Ovid’s Wand: the brush of history and the mirror of *ekphrasis*

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Abstract

The recent work on the manuscript reception of Ovid’s canon and Ovidian commentaries in western Europe has affirmed the author’s significant literary influence in the late Middle Ages. The production and reception of *Ovidinia* flourished, and Ovid’s poems increasingly became read as coherent compositions rather than dissected for bits of moral exempla. In particular, the *Metamorphoses* profoundly affects the literary landscape of late medieval France and England. Allusions to Ovid’s poem reemerge throughout the late Middle Ages at defining moments of poetic self-consciousness, most often through figures of *ekphrasis*, the use of poetry in order to portray other media of art. By examining such moments from a selection of influential medieval poems, the mind of the late medieval poet reveals itself in perpetual contestation with the images and figures of an Ovidian lineage, but the contest entails the paradoxical construction of poetic identity, which forces the poet to impose the haunting shadow of literary history onto the mirror of his or her craft.
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Chapter 1: A Preface on Ovidian *Ekphrasis* and its Medieval Foundations

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* gave medieval Europe a comprehensive encyclopedia for ancient mythology. For some of its audience, a handy reference work proved to be the limit of the poem’s relevance. Moralist commentators and allegorically minded preachers culled the poem with almost complete indifference to the framed narrative, and they largely ignored the cosmic structure of the poem. Ovid’s introductory cosmogony contextualizes the poem’s structural framework within a cyclical form. In the end, the poem culminates with Ovid constructing his own authorial identity, where his self-conscious poetic identity performs a creative role in the narrative’s cosmic history. Throughout the narrative, instruments will sing and play their own origin stories, and *ekphrasis*, a representation of art in a different medium, helps reveal the latent anxiety that the author has toward his or her labor. Because of Ovid’s thematic obsession with artistic ontology, his influence on late medieval poetry compelled a new imagination of authorial identity and self-consciousness. Far from being simply a reference work for so many of its medieval readers, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* gave poets an expansive awareness for the representations which their instruments simultaneously reflected and invented.

Patterson argued that the classical tradition made medieval poets more sensitive to their constructive role within a historical and prophetic legacy:

But the classics do provide Chaucer with two things: first, a form of writing that allows for meaningfulness – for interpretability – while resisting the preemptive hermeneutics of allegorical exegesis; and second, a prospect upon life that is capacious and synoptic but not dismissively transcendental – in other words, a historiography. For Chaucer, as for many other medieval readers, the
classical poets, and especially Virgil and Statius, were essentially historians; and they provided him with a historical vision that allowed him to step outside the suffocating narcissism of court makyng and to recognize the mutual interdependence of subjectivity and history.¹

Patterson demonstrated how classical influence informed Chaucer’s understanding of a “synoptic” history, emerging from a poetic tradition where cosmic time provides the temporal framework for mythological narrative. In deferring to Ovid as a model for influence (peering above the “narcissism of court makyng,” as Patterson argued, which relied on generic and local forms of aristocratic conformity), Chaucer appropriates antique structural devices for the service of his own legacy.

Patterson’s arguments will prove essential in the poems I examine throughout the dissertation. However, Patterson’s neglect of Ovid is precisely the sort of scholarly oversight I hope to rectify. And though I am suggesting that Patterson’s disregard reveals a more general problem, the passage I have just cited has itself proven to be deeply influential on Chaucerian scholarship. The theoretical understanding of classical influence on Chaucer relies on the biographical fantasies of specifically “Virgil and Statius,” which have been quite exaggerated in importance, especially when compared to the significance of Ovid’s literary canon and biography.

The influence of Ovid’s cosmogony extends through successive eras, and the opening of the *Metamorphoses* finds echoes through the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas
corpora; di, coeptis (nam vos mutastis et illas)
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi

ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!
Ante mare et terras et quod tegit omnia caelum
unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe,
quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles
nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem
non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.²

(Metamorphoses I, 1-9)

(The will of my spirit bears to speak on forms transfigured into new bodies. Gods, as you changed and changed all things, favor what I have begun and take my song from the beginning of the world until the end of my time. Before the water and the ground, before sky covered everything, one aspect of nature was over the entire globe: Chaos, a disordered, unrefined pile, nothing there but crude weight and, likewise, the discordant seeds of misfits.)

Ovid’s epic opens in discord. The atoms that compose the essence of existence war with one another in a universe of antagonism and division. But as similar features start to align, a sense of order appears to emerge:

Hanc deus et melior litem natura diremit.
nam caelo terras et terris abscidit undas
et liquidum spisso secrevit ab aere caelum.
quae postquam evolvit caecoque exemit acervo,
dissociate locis concordi pace ligavit

(Metamorphoses I, 21-25)

(A god, or perhaps something kinder, ended this contention, for he cut lands out of the sky, waves from the lands, and he divided the translucent sky from the dense air. After he unrolled everything, removing all from the vacuous mass, he bound what was removed into place, into harmonic peace.)

If this passage concluded the poem’s cosmogony, then the ethical framework would imply a linear dynamic that leads toward an unalterable “harmonic peace.” Such a structure would seem closer to Hesiod and Vergil rather than Homer or Callimachus. But

Ovid’s world declines, and humanity cannot turn away, and the painful realization of Heraclitean loss makes the imagination of history a possibility.

I will attempt to demonstrate that Ovid is the root Patterson was searching for, the alpha to the late medieval imagination of history, and by consequence time, which, as a cyclical fantasy, contains its own omega:

Far from being a straightforward linear development, the history of Theban writing is what Chaucer in the Boece calls a “replicacioun of wordes ... to enter upon it is to broach a labyrinthine way, “so entrelaced that it is unstable to ben unlaced” ... Theban writing simultaneously salves and reopens the wound caused by “the poyn of remembrancce;” and Chaucer, by invoking Thebes as an early and recurrent locus of his own work, and as a metaphor for his own poetics of memory, sets himself in a relationship with origins.³

The appeal of antiquity in the late Middle Ages made it difficult to, at any point, repress Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The poem nonetheless celebrates its own immoral transgressions. Still, the sexual content does not entirely explain the censorious response that the poem elicited, especially from the tradition of English, French, and Italian medieval commentaries that sought to allegorize and moralize most elements of the poem. As I read it, the poem is hostile to political authority, and it intends on subverting the hierarchical nature of power. The poem is positively anti-Vergilian and, consequently, anti-Augustan.

If the poem were limited to satire, it would be much easier to expunge or, perhaps worse, ignore. But beneath the crude exploits of the gods and the self-destructive behavior of the mortals, there remains a drive within Ovid’s poem to announce the motivations and hereditary forces of its own primal, maybe some would say vulgar,

³. Patterson, History, 83.
creations.

As Leonard Barkan observed, “The most important thing for our purposes – and this idea will echo, sometimes verbatim, through the centuries of medieval mythography – is that metamorphosis is taken to be the equivalent of poetic imagination; in fact, it equals the transfer of historical truth into figura.”

Barkan equates transformation to “the poetic imagination” because the representation of anything defines itself by being different than what it represents, or as Magritte might say, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*

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Ovid’s Innovations in Ekphrasis

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provided the medieval poet with a unique framework for revealing historical imagination as a component of artistic invention. A brief analysis and informal organization of Ovidian *ekphrasis* will provide groundwork for understanding Ovid’s influence on late medieval self-consciousness of authorship. Much more important than a compendium for quick reference to a particular ancient fable or deity, the *Metamorphoses* supplied medieval poets with a literary precedent for art’s ontology, specifically when the material symbols of instrument recreate their own historical origins.⁵

If I may generally define *ekphrasis* as the literary representation of artistic media and aesthetic craft, then the *Metamorphoses* is marked by its repetition of *ekphrastic* imagery. These images are not mere garnishes or clever self-indulgences. On the contrary, Ovidian *ekphrasis* constitutes a central theme of the poem, revealing art’s purpose to sublimate a destructive instinct or to undermine a tyrannical and oppressive source of authority. Regardless of the tool (pipe, harp, tapestry, etc.), Ovid repeats and emphasizes those moments when art offers aesthetic consolation in the space of despondent mourning. For example, art will often be called upon to serve as a prosthetic in the wake of unrequited love or death.

Broadly speaking, Ovidian *ekphrasis* functions in a few different ways. My

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⁵ Barkan, *Gods*, 94-136. “If the vision of cosmic cycles can count as the otherworldly medieval drama of metamorphosis, there is also a this-worldly drama. As in earliest antiquity, so in the Middle Ages an interest in metamorphosis is associated with the cultivation of the here-and-now in all its beauty and instability,” 129.
categories are neither comprehensive nor are they entirely formal. But by providing some general definitions for the forms of Ovidian *ekphrasis*, later it will be easier to demonstrate Ovid’s influence on authorial self-consciousness throughout the late Middle Ages. In the *Metamorphoses*, art frequently serves to sublimate a violent or destructive instinct. When Pan sees the nymph Syrinx, his violent lust nearly culminates in a scene of rape, until she transforms into hollow reeds skirting the riverbed:

Panaque cum prensam sibi iam Syringa putaret,
corpore pro nymphae calamos tenuisse palustres,
dumque ibi suspirat, motos in harundine ventos
effecisse sonum tenuem similemque querenti.
arte nova vocisque deum dulcedine captum
'hoc mihi colloquium tecum' dixisse 'manebit,'
atque ita disparibus calamis copaginé cerae
inter se iunctis nomen tenuisse puellae.

*(Metamorphoses I, 703-712)*

(When Pan thought he had seized Syrinx for himself, he held, instead of the nymph’s body, the reeds of the bog. And as he sighed, wind streamed through the flute, making a delicate and plaintive sound. The god, taken by this new art, with its sweet voice, spoke, “this touch with you will remain for me.” And so different reeds joined together and fastened by wax have the name of the girl.)

With the assembled flute, Pan’s violence is transmuted into song, a socially esteemed work of aesthetic invention evolved from an inspired tradition. The story of Pan and Syrinx reenacts the earlier tale of Apollo and Daphne where art’s function is virtually the same. Though not an explicit image of *ekphrasis*, the laurel leaf, which Apollo seizes in Daphne’s absence, symbolizes the sublimating potential of art, athletics, and other culturally significant forms of labor. What was to be an act of sexual violation and moral turpitude lifts itself into an exalted symbol of social achievement, the laurel crown.

In Ovidian *ekphrasis*, art also functions to represent passionate desire, which
often entails undermining the cultural agents of repression. Arachne, renowned for her ability to weave, shows great contempt for institutions of authority by mocking Minerva, the goddess of crafts. Disguised as an old woman, Minerva goads Arachne into exhibiting hubris and disrespect toward the gods. But when Minerva reveals herself, Arachne does not retract her boast. To the contrary, she eagerly agrees to a weaving competition.

The respective tapestries of god and mortal create distinct idealizations of art’s function. Minerva’s work shows a threatening display of divine power and attempts to use art with repressive and normative force: the hill of Mars, god of war; the twelve gods all firmly seated in their thrones with, quite expectedly, Jove at the head; Neptune unleashes his violence over the ocean waves as a witness to the gods’ control over nature as well as humanity’s fragility before the elements; Minerva, in her self-portrait, dresses in armor and wields a spear, an unmistakable threat of divine force against the Maeonian girl:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{at sibi dat clipeum, dat acutae cuspidis hastam,} \\
\text{dat galeam capiti, defenditur aegide pectus,} \\
\text{percussamque sua simulat de cuspide terram} \\
\text{edere cum bacis fetum canentis olivae;} \\
\text{mirarique deos.}
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{(Metamorphoses VI, 78-82)}

(To herself, she gave a shield, a spear with a sharpened blade, a helm, a soldier’s breastplate. She conjures the piercing of her blade, striking the land, unearthing the old olive tree, ripe with its fruit. The Gods wondered at this.)

In the four corners of Minerva’s tapestry, she weaves scenes of gods punishing mortals for varied transgressions, as if the implication of her design had not already been made
In response, Arachne’s tapestry does not betray the slightest hint of fear or
timidity. Arachne shows the gods (turn for turn, Jove and Neptune) debasing themselves,
routinely, to carry out their shameless sexual desires: Jove becomes a variety of different
animals to ensnare one shepherdess after another – in each case he is far from his celestial
throne in the first portrait by Minerva, the god’s daughter; Neptune, having substituted
his trident for an actual phallus, can likewise be seen pursuing country maidens in the
guise of a ram, bull, stallion, bird, and, not least of all, a dolphin.

Rather than execute authority from the grand and austere seat of Mt. Olympus,
these brothers indulge in salacious deceptions and vulgarity. Arachne is bold enough to
expose their deeds. The young girl’s work of art gives the world a witness to the crimes
and exploitations of the immortals, and, perhaps, some accounting for the irrational
behavior so often displayed by mortals as well.

That Ovid sides, ethically, with Arachne’s *ekphrastic* vision can be confirmed
with two pieces of evidence. One: much of Arachne’s tapestry repeats what Ovid has
written earlier in his poem. In other words, Ovid has placed a mirror inside the
*Metamorphoses* that reflects its own poetic legacy. Two: Arachne wins the competition, a
detail that often gets disregarded by some of the scholarship. But contrary to the moralist
reading, Minerva concedes Arachne’s victory, and not even Envy could fault the work:

Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor
possit opus; doluit successu flava virago
et rupit pictas.

*(Metamorphoses* VI, 129-131)
(No, not even Minerva, nor even Envy, could fault the work. The golden-hair warrior grieved at its success and shredded the tapestry.)

Arachne, severely punished for her aesthetic victory, nonetheless reveals a significant function of Ovidian *ekphrasis*: even the representation of desire antagonizes cultural agents of repression. Desire, in Ovid, subverts hierarchies and destabilizes institutions of cultural and political authority.

Certain medieval poets utilized Ovid’s functional conception of art as a way to smuggle political critique within a gilded hull, ironically displaying and revering antique authority to provide cover for speaking truth to power.

Ovidian *ekphrasis* consistently revealed the urge to break the mechanisms, personal and cultural, of repression. For instance, when Io is placed under the watch of the one-hundred-eyed guard, Argus, she plaintively moos, having been transformed into a cow to cover up yet another of Jove’s indiscretions. Mercury flies down and, bearing a sleep-inducing wand, plays a song into a flute of hollow reeds:

\[
\text{Sedit Atlantiades et euntem multa loquendo}
\text{detinuit sermone diem iunctisque canendo}
\text{vincere harundinibus servantia lumina temptat.}
\text{ille tamen pugnat molles evincere somnos}
\text{et, quamvis sopor est oculorum parte receptus,}
\text{parte tamen vigilat. quaerit quoque (namque reperta}
\text{fistula nuper erat), qua sit ratione reperta.}
\]

*(Metamorphose I, 682-688)*

(Atlas’s son sat down, preparing to speak at length, he occupied the day with song, singing on his reed pipe, attempting to overcome the guardian’s alert eyes. And still, Argus fights against tender sleep, and though some of his eyes gave way to rest, his other eyes remained vigilant. He inquired (for the reed pipe was recently crafted) how the instrument had been made.)

Mercury’s subsequent song relates the embedded narrative of Pan and Syrinx, which
itself provides the origin tale for the flute that Mercury plays. From the beginning of the poem and its opening cosmogony, origin stories are recurrent and frequently the content for *ekphrastic* emblems. Notably, Mercury’s flute has a sublimating effect on the listener: Argus falls asleep, and Io is freed from imprisonment. Art’s capacity to alleviate pain applies clearly in the story of Mercury, but the poem is also constructing a rationale for its own origins.

Built on sublimation, the *ekphrastic* emblem finds countless iterations, just in different forms, not least of all the *Metamorphoses* itself: “Iamque opus exegi, quod nec Iovis ira nec ignis/ nec poterit ferrum nec edax abolere vetustas,” “And so I conclude the work. Do not wither, neither from Jove’s rage, nor the sword, nor the flame, nor the greed of time” (XV, 871-72).

The importance of origins, art, and sublimation will repeat itself in medieval Ovidian aesthetics and will be especially emphasized in Chaucer’s early poems, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*. Furthermore, Ovidian *ekphrasis* often serves to represent and articulate tragedy, the death drive, and the desire to represent loss. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe does not offer an explicit image of *ekphrasis*, though it does suggest the destructive implications of passion on the structures of cultural authority, symbolically invested in ‘the wall.’ The lovers reveal that desire will inevitably find the crack, breaking whatever obstructions are in its path. The image might be too conventional if it were not for the devastating consequences for their actions, both of whom kill themselves. The wall, as a symbol for civilization, reveals the overwhelming nature of desire and the often tragic consequences when attempting to repress the
necessities of desire.

The tale of Orpheus and Eurydice focuses on tragic loss, and Orpheus’ lament expresses itself as a culminating moment of Ovidian *ekphrasis*. Besides being a significant character, Orpheus is also an important narrator of the *Metamorphoses*, relating a series of embedded tales, all of which are tragic.

For the Ovidian functions of art, my descriptions for *ekphrasis* are neither exclusive nor comprehensive. However, they are relevant and, so far, unappreciated factors of influence on vernacular poets of the late Middle Ages. The following chapters will demonstrate how Ovid’s influence on a few of these authors goes beyond the petrified authority of rigid imitation or moral dogma. Rather, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* provides a framework for poetic invention that entails the displaced representation of authorial self-consciousness.

The exploration of poetic identity results in images of *ekphrasis*. Through the material marker of the instrument, the *ekphrastic* symbol defines a classical notion of poetic intent in the late Middle Ages and particularly in Chaucer’s early poems. While Ovid does not lack the traditional weight of *auctoritas*, his authority is not dressed in the imposing uniform of a Vergil or a Patristic Father. Rather, in the late Middle Ages, Ovid provoked the poet toward an almost narcissistic impulse, holding a mirror to the labor of art itself.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* begins with a celestial origin story, a cosmogony that imagines a cyclical view of historical and prophetic time. Far removed from the linear ‘progress’ of Vergil’s Roman history, Ovid’s framework for temporality places *chaos* at
the inevitable point of return, the stellar vacuum toward which the entirety of existence gravitates. The descent from the Golden Age to the Bronze to the ‘present’ was not merely a literary trope but, for many medieval authors, not least of all Chaucer, the temporal imagination of moral attrition paralleled their own assumptions of an eschatological timeframe that likewise envisions a world in decline.
Scholarly Review of Medieval Ovidian Aesthetics

Before looking at the literary criticism, a review of the scholarship on Ovidian manuscripts will help to later justify my observations regarding the significance of Ovid on late medieval poets and particularly Chaucer. In short, recent evidence serves to further substantiate Ludwig Traube’s designation for the twelfth century as the *aetas Ovidiana*.

By the end of the twelfth century, the importance of Ovid’s *opera* had taken hold of Orléans and spread westward. The *Metamorphoses*, in particular, became a breeding ground for late medieval thought, realized in the form of allusions, allegories, *accessus*, and commentaries.

