臺大文史哲學報　第六十九期
2008年11月　　頁251~272
臺　灣　大　學　文　學　院

Textual Vision and Visual Text:
Envisioning the Vernacular Text in *The House of Fame*[*]

Yang, Ming-tsang[**]

Abstract

While many critics of Chaucer's early poem *The House of Fame* have put a premium on problems of language and textuality and others have called attention to a predominance of images and sight, they have generally failed to address the crucial convergence of the textual and the visual. This paper investigates three interrelated issues critical to an appropriate understanding of the poem: first, the blurring of the visual and the textual; second, the role of sound or speech in this conflation; and finally, the problems of vision and seeing that help empower the project of vernacular writing. The multiple configurations of visuality in the dream world provide crucial insight into the complicated relationships between Chaucer's vernacular writing and his culture's canon, which haunts the dream vision and text with imposing yet ambivalent visibility and textuality. The poem explores to the fullest the vernacular poet's position, the sources of his knowledge and cultural memory, and the limits and strengths of his vision. As Chaucer exploits the tension and intersection of word and image in the dream vision, his visual text dramatizes vernacular writing's confrontation with canonicity and envisions promises of negotiating and achieving fame through seeing, reading and writing in the vernacular text.

Keywords: *House of Fame*, textuality, visuality, vision, images, vernacular writing

97.08.14 收稿，97.10.28 通過刊登。

* The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions on the original version of this essay.

** Associate Professor of English, National Taiwan University.

Geoffrey Chaucer's early poem *The House of Fame* begins with a discussion on dream lore that covers the haziness surrounding the causes, types, meanings, and interpretations of dreams. The discussion ends with the claim to have the most wonderful dream ever "dreamed": "For never sith that I was born,/ Ne no man elles me beforn,/ Mette, I trowe stedfastly,/ So wonderful a drem as I" (59-62).[1] With the deliberate reflection on the promises as well as the problems of dreams in the long discourse, the dream text at once situates itself within and distances itself from the experience and composition of dream vision. From the very beginning, the poet articulates the important correlation of dream, vision, language and text in the process of speaking and writing. This paper will therefore first investigate the blurring of the visual and the textual to see how the two play out their respective force while intersecting with each other in the poem. The second part of the paper will then examine the role of sound or speech in the dream text to show how it further confirms the conflation of vision and text. In the final part, the paper will explore the problems of vision and seeing and the ensuing promises for a crucial empowerment of the project of vernacular writing. Through the discussion of the three interrelated issues, this study hopes to contribute to an appropriate understanding of the complex yet dynamic visuality and textuality at work in Chaucer's vernacular dream text.

I. The Convergence of the Textual and the Visual

Critics have put a premium on problems of language and textuality in Chaucer's *House of Fame*. In his pioneering study, Robert O. Payne treats the poem as a piece in poetics (129-37). More recently, Robert M. Jordan associates the poem with "a poetics of textual collage, narrative self-reflexiveness, and stylistic flamboyance" (23), while Jesse M. Gellrich sees the poem as an investigation of the working of language, in which Chaucer studies "how language signifies, where it originates, how it is authorized, and how it is received" (174). As Piero Boitani has indicated, "The poem is the literary universe of a fourteenth-century Englishman with a rich cultural formation," (205) and the roots of Chaucer's inspiration in the poem are "bookish and literary" (216). Thus, soon after the narrator/dreamer (named Geffrey) begins to relate his dream, he repeatedly calls attention to the shared knowledge of books in his culture as his textual sources (e.g., 377-80, 385, 406, 426, 427-29, 447-50, 590). The references to Virgil's *Aeneid* are so frequent that it

1 All Chaucer citations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*; the poem is quoted by line numbers.

becomes "the Ur-poem, the Ur-narrative" (Boitani 194) of Chaucer's poem. From this perspective, the dream proper is not about events past or future, but readings about events that the poet has been embroiled in old books of the textual culture. Furthermore, the narrator's recurrent self-reflexive theatrics either contemplates the problem of language or elaborately specifies the textile nature of his compositions (e.g., 66, 109, 151, 245-48, 509, 512, 525, 1109, 1255-56, 1282-84, 1878-82).

On the other hand, few readers would fail to notice the remarkable extent to which the narrator relies on images and sight, a practice that confirms V. A. Kolve's view that it is in the dream vision that literary composition as act of visual imagining is highlighted (32). One prevalent formulation the narrator Geffrey uses is the validation of experience through reference to sight. When the dream, or the text, begins, he describes being enclosed within a well-defined space filled with an abundance of images:

> But as I slepte, me mette I was
> Within a temple ymad of glas,
> In which ther were moo ymages
> Of gold, stondynge in sondry stages,
> And moo ryche tabernacles,
> And with perre moo pynacles,
> And moo curiouse portreytures,
> And queynte maner of figures
> Of olde werk, then I saugh ever. (119-27)

The major pictorial details here ("a temple ymad of glas," "ymages," "stages," "tabernacles," "pynacles," and "portreytures") are informed by the common visual objects and design of the contemporary Gothic edifice. Geffrey later even uses the word "chirche" (473) to identify the temple of glass, thus manifesting the splendid visual space's mirroring of the grandeur of contemporary Gothic visual culture. Several scholars (e.g., Braswell, Hagiioanuu, Kendrick) have demonstrated the influence of contemporary Gothic architecture on many descriptive details in the poem. Mary Flowers Braswell, for example, comments that "a systematic comparison of the architecture in Chaucer's poem with the contemporary art forms with which the poet would have been familiar seems to reveal Chaucer's stubborn adherence to material reality" in the composition of the poem. She further suggests that Chaucer's knowledge of the Gothic visual culture was based on his involvement in architectural projects such as the Palace of Westminster, the Tower of London and the no longer extant Chapel of St. George at Windsor and proposes that the temple of glass was inspired by the Sainte-Chapelle, the renowned Gothic chapel in Paris (101-9).

