and of fame.

Conclusion

While the *House of Fame* appears to be heavily influenced by Virgil, it is much more Ovidian than Virgilian. The description of Rumor does echo Virgil's, especially in the connection with birds,[3] but the House of Rumor is much like Rumor's house in *Metamorphoses* which is placed on a mountain top at the threshold between earth and sky. It is full of murmuring and stories that grow with repetition (286-87). The eagle and the birds of rumor are reminiscent of the birds in *Metamorphoses*; many of the characters are transformed into birds of different types, and in Ovid's description of the death of Dido, the swirling ashes from her funeral pyre become birds (13.325-6). Geffrey's fear of becoming stellified as the eagle bears him upward toward the heavens again alludes to *Metamorphoses,* many of whose subjects became constellations. The general theme of mutability in *House of Fame* is very much in keeping with the whole direction of *Metamorphoses*, although one deals more with forms in nature and the other with forms in communication.

The theme of the nature of communication—its form and durability—is closely tied to the theme of the insubstantial. nature of fame and consequently to the art of the poet and painter. Geffrey's fear of posthumous misquotation (1.1877 above) shows how unstable he believes even the most lasting of media to be. His ekphrastic passage on the wall mural provides an entrance into the topic of the nature of communication, and gives evidence of how the boundary between visual and verbal may become fluid. Like the medieval elements, earth, air, fire, and water, which may become transformed into one another under the right conditions, spoken, written, and pictured ideas can metamorphose into one another without warning. The work weaves the ideas of fame, change, and poetic expression into a complex and engaging pattern.

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Notes

[1] See Mitchell 169-71, Heffernan 108.

[2] The Latin terms are Becker's.

[3] Rumor herself is a bird covered not only with feathers, but eyes, ears, and mouths (4.239-65).

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