The scholarship of Frank Coulson and Kathryn McKinley sheds important light on the influence and reception of Ovid in the late Middle Ages. By explicating the tradition of commentaries and the institutional contexts for reception, they have provided scholars with a better understanding of how Ovid was interpreted and contextualized. McKinley’s scholarship, in particular, is essential to my own research as it creates a coherent model for the reception of the *Metamorphoses* in fourteenth-century England. Her article, “Manuscripts of Ovid in England, 1100-1500” documents how Ovid’s

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influence grows through the late Middle Ages, specifically in fourteenth-century England, which sees a dramatic rise in manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses.*

In McKinley’s list, half of the extant Ovidian manuscripts in Britain are traceable to Benedictine houses. Most of the remaining manuscripts are in Augustinian and secular institutions, and a final smattering are found in Cistercian and Carthusian houses. The earliest Ovidian manuscripts in England date to the late twelfth century. A brief selection will provide a sketch for the reception: Durham held the complete works of Ovid save the *Medicamine*; Bury held an *Epistulae ex ponto*; Dover held the *Fasti* (Dover’s *Fasti* is considered the most authoritative extant copy); and Christ Church Canterbury held the *Ibis, Heroides, Tristia,* and two copies of the *Metamorphoses.*

Over the course of the fourteenth century, omnibus editions of Ovid became increasingly popular. The desire to work with Ovid’s canon *in toto* reveals a much different perspective of a poet than the traditional deference to a Latin authority for scattered bits of *exempla.* Waltham held an omnibus edition in the thirteenth century, as did York and Peterborough in the fourteenth century. Furthermore, the *Amores, Ars amatoria,* and *Remedia amoris* frequently circulated together.

Before the fourteenth century, Ovid was primarily held in monastic houses outside of London. Notably, the *Remedia* and the *Heroides* were included in the *Liber Catonianus,* a popular reader for English students, which also contained Cato, Statius, and Claudian. By the end of the fourteenth century, the *Metamorphoses* became the most witnessed Ovidian manuscript in England, not as a school text nor a referential

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concordance for moralists, but as a single and coherent work of art.9 The *Metamorphoses* was highly influential among medieval poets in France and England.

The Ovidian literary renaissance in England had a profound influence on Chaucer and his contemporaries. Ovid’s impact would be felt as deeply by Shakespeare and, much later, the Romantics. To understand the earlier foundations of his medieval influence, my second chapter examines Béroul’s *Tristran*, a twelfth-century fragmentary romance that is both emblematic of early Ovidian aesthetics and as well foreshadows the nature of poetic self-consciousness in late medieval England. We know little of Béroul except that he was a twelfth-century Norman. And yet, though he lived in the center of the *aetas Ovidiana*, I have found little scholarship that documents the *Metamorphoses*’ influence on the poem. This in spite of the fact that the poem’s allusion to Ovid’s Midas narrative happens at a crucial moment in defining the conflict of King Mark’s regal identity and, consequently, the ethical framework of the poem.

Admittedly, Ovid’s influence on *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer’s early poems is much more sophisticated and, frankly, Ovidian than it is on Béroul. Nonetheless, my close reading of *Tristan* will demonstrate how, even at a very early stage in its development, Ovidian influence affected a poet in a way beyond rote allusion. Ovid’s influence on *Tristan* anticipates his importance in medieval and renaissance England, especially on the southern romances and later the works of Chaucer, Gower, Henryson, and of course Shakespeare.

I will cover specific scholarship regarding Ovid and *Sir Orfeo* in Chapter Three.

Most scholars have followed the premises of John Block Friedman and Roy Liuzza, who seem to agree that the English romance bears only a faint resemblance to its Latin forbearer. My thesis is the opposite: *Sir Orfeo* is a poem profoundly conscious of Ovidian *ekphrasis*, resurrecting Orpheus’ harp for the explicit purpose of ennobling the poetic instinct, while offering the medieval world a spectacular image of the warrior-poet ready to cross the wilderness of medieval England as readily as descend into the Underworld. To some extent, my argument about *Sir Orfeo* will build on Seth Lerer’s work, which provides a firm understanding of the poem’s aesthetic layering. Yet, even Lerer overlooks the poem’s Ovidian themes. *Sir Orfeo* embraces its Ovidian influence and carries on the *ekphrastic* directive that art functions to represent and sublimate desire.

Chapters Four and Five will cover two of Chaucer’s early poems, *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*. Important scholarship regarding Ovidian influence has been done on both of these poems, which I will cover in their respective chapters. Still, it is important to establish the general context of Ovidian influence on Chaucer. The majority of the academic work identifies direct allusions, treating Ovid’s poems like a catalogue as opposed to self-contained and aesthetically unified artistic composition. For the *Heroides*, such a method may be appropriate as the epistolary structure makes each of the lovers’ exchanges fairly discrete, though I personally would be hesitant to even push this point too far.
From Florilegia to Chaucerian Canon

The *Metamorphoses* is an extended poem with an outer frame that establishes cosmic time and an inner series of embedded narratives, some of which are couched inside other embedded narratives. When considering the dense structural layering of the poem, not to mention its frequent indulgence in scandalous subject matter, it should be considered quite remarkable that fourteenth-century England came to prefer the poem in its entirety, perhaps valuing some notion of its literary coherence over the normative and generic conventions of pithy allegorical exegesis.\(^{10}\)

Chaucer may have encountered the *Metamorphoses* when he first began schooling, if not earlier. Though the evidence is not definitive, Donald Howard’s biography suggests the probability of Chaucer attending the school attached to St. Paul’s, where he would have had access to its library. Even if Chaucer did not attend St. Paul’s, it housed titles that scholars have long assumed Chaucer read and knew well. In 1328, William Tolleshunt’s will provides a list of names, revealing the usual suspects of early medieval education: Isidore, Donatus, sermons, logic, law, etc. But in 1358, William Ravenstone, described by Howard as a proto-humanist, leaves a distinctively different set of books to the Almonry school: John of Garland, Cato, Juvenal, Persius, Horace’s *Ars poetica*, Statius, Lucan, Claudian, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer names the last four authors mentioned. Notably, the two different lists of books appears to be representative of a transitional period in literary,

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intellectual, religious, and textual history.

If Chaucer, at a young age, had access to Ravenstone’s library, which was within walking distance from his house, then the prominent influence of Ovid’s epic could, in part, be justified in his biography. But in any case, the Ravenstone library is representative of a broader literary development in London where Ovid was highly esteemed for his canon and poems *in toto* rather than his *sententia*. Chaucer is often lauded for his distinction and uniqueness (undoubtedly fair praise); but my extended analysis of two early poems will rather demonstrate how Chaucer relied on Ovid’s ontological framework for art, imagining a myth of origins through the lens of poetic self-consciousness.

Richard Hoffman’s *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales*, clarifies many of the explicit allusions to Ovid throughout Chaucer’s poem. Hoffman also makes an interesting argument concerning Chaucer's structural modeling of Ovid’s frame narratives, suggesting Ovid’s structural, as well as allusive, influence on Chaucer, though the significance of the frame narrative cannot be appreciated without the company of Boccaccio as well as a number of distinctive French authors, such as Machaut.

Hoffman's guiding thesis is problematic, claiming “Chaucer's dependence [...] in formulating the underlying moral theme which lends unity to his collection.” Hoffman argues that Chaucer was an “ethical philosopher” committed to investing intellectual and aesthetic influences with Christian doctrine. Though Hoffman makes a few interesting claims, his indebtedness to D.W. Robertson overwhelms much that might otherwise be

unique in his scholarship.

John Fyler's *Chaucer and Ovid* focuses on the medieval context for Chaucer’s philosophical orientation. Fyler argues that Ovid gives Chaucer a classical justification to engage with nominalist assumptions and, specifically, language's limited ability for articulation and reason. For Fyler, the philosophical tradition appears to be an indispensable influence on Chaucer’s *opera*. Linking Chaucer to William of Ockham, Fyler claims that Chaucer repeatedly emphasizes humanity’s inability to understand cosmic or biblical design.

According to Fyler, Chaucer found in Ovid an *auctor* who could begin to explain the limited awareness of humanity: “Ovid explores the psychology of how emotion inevitably frustrates rational control. Chaucer generalizes this exploration to a view of the limitations of human reason and knowledge.”12 Because Chaucer laments this state of irrationality, a peculiar and unavoidable desire for self-destruction, he recalls Ovid’s ‘Golden Age,’ a retrospective move that Fyler claims provides a touchstone for Chaucer’s philosophical inquiries. While Fyler’s work is occasionally relevant to my own, I am more concerned with how Ovid allows Chaucer to define the essential functioning of art and aesthetics, a poetic desire that conforms to a broader literary movement and, in some ways, avoids philosophical esotericism.

Michael Calabrese demonstrates the significance of Ovid’s historical identity to Chaucer, and Calabrese specifically emphasizes how the imagination of Ovid’s life

informed Chaucer’s self-consciousness as a poet. Through the examination of a few medieval commentaries, the *Ars Amatoria*, and the late exile poetry, Calabrese reveals how Ovid’s *vita*, in the end tragic, may have influenced Chaucer’s own vision of authorial identity. Did Chaucer believe that suffering and poetic self-consciousness had a fundamental relationship?: “Chaucer likely assimilated the details of Ovid's biography as part of his literary inheritance … Ovid's poems themselves gave him the dramatic, literary material that he could mold in his own way as he became the most prominent new Ovid in English.” Though Calabrese does not extensively pursue the point, if Chaucer did think of himself as a “new Ovid,” such an association must be, in part, defined by the space they both occupied within an elite urbanity. For Calabrese, Chaucer's self-fashioning found a precedent in the recent French and Italian authors that Chaucer admired: “Like Jean de Meun and Boccaccio, Chaucer plays with his poetic identity, and Ovid stands close by as a point of comparison. Chaucer knew that he was an Ovidian poet and that his own vita at times fell into Ovidian patterns.” My own focus is primarily limited to the *Metamorphoses* and not the earlier love poetry nor the later exile poetry. Nonetheless, Calabrese’s arguments regarding the influence of Ovid’s biography supply further evidence for Chaucer’s deployment of Ovidian *ekphrasis*, a distinctly aesthetic literary inheritance that informed important aspects of Ovid’s recorded life as well as his poetry. Indeed, one should infer that the implications to *ekphrasis*, in Chaucer and Ovidian art generally, encourage the poet to

reflect on the literal and phenomenal nature of his or her craft.

One of the clearest examples of Chaucer’s material conditioning of poetic history can be found, quite appropriately, in *The House of Fame*. With the representation of symbolically invested instruments, Chaucer navigates a path through the heavily contested emblems of history: “harpe,” “smale harpers with her gleses,” “pipe, Bothe in doucet and in rede,” “flowte,” “liltyng horn,” “pipes made of grene corn,” “Pipers of the Duche tonge,” “trumpe, beme, and claryoun,” “sondry gleses … Moo than sterres ben in hevene” (*The House of Fame III.*, 1220-1254).

Calabrese’s earlier article provides a specific example for what will later develop into a major argument for his book. He frames the end of Ovid’s life, the infamous exile to the outer limits of the Black Sea, as a literary model for Chaucer’s morbid Pardoner:

Ovid is the author not only of Orpheus’s exile and death but also of his own “death in exile” which he suffers because of the transgressions of the *Ars amatoria*. “Death,” a living death, is the central conceit of all his poetry from the Black Sea. Therefore, by comparing the Pardoner to the changing figure of the exiled Orpheus and also to the figure of the exiled Ovid himself, we can attempt to understand Chaucer’s conception of spiritual exile as it relates to sexual and artistic practice.16

My arguments are more concerned with artistic rather than sexual practice. Admittedly, the two are often related and occasionally indistinguishable; indeed, the pairing of artistic and sexual practice usually feels rather Ovidian. Regardless, Calabrese’s focus on death as a component of poetic invention has, I think, some alternative implications. The projected alienation from physical identity (that is, the fantasy of legacy) shocks the poet into a living death, where a traumatic retreat from an urbane lifestyle of aristocratic

competition transforms into the melancholic mirror of antiquity’s overbearing shadow.

The relationship between death and exile might reveal something of the poet’s psychological contest with alienation. Calabrese focuses on Ovid’s biography and refers to the poetry for support, but he spends no time on the *ekphrastic* or aesthetic designs that Chaucer employs from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and subsequently reimagines as part of his self-conscious contestation with antiquity. Nonetheless, Calabrese’s intriguing three way comparison, between Orpheus, Ovid, and Chaucer, creates the appropriate conceptual framework to understand the convergence of ménage à trois of intertextuality formulating recursive models of aesthetic invention and poetic drive.

Researching the material medieval transmission of Ovid’s textual history, Amanda Gerber’s thorough and incisive analysis of Ovidian commentaries further confirms that late medieval reception increasingly viewed the importance of the *Metamorphoses* as an interlinked and aesthetically unified poem rather than a reference catalogue of trite moralisms:

> With his typological understanding of narrative, the paraphraser envisions all of his abbreviated narratives as repetitions of both the depicted subjects and the historical author. These literary and historical correlations lead audiences to interpret narratives politically as well as comparatively, abbreviating but also concatenating myths within the text and within the Ovidian corpus instead of treating the *Metamorphoses* as a disjointed encyclopedia of moralized mythology.¹⁷

> For my thesis, the correlation between the imagination of the historical author and the pressing influence of Ovidian subjects (for example, Orpheus, Minerva, Mercury, etc.) will itself reveal the importance of Ovid’s unique modes of *ekphrastic* influence, and

specifically those moments where such images assert a form of material transference onto Chaucer’s Ovidian characters. It will prove no coincidence that the Ovidian figures I have just referred to all are all paired with heavily invested intertextual images of *ekphrasis* (respectively, the harp, the tapestry, and the pan flute).

Again, because I will not cover Ovid’s later poetry, I can do little more than observe a chicken and egg paradox. The forces of historical and literary influence work to catalyze and accelerate each other; in other words, the increasing desire to imagine the historical identity of an author compels a reader to interpret the individual work, perhaps the author’s canon, with a coherent imagination of authorial consciousness. The improbability of such a venture does not discount its necessity to the practices of reading, then and now.

A fundamental work published on the relationship between antiquity and Chaucer is Jamie Fumo's *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority, and Chaucerian Poetics*. Though the analysis focuses on the specific influence of Apollo, and is not restricted to Ovid, the arguments, in terms of poetic authority, are related:

In the poetry of Chaucer and his followers, poetic allusions to Apollo confirm the essential intertextuality and artificial quality of myth at the same time that they extend dramatically the implications of such artistic self-consciousness into these poets' own construction of themselves as vernacular heirs – albeit problematically belated ones – of classical *auctoritas*.¹⁸

Fumo describes how Chaucer becomes an inventor pulled toward a tradition that he must simultaneously extract himself from. Without such dissonance, creation regresses into imitation. But too much departure threatens the poet's identity within the forum of the

auctores, effecting a breakdown in intertextual recognition. To find the appropriate space between tradition and creation, the poet must become painfully self-aware. The question is how much of his identity is he willing to sacrifice to take part in a tradition that demands self-abnegation in the face of authority: “Chaucer's ambivalent stance toward the powers of his own fiction reflects concerns deeply rooted in classical tradition itself, in which the position of the vates is ever-precarious and the construction of authority inherently contested.”

Concerning Chaucer, I want to build on Fumo’s important work. But instead of focusing on the model of Apollo, I will concentrate on the significance of Ovidian intertextuality within The Book of the Duchess and The House of Fame. As these are early poems, I believe they are essential for understanding Chaucer’s self-conscious exploration of his own artistry and his self-conscious desire to compete in the tradition of the ancient authority.

I will not cover any of Gower’s poems, though a brief observation is warranted given Ovid’s extensive influence on the poet. The political significance of Gower’s Confessio Amantis has been thoroughly discussed and hotly debated. Specifically, James Simpson has famously argued that the Confessio is critical of monarchical claims to absolute rule. Yet Ovid, an essential model for Gower, has hardly been incorporated in these political discussions. Rather, as is the case with Chaucer, Ovid is seen as a source for classical allusions that can be generalized into universal moral exempla. But Kathryn

McKinley’s chapter, “Lessons for a King from Gower’s Confessio,” demonstrates how Gower could make unique appropriations of Ovid to make prescient political observations and even create a brief ‘mirror for princes.’

In Confessio Book V, which covers the sin of avarice, Gower criticizes perjury and oath breaking. Genius uses the tale of Jason and Medea to demonstrate the significance of the crime. It is Jason, not Medea, who is primarily criticized. Gower does not castigate the wife, forcing the reader to, in at least a small way, empathize with the filicidal Medea. Gower is not interested, in this moment of the text, of criticizing murder. Rather, he emphasizes Jason’s marital transgression. Perhaps most readers of the fourteenth century were unsettled by Gower’s focus on Jason, which, while not exculpating Medea, implicitly suggests that the husband’s violation of his marriage oath might be worse than filicide.

Notably, as with Jason, Gower clearly represents Tereus as a tyrant who breaks his marriage oath. Just prior to the Tereus tale, Genius warns Amans about avarice. McKinley puts these warnings in the historical context of Richard’s extortions of the monasteries in 1383 and his subsequent coercion of the city of London. Unlike the moralizing tradition, Gower did not indict Medea as a criminal or bluntly cite Tereus for rape. Rather, Gower uses Ovid to give advice to Richard, perhaps in an attempt to subtlety deter Richard from a destructive path. Indeed, in his deposition of 1399, he is explicitly cited for failing to keep his oath and to uphold the lex terrae.

To conclude with Gower, I will say that my dissertation provides further substantiation to the sophisticated arguments put forth by Robert Yeager in John Gower’s
Poetic: the search for a new Arion. In Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, a lot of scholarship points to Gower’s moralization of Ovid and his use of frame narratives. Yet, it is the bard at the beginning of the poem, Arion, a symbolic figure for the poet in Ovid’s *Fasti*, who provides the overriding structure and ethos for the Ovidian tales that follow. Through his singing, Arion invests meaning and form into a fallen and collapsing world. This artist persona, like Pan and Pygmalion, justifies his creation by singing where there is meaninglessness and displacing the instinct for violence with the creation of aesthetic representations, displacements, figures, and forms. Much like Arion in Book I, Apollonius, whose name invokes the divine artist, Apollo, is a harpist, and he plays at a banquet with a “vois celestial.” The song sparks the desire of the woman he will marry, thus fulfilling Arion’s promise of creating unity where there was once separation.

I have not dedicated a chapter to *The Canterbury Tales*, but I would be neglectful if I failed to recognize one of the greatest and most dramatic inheritors of Ovid in late medieval England, an inventive and sophisticated poet in her own right, the Wife of Bath. Her prologue alludes to the *Metamorphoses*, both to establish and undermine Ovid’s authority, and it also owes a considerable debt to the structuring principles of the poem. Calabrese claims that the Wife of Bath finds the best justifications for her arguments on love and marriage from the *Ars*. In my estimation, Calabrese is partly right, except that he overstates the case.

The Wife of Bath utilizes a wide variety of Ovidian material. Still, she can neither be sourced to a single author, nor it would seem can she be tied to a single text of one author. The Wife of Bath’s exceptional individuality subverts the patriarchal realities
of the literary tradition. That being said, is there any real question about which ancient author would have most impressed her? While her prologue indicates a vast and learned readership, her use of the *Metamorphoses* reveals that she was a very close, and a very careful, reader of Ovid’s epic.

For example, the tale of Argus and Io is a revealing moment in the Wife’s prologue. In Ovid, Mercury lulls Argus to sleep and then decapitates him in order to free the imprisoned Io. The Wife of Bath represents the one-hundred eyed giant as an example of how authority, no matter how threatening, is ultimately unable to repress desire, whether that symbol of authority be an epic and grotesque monster or a duped husband, an association that may be in the interest of Alyson to confuse.