Although the two groups of scholars have respectively pointed to two important directions for study, they have generally failed to address the crucial conversion between the visual and the textual in the poem. While the act of seeing and the visual space dominate the narrative, the introduction of Virgil's *Aeneid* foregrounds the texuality of the vision. In a highly suggesting move, the poet dreamer sees the opening lines of the epic (in English translation) written on a brass tablet. As Geffrey continues the narration, he accentuates the important role of the sense of sight with so many repetitions of the expression "I sawgh" (e.g., 151, 162, 174, 193, 198, 209, 212, 219, 253) that the unfolding of the dream text is simultaneously the unveiling of the visual field. Book I offers especially interesting evidence concerning the ways in which the verbal, the textual and the visual are linked. As Kolve has observed, more than 330 of Book I's 508 lines are devoted to the story of Virgil's *Aeneid*, described as "graven" on the walls of Venus' temple, "a long section remarkable…for the ambiguity with which it registers the mode of the experience being described" (41). One major cause of the blurring of the distinction between pictorial and verbal representation is created by the ambiguity of the term "grave" (193, 212, 253, 256, 451)—which can mean either to represent pictorially or to inscribe in letters (contrast 211 with 245-7). Thus, the textual inception of the narrative appears immediately implicated with an emphasis on sight, with the gilded visual portrayal of the legend on the panels intertwined with the verbal account. As Geffrey begins to look at the images (which may be words as well), the literal words seem to transform themselves into pictorial signs that recreate the central moments from the ill-fated romance. Although Geffrey's (re)presentation is actually a rewriting or a re-vision of Virgil's story, as most of Dido's lament is not found in the original story, he repeatedly refers readers to his textual sources, even with the blunt statement that "Non other auctour alegge I" (314). The statement is ambiguous, as it may mean that Geffrey is citing no other author than Virgil or that he is not relying on any author.[2] In either case, the frame of reference of the bookish, textual culture is at work.

When Geffrey steps out of the enclosed visual space of the temple, a massive span of desert emerges into view and triggers an unnerving crisis in which he is vulnerably exposed to the unknown visibility (or invisibility) of the immense wilderness. That is why Geffrey, acutely aware of the potential threat and danger

2 Even though Dido's lament is not found in the Virgil's story, Chaucer may have been influenced or inspired by other textual sources. Christopher Baswell has noted the foregrounding of women in illustrations of the Aeneas story in vernacular manuscripts, especially in manuscripts of *Roman d'Eneas*, which indicate shifts in readerly attention that challenge Virgil's concern with male heroism (25-28).

this encounter might entail, desperately pleads for divine protection from evil: "'O Crist,' thoughte I, 'that art in blysse,/ Fro fantome and illusion/ Me save!' And with devocion/ Myn eyen to the hevene I caste" (492-95). The contrast between the details of the illustrations within the temple of Venus and the wide expanse of emptiness (483-85) foregrounds the ways in which the sense of sight functions to formulate knowledge for the dreamer. Some critics have suggested that the episode demonstrates the narrator's visual limitations, as it leads to the arrival of the eagle (e.g., Hagiioannu 35), a creature of wisdom, vision and power, famed for its lofty flight, clarity of vision, and penetrating gaze, powerful enough to look into the sun's eye. Paradoxically, here the particular capacity seems to belong to Geffrey, who stares at the dazzling bird that is described as "another sonne" (506). Yet the visual contact with the eagle turns out to be initiated by a dynamic textual encounter. According to the eagle, he comes to bring reward to Geffrey's immersion in the textual culture (652-68), and he confirms the explanation of the house of Fame by drawing Geffrey's attention to the textual source: "First shalt thou here where she duelleth,/ And so thyn oune bok hyt tellith" (711-12). Moreover, the eagle himself can be regarded as the embodiment of textual references, for, in addition to a preponderance of allusions to Virgil and Ovid, some critics also see the poem as a commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy* for a number of explicit echoes of themes or phrases, especially the image of the eagle that appears in Dante's Purgatorio IX.[3] When Geffrey later approaches the house of Fame, the texuality of the vision (namely, how vision is shaped or informed by texts) and the visuality of text seem to converge as visual objects confronting him have turned into verbal signs or script: a glistening "roche of yse" (1130) covered with writing; the castle of Fame "ful of ymageries…al with gold behewe" (1304-6); the building constructed of "pilers," each of which identified with a famous author. As Jesse M. Gellrich has made clear, "Fame's House, made of the pillars of the community of 'olde auctores,' is a *domus auctoritatis*, a 'palace of writing'" (187). Against the visual backdrop of Fame's hall, the narrator reminds readers that what they see is mediated by the text he presents to them: "And loo, thys hous, of which *I write*,/ Syker be ye, hit nas not lyte" (1977-78; emphasis added). Accordingly, the house of Fame is a material structure that is both textually and visually grounded.