The literary allusion further substantiates Alyson’s authorial identity, in an other sense a model of authorship that Chaucer parallels with the nature of the material she alludes to, a violent gesture of freedom informed by a history of authorial consciousness hostile to repressive forms of authority: “Thogh thou preye Argus with his hundred yen/To be my warde-cors, as he kan best,/ In feith, he shal nat kepe me but me lest;/ Yet koude I make his berd, so moot I thee!”

21. Now, on just reading these four lines, one might assume that the Wife is referring to Argus’ conventional status as an unbreakable guard. She would not necessarily require direct knowledge of the *Metamorphoses* to make this claim. However, later in the prologue, she recites the tale of Midas, and she even exhorts the reader to “Redeth Ovyd” if he or she wants to know the end of the story. In other words, the Wife of Bath announces the context for her Ovidian allusions (as

Chaucer does in his poems, though not with same directness). Of course, she alters the story to her personal advantage, and she changes Midas’ barber into his wife.

She intentionally manipulates the narrative in order to further support her own perspective. Her literary interpretation aligns nicely with her biography and general disposition. In the allusion to Argus, the part she leaves out provides some typical Chaucerian irony to her argument. Argus could guard her “as he kan best.” On the surface, such a statement implies that the best guard in the world could not restrain her. But with the knowledge of Ovid’s epic (a knowledge that would allow her to know the tale of Midas), the claim is far more sinister, suggesting that a man literally risks his neck in contesting the Wife of Bath’s own authority. Rather than ascribe any ideology to her, I think the Wife of Bath is a un-squeamish survivalist. And given the fate of some of her husbands, perhaps her threats should be taken a little more than metaphorically.
Chapter 2: Tristan: an early witness to Ovidian ethics

The author(s) who is referred to the poem as Béroul composed Tristan in a Norman dialect around 1160-1190, but the author’s biography is unknown. Scholars frequently speculate that Béroul, because of his style and content, was not a ‘courtly poet.’ The literary implications to such an assessment need to be further reviewed. My own opinion is that Béroul’s poem appealed to a variety of audiences: men and women, religious and lay, English and French, courtly and rustic. The literary context is simultaneous with the fluorescence of the aetas Ovidiana in the country.

The English and French hostilities were noted for their political infighting, a persistence of violent hostilities, and competing claims over the ownership of national identity. While little is known of Béroul’s life, the poet composed at a time when definitions of justice swayed with the trends of allegiance and authority had no guarantee, neither by birth nor by religious idolatry. Perhaps the poem’s adaptability, given the uncertain political circumstances, is, in part, why the Tristan legend found such popularity over successive centuries. Its legacy suggests how passionate desire inevitably conflicts with repressive institutions of authority.

On the Continent, Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan employed a vast array of rhetorical devices, not least in order to form the structural basis of the narrative around

23. Béroul, i-xv.
the paradoxical, often oxymoronic, expression of *eros*.²⁵ Gottfried’s rhetorical development of *eros* fell within a broader literary context of the *aetas Ovidiana*, and Gottfried seemed especially reliant on Ovid’s earlier poems: *Amores*, the *Ars Amatoria*, and the *Remedia Ameoris*. The entirety of Ovid’s canon had a profound influence on Béroul as well.²⁶

Scholars tend to remove any association that Béroul might have had to Gottfried, in part because Gottfried composed his own poem by elaborating on a different Tristan poet, Thomas of Britain. In the same century as Gottfried, the *Roman de la rose* would likewise be continued between two authors. It does not seem to be a coincidence that as poets becomes more self-conscious about naming and authorial identity, they also desire to piece the loose fragments of texts into a coherent and singular narrative order.

Gottfried’s indebtedness to Thomas appeared to be so strong that scholars have relied on artificial distinctions, considering Gottfried and Thomas as the ‘courtly’ poets while labeling Béroul and Eilhart von Oberge as the ‘common’ bards. Such a distinction, though perhaps once helpful, raises more questions than it ultimately answers, and misrepresents the the self-conscious identity that began to emerge in narrative poetry, in no small part due to the growing influence of Ovid sweeping across northwestern France and England.


²⁶. Glendinning, “Eros, Agape, and Rhetoric,” “Like many others in this ‘age of Ovid,’ Gottfried and the rhetoricians were [...] fascinated by the phenomenon of eros.” (923).
The Case of Violence of Béroul

In any case, the rich history that binds Thomas to Gottfried need not be justified at the expense of Béroul. He is not the primitive forbearer of more refined inheritors,\(^\text{27}\) nor should our literary and aesthetic estimation of his work be determined by the imagined conventions of the \textit{version courtoise}, an ill-defined designation that unfairly casts a disparaging tone over its supposedly pejorative opposite, the \textit{version commune}. The justification for such labels often rely on Béroul’s propensity for graphic violence. Norris Lacy expresses “shock” over a few scenes, and he is certainly not alone in that reaction. Even in the company of some fairly violent literature, Béroul’s poem stands out.\(^\text{28}\)

We should ask if the violence served a purpose other than the brutal indulgences of a ‘common’ poet. Beyond describing the literary and historical conventions that define Béroul's aesthetics of punctuated shock, the poem's modalities of violence demonstrate how a medieval romance, even at the very beginning of Ovid’s European florescence, displays the essential struggle between art and politics, between individual desire and centralized authority. At a crucial moment in the poem, the poet utilizes an Ovidian allusion in order to display and explicate the poem’s deconstructive relationship toward political authority.

Four elements of the poem will justify my claims: the fantasies of violence that

\(^{27}\) We lack the historical evidence to even justify such a supposed chronology.

run through the narrative; the use of leprosy as a structural image; the literary history of
the dwarf; and Frocin’s ultimate beheading, a culminating scene of the poem’s ethics that
fundamentally relies on its association to Ovid in order to formulate its ethical
foregrounding.
Non-Ovidian Intertextual Influence on the Poem

To understand the foundational importance of Ovid to Béroul, a relationship that does not immediately reveal itself, I will isolate the intertextual influence outside of the Ovidian tradition. Béroul’s narrative constantly returns to fantasized violence into the haunted minds of its characters. In the extent of its brutality, the imagination of King Mark, in particular, could be more repulsive than any of the narrative’s actuated violence.

Over the course of the poem, the artificial mechanisms of the political order begin to break, prophesying a gloomy conclusion for the structures of authority that vainly try to restructure its order. For Iseut, whose role as Queen makes her illicit sexual affair a matter of public concern, her fantasy of passionate sacrifice develops the tone and style a medieval reader might find in the graphic hagiography as well as the generically expanding form of the hagiography.29

Like Béroul’s Tristan, the medieval hagiography occasionally relies on violence in order to suggest the extreme nature of the victim’s passion.30 Religious sacrifice sometimes demands the relentless and excruciating violence of a martyrdom. The spectacle of the martyrdom in medieval romance often takes the secular shame that would be projected onto the martyr and converts it into the collective guilt and sin of the audience. Fulfilling some of the conventions of a broader genre, Tristan invokes the

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language of the spiritual martyr. In *Tristan*, the passion of love becomes so intense that it begins to look like a close relative to spiritual zeal.

Likewise, in the *Vie de Sainte Agnès*, the martyr’s exaltation is predicated on the testament of her virginity. Broadly speaking, the connection between female sainthood and virginity is often essential. As Simon Gaunt observes, “Sexuality is thus a crucial element in the construction of female sainthood and medieval depictions of female saints indicate that medieval culture was obsessed with virginity.”

The power of inversion, as means either for the saint or the romance heroine, proved a tool in the struggle against the culturally normative conditions of repression: the universe of late-thirteenth- and fourteenth-century virgin martyr legends is a world turned upside down: maidens batter devils; girls reduce princes to buffoons; wives and daughters outmaneuver husbands, fathers, and magistrates … In defying husbands, fathers, and civil authorities, these women stood society on its head. Their heroism consisted in their fearless confrontation of their adversaries, their undisguised scorn of the world, and their unequivocal rejection of social values.

Iseut contorts her language to satisfy merely the letter of the oath. The public nature of ‘oath-making’ makes the insult of Iseut’s manipulation all the more political.

She undermines an essential institution of authoritative justice that the public relies on to regulate and maintain its social and economic structures. Furthermore, she distances herself from any tinge of innocence that her associations with the martyr might

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have brought her. Iseut’s deception may indict the assumed strength and security of these institutions, revealing the fragility of power when an individual’s passion cannot be repressed.

King Mark did not take her virginity, so the implication is that he does not have her love. As a saint would promise her virginity to God as a promise of devotion, Iseut's deceptive oath infuses the nature of the lovers' desire with a language traditionally coded for saints and martyrs. Iseut, working on two layers of deception, places Tristan in the role of God, and she appropriates the language of the martyr to proclaim the supremacy of her sensual desires. She establishes the terms of her own passion in the context of her absolute devotion to her lover, and she uses her virginity as the crux of the symbolic action.

The intense nature of her passionate sensuality swells into a fantasy of vivid self-immolation:

Mex voudroie que je fuse arse,
Aval le vent la poudre espars,
Jor que je vive que amor
Aie o home qu'o mon seignor

(35-38)

(I would rather be burned alive and have my ashes scattered in the wind than ever in my life love any man except my lord)36

Iseut once again fools Mark, who thinks himself to be “seignor.” Iseut retains the signifier while displacing the signified; such a model is almost emblematically Freudian

36. Iseut’s declaration might remind one of Saint Catherine, who also imagines her physical dismemberment and obliteration: “I fear neither pain nor torture that you can inflict on my body, whether you chose to burn it or quarter it.” De Sainte Katerine: an anonymous Picard version of the life of St. Catherine of Alexandria, ed. William Macbain (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1987), 166.
and, strangely, anticipates the peculiar influence of Lacan, where language operates to
displace desire much in the same way Iseut preserves the seeming coherence of the sign
while facilitating the subconscious exchange of the desired signified.
Pagan and Saintly Influences in Tension

As in the many sacrifices in Ovid, death appears preferable to a life of unsatisfied desire. The martyr becomes secular and sensual, at once staining the virginal purity of the Church while sanctifying the temple of Bacchus. The different genres influence each other by inverting the ethical framework. As the audience of the saint’s death is implicated in spiritual sin, the audience of the lover’s martyrdom is implicated in the political bonds that disallow the demands of desire.

Iseut acts as an inversion of the religious martyr, describing the nature of her sensual desire in terms that invoke language found throughout the literary corpus of virginal saints:

Li rois pense que par folie,
Sire Tristran, vos aie amé:
Mais Dex plevis ma loiauté,
Qui sor mon cors mete flaele,
S’onques for cil qui m’ot pucele
Out m’amistié encor nul jor!,”

(20-26)

(Lord Tristan, the king thinks that I have loved you sinfully; but I affirm my fidelity before God, and may He punish me if anyone except the man who took my virginity ever had my love.)

The promise of virginity is a theme in the lives of female saints. While rather audacious for Iseut to invoke God in what she knows to be a deceptive proclamation, it is all the more an association or perhaps even an embodiment of her intertextual identification with the religious martyr.

As a queen, she harnesses her immense political power in the service of her
unyielding sensuality. Iseut’s fantasy of violence imagines the disintegration of her corporeal unity into “la poudre esparse” (scattered dust) a startling vision where the wake of passionate desire would leave no remnant of the material self. In this context, Iseut's imagined self-obliteration also has dark implications for the stability of the political order. In political discourse, a prominent use of the corporeal metaphor, most famously in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*, likens the authoritative dominion of the State to the coherence of the metaphorical body: the king is the head, the peasants are the feet, and so on.  

By projecting the fantasy of incineration onto her own body, Iseut imagines the conflagration of political hierarchy as a contingent vision to the testament of her sexuality. Though Ovid’s influence on the poem is not yet explicitly apparent, the antagonistic nature between desire and authority foregrounds what will culminate into Ovid’s ethical influence on the poem.

The ‘public’ – or, more specifically, the ‘political’ – becomes a hostage to the queen, who is ready to sacrifice her regal identity as a declamation to the vast nature of her sensual interiority.  

This dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside gives rise to a fourth aspect of the felt experience of physical pain, an almost obscene conflation of private and public. It brings with it all the solitude of absolute privacy with none of its safety, all the self-exposure of the utterly public … Artistic objectifications of pain often concentrate on this combination of isolation and exposure. Ingmar Bergman’s film’s repeatedly couple physical pain with intense

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moments of humiliation.\textsuperscript{39}

Like Iseut, Tristan also fantasizes about being burned alive:

\begin{verbatim}
Por Deu, le fiz Sainte Marie,
Dame, ore li dites errant
Qu'il face faire un feu ardant;
E je m'en entrerai el ré.
Se ja un poil en ai bruslé
De la haire qu'avrai vestu,
Si me laist tot ardoir u feu;
Qar je sai bien n'a de sa cort
Qui a bataille o moi s'en tort
\end{verbatim}

(148-156)

(In the name of God, the son of the Virgin Mary, lady, tell him immediately to have a hot fire made, and I will enter the pyre. If even a single hair is singed on the hair-shirt I will be wearing, then let him have me consumed by the fire; for I know that there is no one at court who will dare do battle with me)

Conforming to the role of primitive warrior, what Tristan lacks in rhetorical eloquence or poetic sensibility, he compensates with the threat of brute strength. If Iseut’s manipulation of language shows how political authority can be subverted with rhetoric, then Tristan shows how it can likewise be undermined with his consistent threat of physical force, especially against the barons and King Mark.

For Tristan and Iseut, the fantasy of self-immolation posits an implicit threat. Political authority can restrict desire to the extent it can survive without passion’s contingent acolytes. In this situation it cannot. The symbolic image of suicide conveys an existential threat against the foundations of political authority and, not by association but by effect, the mechanism of the narrative’s plot.

Fortunately for the young knight, Tristan’s repeated retreats from the court

successfully keep him from proving his reckless boasts. Even when it comes to
dispatching the first baron, whom the narrator presents as an immediate threat to Tristan,
the task falls to the warrior’s elderly tutor, Governal. The older man decapitates the
baron and hangs his head on a forked limb in the famous bower, the wooded house of
nature for Tristan and Iseut’s passionate desire. During this entire time, Tristan naps,
passive and exhausted, not from the struggle of a warrior but from the exertions of young
love. When Tristan finally awakens, he is shocked by the head hanging in front of him.
What was Governal trying to teach his student with such a grisly scene?

Governal's execution of the baron could represent Tristan's extended realm of
authority. Yet, this fails to consider Tristan’s unique relationship to Governal, and it
does not help to explain Tristan’s pattern of inaction. Why would Governal, the elder
counselor, be called upon to the dispatch the enemies of young warrior? Ultimately
Governal forces Tristan to reflect on his propensity for avoidance and deferral.

The narrator’s apostrophe suggests a specific emphasis or division to the
structure: “Un de ces trois (que Dex maudie!)/ Par qui il furent discovert/ Oiez comento
par un jor ser!” (Listen now to what happened to one of the three/ (may God curse
them!)/ who had betrayed the lovers.) (1656-1658). The barons were last mentioned on
line 1473, when the dog, Husdent, is released into the woods, ostensibly to see if the
dog’s incessant barking is senseless, or if the dog is pining for its master’s company.
Indeed, the dog’s barking soon threatens the secrecy of the lovers, which was the ulterior
motive of the nobles when they initially dispatched the animal into the wilderness.

40. For example, Adam Miyashiro, “Disease and Deceit in Béroul's Roman de Tristan,” Neophilologus 89
Tristan, at Iseut’s requests, trains the dog to be silent so that they don’t have to abandon it. Symbolically, the figure of the dog portrays Tristan repressing an aggressive instinct that potentially disrupts the lovers’ union.

The narrator conditions the audience to expect that Tristan should be the agent of vengeance; the narrator tells the audience that we are to learn about the fate of one of the three barons who betrayed the lovers (1656). We are then told that the people of Cornwall feared the woods of Morrois because of the threat that Tristan posed: “Il les feïst as arbres pendre” (he [Tristan] would hang them from the trees) (1666). To his dismay, Governal sees the baron in the woods while Tristan is asleep in the bower with his arms “tightly around the queen” (1674-75). The narrator explicitly emphasizes the expectation that Tristan is the appropriate agent for vengeance: “Nus retorner ne puet fortune/ Ne se gaitoit de la rancune/ Que il avoit a Tristran fait,” (No one can escape fate:/ He was not on his guard against the anger/ he had inspired in Tristan) (1697-1699).

Of course, the anger he inspires in Tristan finds no direct outlet. The action is taken up by his old tutor, the man who raised him, now feeble in old age and playing the role of the sagacious counselor. And again the narrator notes Tristan's lack of action when we hear the court's expectations when the headless body is found, “Bien quident ce ait fait Tristran,” (They were sure that this had been done by Tristan) (1717). In reality, it had been done by Governal while “Tristan se jut a la fullie” (Tristan lay in his bower) (1729). By hanging the head in front of him, it is as if Governal is trying to instruct Tristan, or perhaps even shame him.

At this point in the narrative Tristan is much more accustomed to avoiding
confrontation, especially while in the company of Iseut. Instead of acting with the conventional bravado of the ‘medieval’ knight, Tristan withdraws from the prospect of battle and, he displaces, literally, the socially invested appendage that should define his masculine identity. The loss causes Tristan to withdraw inside himself and to become the receptive object of Iseut’s desires. Béroul has a precedent for the lover's transformation into the beloved's object in the literary tradition of the troubadours: “The man is constantly being drawn into an object role (one where he is subject to another's desire) by the possibility of the woman assuming 'feminine' agency.”

Leprosy, the Law, and Subversion

The intertextual elements of Tristan are partly informed by the historical and legal contexts for leprosy. I am a little skeptical of some of the scholarly conclusions given that medieval legal texts concerned with leprosy seek little foundation in anything resembling empirical evidence. The stereotypes of barbaric cruelty might be overstated, in some cases, if Edward Kealey’s interpretations of textually codified medieval regulations are approximate to reality:

In his book on Anglo-Norman medicine, historian Edward Kealey studied English leprosaria and included a commentary on the earliest regulations to survive from any leper hospital in Europe, those from Saint Mary Magdalene at Dudston (ca. 1130). In agreement with the interpretation of the French leprosaria regulae offered in this study, Kealey concludes that these Anglo-Norman rules were designed to assist lepers, not to punish or imprison them … Although Kealey did not find any evidence that the Magdelana leprosarium incarcerated its residents, Risse and especially Moore insist that French leper hospitals were designed to confine lepers. Both of these scholars stress the significance of Canon 23 of the Third Lateran Council, held in 1179 under Pope Alexander III. This canon required that leprosaria throughout Europe provide chapels and cemeteries for leper hospitals and hire leper priests to serve there. Moore interprets this canon as the decisive step in incarcerating lepers.43

“Incarceration,” it seems to me, is a distinction without difference from “confinement.” If there were universal cultural standards regarding leprosaria, exile, and confinement, then it is probable that aristocratic poets had knowledge of leprosy only through poetic and historical texts as opposed to personal interaction. Even the legal construction of leprosy feels more literary and biblical than empirical or scientific. The representation of leprosy in Béroul’s poem tells us little of the historical reality. However, the intertextual

association between the legal and literary might build a case for a cold and insensate political elite who constructed a crude image of disability in the service of an exploitive and self-serving cultural morality. In any case, the use of leprosy, as a structuring marker within Béroul’s poem, deserves further explication. There are two scenes defined by the representation of leprosy, and, as they reflect meaning onto each other, they inform the poem’s structural arrangement.