This overlap and overlay of the textual and the visual suggests that the narrator's experience of the world of signs in the dream vision and text is mediated by both textual and visual encounters. What characterizes his narration is a constant

3 On Chaucer's use of Dante, see Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A Revaluation* (Norman: Pilgrim, 1984) and Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads the Divine Comedy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989).

conversion between the visual and the textual. The narrator repeatedly switches from the visual scenes presented to him (or rather he himself presents in words) to call attention to the textual sources as well as his very act of speaking/writing, so much so that the textual reference appears to define the framework of his own visuality. Thus in the middle of describing what he sees, Geffrey bluntly tells his readers: "Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos, /Rede Virgile in Eneydos/ Or the Epistle of Ovyde,/ What that she wrot or that she dyde" (377-80), "But to excusen Eneas/ Fullyche of al his grete trespas,/ The book seyth . . ." (427-29), and "Which whoso willeth for to knowe,/ He moste rede many a rowe/ On Virgile or on Claudian, Or Daunte, that hit telle kan" (447-50). Geffrey even spells out his own textual immersion through the mouth of the eagle:

> 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 anoon,
> And, also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look. (652-58).

This bedtime reading that typically occasions Chaucer's dream visions dramatizes the experience of textual/bookish immersion and reiterates his initial textual (and visual) experience as a reader as well as an overdetermined sense of the textual origins of his "visionary" experience. A common reading of the poem is that it is a narrative of the dream in which illustrated panels and other images invoke texts that are read in the waking life, an interpretation that sees the dream as visually grounded. But if Chaucer's dreamer epitomizes the well-informed medieval reader, and the dream itself invokes materials presumably read and studied in the dreamer's waking life, then a careful reading would point to a different perspective from which to view the whole process of signification. In other words, the complications of medieval experience and process of reading books may create images as visual grounding for the dream text and endow what the narrator sees in the dream with both visual and textual dimensions. Words at once invoke and become pictures, which in turn give rise to words to describe the images. As Christopher Baswell has argued, when the narrator found himself dreaming Virgil's *Aeneid* in captioned pictures, his experience could find analogue in contemporary manuscript illustration of vernacular versions of the Aeneas story, whose systematic presentation may have been an important means of access to Virgilian story for some beholders (23). Baswell further suggested that the visual rendition of the Aeneas story in books of the romance tradition may influence the architectural makeup of the dream, for "at

least one splendid *Eneas* manuscript illustrates the opening episodes as a series of vignettes on a diapered gold ground, separated by pillars and Gothic arches," with arresting similarity to Venus's temple in the poem (231).

Geffrey's space travel with the eagle again attests to this critical connection between reading, seeing and visualization. It appears that what the narrator sees reminds him of what he reads (e.g., Alexander the Great, Scipio, Daedalus, Icarus, Plato, Boethius). He even states that what he sees can verify what he reads:

> And than thoughte y on Marcian,
> And eke on Anteclaudian,
> That sooth was her descripsion
> Of alle the hevenes region,
> As fer as that y sey the preve;
> Therfore y kan hem now believe. (985-90)

But the truth is that what Geffrey sees in this quasi ascension to heaven is the imagination or visualization of what he has read. Margaret Aston has commented that reading for the literate person in the Middle Ages was a passage to visual memory—a calling to mind things that were absent (116-20). If reading was for the sake of imaging, the act of seeing in the poem, accentuated through the visual medium of the panels and other material objects, becomes both an act of reading and seeing. The dreamer interprets what he perceives by mnemonic reference to the story, which may be a textual or/and visual one, based on pictures or images in his mind, conjured up by the story engraved on the wall or written on the manuscript. In this way, reading, seeing, remembering and writing are interrelated or even interchangeable. As a result, it is difficult to decide where the visual/pictorial space ends and where the verbal/textual space begins, for the poem is a textual dream as well as a visual text.

II. The Relationship of Sound/Speech and Sight

A proper understanding of this conflation of the visual and the textual in the dream text enables us to assess the validity of the common argument for an increasing prevalence of sound or speech over the visual as the narrative progresses. According to Lesley Kordecki, for example, the narrator's prioritization of sound indicates the departure from his role as viewer in a vision (59-60) and thereby undermines the genre of dream vision (58). Kordecki argues that "Only when the dreamer loses himself and turns to voice, not vision, does he partake in the authorial process" (62), and "Only when the petitioner, through speech, appeal to the goddess does Chaucer, through direct discourse, make the narrative come alive" (72). I want

to take issue with Kordecki's view here, for it represents a typical misunderstanding of the multiple configurations of visuality in the poem (and a conception of a stern duality that belies the very mechanism of dream vision in general).[4] The argument is unconvincing for it cannot justify why the visual and the aural are unrelated and why dream vision should be limited to visual representation alone. Furthermore, it fails to address the subtle ways in which the narrator negotiates with his sources in his narration and writing. In fact, the significance of the speaking voice is already evident from the beginning of the narrative. As Robert M. Jordan rightly points out, the narrator's extensive introduction to the account of his wonderful dream—some 120 lines of digressive talk—draws our attention to the speaking voice (35). The long preamble reminds readers that it is the narrator who is "speaking" to them, to the extent that the presentation of the dream vision is only made possible through the speaking voice. In Book I, whose predominant reference to sight is much emphasized by critics, the narrator does not allow his speaking voice to go unnoticed. After the description of the brass and Dido's story, the narrator immediately adds: "What shulde I speke more queynte,/ Or peyne me my wordes peynte/ To speke of love?" (245-47; cf. 293). The ekphratic account of the episode is then punctuated by a string of exclamations of the agitated voice:

> *Allas!* what harm doth apparence,
> Whan it is fals in existence!
> For he to hir a traytour was;
> Wherfore she slow hirself, *allas!*
> *Loo*, how a woman doth amys
> To love hym that unknowen ys!
> For, *be Cryste, lo*, thus yt fareth:
> "Hyt is not al gold that glareth." (265-72; emphasis added)

The long succession of the hyperactive voice heralds Dido's climatic bewailings which bring into focus the predominance of speech. And here the speaking voice attributes the cause of the tragedy to the deceptive appearance and false promise, thus highlighting the problem of look (vision) and visual illusion and their connection with speech. Geffrey's space travel with the eagle also displays a complicated dynamics of vision, text and speech. As Geffrey and his guide

4 Steven F. Kruger's remark cogently summarizes the appeal of the dream: "Because [the dream] leaves the dreamer in a position *between clearly defined entities*, the dream becomes a way of exploring *'betweenness'* . . . an instrument for examining the grey areas that bridge the terms of polar opposition." See *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), p. 65.

constantly talk about the texts they have read in the face of the visionary experience, what they see is informed by what they read, which in turn is brought into view through their speech.