At the center of both scenes stands the image of the puiot, ‘a crutch,’ a symbol that will transform itself with its altered repetition. The initial scene forms the puiot into an image of sexual violation, though the catalyst for the transgression is the community’s center of political authority, King Mark. After discovering the Queen’s infidelity, Mark considers a public burning, which would, in some ways, facilitate Iseut’s imagined martyrdom. But Yvain, the lone voice of the poem’s lepers, stokes the king’s desire for personal vengeance and outlandish retribution. The leper promises Mark unspeakable punishments: “Paior fin dame n’ot mais une:/ Sire, en nos a si grant ardor!” (No lady ever had a worse fate:/ Sir, our lust is so strong!) 1194-95. The revulsion that such lines produce in the audience are unequivocally echoed in the unified dissent of the community within the poem:

Tuit s’escrient la gent du reigne:
“Rois, trop feriez lai pechié,
S’il n’estoient primes jugié.
Puis les destrui. Sire, merci!

(884-887)

(All the nobles of the kingdom cried:/ “King, you would be committing a terrible injustice/ if they were not tried first;/ wait until afterwards to kill them. Sir, have mercy!”)
The uniformity of the objection is explicit; ‘all the people of the kingdom’ cried out in a single voice. The verb of the community’s exhortation, _escrier_ ‘to cry out,’ recalls the rhetoric of lamentation found in the Psalms, an allusion further emphasized at the end of the block quote with the vocative exclamation, “_Sire, merci!”_ The community’s psalmist interjection reveals a spiritual admonishment to Mark’s violation of moral conventions; the point is emphasized when he declares his commitment to the immoral deed even if he were disowned “Par cel seignor qui fist le mont” (by the lord who created the world) (889).

The poem’s ethical construction of justice is further articulated by the proximate vocabulary: _justise_ (1127, 1165) _justise durra_ (1168), _sanz jugement_ (1097). In Lacy’s translation of the accusation, “Rois, trop ferïez lai pechié,” the judicial bearing is explicit: “King, you would be committing a terrible injustice.” However, a more literal translation may reveal an even more poetically self-conscious inflection on the king’s legal breach: ‘King, you would sin against the song.’

Because the community is referring to its own legal conventions, translating _lai_ as ‘text’ could be preferable, though this does not discredit a suppressed translation of ‘song’ or ‘lay,’ which allows the narrator to silently echo the community’s ethical framework; the king is a tyrant and transgresses the morally encoded customs of family, kingdom, and religion. Furthermore, when the poem announces its Ovidian associations, the

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44. Psalm 27.1 ad te Domine clamabo , Ps 29.3 Domine Deus meus clamavi , Ps 60.3 de novissimo terrae ad te clamabo , 63.2 audi Deus vocem meam , 76.2 voce mea ad Dominum clamavi , 87.14 ego autem ad te Domine clamavi.

45. Psalm 30.10 miserere mei Domine, Psalm 40.11 tu autem Domine miserere, Psalm 55.2 miserere mei Deus, Ps 56.2 miserere mei Deus miserere mei , 84.8 ostende nobis Domine msiericordiam tuam, 85.16 respice ad me et miserere mei.
hierarchical symbolism of authority itself will incur critical interrogation, not least from the relentless demands of individual passion and its displaced need to represent unsatisfied desire.

My focus on legal jurisdiction should not lessen the revulsion that the punishment itself should evoke (in any audience). King Mark gives Iseut to the lepers because a public burning appeared insufficient, not quite brutal or shameful enough for the king. There is nothing subtle about Mark’s intentions. He delivers Iseut to the lepers under the unmistakable implication that rape will be a condition of her punishment: “Et l’estovra a nos coucer” (and [she] has to sleep with us) 1206. The *lex regis* reveals itself as nothing more than a grotesque form of sexual violence, dressed in moldering rags that fail to conceal the savage capriciousness of the ‘law:’ “The association of leprosy and carnality also explains Mark’s decision to hand Iseut over to Yvain's band of lepers, who will provide for her a far more horrible fate than the penalty traditionally reserved for the convicted adulteress.”46

By conditioning the audience’s ethical framework in the capricious horror of authority, Béroul offers a critique of the political order as well as the customs of his own culture. This is all to say that, without yet invoking the ancient poet, the ethics of the poem are quite suitable to Ovidian influence, which will emerge, ironically, when Mark attempts to take the sword of authority into his own hand.

I detect phallic imagery at the symbolic center of Iseut’s *contra passo* in an otherwise odd bit of detail for the colony of lepers: “N'i a celui n'ait son puiot,” (Not a

single one was without his crutch)\(^{47}\) (1232). The phallic associations are justified in the historical context that associates leprosy and carnality, the fact that Yvain asserts the colony’s vicious lust, and finally because of the implications of an “unspeakable punishment.” Suspicious of Freudian anachronisms, some may still object to my argument for a \textit{double entendre} on \textit{puoit}. If the present evidence is not sufficient, the second scene involving the representation of leprosy will justify the observation.

When Tristan dresses as a leper, he performs the role of the societal outcast, and he contorts his identity into a public spectacle of self-abasement and shame. The consistent repression of his aggressive instincts constitutes a pattern of avoidance. But above all, Tristan’s performance reveals the depth of Iseut’s gained agency; this is yet another of Béroul’s inversions, in this case the chivalric warrior sacrifices his identity in service of his own desire for submission. Iseut asserts her absolute possession over Tristan with an emphatically exhibitionist form of sexual self-pleasure: “‘Tor la ton vis et ça ton dos:/ Ge monterai comme vaslet.’ Et lors s’en sorrist li deget,/ Torne le dos, et ele monte./ Tuit les gardent, et roi et conte./ Ses cuises tient sor son puiot,’” (‘Turn your face away and your back toward me,/ and I will straddle you like a man.’) Then the leper smiled./ He turned around, and she mounted./ Everyone watched them, kings and counts alike./ She kept her thigh pressed against his crutch) (3929-3935). I agree with Lacy when he says that the phallic significance of Tristan’s crutch is difficult to ignore.\(^{48}\)

The structural importance of the crutch is equally important and perhaps more

\(^{47}\) I have modified Lacy’s translation, which reads, “each one with his crutch.” The meaning is the same, but the negative conjunctions in Béroul offer an emphasis of ownership not conveyed in Lacy.

\(^{48}\) \textit{Béroul}, 235-236.
ideologically antagonistic. The image recalls and delineates a former scene, where the symbolic significance of the former *puiot* clearly emerged on line 1232. The *double entendre* could be inferred by the structural signification of the repeated image; the *puiot* that was the potential metonym for the sexual threat has been transformed into the literal object of Iseut’s sexual desire. And as an emblem of transformation, the *puiot* symbolizes metamorphosis itself, a literary image for catharsis, forging a keystone to the poem’s architecture of sublimation. Iseut ‘rides’ Tristan over a muckish wasteland, metaphorically bridging her control over the phallic threat on a swampy stage that appears to conjure the appropriate bedroom for Iseut’s symbolic domineering.

Iseut has reformed the specific image of the crutch, changing it from a subject of potential violation into an objective possession that facilitates her own pleasure and allows her to define her identity through her own erotic desires. She asserts her subjectivity by establishing control over a phallic symbol, rendering it into an object of her intimate pleasure.

The imagined threat of leprous contamination allows Iseut to invert her religious devotion, as if she required divine intervention to protect herself from the imitation of leprosy. Her hidden knowledge allows her to manipulate the public ordeal by

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49. Earlier, I noted how Iseut adopts the language of the martyr of hagiography in order to describe the nature of her ‘passionate’ devotion. Her control over Tristan, ‘the leper,’ continues her own self-construction as a saint of love. Indeed, it has already been noted in the scholarship how Iseut's contact with a leper connotes the idea of her own sainthood, see Sally L. Burch, “Leprosy and Law in Béroul's Roman de Tristram,” *Viator* 38 (2008): 148.

50. The material disguise of leprosy also allows Iseut to exhibit her sexual desire without the fear of retribution: “The lovers are not playing with but manipulating truth. Their goal is to use the dual capacity of clothing to reveal and conceal simultaneously – to appropriate the legitimacy in the service of untruth … These two characters possess an impressive facility in choosing the context that will best accomplish their desires,” Monica Wright, “Dress for Success: Bérou’s Tristan and the Restoration of Status through Clothes,” *Arthuriana* 18 (2008): 12; Tracy Adams, “Love and Charisma in Béroul,” *Philological Quarterly* 82 (2003): 15.
transforming it into a sexually self-satisfying performance.\footnote{Sally L. Burch, “Leprosy and Law,” 145-154.} Many critics have noted the power of secrecy in the love affair, but in this case Iseut's erotic enjoyment demonstrates subversive exhibitionism. She undermines the moral and judicial order in the presence of its unknowing authorities.\footnote{Mccracken, The Romance of Adultery, 80.} Miyashiro argues that the ride on the leper constitutes part of the legal trial: “it is more specifically a refutation or rejection of the charges: it is prefigured and formative, a preconditioned legal defense, a statement which is expected to be a denial of the charges.”\footnote{Miyashiro, “Disease and Deceit,” 515.} If this is correct, Iseut’s sexual exhibitionism is legally subversive, undermining the conventions of judicial precedent by privileging her arousal as a mechanism for her social identity to reject the normative conditions of her social role.

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52. Mccracken, The Romance of Adultery, 80.
Ovid’s Influence on Froncin’s Literary Inheritance

Though much of the poem’s source material is perhaps not strictly Ovidian, the poem utilizes a pattern of non-Ovidian features as a negative contrast to the culminating moment of Ovidian allusion that defines the narrative’s ethical framework. The King’s ultimate decapitation of Frocin, which happens long after the affair is uncovered (under ambiguous pretenses), orients the narrative’s ethics by privileging the tenets of Ovidian desire, where sensual passion cannot be repressed by the artificial demands of authority.

Mark’s execution of Frocin reveals Ovid’s guiding influence on the poem’s consciousness of its own poetic creation. Fulfilling a convention of the medieval romance, Mark is the cuckolded king, a personal misfortune that has implications on his political authority. He falls within a literary (and historical) tradition of royally deceived husbands, not least of all King Arthur, who makes a brief appearance in Béroul’s poem. But Mark, unlike some of his real and fictional counterparts, is not entirely unaware of the queen’s infidelity.

If he could remain ignorant, it might be fine, but Mark’s inability to fully repress the truth results in grisly visions of displaced rage. The king reveals an incredibly violent instinct that seeks to punish the poem’s lone truth-teller, his advisory dwarf, Frocin. To justify what might strike some as an anachronistic appeal to psychoanalytic terminology, I will prove that Mark’s intimate and political anxieties over the queen’s affair get expressed, though not all satisfied, through his mortal punishment of Frocin, not because

Mark shares the narrator’s bigoted hostility toward the dwarf, but because the king needs to attack the poem’s symbolic image of truth, a fantasy of authoritarian aesthetics that are inimical to Ovid and the Ovidian tradition of art.

Almost from the beginning, Frocin is alert to Tristan and Iseut’s affair, and he is committed to exposing it to King Mark, even though his repeated attempts threaten his social status as well as his life. In his initial plot, Frocin leads Mark to a tree where they can potentially catch the lovers in the act. Tristan and Iseut successfully fool Mark, more than ready to be deceived it seems to me. The King projects the rage that had been swelling against his wife onto the dwarf, who must flee to Wales to escape the king’s wrath.

Frocin’s unflagging veracity fails to get rewarded by the poem’s ethical framework; on the contrary, the narrator conditions the audience to detest the dwarf as an importunate instigator for conflict. To create such a figure, Béroul relies on a crude type of similitude: an unfortunate physical disability reflects a deformed spirit. We learn nothing of Frocin’s desires, what he loves, or whether he has a family. The narrator hates Frocin for his need to expose the infidelity of the lovers, to remove the Ovidian drive of the medieval romance, both as a poem and a genre, and to expose the “truth” to his lord, King Mark, whose failure to acknowledge reality puts him in a place of personal shame and political instability.

Frocin, like Vergil, would have it that political authority clearly and unapologetically extinguish the flames of desire, which would kill the plot of the romance.

55. The need to witness the event may speak to contemporaneous legal practices, which required visual documentation. McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery*, 63-70.
in order to establish the frigid dictates that justify the regal hierarchy.

While Frocin’s commitment to transparency may threaten the narrator and audience’s celebration of illicit love, a virtue within the Ovidian tradition, he cannot be charged with failing in his advisory role to the king. Because the affair threatens Mark’s public legitimacy, perhaps members of his court should be persistent in uncovering the queen’s infidelity, if they care about the stability of the king’s political authority. Yet, Frocin appears to be the only councilor willing to honestly confront the King; additionally, he clearly does so at great risk to his personal security. And unlike the barons, who are constantly scheming, Frocin appears to lack any noble or regal ambitions.

So while the narrator disparages him, Frocin fulfills a few exemplary qualities of the good advisor, a role codified in a tradition of literary and political writings generally referred to as the *speculum principum*, ‘the mirror of princes.’ The pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum* is a foundational work for the genre, and, though somewhat ironic given the title, its endorsement of the truth-telling councilor is unequivocal: “he sholde be cvnnynge in dyuers sciences, he sholde bene Sothefaste in worde and dedd, and lowe throuth abowe al thynge, and hate lesynge” (Chap 48, 11-13). In Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower forms his own ‘mirror for princes’ by providing a summation of the genre that is grounded in its most influential works: Godfrey of Viterbo’s *Speculum regum*, Giles of Rome’s *De regimine principum*, Brunetto Latini’s *Li Livres dou Trésor*, and – perhaps above all –, the *Secretum Secretorum*.

To embody this tradition, Gower begins his discussion of ‘Policy, a section that
speaks directly to the ethical drive of the entire poem by emphasizing the value of truth:

“Among the vertus on is chief,/ And that is Trouthe, which is lief/ To God and ek to man also” (7.1723-25). As the king’s lone advisor, Frocin’s commitment to truth-telling should not be observed in a vacuum; given the popularity and influence of the *specula principum*, a medieval audience, which very well could have shared the narrator’s bigoted disgust, would nonetheless observe that Frocin fulfills a conventional, if not exemplary, role of the honest advisor. Nonetheless, the political literature that Frocin emerges from is, by definition it seems to me, anti-Ovidian.

The literary history of the medieval ‘dwarf’ will provide further corroboration for my assessment. Due to the influence of Arthurian romance on some scholarship, and the influence of Chrétien in particular, the dwarf normally receives a rather flat reading; he is mean-spirited, ugly, and perhaps slightly mystical. But this fails to consider the variety of medieval representations that informed the image of the dwarf within the Arthurian tradition and, more specifically, that informed the construction of Béroul’s Frocin.

A mythological celtic ruler, Iubdan, the dwarf king of the leprechauns, is noted both for his veracity and his magical abilities, not often thought of as kissing cousins in the middle ages. The association should feel odd in any era, given the spellbinding nature of magic. In the legend of Cuchullain, the epic hero of Ulster threatens to pilfer the magical items of a dwarf that he pulls from the river. But the smaller man is a harpist, and his song cast a somnolent spell over the would-be thief. Like the story of Mercury

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and Argus, this scene reflects art’s essential capacity to pacify and disarm authority.

Fortunately for Cuchullain, the dwarf is more merciful than Mercury.

Not every story that features a dwarf can by uniformly interpreted. Vernon Harward’s survey of the literary representation of “the dwarf” examines Walter Map and Giraldus Cambrensis, where we find literary characters who are “truth-loving and noble-minded.” However, while I agree with Vernon Harward’s analysis of Giraldus, the story he refers to in Map’s *De nugis curialium* deserves a closer reading. Map relates the story of Herla, “regem antiquissimorum Britonum,” who meets a dwarf king, and they create a reciprocal pact to attend each other’s weddings.

At King Herla’s wedding, the dwarf and his retinue supply their own food and announce their collective desire to wholly accommodate Herla. The following year, Herla attends the dwarf’s wedding, but when he leaves and greets a shepherd in the field, Herla discovers that a supernatural amount of time has passed. He is now the last Briton in a land of Saxons, and he faces the same problem as Rip Van Winkle: the fidelity we place in the inherency of our customs becomes essentially undercut through our expanding awareness of temporality.

So while I agree with Harward that the dwarf is associated with the importance of oath-keeping, and in this sense falls within a broader literary tradition of dwarves noted for their allegiance to the bonds of trust and truth, the story offers a hesitantly synthetic representation. The dwarf ennobles one of culture’s most cherished customs, the wedding feast, but in doing so lulls Herla into the classic fatalistic trap: the erasure of

time undermines the stability of all our conventions, perpetually making philosophy a
subsidiary to experience, so thought always remains a slave to life.

Béroul’s dwarf exhibits the same paradox as Map’s pigmeus. Frocin has the gift
of prophecy, and yet he cannot avoid his execution. Knowledge and self-awareness
prove to be no value in avoiding his grim fate. Of course, some of the most notorious
literary dwarves are found in Chrétien’s Knight of the Cart and Érec and Énide. There is
no interiority in these representations. They are flat images of hate and debasement. As a
result, the influence of Chrétien on current scholarship has skewed our perception for the
dwarf’s literary significance.

Given the literary history of the ‘dwarf,’ Frocin’s role as truth-teller cannot be
dismissed as an eccentricity nor assumed to be a conditional factor of his malicious
intent. It is cultivated by a tradition of sometimes ennobled representations, and within
this context, Frocin is a peculiar synthesis: at once a grotesque target of the narrator’s
scorn and simultaneously a symbol of honesty. In some ways, the narrator forms Frocin
as the crude and inhuman representation of the thing within us that must acknowledge,
truthfully, our hate of decay, the mirror of the truth, repressing what we are forced to
witness. Frocin’s physical stature is a broken metaphor, as he is not essentially deformed,
but rather he represents the deformity within a culture that would project hate onto him.

Noting the significance of Ovid on the medieval literary dwarf is not beside the
point. Not only will Ovid’s influence on Béroul have a decisive impact on Frocin’s
ultimate fate, but Walter Map explicitly states that his dwarf looks like Pan, the satyr, and
his wedding feast is held in the palace “described by Naso.”

While the representation of the dwarf is slightly more ambivalent in Béroul than Chrétien, the Tristan narrator unequivocally disparages Frocin. So when the King imagines how he might dismember his truth-telling advisor, perhaps many in the audience were expected to delight in such cruel fantasies. Others might have been mortified or shocked. But if the poem peers above the brutishness of its time, as I hope it does, then the violence of Mark’s fantasy may serve the interest of complicating the king’s displaced subconsciousness:

Il ne me pout plus ahonter;  
De mon nevo me fist entendre  
Mençonge, porqoi ferai pendre.  
Por ce me fist metre en aîr,  
De ma mollier faire hair.  
Ge l'en crui et si fis que fous.  
Li gerredon l'en sera sous:  
Se je le puis as poinz tenir,  
Par feu ferai son cors fenir.  
Par moi avra plus dure fin  
Que ne fist faire Costentin  
A Segoçon, qu'il escolla  
Qant o sa feme le trova.  

(268-280)

(He made me believe a lie about my nephew, and for that I will have him hanged, for he stirred up my anger and made my wife hate me. I believed him and thus acted the fool. He will get what is due him: If I get my hands on him, I will have him burned in flames! He will meet a worse fate at my hands than that inflicted by Constantine on Segoncin, whom he had castrated when he found him with his wife.)