In fact, the culture of reading in Chaucer's England was still generally an oral one, a culture reliant on the voice of people reading to themselves aloud and the reciting voice of the communal literary experience (Fry 31-2; Grudin 2). According to the study by Michael Camille, the page was a prompt to sound for devotional reading such as the Psalms and later Books of Hours. Likewise, the rise of romance as a genre of courtly literature indicates the context of social or collective response amidst oral transmission, rather than the typical solitary silent reader of the later periods (1998: 41). Kolve has also observed that "Hearing a tale in company was one of the great ceremonial pleasures of medieval society," and, since it was widely valued, Chaucer's poetic art is "shaped by, and continually responsive to, an oral-audial environment" (14-15). Kolve goes on to argue that readers make sense of the text "by narrative imagery, the images they form in their minds as they attend to the progress of a story" (18). In the particular medieval literary practice Kolve and Camille elaborate, the close relationship between the textual, oral/audial and visual is powerfully established. In this regard, the narrator's foregrounding of the deploring Dido, framed in the visual space of the textual authority in the poem, can be seen as a creative crystalization of his imaginary reading of the *Aeneid*. It can also possibly explain the eagle's visualization of speech as he correlates it to the speaker: "Whan any speche ycomen ys/ Up to the paleys, anon-ryght/ Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight/ Which that the word in erthe spak" (1074-84). In the eagle's peculiar rendition, sight and sound are physically interchangeable.

The eagle's famous description of the metaphysics of sound in Book II (765-821) featuring circles and multiplication of sound waves can also illuminate the point here. On the one hand, the familiar account is informed by textual authorities;[5] on the other hand, it formulates an image of textual relationships, a telling picture reminiscent of textual structure. As Elizabeth Scala suggests, "The circles are the visual analogue of the air that is moved by a spoken sound, but they may also figure for us the chain of texts in which such sounds (speech, rumor, fame) are memorialized" (35). Understood in visual terms, the acoustic imaginings attest to the strong dependence of the textual on oral presentation and aural reception, and vice versa.

This interdependence of text and speech can help us better understand the

5 The discourse on sound is based on a well-known theory. See the note on p. 983 in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

complexities of visuality and textuality involved in the description of the house of Fame in Book III. Kordecki remarks that Fame's decisions are all "announced by sound" and that the place is "all about sound, not sight" (72). This is far from true, for a closer look will show that the presentation of the house of Fame also witnesses a similar dynamics that we have been examining. Granted that in Latin, as in Middle English, fame can mean either reputation or rumor, fame is closely predicated on verbal report or speech. It is therefore reasonable to expect a variety of sounds at play in the house of Fame. What emerges as more remarkable is the visual dimension the entire episode creates. The dreamer gives careful attention to visual settings, as can notably be seen in those visual details he mentions: "pynacles, Ymageries and tabernacles" indicate the Gothic style; "babewynnes," or gargoyles, decorate the building; and numerous windows, like "flakes . . . in grete snowes," recall the glass snowflake pattern in the rose window of medieval cathedrals (Braswell 106). The poet then devotes more than eighty lines of verse (1201ff.) to catalogue a long list of the imagery of statues, a visual plenitude that calls to mind a late Gothic façade characterized by an image overload. This is then followed by another series of description that visualizes again the Gothic space (1299-1306).

Indeed, acts of speaking and seeing are both constitutive narrative events in the poem. The eagle's introduction of the hall of Fame to Geffrey sets the sense of hearing side by side with that of sight: "Y shulde *bothe here and se*/ In this place wonder thynges" (1886-92; emphasis added). The most appealing graphic presentation of the episode is certainly the visualization of Fame, which imbues the supposedly oral/audial scene with an imposing visual image at the center stage:

> But in this lusty and ryche place
> That Fames halle called was,
> Ful moche prees of folk ther nas,
> Ne crowdyng for to mochil prees.
> But al on hye, above a dees,
> Sitte in a see imperiall,
> That made was of a rubee all,
> Which that a carbuncle ys ycalled,
> Y saugh, perpetually ystalled,
> A femynyne creature,
> That never formed by Nature
> Nas such another thing yseye. (1356-67)

In lavishing the iconic features on Fame, the narrator sees the goddess enshrined in a commanding status against the background of a visual space replete with pictorial details, so much so that she seems to become an emblem of sacral power. Enthroned

in the center, Fame thus assumes the lofty position of the imperial eye—she even has the dramatic feature of having numerous eyes (1981-82).[6] The canonical writers and their creations are also portrayed as statues adorning the great hall of Fame. The rhetorical catalogue of the canonical authors in statues and pillars also associates them with idols whose status demands a plethora of visual presence and exerts the authority of visual dominance, empowered by the supreme goddess.

What deserves our attention here is the description of Fame that closely relates the visual (sight) to the audial/oral (speech):

> For as feele eyen hadde she
> As fetheres upon foules be,
> Or weren on the bestes foure
> That Goddis trone gunne honoure,
> As John writ in th'Apocalips.
> Hir heer, that oundy was and crips,
> As burned gold hyt shoon to see;
> And soth to tellen, also she
> Had also fele upstondyng eres
> And tonges, as on bestes heres. (1381-90)

Late medieval culture demonstrated much concern with speech in general and with the mouth and the tongue in particular. The entrance to hell, for example, was often represented as a gigantic mouth that consumed sinners, as witnessed in wall paintings, stained-glass windows, carvings, manuscript illuminations, and even stage props in mystery cycle plays in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In wall paintings and stained-glass windows, hell mouths appeared in scenes of the Last Judgment, in which the worthy were rewarded ascent to heaven and the damned were cast into the inferno through the mouth of hell.[7] The image of Fame as a monstrous creature of immeasurable size with countless tongues, framed in particular reference to the Apocalypse in the narrator's observation, thus powerfully invokes iconography of mouth and speech that articulates the close relationship between the visual and the

6 Despite this apparent visual dominance Fame displays, the narrator does not show fear or intimidation. This is an important point to which I will return in the third part of the paper.

7 Examples of hell mouths on bench-ends can be seen at Horning (Norfolk), Southwold (Suffolk) and Freckenham (Suffolk). For a discussion of hell mouths throughout northern Europe, see Pamela Sheingorn, "Who can Open the Doors of His Face? The Iconography of Hell Mouth" *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1992), 1-19.

audial/oral.

But Fame also introduces other visual aspects. As Suzanne Conklin Akbari has aptly pointed out (206), the narrator first describes Fame in terms of light in his account of Dido. Like light, Fame travels instantaneously, penetrating mist (349-52); the analogy is explicit in the eagle's discussion of the dynamics of sound, where sound is broken air that flies "thurgh hys multiplicacioun" (784), namely through the transmission of sensible species, an idea reiterated several times in the poem (cf. 790-803, 1932-34, 2060ff.). Since in his widely used text on optics John Pecham employs a similar metaphor to account for the emanation of the visible species, Akbari further suggests that Chaucer is adopting a terminology that stresses the role of the intermediary, or the species, in the act of perception popularized through grammatical texts influenced by perspectivist writers such as Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon (207).

The description of Fame thus epitomizes a multiple convergence of the audial/oral, the visual and the textual in the presentation and writing of the dream vision. It shows how problematic it is to argue for the increasingly important role of sound or speech in the dream vision by overlooking its fundamental link with the visual field, which, as we have shown, is at the same time intersected with the textual space. The eagle has made it clear that it is because of the narrator's enthusiastic engagement with the textual culture and textualization that he is awarded the journey to the house of Fame. The eagle's explanation of the mechanism of sound (and by implication word or language) alludes to the textual origins of the narrator's version of the house of Fame, which indeed is modeled on the *Aeneid* IV. 173-90. This association of Fame, originally mediated by speech and language, with textual tradition seems to embody the medieval idea of Fame as tradition in general, which, Sheila Delany writes, turns Fame into "the body of traditional knowledge that confronted the educated fourteenth-century reader" (3). Beryl Rowland also argues that Fame's palace, as well as Venus's temple, is a hall of memory, where the poet "reveals the *loci* for various images and explains the significance which the images retain in the memory" (48). The narrator's references to memory may confirm this point (cf. 523-27, 1181-82). The episode of the house of Rumor further testifies to this dynamic convergence of vision, text and sound. To begin with, the eagle's introduction of the place accentuates the symbiosis of sight and sound: "As I have seyd, wol the solace/ Fynally with these thinges,/ Unkouthe syghtes and tydynges,/ To passe with thyn hevynesse" (2008-11). Then the narrator's description of the multiple audial place is punctuated by references to the sense of sight: "But which a congregacioun/ Of folk, as I saugh rome aboute/ Some wythin and some wythoute,/ Nas never seen, ne shal ben eft" (2034-37), and "Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned/ Togeder fle for oo tydynge" (2108-9). At the end

of the narrative (although the problem of the conclusion is unsettled), the narrator underscores the close tie of the act of seeing and textual authority one last time: "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). Boitani has keenly observed that in the house of Rumor, Chaucer "seems to abandon the world of literature and to tackle reality" (209), yet it is not reality as such, but "a reality fragmented and transformed into its narrative sign" (210). To put it another way, in the last episode the poet is dealing with reality as textualized visual signs and is reflecting on problems regarding the textuality of visible and audible reality. As it witnesses the close interconnection of text, vision and speech, it also discredits the argument for a prioritization of speech or sound in the later part of the poem.

III. Problems of Vision and Seeing

This manifold crisscrossing of sight, speech, and text reveals the tension and dynamism with which the narrator negotiates with the visualized textual sources. The dream vision/text becomes a site of cultural signification where the vigorous dialogism of various energies of the contemporary visual culture is brought into full play. The later Middle Ages saw multiple configurations of a complex visual culture: the splendors of Gothic cathedrals, a proliferation of public and devotional images, dramatic reenactments of Biblical stories, the exhibition of relics and other cultic objects, the elevation of the host within mass, the wealth of manuscript illuminations, to name only a few. However, medieval culture also harbored a fundamental Christian ambivalence toward vision that challenged its primacy with the inadequacy of the senses and the privilege accorded to "the Word." While the religious value of images and other visual practices was generally accepted in Chaucer's time, the excess of their uses invited mounting censure and condemnation that crystallized in the image debate, thus reiterating ancient iconoclastic polemics over the seductive power of images and the political implications of visual stimulation.[8] Granted the central ambivalence in Chaucer's culture about the visual—that it is at once dubious and fascinating—the multiple configurations of visuality in the narrator's dream world provide critical insight into the complicated relationships between Chaucer's vernacular writing and his culture's canon.