We need not invoke Freud to appreciate the significance of this very conscious castration fantasy. Mark's imagination culminates into a moment of shock, that moment when

language announces its semantic breakdown, where the inference of an unutterable image must impose itself on the narrative and, for a moment, halt the plot. The punishment is a “worse fate” than castration; whatever the audience could conceive, the poem dares not speak.

Mark, having been symbolically castrated by his nephew, projects that rage onto a man who is constantly ridiculed for his size. The phallic truth of the dwarf presents the king with reality’s mirror, for only the haunting acceptance of reality ensures a “fate worse” than the literal removal of the genitals. But ultimately, in which skeptics will assure me has nothing to do with the preceding discussion, Mark decapitates Frocin. Nonetheless, I will admit, in the case of the dwarf’s execution, Béroul owes a greater debt to Ovid than to Freud.

Because he waits until after Iseut’s infidelity has been confirmed, it could seem that Mark kills Frocin for reasons other than the affair. Indeed, Mark is aware of Iseut’s infidelity due to Frocin's scheme in the bedroom, where the flour on the floor becomes an ephemeral page and Tristan’s blood inscribes the incriminating ink. Mark eventually kills Frocin in what, at first, appears to be an odd supernatural digression that does little more for the poem than offer a quick nod to the Ovidian tradition, an appropriate if not conventional gesture for Béroul who writes during the aetas Ovidiana. However, my argument for Frocin as truth-teller, invested with its own literary tradition, reveals that the invocation of Ovid is more than a rote allusion.

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60. One cannot fail to note the similarities to Lancelot.
The Apotheosis of the Ovidian Allusion

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Midas' barber discovers that the king has the ears of a beast, though they are normally hidden within his hair:

cetera sunt hominis, partem damnatur in unam
induiturque aures lente gradientis aselli.
ille quidem celare cupit turpique pudore
tempora purpureis temptat relevare tiaris;
sed solitus longos ferro resecare capillos
viderat hoc famulus, qui cum nec prodere visum
dedecus auderet, cupiens efferre sub auras,
nec posset reticere tamen, secedit humumque
effodit et, domini quales adspexerit aures,
voce refert parva terraeque inmurmurat haustae
indiciumque suae vocis tellure regesta
obruit et scrobibus tacitus discedit opertis.
creber harundinibus tremulis ibi surgere lucus
coopit et, ut primum pleno maturuit anno,
prodidit agricolam: leni nam motus ab austro
obruta verba refert dominique coarguit aures.

*(Metamorphoses XI, 178-193)*

(The rest of him was like a person, but a single part was condemned. He took the ears of a slow donkey. He desired to hide them, and with purple turbans he tried to cover the debased shame of his crown. But his butler, who cut his long hair with a blade, had seen this. Since he did not dare proclaim such a disgraceful spectacle, he rather desired to utter it to the winds. But the winds would betray his lord: as he could not keep quiet, he went away to dig a hole in the earth. He spoke with a soft voice and murmured the revelation in a hole in the ground. With his voice in a trench covered with dirt, he left. There, within a year, a bed of thick tremulous reeds grew and disclosed the planter: gently disturbed by the wind, the reeds uncovered the buried words, and testified about the ears about the ears of the lord.)

The story reveals that not even culture’s most esteemed figures are immune from some hidden traits that might repulse the community or offend normative conventions; furthermore, the revelation indicates that attempting to hide such qualities usually prove
futile. The innate ‘need’ of the desire becomes too great to be contained. I myself wonder if the ancient barber would have had an especially intimate relationship with his king, not unlike the Groom of the Stool perhaps, which would add the tone of betrayal to the whole affair.

Indeed, Midas swears his barber to secrecy, but, unable to contain himself, the barber digs a hole, whispers the king's secret into the ground, and buries it. From this spot, reeds grow, and, with the help of the wind, will occasionally 'sing' the tale of Midas' ears. The story is less refined in Béroul's Tristran. Remarking to a group of barons that the king places a great deal of faith in him, the dwarf tells the potential confederates that he is sworn to secrecy. Here, it would seem the king’s advisor places little value on his oath, and, having inebriated himself, he tells the king’s secret, concerning Mark’s own bestial ears, to a hawthorn bush with the intention that the barons can overhear him. When Mark finds out what has occurred, he decapitates the dwarf.

Aside the dwarf’s nebulous prophetic abilities, Mark’s hidden ears, probably a direct allusion to the Metamorphoses, are the only supernatural phenomena in the poem. The image of the ears is striking and, on a first reading, it feels quite out of place. As far as I can tell, no one else is any sort of animal hybrid. However, the allusion intends on announcing its own importance, which in part explains the startling effect of the imagery. The Ovidian allusion symbolizes King Mark’s earlier problem; that is to say, the dwarf possesses the knowledge of something that the King wishes to repress, not unlike Ovid’s

61. The reeds have an added significance, as they are the same medium that Pan uses to construct his renowned flute. In Ovid, the secret of the king's gross deformity is transformed and sublimated by a sonic expression intimately related to the production of art.
cast of immortals who live a life of deception which is shortly followed by shame.

As a result, the violence against the dwarf has little to do with Frocin's deeds, even though the narrator completely disparages his character repeatedly. Rather, the execution of the counselor emphasizes the king’s displaced rage. Furthermore, though only a few lines, Frocin’s removal produces the poem’s culminating moment of the narrator’s ethical expression. Above, I showed how the poem pulls on a variety of sources with distinct, and sometimes exclusive, ethical frameworks, including the hagiography, advice literature, the troubadours, political literature, the Psalms, the heroic epic, etc. However, in Béroul’s *Tristan*, the intertextual design pulls every source toward an aesthetic vision of ethics, an Ovidian imagination of sensual desires that demand self-expression at the expense of social, normative, and moral customs. Béroul forms the poem’s ethics from the material of tradition, but he weaves the strands so that the poem’s ethical portrait finally solidifies in the image of Frocin’s decapitation, where Mark unconsciously enacts an Ovidian allusion that itself describes his unconscious motivations for killing Frocin. With the death of the poem’s symbol of truth and transparency, the plot can continue without the threat of the reality-principle; thus, the Ovidian allusion is strategically deployed by the poet in order to establish a literary function of ethics that privileges the individual desire for and of displacement as a mechanism of self-expression.

Thomas of Britain also refers to Ovid at an essential moment for representing the self-awareness of poetic and artistic craft. By the end of this dissertation, I hope to have demonstrated that such a decision could not have been a coincidence. Thomas writes that
Tristan, having defeated a giant, constructs a scene of statues including Isolde and her handmaiden. Like Pygmalion, Tristan creates an aesthetic monument to commemorate the nature of his devotion. The portrait and perhaps vague allusion to Pygmalion perhaps reveals a certain self-consciousness about Thomas’ own poetry, and as well evokes the Ovidian link between poetic invention and separated love:

Por iço fist il ceste image
Que dire li volt son corage,
Son bon penser, sa folle errur,
Sa paigne, sa joie d’amor,
Car ne sot vers cui descovrir
Ne son voler ne son desir.

(45-50, Turin fragment)

(For this he made the image: because he wanted to speak to his heart, to think on what is good, to follow his madness, his pain, his joy of love, for he had no one to whom he could reveal his desires.)

Having no place or person to adequately vent his grief, Tristan subdues a giant, maybe an emblem of his own exaggerated instincts, and harnesses that force to create a physical representation of what he has lost. Such a role for ekphrasis will come to define the Ovidian tradition of self-conscious poetics in the late Middle Ages.
Chapter 3: Sir Orfeo’s Harp, Ovidian Relic

Sir Orfeo is a Breton lay preserved in the early fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript, accompanied by other romances, religious material, and saints’ lives. The compilation of various genres illustrates a variable set of conventions, ranging from literary aesthetics to strict religious dogma. Notions of ethics and morality are not absolute. But Sir Orfeo combines generic and local influence and consistently returns to the Ovidian model of ekphrastic self-consciousness.

The scholarly neglect of Ovid can in part be explained by the reasonable need to focus on the poem’s Breton and Celtic elements more than on its classical features. Grimaldi’s moralistic interpretation has been influential, though I cannot find much in Sir Orfeo that would justify such a rigid allegorical lens. Grimaldi also makes some interesting connections to Propp’s work on fairy tales, but her analysis is too dogmatic, arguing that Propp’s formula reveals that “the main concern of the author is not Orfeo’s great love for Heurodis. Vladimir Propp has established that the basic unit of the fairy tale is not the character but the character’s function in the plot.”62 Grimaldi makes no distinctions in the qualities of authorship in different eras, which are separated by centuries, nor does she define “main concern” rather letting it implicitly stand in for

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something like ‘intent’ or ‘design’ or ‘form,’ all definitions that require distinction.

That Grimaldi reduces all medieval Breton lays to a very rigid interpretation of Propp’s analysis regarding the structure of nineteenth-century Russian folktales limits the interpretive scope of Sir Orfeo’s intertextual foundations, not least of all the radically inventive notions of authorship that the poet explores in conscious and unconscious ways. Furthermore, other than the fact that the poem is medieval, I can find no explicit reason for Grimaldi’s allegorical method, which ignores the trends of vernacular composition and readership in the late Middle Ages, as well as the increase of Ovidian manuscripts and influence.

John Block Friedman provides considerable insight into the complex nature of literary influence in Sir Orfeo. I agree that the medieval imagination would have seen important associations between Orpheus, the famous and tragic classical harpist, and David, the Biblical psalmist:

In the account of David’s surrounding himself with musicians and organizing them into classes (I Chron. 15:16-25) a medieval reader would have seen hints not only of Orpheus’ pre-eminence among musicians, but also of his supposed discovery of the laws of harmony and arrangement of the tones of music.63

Friedman’s description might suggest a vaguely Neo-Platonic resonance, perhaps indirectly channeling Macrobius and Boethius. The possibility only further substantiates Orpheus’ semantic richness, specifically as it regards his recurrently symbolic portraits of authorial self-consciousness throughout the Middle Ages.

The music of the Orphic lyre could provide revelry in a pagan bacchanal, in this context often directly alluding to Ovid’s own retelling. Alternatively, the Orphic sound

could evoke the celestial tones that inspire a Christian contemplation on harmony and the harmonic potential of intellection. Furthermore, the conflation of Orpheus and David is also found throughout medieval pictorial art. Friedman describes the significance of Ovid, and specifically the *Metamorphoses*, in the rhetorical and poetic arts of the late Middle Ages, and Friedman provides a decisive body of literary evidence that reveals how medieval rhetoricians, poets, and commentators viewed Orpheus primarily through the lens of love and loss, not moralized fairy tales or the dogma of Christian *exempla*.  

But Friedman places more emphasis than I would on the literary conventions of chivalric romance, a concept that gives scholars some general inroads into the medieval literary world, but I fear it begins to fall apart when held up to the aesthetic details of any particular work of art. So it is contrary to my critical instincts when Friedman calls Orpheus and Eurydice emblematic “courtly lovers” of the late Middle Ages.

Furthermore, as I will show, Friedman is incorrect in his assessment that *Sir Orfeo* “only bears a slight resemblance to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as we see it in Ovid.” Though there are significant alterations, and the poem is undoubtedly influenced by some of the romantic conventions that scholars generally discuss, the significance of the *Metamorphoses* cannot be so dismissed, especially considering the *ekphrastic* symbolism of the harp, a conventional literary image of antiquity that Friedman acknowledges was extremely influential in the late Middle Ages. The  

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65. Friedman, *Orpheus*, 164-175.  
significance of the harp as the poem’s structural bedrock ensures the allusive importance of Orpheus’ lyre remains fairly close to the poem’s surface throughout its entirety.

In some ways, my arguments concerning the function of art in *Sir Orfeo* are similar to those of Seth Lerer:

> The artifice of painting or architecture imposes a human plan on nature; musical artistry, however, has the power to bring out the order inherent in Creation. Only the artist can find that order, and the poem contrasts deceptive structures which offer but the semblance of security with an art which can harmonize man with nature and nature with man.⁶⁹

I believe this is mostly correct, but Lerer does not fully appreciate the authoritative source of Chaucer’s artistic ‘structuring’ and ‘harmonizing’ through representations of Ovidian *ekphrasis* that continually develop the semantic meaning into the literary image for the harp. In other words, I mostly agree with Lerer’s interpretation of the poem, though I think he underestimates Ovid’s influence, which, in my opinion, actually supplies further evidence for Lerer’s interpretation of *Sir Orfeo*’s aesthetics and structure.

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The Intertextuality of Nature

My reading of the *ymp* tree is emblematic of the interpretive departure I take from Lerer. He points to contemporaneous texts on gardening to illustrate the juxtaposition of artificial craft (represented by the grafted tree) and the more natural craft of music, which provides a genuine expression of harmony:

The grafting of trees was, as one historian reports, “a medieval enthusiasm,” in sharp contrast to its modern, utilitarian function. Medieval treatises considered it a highly prized art, and a text of 1305 holds it to be “a great beauty and pleasure to have in one’s garden trees variously and marvelously grafted, and many different fruits growing on a single tree.” A surviving fifteenth-century text, “The Feate of Gardening” ... presents in detail the techniques of grafting, and it revels in the grafter’s ability to change nature almost at whim.70

While his interpretation is different, it is not mutually exclusive from my argument that the *ymp* tree symbolizes a point of convergence for starkly different poetic traditions. I agree with Lerer that the poem is extremely self-conscious about its own artistry. I would just add that the poem’s self-consciousness demands a strong appreciation for its symbols of intertextuality, of which the *ymp* tree is a predominate figure. While the tree certainly has immediate cultural relevance, it may also be working within a specific classical tradition:

Herodis’ death, lacking any other obvious agent besides the *ympe-tre* itself, may thus invoke a longstanding tradition of the perils of tree shadows that is well-attested in classical sources and survives into the fourteenth century. Perhaps this tradition had a further hold in popular culture as well.71

The image of the tree is rooted to an ornately aesthetic cultural practice, and it furthers

the poem’s elaboration of its own aesthetics, displaying a visual emblem for tradition from which itself emerges.

Lerer’s structural interpretation is also much different from my own. He describes an explicitly romantic form, defined by the departure and return to court, which owes very little, it would seem, to classical literature:

Now, dressed in his pilgrim’s mantle and staff, barefoot and with only his harp as a relic of court life, Orfeo enters the wilderness. The narrator’s depiction of his loss (241-46) emphasizes that Orfeo’s journey is a departure from the regulated world of court. With each new rhetorical antithesis, he progressively strips away the veneer of civilized life.72

I will focus on the harp, less as a “relic” of the court than an essential identity marker of the ancient Orphic bard. This has direct implications on the poem’s structure because the harp, as a literary image, facilitates Orfeo’s catabasis, an iteration of Ovid’s structural movement in the Metamorphoses that Lerer does not analyze.

Roy Liuzza’s article puts the focus on what I believe to be the essential theme of the poem:

Like many of the so-called Breton lais, Sir Orfeo is notable for having as part of its subject the process of its own creation, and as one of its themes the means by which it has been constructed as a narrative and passed down through time; its manipulations of sources and contexts may be read as a commentary on its own process of creation and transmission, and by extension, perhaps that of medieval popular romance in general.73

I share this perspective entirely, but Liuzza falls into the scholarly convention of removing the central importance of Ovid: “The most striking characteristic of the Middle

English *Sir Orfeo*, then, is its degree of divergence from this traditional story.”\textsuperscript{74} Though I understand Liuzza’s need to remove Ovid, as Liuzza concentrates on the poem’s distinctively oral features, my argument is the opposite, that one of the most striking features is the poem’s indebtedness to the exiled poet, and I will demonstrate that Ovid’s importance to *Sir Orfeo* is a direct result of the romance being “a commentary on its own process of creation and transmission.” When works of art are motivated by their self-consciousness, as Liuzza argues regarding *Sir Orfeo*, intertextuality can more fully emerge as a component of authorial identity.

The scholarly neglect of Ovid has made the poem’s intertextual significance appear superficial and perhaps overly rustic. My analysis will reveal a self-conscious author who works within an Ovidian *ekphrastic* tradition, a literary context that has implications for *Sir Orfeo*’s structural complexity as well as its own ontology of artistic functioning.

The manuscript was produced in London around 1330, and Derek Pearsall suggested that it may have been commissioned by a London merchant, which could imply a non-aristocratic readership.\textsuperscript{75} The manuscript itself has been a popular focus of scholars, not least of all because some believe that it was owned by Chaucer. The direct source for *Sir Orfeo* may have been a French lay, but that cannot be confirmed. Given the extent of speculation regarding the sources and reception of this poem, it is a wonder how consistently Ovid is dismissed, in spite of his popularity in medieval England.

Given the material evidence of Ovidian manuscripts, a relatively accessible

\textsuperscript{74} Liuzza, “Sources, Traditions,” 272.
source for the Orpheus myth in medieval England must have been the *Metamorphoses* Book X. But if one assumes that the author of *Sir Orfeo* did not have access to Ovid directly (which would neglect the evidence supplied in McKinley’s lists, see Chapter 1), the poem still bears the mark of the Ovidian master plot that persist through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; this is not even to mention that the poem’s title, protagonist, and plot clearly announce its indebtedness to the Roman poet. In the end, the analytical evidence will weigh in favor that the author of *Sir Orfeo* had a sophisticated appreciation for Ovidian aesthetics and understood the implications that the *Metamorphoses* had on the poem’s ontological bearing.

But *Sir Orfeo* is not a straight translation of an ancient tale. Rather, it is an eclectic marriage, at times uncomfortable and strange, of Ovidian, Breton, and Christian conventions. The setting is Winchester and the season is spring, but the characters’ names are apparent references to the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. As in Ovid, a husband and wife are tragically separated, but the structure of separation and reunion seems, as Lerer suggests, to be an explicitly Breton or romantic convention.

Other themes that are generally assumed to be strictly Breton include the hint of magic, the uniting power of music, ambivalent regal identities, the woods as a wild and uncivilized locale, the underworld, fairies or demons, and kidnapping. It should be said that all of these conventions can likewise be found in classical literature and, more to the point, they can all be found repeatedly in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

However, I do not claim that all of these features derive directly from the *Metamorphoses*, nor do I suggest that Breton influence is not a significant factor. Rather,
I will argue that the scholarship should become more willing to see *Sir Orfeo* not as an emblematic ‘Breton’ poem but as a poem that embodies the synthetic structures and images of its Breton and classical literary influences.

Many readers have noted that the poem’s divergent elements and influences risk the coherency of the narrative. Like the menacing *ymp* tree, a jumbled collusion of protruding source texts can cast a shadow over the poem’s search for meaning. By revealing the poem’s essential connection to Ovidian *ekphrasis*, the semantic framework of the poem should become clearer, though I should say that it was never meant to be completely untangled.
The Orphic Lyre

At its foundation, the harp bears the genetic mark of Ovidian *ekphrasis*, though the image is situated at a convergence of ancient and contemporary influences. There are many Breton lays and romances where a personal object becomes an important emblem of the protagonist identity, for example Gowther’s *fachion* or Sir Degaré’s fractured sword:

> Be that he was fifteen yere of eld  
> He made a wepon that he schuld beyr;  
> A fachon bothe of styyle and yron,  
> Wytte yow wyll he wex full styron  
> And fell folke con he feyr.  
> (*Sir Gowther*, 139-144)

> “Oh Degarre, sone mine!  
> Certes ich am fader thine!  
> And bi thi swerd I knowe hit here:  
> The point is in min aumenere.”  
> (*Sir Degaré*, 1058-1060)

But unlike these identity markers, which provide their characters a sort of phallic assurance, Orfeo’s harp creates a closer association to his namesake than it does to the immediate literary imagination of chivalry. Significantly, the object does not denote a familial legacy, as it explicitly does in *Sir Degaré*, but it rather provides a signature for his artistic inheritance and links him into the tradition of Ovidian *ekphrasis* and, by consequence, aesthetic self-consciousness.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus, with his lyre as accompaniment, sings with such affect that his poetry compels the king of the Underworld to allow him to resurrect his
wife, Eurydice. Much as with Argus, music has the ability to crack the cell of imprisonment and to provide liberation of a kind. In Orpheus’ case, it is the ultimate prison sentence, death, and the fact that he is able to violate the laws of nature that reveal the profound extent of his artistic ability.

However, the power of Orpheus’ music is not absolute, as the king of the dead places a rule on their contract, demanding that Orpheus not look back to his wife on their return to the surface of the earth. This rule enforces the tragic form of the plot, casting the shadow of inevitability over Orpheus’ proceeding actions. As in Oedipus, the audience knows too well the ending when the story begins; that Orpheus is the agent of his own demise only heightens the association to the protagonists of antique tragedies.

From medieval to modern times, the Metamorphoses has been read morally and allegorically, and Orpheus’ turn back toward Eurydice can easily be refigured as an emblem for sin or a cautionary tale of disobedience. The tradition of sermons, commentaries, and allegorizations give ample justification. But such readings reduce the tale to one or two elements of the plot, making the rest of the narrative burdensomely irrelevant. While this may serve well for a sermon or a moralist commentator, there were some poets of late medieval Europe who were too self-conscious about art to be so reductive, in some sense because the moral interpretation discounted Ovid’s themes of transformation:

The fundamental challenge posed by the Ovide moralisé to medieval readers concerns the Ovidian paradox of the instability of being and of identity in change. The poem both enacts and reflects a contradiction between doctrine and practice. At the doctrinal level, the Church Fathers’ crusade to domesticate metamorphosis by reaffirming the omnipotence of God ... Moralisation of Ovid effectively
dissociates the theme of bodily change from the domain of the marvelous which had dominated vernacular representations of ‘mutacion’ since the twelfth century.\footnote{Ana Pairet, “Metamorphoses in fourteenth-century France,” \textit{Ovid in the Middle Ages}, 106.}

The influence of Ovid on the \textit{Sir Orfeo} poet is defined by its transformative themes; indeed, this component of Ovid’s influence is an essential ingredient in every image of medieval Ovidian \textit{ekphrasis} that I examine in the dissertation.

A Freudian would interpret Orpheus’ fatal look backward as an expression of his subconscious desire. In other words, Orpheus wanted his wife to remain dead so he could act out his repressed homosexual urges. The poem seems to provide further evidence for this conclusion when Orpheus, back on the surface, renounces the company of all women in preference for young boys. However, this interpretation assumes a desperate and disloyal kind of lust in the protagonist; my characterization of the hero is neither so lubricious nor insensate (to grief).

Such a reading discounts the profound depth of Orpheus’ melancholia, as I see it, over Eurydice’s second death. Orpheus’ obligation to Ovidian \textit{ekphrasis} reveals that his devotion to the lyre is a product of displaced grief, not repressed desire. And by displacing his grief, he sublimes it, inspired to create a series of embedded poems and, for a moment, Ovid shares the stage with Orpheus for the role of the \textit{Metamorphoses’} narrator.

The coalescence was foreshadowed earlier in the tale’s plot, when Ovid conveys Orpheus’ emotional appeal to the king, where author and character become indiscernible: the function of art, whether it is Orpheus’ lyre or the \textit{Metamorphoses} itself, is the
expression of grief in a way that alleviates it. But relief is temporary, and when Orpheus
glances back, the gesture betrays self-reflection in the mirror of life, a mournful
recognition of the reality-principle’s inevitable incursion in the poet’s work of art.

The mythic poet must again return to poetry, not with the hope of reviving his
wife, but that he might temporarily supply the void now in his existence with the illusion
of art and artifice. The explicit conflation of poet and poet-narrator finds an apotheosis in
the series of embedded narratives given to Orpheus after his wife’s final death. As the
audience might expect, Orpheus’ series of narratives are iterations on the same themes,
tragic loss and death.

While I do not see much justification for the claims regarding Orpheus’s latent
sexual urges, I do think Freud’s observations regarding the death drive are relevant:

‘Anxiety’ describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it,
even though it may be an unknown one. ‘Fear’ requires a definite object of which
to be afraid. ‘Fright,’ however, is the name we give to the state a person gets into
when he has run into danger without being prepared for it ... Now dreams
occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the
patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes in
another fright. This astonishes people far too little.77

Like Orpheus, one scourged with a traumatic neurosis repeatedly returns to the event,
expressing his or her mourning through an unsatisfying performance of recursion. Even
today, the public act of burial, or for that matter the spreading of ashes, repeats the
moment of death in order to inscribe what is inexpressible of loss – that which is beyond
the suits and trappings of woe – back into the world of cultural signifiers, attempting,

Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol.XVIII, ed. and trans. James Strachey and Anna Freud (London:
through a traditional (that is to say, recurrent) performance of mourning, to extract meaning from the earth by the exchange of material deadness. It is no different than Charon’s golden coin, a symbol of value we invest into a morbid ritual meant to ennoble our collective materiality; this ‘body’ had value, even if it was nothing more than the cultural symbolism we built it with, a suit of rhetorical armor against the creep of existential nihilism.

As it concerns Orpheus, the ability to preserve meaning slips away. Here, Freud will prove useful, not so much to understand the underlying urges of Orpheus and Eurydice, but as a way to analyze the structural formation of catabasis. Catabasis is an important convention of Greek and Latin epic poetry, though this has not been adequately considered in the scholarship on Sir Orfeo. In Book XI of the Odyssey, Odysseus prefaces his descent into Hades with a ritualistic sacrifice. The excursion, religiously commemorated, is no minor wandering, but a central part of the sailor’s journey that will force him to deal with the paradox of self-discovery, a realization inevitably informed by the recognition of one’s own mortality, the silent subject haunting Odysseus as he talks to a variety of different shades.

By no coincidence, he encounters the ghost of the Theban Tiresias, the blind prophet who warned Oedipus away from his wholly destructive quest for self-knowledge. In a world driven by fatalism, prophets symbolize the cruellest kind of paradox: one can possess knowledge of the future without having any ability to alter it; indeed, it is a wicked irony, found in the oldest literature, that knowledge of the future may very well precipitate the tragedy of its own prophecy.
But Odysseus, unlike virtually all of his comrades in the Trojan War, does not have a tragic fate ahead of him. To the contrary, Tiresias assures him a long and happy life. Yet, this only encourages Odysseus to descend deeper, to see the shades of his friends and family, to have a more immediate experience with the world of the dead. Because Odysseus’s quest for knowledge is not sated with the knowledge of his personal fortune, some other factor must be driving him further underground. An unspoken problem remains.

Unfortunately, the greatest mortal warrior has little to offer the veteran traveller. Rather, Achilles’ famously laments his eternal state of dead wandering, suggesting he would rather be a slave on earth than spend anymore time as a shade in the underworld. Many readers of the Odyssey are struck by his statement, perhaps because it reveals that Achilles may regret his decision for a short life of glory as opposed to a long life in obscurity. However, when Odysseus tells Achilles about the martial prowess of his son, it leaves the gloomy soul with much fatherly pride. Achilles departs the encounter rejoicing over the successes of his bloodline as he struts through the Asphodel Meadows.

What I find striking is the absence of any discussion of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. Achilles’ has found the paternal satisfaction that Odysseus lacks, as his journey is predicated, in part, on the fact that his son is unable to safeguard his estates or protect his mother from conniving suitors. Unlike Achilles, Odysseus’ failure as a husband and a father prevents him from receding into the womb of the earth (or ‘Calypso’ or what you will). Tiresias does, in fact, offer Odysseus a prophetic paradox, though it is, as one should expect, somewhat veiled: Odysseus’ quest for self-discovery has become a
pattern of avoidance that threatens his legacy, a quality which, for his culture, equates almost evenly to his identity.

Likewise, Orpheus’ *catabasis* is an explicit escape from reality, a type of avoidance that, as with Odysseus, the plot will eventually force him to confront. The form remains popular in the cinema of our own time, finding a recent iteration in Disney’s animated film *Up*, containing a plot that the director initially suggested was motivated by an old man’s apparent “suicide mission.”

Hamlet’s peculiar *catabasis* at the play’s outset also represents the paradox quite well. Confronting the ghost of his father puts him into a cycle of inaction and displacement, resulting in the swelling exploration of his haunted interiority. *Catabasis*, as a form, pushes the protagonist into a mode of self-reflection that emphasizes the temporal constraint on a mortal’s life, which paradoxically critiques this sort of self-reflection as a kind of deferral and existential avoidance. But does *catabasis*, as a formal structuring device, necessitate the themes of prophecy as an ethical mechanism for understanding knowledge as a necessary contemplation of death, the paradox that the end of knowledge is the reflection on its own absence?

Orpheus, not unlike the misanthropic protagonist of *Up*, is unable to accept the painful tragedy of his wife’s death. In order to avoid reality, he will attempt to undo the entire ethical and philosophical framework of his culture. So much of ancient literature and philosophy is predicated on the inevitability of death that Orpheus’ desire represents a fundamentally recalcitrant expression, not merely that of natural phenomenon, but of

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his culture’s fundamental philosophical assumptions. And so with his song, Orpheus transforms the king of the Underworld’s customary intransigence. Orpheus’ poetry has a unique and spectacular effect that ripples over the plane of Hades:

Talia dicentem nervosque ad verba moventem
exsangues flebant animae; nec Tantalus undam
captavit refugam, stupuitque Ixionis orbis,
nec carpsere iecur volucres, urnisque vacarunt
Belides, inque tuo sedisti, Sisyphe, saxo.
tunc primum lacrimis victarum carmine fama est
Eumenidum maduisse genas, nec regia coniunx
sustinet oranti nec, qui regit ima, negare,
Eurydicenque vocant: umbras erat illa recentes
inter et incessit passu de vulnere tardo.

(X.40-49)

(And as he said such words, and as he struck the lyre, the pale souls wept. Tantalus did not reach for the receding water, and the disc of Ixion paused; the winged-beasts did not tear at the liver; the Belides departed from the jars, and Sisyphus even you sat atop your rock. By his song, Fame is in tears that stream over her face, the first time since she came alive. The Queen could not repress her lament, nor could the King of the Depths refuse him. They summoned, Eurydice. She was among the young shades and she limped on account of her new wound.)

Orpheus’s song appears to, for a brief moment, stop time and pause the engines of fate.

But significantly, Tantalus does not taste the water, nor does Sisyphus reach the top of the mountain. They are never able to achieve their apparent desires.

Orpheus’ song does, however, allow for a brief displacement, a moment of temporary escape and deferral in an otherwise eternity of unfulfilled struggle. It seems that all who reside in the Underworld are deeply affected by Orpheus’ appeal. Ovidian ekphrasis defines art for its ability to respond to existential pain and, if only momentarily,

79. Literally, “nervos” is accusative plural of nervus, i: “musical string.”
to provide the illusion that time is not a prison framed in an inexorable death sentence.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story of Orpheus is defined by its *ekphrastic* representations. The audience hears the literal song of his appeal as well as the literal expression of his grief; even the aesthetics of *ekphrasis* are refined with the image of the *nervos*, the strings of the lyre which evoke the sound of musical accompaniment.

Likewise, the tale of *Sir Orfeo* is predicated on the thematic and structural frame of its own *ekphrastic* images:

> In Brytayne this layes were wrought,
> First y-founde and forth y-brought,
> Of aventours that fel bi dayes,
> Wherof Bretouns maked her layes.
> When kinges might ovr y-here
> Of ani mervailles that ther were,
> Thai token an harp in gle and game
> And maked a lay and gaf it a name.
> (13-20)

The block quote is replete with romantic language and local generic signifiers (“Breteyne,” “aventours,” “layes,” “mervailles,” “harp,” “gle and game”). However, the “harp,” much like the *ymp* tree, stands out as a convergent marker, an emblem both of the classical Orphic lyre as well as the courtly instrument for local minstrels.80 And by no coincidence, the *harp* is the motivating image for “gle and game” and perhaps the production of the lay itself. A poem’s self-consciousness of its own aesthetic production will prove to be a recurrent theme of Ovidian aesthetics.

Scholars have assumed that the harp reflects a mere convention of many other

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80. Perhaps the point is obvious, but even the name “Sir Orfeo” reveals yet another image of convergent influences. “Sir,” a chivalric marker, pairs with a nominal allusion to the ancient poet. The observation might suggest that the some of the scholarship has been misguided in its attempt to emphasize the poem’s local distinctions when so many of the poem’s essential images reveal a bonded form of influence.
Breton lays, and the story of Orpheus just happened to accommodate local literary tropes.

Admittedly, we will never know if the poet (or poets) began with Breton or classical literature or had some personal preference for either romances or Ovid. Still, the fact remains that the implications of literary influence go far beyond the apparent overtures that seem to broadly define an imagined set of generic conventions. My arguments regarding *Sir Orfeo* suggest that the poem’s thematic imagery and structure are intent on undermining the stability of these same supposed requirements for local genres.

In *Sir Orfeo*, the figures of the Underworld share a much closer kinship to the ancient shades of Homer and Ovid than to the paradise and eternal splendor of Christianity:

> Sum stode withouten hade,
> And sum non armes nade,
> And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
> And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
> And sum armed on horse sete,
> And sum astrangled as thai ete

(391-396)

In the tradition of Tantalus and Sisyphus, *Sir Orfeo* represents the damned as fragmented, constricted, pulled apart from their essential needs, and fundamentally removed from their essence. The soldiers are reminiscent of the shades of Achilles and Hercules, still searching for a battle that ended long ago, still haunted by the memories of former glories. Though a little speculative, I read the last image from the block quote as a direct inversion of Tantalus: in both cases, the act of consumption has been perverted in a way that contorts pleasure into suffering. In the scholarship, the debate surrounding the Underworld largely divides into folkloric vs. Christian perspectives. While both sides
have contributed to our understanding of the poem, I think an unfortunate consequence of
the debate has been the implicit exclusion of ancient source texts.  

In source texts that are further removed from Ovidian design, Orfeo may feel
closer to a Christian, monkish poet, sometimes singing in the service of the Church, or
perhaps playing the role of the English minstrel. Because I imagine that the poet is
exceptionally self-aware, I must defer to Ovid’s characterization of his poetic lineage. In
any case, Orfeo’s descent further substantiates his exploration of interiority through the
poem’s self-consciousness of its own creation:

But the most powerful force for the credibility of these fantastic elements is the
psychological and emotional realism that dominates the poem. Herodis’s terror
and Orfeo’s love and concern are moving and convincing ... In Sir Orfeo, meaning
does emerge from action but it is a qualitatively different kind of meaning. This is
not the story of a hero but the exploration of an emotion. As such, the story takes
on a metaphorical dimension.

The outer frame of Sir Orfeo follows a generally romantic structure, though an important
tragic inflection at the narrative’s center emerges precisely when the harp reveals its
indebtedness to Ovidian ekphrasis; in other words, the functional ability of art to create
the brief appearance of union and harmony is the mechanism (it is an allusively Ovidian
mechanism) that facilitates restitution in the conventional romantic plot of separation and
reunion.

Classical influence merges with the conventional demands of a contemporary
structural device. The pairing of discordant features, now at the level of structure, again
recalls the central symbolism of the ymp tree. But unlike this specific tree, which very

81. The Middle English Breton Lays eds. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute
well could be a local literary image, the harp’s Ovidian associations give it the potential
to be an dynamic instrument of creative invention. The transformative function of the
harp, which will eventually allow Orfeo to successfully retrieve his wife, is earlier
revealed, as a kind of foreshadowing, during Orfeo’s time in the woods, appropriately
since it is in the woods where he has forfeited his identity and eschewed the customs and
the morals of the court.

As I suggested above, the Breton woods are conventionally defined as a wild and
potentially dangerous environment. Their lack of civilization implies an excess of
primitive instinct and hostility. But Orfeo’s harp has a pacifying effect, bringing the
beasts of the wilderness together for a brief moment of collective harmony:

And when the weder was clere and bright,
He toke his harp to him wel right
And harped at his owhen wille.
Into all the wode the soun gan schille,
That all the wilde bestes that ther beth
For joie abouten him thai teth,
And alle the foules that ther were
Come and sete on ich a brere
To here his harping a-fine –
So miche melody was therin;
And when he his harping lete wold,
No best bi him abide nold.
(269-280)

Politically, these lines are remarkable: Orfeo’s “owhen wille” becomes his primary
motivating force, the center of his desire as well as his morality. In fact, his desire and
morality have become the same thing, perhaps an embodiment of what Max Stirner called
‘true morality.’ Furthermore, the implications of announcing an exchange of custom for
will are startling and, because of this, it is reasonable to understand “wille” as a faint relic
to what Schopenhauer would describe so extensively.

The poem’s development of its own self-consciousness, a desire it inherits from Ovid, prevents the audience from accepting the fantasy of authority and regal hierarchy that the work would seem to conclude with. There is a demand for interiority that denies the absolute resolution of interpretation when the poem concludes.

The transformation inside the woods accords with the poem’s broader erasure of political (though not literary) authority: “Thus, both Orfeo and Heruodis present us with an alternative to elite displays of power: one can hide nobility so fully that it exceeds the bounds of usefulness, for what use is nobility if it cannot be seen?”83

Yet the resurgence of art proves that Orfeo is not entirely lost in the wilderness. Orfeo’s harp affords a living and breathing sanctuary evoked with song and lyric that can possess even the most hostile creatures. This falls within the tradition of Ovidian ekphrasis, reflecting a function of art that can put Argus to sleep or transform Pan’s violent lust;84 and perhaps this scene from Ovid’s Metamorphoses provides the source for the block quote above:

Tale nemus vates attraxerat inque ferarum concilio, medius turbae, volucrumque sedebat. ut satis impulsas temptavit pollice chordas et sensit varios, quamvis diversa sonarent, concordare modos, hoc vocem carmine movit (143-147)

(The bard, sitting in the middle of his audience, had attracted a gathering of beasts and birds into this grove; as he tried the strings, he sensed differences, although variety harmonized to the sonorous modes, and this moved his voice to sing.)

84. Gower’s Arion and Apollonius are also in the Ovidian ekphrastic tradition.
But for Orpheus and Orfeo, the union and harmony of animals is temporary, lasting only as long as the song itself, focusing the enchanting effect of the song on the instrument and not the player. And in the end, I think Orfeo pays a severe price for his exploration of freedom and wilderness: “At his death, the hero’s inheritance passes out of his line to his steward, and a story that might have ended happily ever after is instead overshadowed by the finale of a dynasty: Orfeo’s line ends here.”