8 On the diverse issues and problems of the image debate, see the important study of Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts I; Laws against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) and the fine collection of essays in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick, James Simpson and Nicolette Zeeman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

Critics tend to either overemphasize the dreamer's power of seeing or exaggerate his passive role in visualizing, without paying due attention to the ambiguity of his vision that relates both to the visualized authorities and to himself as a reader as well as an observing subject, a dual performance that reveals the dreamer's vigorous struggle with the imposing authorities. For instance, Kordecki suggests that in Book I the narrator is simply reading the pictures, passively receiving (through sight) the story of Troy as the first lesson of his journey to fame (56). Michael Hagiioanuu also reads the poem as highlighting the limitations of the individual's knowledge as derived from what he can see before him (28, 35). On the opposite side, critics such as Laurel Amtower have argued that the vehicle of the dream allows the narrator, as a reader, to challenge the venerated traditions of authority and canonicity (282), for "it privileges the immediate vision of the dreamer over any knowledge that might hold true in the waking world" (Amtower 283). Ruth Evans has also commented on the powerlessness and ineffectiveness of textual tradition in her reading of the role of the *Aeneid* in the poem: "The engraving of the opening line of the *Aeneid* on a 'table of bras' is a graphic representation of the way that Virgil's epic is etched into cultural memory, but in a way that also freezes it and renders it lifeless" (58). Amtower and Evans are only partially right here, for in the visual world of Chaucer's poem, the immediate vision of the individual does not enjoy an unaffected vantage point. Moreover, written, textual tradition and cultural memory are far from lifeless or dead; on the contrary, they are the necessary point of departure for medieval vernacular writers and the very vital source of the presentation and writing of Geffrey's dream vision. In her illuminating study of problems of medieval textuality and authority, Elizabeth Scala writes, "Medieval texts must be authorized; that is, they must announce their authority—not who the narrator is, but from whom (*auctor*) or where (*auctoritas*) the narrator has taken the story" (2). This engagement with textual origins paradoxically enables them to appropriate authority within and against the precondition of their existence.

A consideration of medieval theories of vision will further shed light on the problems of the narrator's seeing and visualizing. Late medieval conceptions of vision were informed by theories of extramission and intromission. According to the extramission theory of vision, optical rays project from the eye and seize the object seen. Since the eye initiates vision that connects the viewer with the viewed, the eye (the subject) is the starting point and the active agent in vision. In this light, vision is active and motivated (expressing intention or desire), forceful and consequential (causing direct physical contact with the object seen and exercising power of gaze). From the intromissionist perspective, by contrast, visible objects emanate rays and generate, or multiply, visible species that are received by the eye. In her study of medieval visuality, Suzannah Biernoff lucidly explains the implication of this theory:

"objects and their species have the power to captivate and seduce us because they are agents and we are recipients" (104). In explaining how the visible qualities of objects are transmitted to the organ of sight, the intromission model sees the flow of visual rays as traveling from object to subject and thus places emphasis on the object seen (the image) or on the affective power of the image on the viewer. The differences between extramission and intromission theories are thus premised on the contrast of active vision of the subject/eye and passive vision in relation to the object/image, but, in fact, the distinction cannot be so clearly maintained. Biernoff has shown that in the Middle Ages the eye was simultaneously receptive and active, and "sight was at once an extension of the sensitive soul towards an object and the passage of sensible forms through the eye and into the brain" (3). Some versions of extramission also discuss how the visual rays are shaped by the object and return to the eye, thus suggesting the impact of sight upon the beholder, whereas the intromission model, although appearing to be a passive one, ends up being rooted in the active senses (Camille 2000: 206). Camille has observed that the late medieval focus on the object in intromission, rather than resulting in a neglect of subjectivity, witnessed the production of powerful religious images that appealed to the sensitivity of the perceiving subject and "helped construct new modes of subjectivity and human identity in both lay and monastic circles" (207). Cynthia Hahn has also pointed to the parallel development of theories of vision in the institution of the elevation of the host in the later Middle Ages (175). The elevation of the host, along with the popularity of devotional images, showed a significant visual practice that articulated the affective power of image and the role of the perceiving subject. Since vision in the Middle Ages was a way of relating to oneself, to the sensible world, and to God, it moved across a stable boundary of viewing subjects and visible objects and revealed that the relationship between subjects and objects was not unidirectional. Biernoff's comment nicely summarizes this central link that goes beyond the rigid divide of subject and object: "Vision was a dynamic extension of the subject into the world and a penetration and alteration of the viewer's body by the object" (102). What is at issue, therefore, is a vital reciprocity that generates a potential intertwining of the viewer and the viewed.