Nonetheless, the harp remains attached to the memory of the vagrant king. The musical instrument is the essential symbol of Orfeo’s identity. The harp’s moment of revelation occurs with an important scene of recognition, while Orpheus stands in an anonymous crowd of musicians:

In the castel and the steward sat att mete,  
And mani lording was bi him sete;  
Ther were trompours and tabourers,  
Harpours fele, and crouders –  
Miche melody thai maked alle.  
And Orfeo sat stille in the halle  
and herkneth; when thai ben al stille,  
He toke his harp and tempred shille;  
The blissefullest notes he harped there  
That ever ani man y-herd with ere –  
Ich man liked wele his gle.  

(519-529)

In Ovid, Orpheus’ song allows him to cross into the realm of the dead. The recurrent portraits of descent found throughout the Ovidian tradition reveal the poet’s desire to invest the ekphrastic emblem. In Sir Orfeo, art is also the portal that grants access.

When the castle’s guard blocks his entrance, Orfeo responds,

“Parfay!” quath he, “icham a minstral, lo!
To solas thi lord with mi gle,
Yif his swete wille be.”
The porter undede the gate anon
And lete him into the castel gon.

(382-386)

Orfeo offers “gle” as a kind of currency or credential that facilitates the plot’s structural progression. The importance of gle cannot be understood without appreciating its essential relationship to the harp:

Orfeo mest of ani thing
Lovede the gle of harping.
Siker was everi gode harpour
Himself he lerned forto harp,
And leyd theron his wittes sarph;
He lerned so ther nothing was
A better harpour in no plas.
In al the walrd was no man bore
That ones Orfeo sat before –
And he might of his harping here –
Bot he shuld thanche that he were
In on of the joies of Paradis,
Swiche melody in his harping is.

(25-38)

The king’s exalted musicianship recalls the legendary status of Orpheus. The austere association, paired with the lay’s own emphasis on ekphrasis, concentrates the thematic significance of the harp into a device of authorial self-awareness emerging through an association to craft.86

Much has been written on the importance of gle and the local mystique it

86. The TEAMS edition’s expository footnote for harping (ln. 26) refers to contemporaneous romances and cites Friedman in support of the Davidic image (also see my discussion earlier). But the note does not mention Ovid, the Orphic lyre, or any association to classical ideas of music or lyricism. Thus it seems that even the standard text for scholarship makes an implicit argument (perhaps unintentional) against an interpretation that might defer to Ovid’s ekphrastic legacy in the late Middle Ages.
possesses. One could also note that *gle* appears to have at least some association with what I have called the Ovidian functioning of art, or what could more generally be regarded as art’s capacity for sublimation and the consolation of grief. One may suspect I am pushing the association too far, unless it is noted that the poem represents *gle*, not as an internal emotion that the instrument can evoke, but as an affective quality of material embodiment that defines the poem’s *ekphrastic* significance. The mirror of poetic craft progressively delineates itself with the recurring associations attached to the poem’s attestations of *gle*.

In the tavern of East Cheap, time is measured in chickens and wine. In the wilderness of our medieval poem, the degradation of Orfeo’s physical appearance marks the loss of successive months if not years. His former self, or at least his initial regal identity, becomes wholly unrecognizable. One cannot help but wonder if all the trappings of his authority were only “veneer.” The court’s hierarchical organizations of authority fail to penetrate the woods, resulting in a forum less hospitable to politics and authority and more suitable for primitive urges, those desires which frequently, maybe by definition, betray the need for subversion, sedition, and misrule:

The emerging theme of clandestine sedition may strike a new bass line in the first section of *Sir Orfeo*, but its notes go on reverberating later into the poem: it has a bearing on the poetic rationale for Heurodis’s rescue and for the steward’s eventual succession, as well.87

When he initially enters the woods, the shedding of Orfeo’s cultural authority culminates, by no coincidence, with the burial of the harp inside of a hollow tree, neither to be seen

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nor played:

    Lord! who may telle the sore
    This king suffred ten yere and more?
    His here of his berd, blac and rowe,
    To his girdel-stede was growe.
    His harp, whereon was al his gle,
    He hidde in an holwe tre;

(263-268)

The abnormal length of his beard, drooping down to his “girdel-stede,” marks an absence of attention regarding the grooming practices that define the court’s cultural identity. His beard also gives the audience a phallic in grotesque that, if one imagines a sort of belt that the harp attaches to, seems to literally displace Orfeo’s musical instrument. Furthermore, I read no hyperbole in “al his gle” and I take the harp’s removal to infer a kind of despair or existential detachment.

At once, the harp acts as a metonymic emblem for his obscured self while also serving as a vehicle to materially substantiate gle, now departed from him through an embodiment of the musical instrument that, paradoxically, serves to disembody Orfeo. The exaggerated image of Orfeo’s phallus conforms to the poem’s ekphrastic theme, though as an inversion, to the extent that it shows what other instrument becomes emphasized when his harp is out of reach.

When Orfeo joins the realm of haunted specters, he is surrounded by apparitions who are likewise disassociated and divided at their essential being. Straight to the point then, the king of the Underworld ask Orfeo, “What man artow?” The question brings the issue of his fragmented identity to the forefront with a suspicion that emerges again and again in the body of medieval English poetry.
By Chaucer’s time, the question’s recursive presence lends a certain anxiety to its implications when it persistently proves too difficult to answer. In response, Orfeo must resurrect his identity, which he does by rescuing the harp from within his own hollowness, holding the instrument itself up in a symbolic spectacle of the poem’s ekphrastic theme:

“Y nam bot a pover menstrel;
And, sir, it is the maner of ous
To seche mani a lordes hous –
Thei we nought welcom no be,
Yete we mot proferi forth our gle.”
Bifor the king he sat adoun
And tok his harp so miri of soun,
And tempreth his harp, as he wele can,
And blisseeful notes he ther gan,
That al that in the palays were
Com to him forto here,
And liggeth adoun to his fete –
Hem thenketh his melody so swete.
The king herkneth and sitt ful stille;
To here his gle he hath gode wille.
Gode bourde he hadde of his gle;
The riche quen also hadde he.
When he hadde stint his harping,
Than seyd to him the king,
“Menstrel, me liketh wel thi gle.
(430-449)

The return of “wille,” now in a form that can be culturally appropriated, is emblematic of Orfeo’s return to the throne. Earlier, Orfeo’s “owhen wille” defined his behavior in the woods and even the grammar notes how its personally attached to him – in the woods, Orfeo’s “wille” lives somewhere inside of him. But back at the court, “wille” returns to the marketplace of cultural exchange.

The regent’s initial interrogation of Orfeo was quite threatening, specifically when
he faults Orfeo for breaking custom and intrusion upon the court without the proper
invitation. But after Orfeo’s “harping,” the regent’s hostility dissipates. The poem
stresses music’s capacity to pacify an antagonistic and resistant impulse, just as harping
had done earlier when it enchanted the animals in the wilderness.

It is in this context that the regent acclaims Orfeo’s gle; because gle has a distinct
resonance with the actual harp, the transformation of the regent’s emotions accords with
the poem’s self-consciousness of its ekphrastic themes. The essential association
between the harp and gle is confirmed by the poem’s revelation of its ekphrastic
meaning:

And Orfeo sat stille in the halle
And herkneth; when thai ben al stille,
He toke his harp and tempred schille;
The blissefulest notes he harped there
That ever ani man y-herd with ere –
Ich man liked wele his gle.

(524-529)

Again, gle is an object, even Orpheus’ possession, drawn in direct association to “his
harp.” Furthermore, “his gle” inspires the evocative capability of his instrument. Finally
returned to Winchester, Orfeo appears an alien until he plays for his courtly audience.
But after he plays, the token of recognition is not the sound of Orfeo’s voice or even the
sound of the harp; it is, quite explicitly, the harp itself: “Where hadestow this harp, and
how?”88 At the moment of recognition, Sir Orfeo’s own anagnorisis, the symbolic lens
focuses squarely on the musical instrument, the ekphrastic emblem that links the poem
into a tradition of artistic self-consciousness and a tradition that is substantially informed

88. ln. 533.
by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. 
**Orfeo’s Return to the Court**

Like the *Sir Orfeo* poet, Chaucer explicitly conveys the material significance of *gle*. In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer employs “gleês” as a synecdoche, naming the physical instrument for its evocative capacity, which he does when he lays out his hierarchy of harpists, of whom, by no coincidence, Orpheus stands at the top:

> Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,  
> That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,  
> Orpheus ful craftely,  
> And on his syde, faste by,  
> Sat the harper Orion,  
> And Eacides Chiron,  
> And other harpers many oon,  
> And the Bret Glascurion;  
> And smale harpers with her gleês  
> Sate under hem in dyvers seës,  
> And gunne on hem upward to gape,  
> And countrefete hem as an ape,  
> Or as craft countrefete kynd.

(*The House of Fame*, 1201-1213)

If these musicians are situated in any particular history, it must be in or near the cyclical Ovidian cosmogony and, even more specifically, in a time implicated by the degradation of the ages.

Orpheus’ fame among, specifically, the harpers provides further evidence concerning the ancient poet’s unique importance for literary *ekphrasis* in the late Middle Ages. Orpheus’ reputation is not simply that of a great musician and lyricist, rather his association to a distinct instrument provide a framework for the intertextual integrity of Ovidian *ekphrasis*.  

92
Chaucer consciously facilitates *ekphrastic* development when, with his multinational harpists, he traces an Ovidian aesthetic tradition within his most explicitly Ovidian poem. The *harping* that begins in antiquity has migrated to his homeland. I agree with Delany that there is a clear sense of self-deprecation in Chaucer’s sketch. The “smale harpers,” sitting far beneath their predecessors, can only “gape” back at the austere tradition that towers over them:

In Chaucer’s use of the ape-image, then, we may see another example of the self-deprecating irony which characterizes the style of the *House of Fame* [...] The lesser harpers, we recall, are imitating Orpheus and several other great musicians. They correspond to the ape imitating man and to art imitating divinely created nature. Orpheus then would represent the supreme artist, the poet who, impelled by divine inspiration, sings of the most elevated subjects.  

But unlike Delany, I read a great deal of ambivalence, and additionally intertextual significance, in the final two lines “And countrefete hem as an ape,/ Or as craft countrefete kynd.” Delany, implicitly, makes the reasonable assumption that “Or” is employed to unite synonymous phrases; that is to say, as the small harpers, reduced to simians by the poetic tradition, can accomplish little more than uncreative copyists, so it is that “craft” can do little more than copy nature.

While I do not discount such an interpretation, I would also consider that Chaucer is not being wholly self-defeating. Perhaps “Or” offers two alternatives: the small harpers can either be ape-like imitators or, if they have the ability, they might aspire to a *craft*, a word that immediately recalls the “ful craftely” Orpheus, and, perhaps, lightly implies an elevation of practice above mere verisimilitude.

 Additionally, the repetition of *countrefete* feels suspicious. The *Middle English*
Dictionary offers two primary definitions: (to paraphrase) 1) a likeness, an image; 2) an imposter, a fraud. The word lends itself to semantic ambivalence; at once, the two definitions could be perfectly accommodating or mutually exclusive. For example, in The Book of John Mandeville,

And all tho that beth y-wedded haveth a contrefeit of a mannes foot uppon her hedes, half a foot longe and all y-maked with precious stones wel and rychely, in tocknyng that they ben in subjeccioun to man and under mannes foot. And they that beth noght wedded have no soch tocknynge.
(1983-1986)

Behind Mandeville’s description of this misogynistic vision lays the sad truth that marriage was a social structure that practically necessitated unequal relationships of power, be they the physical and emotional injuries of envy or the crude exchanges of private property among contracted parties, “precious stones wel and richely.” Because Mandeville attempts to symbolize this fantasy, “contrefeit” must be taken to mean a strict likeness or image. The impression of the “foot,” which intends to inflate its own symbolic gesture, does not intend to be the “foot,” so it would be nonsense to call Mandeville’s “contrefeit” a ‘fraud’ or an ‘imposter.’

Nonetheless, other examples of the word demand that it mean ‘fraud,’ especially in regards to vitiated metals, which could be informed with further semantic resonance in the context of both alchemy and debased currency (two subjects that were apparently familiar to Chaucer). Chaucer could be exploiting the semantic tension between the two definitions through his repetition of the term. For the apish copier, his ‘image’ of nature is a tarnished imposter, lacking the affective beauty of Orpheus, wilting beneath the ancient predecessors. The demands of “craft,” on the other hand, could compel the artist
to create a genuine impression of *kynd*.

In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer explicitly uses *contrefet* for its primary definition:

> I kan not now wel counterfete  
> Hir wordes, but this was the grete  
> Of hir answere: she sayde ‘Nay.’

(*Book of the Duchess*, 1241-1243)

Because the grieving knight does not intend to fraudulently mask the dead lady’s voice, Chaucer’s definition, in this instance, must exclusively mean ‘a strict likeness.’ I will return to these lines in my next chapter, but for now I have hopefully demonstrated 1) Chaucer’s various usages of *contrefet* prove he was aware of the word’s semantic distinction 2) the possibility that the repetition of *countrefete* in the *House of Fame* relies on this distinction and 3) the repetition plays on a semantic tension that resolves itself by revealing a specific formulation on poetic intent and the demands of authorial identity.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer famously personifies his “litel bok,” having it kneel beneath the ancient poets, not least of all “Ovide.” I bring this up only to emphasize how self-conscious Chaucer became as a poet when concluding *Troilus*, not only wanting to explicitly invest his work into an austere poetic lineage, but also pushing it to conquer some form of temporality, to outlive its own creator and, in doing so, provide some compensation for the threat of mortality. Perhaps such a drive is not without risk:

The reticulated pattern of Ovidian allusion prompted by the *Heroides* intertext ultimately exposes the metatextual dimensions of Chaucer’s Troy, an edifice—like Troilus—of textual fragments and echoes, as an image of the status of (pagan) poetry itself. Thus formulated, poetry emerges in *Troilus* both as potential remedy
of love and as doomed cultural foundation.90

As a literary landscape, the fragmentation of ancient Troy seems to haunt Chaucer.

Chaucer provides an exposition on harping in a gesture that recalls the thematic orientation of Ovid’s major works, specifically the Amores, the Ars Amatoria, and the Metamorphoses. Chaucer uses Pandarus, in the act of conveying amorous advice to Troilus, to echo a similar formulation of art that was expressed in The House of Fame:

Towchyng thi lettre, thou art wys ynough.
I woot thow nylt it dygneliche endite,
As make it with thise argumentes tough;
Ne scryvenyssh or craftely thow it write;
Biblotte it with thi teris ek a lite;
And if thow write a goodly word al softe,
Though it be good, reherce it nought to ofte.
(II.1023-1029)

Bringing attention to the “lettre,” Pandarus’ anxiety over a textual object anticipates Chaucer’s own worry over the integrity of his text, which he expresses near the poem’s end (V.1793-99). While “craftely” is somewhat pejorative here, Pandarus encourages Troilus to find a middle ground between dry imitation and the appearance of excessive artfulness; the intent of Pandarus’ advice reflects the dialectic opposition of counterfête that I interpret in The House of Fame. That is to say, the dualist tension of “scryvenyssh or craftely” intends to resolve itself by rendering a more refined impression of kynd, regardless if that impression is actually quite embellished (for example, Pandarus’ suggestions that a tear be artificially blotted on, as another kind of ink it would seem.)

Pandarus’ advice continues with an especially material description of the harp and

harping:

For though the beste harpour upon lyve
Wolde on the beste sowned joly harpe
That evere was, with alle his fyngres fyve
Touche ay o stryng, or ay o werbul harpe, 
Were his nayles poyned nevere so sharpe,
It sholde maken every wight to dulle,
To here his glee, and of his strokes fulle.

(Troilus and Criseyde, II.1030-1036)

Pandarus focuses on the materiality of the instrument and the physical sensuality of playing, presenting a rich formation of ekphrasis in order to convey an important statement about Chaucerian aesthetics. The thrust of Pandarus’ advice is not to seem over rehearse, to again, not appear too ‘crafty.’ This formulation of art is voiced through Pandarus, who perhaps would be an artist if he were not so lubriciously motivated.

Pandarus ends his speech with the further refinement of the underlying principles of the poem’s aesthetics:

Ne jompre ek no discordant thyng yfeere,
As thus, to usen termes of phisik
In loves termes; hold of thi matere
The forme alwey, and do that it be lik;
For if a peyntour wolde peynte a pyk
With asses feet, and hedde it as an ape,
It cordeth naught, so were it but a jape.
This counsel liked wel to Troilus

(II. 1037-1044)

Pandarus envisions a coherency of structure and, in doing so, relies on the image of the ape that appeared in the House of Fame. The ape is again the foil, representing a failed reproduction, the dead eyes of imitation that stare blankly back at the artist, even though he or she may be aspiring to paint something as natural as a fish, which, here, also works
as an emblem for a composition’s structural unity, its “forme.”

Chaucer’s early artistic formulations, later developed and refined through Pandarus, allow for a fairly specific understanding of the poet’s drives, at least regarding the demands of aesthetics: namely, the work should create an impression or likeness of kynd that, perhaps through artificial decoration, possesses some affective capacity. In my final two chapters, I will examine Chaucer’s specific development and interrogation of art’s obligation to pathos, an obligation grounded in poetry’s sublimating and consolatory affect and indebted to a tradition of fundamentally Ovidian poetic aesthetics.
Chapter 4: A Fallen Language and the Consolation of Art in The Book of the Duchess

In The House of Fame, Chaucer represents language as an unreliable recorder of experience and a dissipating substance unable to accurately portray reality. The poem occurs within a larger context of medieval investigations of language, which includes the works of Augustine, Hugh of St. Victor, Alain de Lille, and Dante. Chaucer owes a substantial debt to the Commedia. He subversively responds to Dante and undercuts the transcendent potential of language by emphasizing its limits and fallibility. As John Fyler notes,

if Dante’s vision is of the upper bounds of language, which force a redefinition of poetry and eventually its transcendence into a wordless realm, Chaucer’s is in some respects of the other extreme, the foul rag and bone shop from which the poet, like all other human beings, takes his terms of discourse. What he sees is a simulacrum, a representation of language, as it works in the fallen world.  

Marked by the sin of humanity, language’s essential hollowness always recalls the great rupture of time.

The Book of the Duchess rarely gets considered as a forerunner to Chaucer’s exposition on language in The House of Fame. This lack is partly justified because of the striking uniqueness of Chaucer’s consideration of language in the later poem. Nonetheless, The Book of the Duchess focuses extensively on the limits of representational language, revealing Chaucer’s earliest engagements with form, content, and the function of poetry. The model is Ovid as opposed to Dante, and the subject is

grief not history.

Chaucer creates a familiar French landscape with its mournful lover and inquisitive narrator, and he uses Boethian lighting to inflect the Knight’s lamentation. The poem ultimately regards language as inadequate for representing the reality of human suffering. But with Chaucer’s own development of Ovidian aesthetics, the language of art becomes an appropriate, perhaps necessary, response to grief. Indeed, Chaucer’s representation of language owes much to Ovid, according to Fyler: “What Chaucer adds to this Biblical view of early history is a specifically Ovidian awareness of the way in which language and poetry are implicated in decline, especially as they serve as vehicles for expressing love.”