The visual world of the poem witnesses this forceful reciprocity. While Geffrey seems to highlight his eye by the repeated formula of "I sawgh" in the narration, the privileging of the immediate vision does not promise a secure foundation for knowledge, nor does it guarantee a straightforward medium for questioning the authority of the canon. Even as the poet dreamer underlines the discursiveness and textuality of the revered traditions and legends, he as an observer cannot assert straightforward control over the observed. While Geffrey sometimes comments on the blind spot of vision (e.g., 351-2, 708-09), the desert scene shows his keen

awareness of the potential problem of vision and the danger of visual deception, as he prays to Christ to protect him from hallucination and illusion (492-4). Images can also have animate aura or magical power (e.g., 1268-70). The most significant case in point is the depiction of goddess Fame and the statues of the canonical writers that we discussed earlier in the paper, a remarkable scene that grants the objects seen (or images) a predominant role. Fame defeats the dreamer's capacity for description, thus revealing the limitation of his vision. What is more, Fame is not only the object seen; she also takes up the center stage as the perceiving and judging subject that issues arbitrary ruling on the state of things. However, with her power of vision dramatized as having numerous eyes and her viewpoint accepted as the source of authority, the goddess Fame, flanked by the textual authorities, does not hold the viewer in awe. Even so, Geffrey still harbors unnamed, or unnamable, fear and anxiety in the presence of the goddess, as demonstrated by his careful distancing from and proclaimed disinterest in affairs of Fame (1873-77). Yet, the poem's obsession with textual origins, coupled with the anxiety over its own textual status, invokes the textual authorities as specters that, now embodied in the poem's visual field, stand there seeing and, themselves turned into spectacle, demand to be seen. As Jacques Derrida observes in *Specters of Marx*, spectrality can be understood not only in terms of polemic against the spirit of an adversary but also in various forms of "incorporation": "Once ideas or thoughts are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by *giving them a body*" (126). Spectrality is not simply the return of the repressed or the dead; it is "incorporated" or embodied through replication, resurrected through negation, and remembered in the gestures of those who deal with it in whatever way. In the case of *The House of Fame*, the poet dreamer's references of textual tradition and cultural memory flesh out another text as body that reanimates them. Even though he tries to call the authorities into question, their canonical facticity still presents itself both as a spectral power and a formidable spectacle that allow him the visual encounter with Fame despite his vehement denial of any involvement with Fame.

Baswell has shown that books and manuscripts about Virgil were a crucial site of cultural contest and cultural recreation in the Middle Ages, and England in particular was "the scene of a lively and widespread interest in Virgil," not only in terms of the transmission of the late-classical commentaries but also in terms of original contributions (40). We have discussed earlier that this textual preoccupation was also a visual obsession, but an understanding of medieval visuality will further help explain the fusion of the textual (word) and the visual (image). As Katherine H. Tachau puts it, "Like every other entity, the uttered (or written) word is capable of generating species that, in turn, multiply through the sense of hearing (or sight) into the inner senses" (19). In other words, reading is critically related to seeing, and

textual encounter is necessarily also visual encounter. In this light, the opulence of images and reciprocity of vision figure forth anxiety about the permanent gaze of the formidable textual apparatus, as well as promises of participation in it, and hence the possibility of future canonization. It is against this backdrop of imposing yet ambivalent visuality that the poet dreamer forcefully engages with the haunting visibility of the textual authority. In Chaucer's first dream vision, *The Book of the Duchess*, the dreamer sets out by pondering over his insomnia, a metaphor of the anxiety of influence that problematizes his writing project of dream vision. He then awakens in a chamber with wall paintings of scenes from the Trojan story, a powerful visual image of the feeling of being surrounded by textual sources. *The House of Fame* continues to deal with the vernacular writer's anxiety of influence but playfully records that very agonizing yet invigorating confrontation in terms of unswerving visual and textual encounters. It boldly announces its explicit intertextual relationship to Virgil's *Aeneid* and ventures to call his authoritative sources into question. As Baswell has indicated, in the manuscript presentations of the poem, as in the text, "Virgil is at once central but decentered, honored but ignored, cited but marginalized." Instead, the source of energy turns out to center around the seemingly marginal figure of Geffrey the reader and the writer, "who usurps the page, thrusting a confused sequence of *auctoritates* into the margins" (247). However, the narrator's frequent references to the textual roots, rather than simply challenging their reliability, is a serious call to the productive and invigorating dynamics between reader, text, vision and language. Chaucer appropriates his Virgilian source material in the framework of dream vision that particularly demands ekphrasis, thereby occasioning a vigorous visualization that develops into an elaborate re-vision of the *Aeneid* as well as the textual culture at large and reflects on problems of seeing, reading, interpretation and writing.

Coda: A Vision/Story of Love

Geffrey's initial encounter with Virgil is triggered by the love story of Aeneas and Dido, and the eagle says that Jupiter has asked him to carry Geffrey to the house of Fame in return for his devotion to reading and writing stories of love (613-68). It is also the eagle, the embodiment of textual references, who specifies the narrator's name (729) and thus confirms his identity in the textual world of love. Notably, before soaring to great heights to the hall of Fame with the eagle, the narrator precedes the celestial journey with the proem to Book II that features the signifying capacity of the English language:

> Now herkeneth every maner man

That Englissh understonde kan
And listeth of my drem to lere,
For now at erste shul ye here
So sely an avisyon,
That Isaye, ne Scipion,
Ne kyng Nabugodonosor,
Pharoo, Turnus, ne Elcanor,
Ne mette such a drem as this. (509-17)

Later, in relating his trip to the heavens and placing his vision in comic contrast with the celestial travelers in the classics of visionary literature such as St. Paul and Boethius, the poet again humorously valorizes his vernacular authority and anticipates his future fame as a love poet. Boitani has suggested that love is “the literary universe *par excellence* of the Middle Ages” (199). Chaucer’s concern with love as a vernacular poet therefore goes beyond the mundane matter of love to express love with the English language, the resources of his mother tongue and its capacity to rival the classics in elegance and expressive power. If “‘Geffrey’s’ movement from earth to heaven—a kind of secular Assumption—represents spatially the movement between different cultural domains” (Evans 58), the poet’s preoccupations with love and empire in the Trojan story engender a poetic articulation of *translatio imperii*, a translation of power from the classical canon to the vernacular text. This explains why at the outset the poet dreamer sees the opening lines of the epic written on a brass tablet in English translation and why he is the chosen one to be transported to the house of Fame and other extraordinary places.

The narrator’s daring announcements of the unprecedented wonder of the dream at the beginning of Book I (in which he issues caution against scorning or misjudging of the poem in the first invocation) as well as at the beginning of Book II (which opens with an explicit concern with and love of the vernacular) are indeed his underwritten conclusion to the supposedly unfinished poem, a manifesto of the growing and glowing splendor of the vernacular English writer. This emergent sense of pride and confidence in the power of seeing and writing is purchased at the cost of the at once overwhelmed and overwhelming encounter with the visual texts of the revered canon and brought into view by the textual gaze of the classical authorities. If the dynamic reciprocity of vision brings about the intertwining of the viewer and the viewed, the man of authority at the end of the poem turns out to be a climatic amalgam of the visual encounter in which reader/viewer and author/viewed are merged.

In this early poem Chaucer explores to the fullest the vernacular poet’s position,

the sources of his knowledge and cultural memory, and the limits and strengths of his vision. As Chaucer exploits the tension and intersection of word and image in the dream vision, his visual text dramatizes vernacular writing's confrontation with canonicity and envisions promises of engaging and achieving fame through love of the vernacular and through seeing, reading and writing love in the vernacular text.

Works Cited

Akbari, Suzanne Conklin. *Seeing through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004.

Amtower, Laurel. “Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*.” *Philological Quarterly* 79 (2000): 273-91.

Aston, Margaret. *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion*. London: Hambledon, 1984.

Baswell, Christopher. *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

Biernoff, Suzannah. *Sight and Embodiment in the Middle Ages*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Boitani, Piero. *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1984.

Braswell, Mary Flowers. “Architectural Portraiture in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*.” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11 (1981): 101-12.

Camille, Michael. “Sensations of the Page: Imaging Technologies and Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts.” *The Iconic Page in Manuscript, Print, and Digital Culture*. Ed. George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. 33-53.

Camille, Michael. “Before the Gaze: The Internal Senses and Late Medieval Practice of Seeing.” *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance*. Ed. Robert S. Nelson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 197-223.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

Delany, Sheila. *Chaucer’s House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972.

Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Evans, Ruth. “Chaucer in Cyberspace: Medieval Technologies of Memory and *The* House *of Fame*.” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 43-69.

Fry, Donald K. “The Ending of the *House of Fame*.” *Chaucer at Albany*. Ed. Rossell Hope Robbins. New York: Burt Franklin, 1975. 27-40.

Gellrich, Jesse M. *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Grudin, Michaela Paasche. *Chaucer and Politics of Discourse*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1996.

Hagiioannu, Michael. "Giotto's Bardi Chapel Frescoes and Chaucer's *House of Fame*: Influence, Evidence, and Interpretations." *Chaucer Review* 36.1 (2001): 28-47.

Hahn, Cynthia. "*Visio Dei*: Changes in Medieval Visuality." *Visuality before and beyond the Renaissance*. Ed. Robert S. Nelson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 169-96.

Jordan, Robert M. *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.

Kendrick, Laura. "Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the French Palais De Justice." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 6 (1984): 121-33.

Kolve, V. A. *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1984.

Kordecki, Lesley. "Subversive Voices in Chaucer's *House of Fame*." *Exemplaria* 11 (1999): 53-77.

Payne, Robert O. *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1963.

Rowland, Beryl. "Bishop Bradwardine, the Artificial Memory, and the *House of Fame*." *Chaucer in Albany*. Ed. Rossell Hope Robbins. New York: Burt Franklin, 1975. 41-62.

Scala, Elizabeth. *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Sheingorn, Pamela. "Who can Open the Doors of His Face? The Iconography of Hell Mouth." *The Iconography of Hell*. Ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1992. 1-19.

Tachau, Katherine H. *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham: Optics, Epistemology and the Foundations of Semantics 1250-1345*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988.

視覺與文本的交融
——《名人堂》中的方言視界與書寫

楊　明　蒼*

摘　要

在關於喬瑟早期詩作《名人堂》的討論中，許多學者強調此部詩作著重處理語言與文本性的問題，而另一方面也有諸多論者指出視覺與圖像的重要性；然而卻少有研究進一步思考視覺與文本兩者間交錯關聯所引生的意義。本論文試圖探討三個彼此相關的議題，期能適切了解喬瑟這部早期作品的中心旨趣：(1) 視覺與文本的交融；(2) 聲音或言語在其間的角色；(3) 視覺與觀看所牽涉的問題如何幫助方言寫作得力而強化。在喬瑟所屬文化標榜的權威文本不時以難以抗拒卻又曖昧的文本性與視覺性盤繞其文本視界下，夢境裡多重的視覺性樣貌為喬瑟的方言書寫與其文化典律間之複雜關係提供重要洞見。詩作中充分鋪陳方言詩人所處的位置，其知識與文化記憶的來源，以及其識見之力量與侷限。隨著喬瑟在夢境與文本中剖析文字與圖像的交錯張力，其所造就出的視覺文本也戲劇性的展現方言寫作與權威典律的遭逢與斡旋，以及詩人如何透過方言文本以視覺、閱讀與書寫預見並傳播其美名。

關鍵詞：名人堂　文本性　視覺　圖像　方言書寫

* 臺灣大學外國語文學系副教授