In *The Book of Duchess*, the narrator, Alcyone, and the Black Knight all seek help for intense emotional distress. However, the poem renders language ineffectual for representing the trauma of their suffering. The poem begins with the narrator unable to describe the pain that causes his sleeplessness:

\[
\text{Myselven can not telle why}
\]

94. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, 66. When examining medieval representations of desire, Fyler stresses the significance of Ovid: “for the medieval poets schooled by Ovid, the language we use is not only analogous to but directly implicated in the domain of sexual difference and heterosexual desire. . . . [L]anguage in the fallen world . . . engenders narrative, desire, and especially narratives of desire” (60). In Fyler’s earlier work, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven, 1979), he argues that Ovid gives Chaucer a framework to engage with nominalist assumptions, or at least assumptions of language’s limited capacity for articulation. Linking Chaucer to William of Ockham, Fyler says that “Ovid explores the psychology of how emotion inevitably frustrates rational control. Chaucer generalizes this exploration to a view of the limitations of human reason and knowledge” (22). Some scholars from the Robertsonian tradition have emphasized Ovid’s allegorical influence on Chaucer’s ethics and morality; see Richard Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Philadelphia, 1966). But this view fails to account for Chaucer’s extensive poetic and aesthetic modeling of Ovid. Indeed, Chaucer was exceptionally self-conscious, as a poet more than a moralist, of his model’s *vita*. According to Michael Calabrese, “Chaucer likely assimilated the details of Ovid’s biography as part of his literary inheritance. . . . Ovid’s poems themselves gave him the dramatic, literary material that he could mold in his own way as he became the most prominent new Ovid in English” (*Chaucer’s Ovidian Arts of Love* [Gainesville, 1994], 21). For the broader influence of classical authority on Chaucer, see A. J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, U.K., 1982).
The sothe; but trewly, as I gesse,
I holde hit be a sicknesse
That I have suffred this eight yeer;
And yet my boote is never the ner,
For there is phisicien but oon
That may me hele; but that is don.
Passe we over untill eft;
That wil not be mot nede be left;
Our first mater is good to kepe.
(34–43)

Of course, he fails to return to the subject of his personal grief. Words escape him.

Without completely reopening the debate on the physician’s identity, I will tentatively suggest that, among other possibilities, the physician is an allegorical figure for death. The one remedy that can truly cure the narrator is that which would absolutely remove him from the world. But the reflection on his mortality becomes too much, and it breaks the language of the narrator.

With the death of Alcyone, the poem reiterates its indictment of language.95 Alcyone’s tragedy cannot be realistically described, and her grief overwhelms the conventional demands of the poem. Emphasizing Alcyone’s inexpressible sorrow, the poet disallows the transformation that she experiences in Ovid and Machaut.96 The narrator fails to communicate her final words:

But what she sayede more in that swow
I may not telle yow as now;
Hyt were to longe for to dwelle.
My first matere I wil yow telle.
(215–18)

The narrator turns back to his “first mater” when he cannot describe his own grief, and

here, again, he returns to the “first matere” after he fails to describe Alcyone’s last lament. His “first matere” has become a refrain and a retreat, when words would otherwise abandon him.

The Black Knight, more so than the narrator or Alcyone, persistently reveals language’s inadequacy of literal representation. After the dream narrator’s attempt to have the Knight “discure me youre woo” (549), the Knight replies in what is now an accustomed vocabulary for language’s representational capacity: “Nay, that wol not be” (559). The Knight visualizes his silence, associating his incapacity for speech with hell’s eternally futile prisoner:

“This ys my peyne wythoute red,
Alway deynge and be not ded,
That Cesiphus, that lyeth in helle,
May not of more sorwe telle.”
(587–90)

The Knight’s perpetual approach to death, “Alway deynge and be not ded,” reflects the ultimate indefiniteness rooted in his semantic expression, his impotent attempt to articulate the tragedy of nature. In other words, the failure of resolution in his morbid Sisyphean journey reflects the eternal distance between the signifier and signified. He may be able to push the rock of meaning a long way up the hill, but it inevitably falls back on him, crushing any illusion of semantic success.97

The Knight’s faltering expression of language continues when he attempts to verbalize his initial feelings of love for the Lady. The description of his insecurity culminates in a rambling admission of inadequacy:

“I not wel how that I began;
Ful evel rehersen hyt I kan;
And eke, as helpe me God withal,
I trowe hyt was in the dismal,
That was the ten woundes of Egipte—
For many a word I over-skipte
In my tale, for pure fere.”

(1203–9)

Unable to recite much of anything, he does, however, remember that he could not find the appropriate words at the time he was speaking to her. While he has conscious access to memories, they are beyond language’s capacity to describe. Words are again lost on the Knight when he recounts the Lady’s initial rejection of him:

“Trewly hir answere hyt was this—
I kan not now wel counterfete
Hir wordes, but this was the grete
Of hir answere: she seyde, ‘Nay.’”

(1240–43)

The Knight cannot even *counterfete* her words; he is unable to reproduce a forged imitation of the original. The possible image of debased currency conforms to the poem’s broader theme on language. The final “Nay” takes a while for the Knight to get to, and the reader can sense the distance between his memory and the language he is grasping for in order to describe it.

Likewise, the woman’s beauty is also beyond definition:

“Allas, myn herte ys wonder woo
That I ne kan discryven hyt!
Me lakketh both Englyssh and wit
For to undo hyt at the fulle.”

(896–99)

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98. One wonders if the image vaguely calls Natura from Alain of Lille’s *De planctu naturae* to mind. In Alain, she is compared to a mint that imperfectly reproduces the divine image.
The Knight pairs “Englyssh” and “wit,” suggesting that the vehicle and the tenor of his expression are deficient. The Knight’s strategy of describing the White Lady is constantly one of negation:

“For every heer on hir hed,
Soth to seyne, hyt was not red,
Ne nouther yelowe ne broun hyt nas
Me thoughte most lyk gold hyt was.”
(855–58)

He finally commits to a simile, but he coyly hedges his bets with the use of “most.” And this sort of thing continues:

“Of eloquence was never founde
So swete a sownynge facounde,
Ne trewer tonged, ne skorned lasse.”
(925–27)

Descriptions like these abound, yet there is one moment where the Knight nearly gives up on words altogether:

“I wolde ever, withoute drede,
Have loved hir, for I moste nede.
‘Nede?’ Nay, trewly, I gabbe now.”
(1073–75)

The Knight consistently expresses frustrations with his language, much of which has regressed to “gabbe.” After the Knight recognizes his own nonsensical speech, he reverts back to metaphor, comparing the Lady to Penelope and Lucretia (1081–82).
The Themes of Despondence and Depression

Through the poem’s representation of despondency in the three main characters, the narrator demonstrates the inability of language to capture the reality of love or suffering.

Concerning himself and Alcyone, the narrator’s criticism of language is direct, but the Black Knight reveals language’s essential inability to express the reality of virtually anything. The failure of language for realistic expression does not, however, preclude the consolatory potential of art. By referring to Ovid, Chaucer situates art as a mode of transformation, where destructive emotions undergo conversion, and language, precisely by its indirection, can facilitate a metamorphosis of grief and loss into creativity and invention.

For *The Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer owes an obvious debt to the *Roman de la Rose*, Froissart’s *Paradys d’Amours*, Machaut’s *Dit de la Fonteinne amoureuse*, and the *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*. But it is Ovid who gives Chaucer a literary model for the psychological instability of grief and its metaphorical correspondence to art. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, art frequently becomes the medium either displaces or alleviates pain and suffering.

For example, when Pan is unable to satiate his violent lust on the fleeing nymph Syrinx, Pan’s sexual rage becomes pacified by the song he plays into the flute, Syrinx’s only remains. The sensation that was potentially repulsive and destructive is now creative.

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100. Glending Olson, *Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1982).
and defined by beauty. Later, the god Mercury will use Pan’s flute to lull Argus into a sleep so that the tormented Io can be freed. From Ovid, Chaucer finds a precedent to form an important correspondence between art, sleep, liberation, and the sublimation of pain.

Language’s metaphorical capacity in The Book of the Duchess transforms the narrator’s own destructive grief in much the same way that Pan utilizes the flute. The poem locates its own transformative ontology by referring to the origin of art in biblical history:

As koude Lamekes sone Tubal,
That found out first the art of songe;
For as hys brothres hamers ronge
Upon hys anvelt up and doun,
Therof he took the firste soun.

(1162–66)

Like Pan, who sublimes his debased lust, Tubal mollifies the engineering of weapons by converting the process into a production of “the firste soun.” Chaucer does not merely define the essence of art. He imagines a dream of origins rooted in art’s essential capacity to convert war into song.

The Book of the Duchess begins by focusing on the pain of the narrator:

Suche fantasies ben in myn hede
So I not what is best to doo.

(28–29)

His grief could be the result or the cause of his insomnia, but, either way, artistic inspiration eludes him. He reaches for an Ovidian “romaunce” (48) in the search to relieve his sleeplessness. But Ovid’s tale does more than cure the narrator’s insomnia.

The story offers the narrator a substitution from his haunted reality. He finds
poetic inspiration as well as psychological relief. Of course, when Chaucer includes the
tale of Alcyone and Seys, his immediate model is probably Machaut’s *Dit de la
Fonteinne amoureuse*. In Machaut’s poem, a restless narrator spies on a knight lamenting
his lost love. Part of the knight’s soliloquy includes a retelling of Ovid’s tale of Alcyone
and Seys. Chaucer, on the other hand, reads the story inside of a book, transforming the
substance of his source material from oral to written:

> And in this bok were written fables
> That clerkes had in olde tyme,
> And other poetes, put in rime
> To rede and for to be in minde,
> While men loved the lawe of kinde.
> (52–56)

The written nature of Chaucer’s retelling contrasts with Machaut’s poem, which
announces itself as a spoken utterance, a *dit*. Moreover, there is no sense of Machaut’s
surrounding narrative. The reader naturally assumes that Chaucer is not reciting the
middle of Machaut’s poem, but rather that Chaucer incorporates, or supplants, a classical
story taken from a compendium of related “written fables.”

Chaucer says that the poems were composed “in olde tyme,” emphasizing the
influence of the ancient “poetes” and distancing the connection to the recent French
tradition and, specifically, Machaut. Even the focus on “the lawe of kinde” recalls Ovid’s
Golden Age, an era of tranquility found in the opening cosmogony of the
*Metamorphoses*. Chaucer has masked his debt to Machaut by decontextualizing the
reference. In hiding his association with the court poet Machaut, Chaucer amplifies his

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own connection to Ovid, appropriating the inset narrative in order to establish a direct connection to a venerated *poeta*. The erasure of Machaut from the written page allows Chaucer to take Ovid’s influence from the mouth of the courtly *maker* and reclaim him in the written record for the poet of history.\textsuperscript{104}

But like Machaut, Chaucer retells Ovid’s story of Alcyone’s melancholic devastation.\textsuperscript{105} The reader learns that her husband, King Seys, dies in a calamitous ocean voyage. Alcyone, ignorant of his fate, begs Juno for some knowledge about her husband. Grief overwhelms the Queen:

For sorwe ful nygh wood she was,
Ne she koude no reed but oon.
(104–5)

The “oon” remedy is prayer, which allows her to sleep, a form of consolation that she shares with the narrator.

Juno responds to her entreaties by sending a messenger to Morpheus, whom he finds sleeping in a desolate environment where the constant murmurings of the river Lethe keep its inhabitants in a state of somnolent forgetfulness:

Ther never yet grew corn ne gras,
Ne tre, ne nought that ought was,
Beste, ne man, ne nought elles,
Save ther were a fewe welles
Came rennynge fro the clyves adoun,
That made a dedly slepyng slepyng soun.
(157–62)


After Morpheus rises, he embodies the corpse of Seys, reanimates it, and enters the dream of Alcyone. Once there, he makes a request, as Seys, that Alcyone bury her husband:

“For, certes, swete, I am but ded.
Ye shul me never on lyve yse.
But, goode swete herte, that ye
Bury my body, for such a tyde
Ye mowe hyt fynde the see besyde;
And farewel, swete, my worldes blysse!
I praye God youre sorwe lysse.”
(204–10)

When he possesses Seys, Morpheus attempts to communicate his death to Alcyone. Morpheus counsels Alcyone to bury her husband and symbolically accept his death. Such a ritual may help resolve her sorrow. She refuses the advice. Her grief is too great, and she dies in hysterical mourning. Morpheus fails because language does not have the representational capacity to express an event of such profound tragedy. In other words, Morpheus’s imitation is morbidly literal, revealing the inadequacies of representational form. The tale of Alcyone and Seys exemplifies The Book of the Duchess’s larger engagement with language. The hollowness of the relation between form and meaning fails to communicate the depth of real tragedy.

After reading the Ovidian tale, the narrator finally falls asleep, discovering a poetic revelation, a sensual release of visions and sounds. He begins a self-reflective meditation on the nature of art itself.106 Chaucer, a young poet when he wrote The Book of the Duchess, recognized the necessity of imaginative inventiveness. As Robert

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Edwards observes, “The poem is a work of artistic initiation, and its beginnings lie equally in the domains of representation and aesthetic speculation.” An expression essentially about poetry, the dream vision in *The Book of the Duchess* represents an aesthetic liberation inspired by Ovid’s influence and inflected by language’s metaphorical foundations.

For the narrator, the sonorous verse of Ovid’s romance has the same outcome that the water’s “slepinge soun” has on Morpheus. But in contrast to Morpheus, the dream narrator awakens to a world more vibrant, alive, and inspiring. The two distinct bedrooms of Morpheus and the dream narrator give the reader a stark sense of auditory and visual difference. The narrator rises to the pleasant song of the birds:

> With smale foules a gret hep  
> That had affrayed me out of my slep  
> Thorgh noyse and sweetnesse of hir songe.

(295–97)

The birds’ “songe” reflects a kind of poetic inspiration, and the literary mural contextualizes the dream narrator’s bedroom. Chaucer orients the intertextual alignment of the poem by inscribing the dream narrator within a literal vision of poetic history:

> Of Achilles and of kyng Lamedon,  
> And eke of Medea and of Jason,  
> Of Paris, Eleyne, and of Lavyne.

(329–31, 334)

The harmony of the birds and the images of literary history converge into a symbol of

poetic rebirth:

And in the dawenynge I lay  
(Me mette thus) in my bed al naked.  

(292–93)

To find his own literary voice, the poet must depart from his literary gestation and venture into the woods. *The Book of the Duchess* presents a trial of maturation for Chaucer the poet. Just as Pan and Tubal must learn to substitute their primitive drives for more socially productive practices, so too must the artist abandon his adolescence of base imitation in favor of originality.

The dream, appropriately, necessitates a temporal destabilization. As a result, the reader cannot rely on a linear form of time, but can only localize him or herself through the pattern of associations that the dream creates. Chaucer utilizes this temporal freedom by introducing the “emperour Octovyen” (368) into the poem. The Roman emperor leads a hunting party through the woods where the dream narrator interrogates the Black Knight.

During the reign of the historical Augustus, Ovid found himself in the extended company of Horace and Virgil. Of course, while they were writing moralistic satires and encomiums for the emperor, Ovid foregrounded an exploration of interiority that

109. When Alcyone faints from exhaustion, she is taken to her bed naked. In Morpheus’s cave/bedroom, the narrator notes the nudity of the sleepers. This association between all three characters offers another linking element in the structural design of the poem.

110. Sigmund Freud argues that the dream is unrestrained by notions of time because the dreamer is unable to observe a particular concept of death in the dream state.

111. Jacqueline de Weever, *Chaucer Name Dictionary* (New York, 1996), s.v. Octavyen. The dictionary lists Octovyen, specifically attesting BD, as an alternate spelling for Octavius, first name of Augustus, emperor of Rome under whom Ovid lived. Minnis notes the connection to the Roman emperor as well, but he emphasizes an association with Gaunt (*Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* [New York, 1995], 119). Fyler also discusses the significance of a relocation of time through the reference to Augustus (*Chaucer and Ovid, 73–74*).
emphasized desire, death, and recalcitrance. Augustus eventually banished Ovid from Rome, and Chaucer would most likely have been aware of Ovid’s exile. If Gaunt should be compared to Augustus, as many scholars suggest, then I imagine that Chaucer knew that Gaunt would find that flattering, even if Chaucer understood the subtler implications of such a comparison.

112. Though it hardly does justice to the extent of the connection, I would merely say that Freud clearly owed a debt to Ovid for substantial elements of the psychoanalytic vocabulary, e.g., “Narcissism.”

Augustus as a model for Gaunt?

But Gaunt’s involvement should not overshadow the fact that the use of Octovyen allows Chaucer to forge another unique association to antiquity. Chaucer creates a vision of himself in the spatial and temporal proximity to a Roman emperor who was the sovereign of an imperialist and aristocratic form of patronage. Chaucer would have imagined himself in the literary company of Vergil, Horace, and, above all, Ovid.

Of course, Chaucer’s use of Octovyen may be indebted to Machaut’s *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*. In Machaut, the emperor is not actually present; rather the lover simply says that he would give up his wealth even if he had the riches of Augustus. Chaucer gives the Roman emperor a presence in his poem that more fully substantiates a relocation of time. As he did earlier in the poem, Chaucer again decontextualizes an association from the French tradition in order to create a more immediate connection to the ancient past.

But the Black Knight seems to have little connection to the Roman emperor. And unlike the dream narrator, the Black Knight lacks associations with *notes, melodye*, or *armonye*: “He sayd a lay, a maner song,/ Withoute noote, withoute song” (471–72). A lugubrious muteness displaces the sound of birds that filled the beginning of the dream. Then, the Black Knight explicitly discounts two venerated poets of antiquity, Ovid and Orpheus:

Nought al the remedies of Ovyde,  
Ne Orpheus, god of melodye,  
Ne Dedalus with his playes slye.
At the beginning of the poem, the dreamer turns to Ovid for help in his emotional distress. He emphasizes the classical association at the expense of his French contemporaries. The Black Knight’s disavowal of Ovid suggests that, while the Black Knight reflects some sense of the narrator’s feelings of grief, he rejects the narrator’s—and, I think, Chaucer’s—aesthetics of consolation.

Yet not even the Knight can completely ignore his own desires for poetry:

Trewly I dide my besynesse
To make songes, as I best koude,
And ofte tyme I song hem loude;
And made songes thus a gret del,
Althogh I koude not make so wel
Songes, ne knewe the art al.”

But he also clearly admits failure. He could not “make so wel,” and he concedes that, as one would expect, he lacks knowledge in the art of poetry. A few scholars have noted a close resemblance between the Black Knight and the narrator of the Consolatio Philosophiae. The Knight imitates something of an internal dialogue: “but he spak noght, / But argued with his owne thoght” (503–4). Also like a Boethian narrator, he laments his despair over worldly loss. In a more direct association, he levels his harshest attacks at Fortune.

But after some exposure to the Knight’s mode of consolation, the narrator finds the strategy inadequate. The Knight cannot resolve, nor even express, his grief with any

representational adequacy. For Chaucer, poetry can approach consolation and simultaneously reject the assumptions regarding intellection. 115 In The Book of the Duchess, poetry becomes, at least, a necessary distraction and, at most, a therapeutic aid to melancholia. The mystery of the Black Knight can largely be understood as a kind of despondent amorphousness.

The Knight reflects aspects of Alcyone, a Boethian narrator, and a failed poet. 116 In his discussion with the Knight, the dream narrator is essentially debating a kaleidoscopic portrait with shifting identities. Of course, with the exchange of reflections between Knight and clerk, the traditional hierarchies of class are necessarily complicated. Given the social and political struggles of the fourteenth century, Chaucer was on especially ambiguous ground for class interchange. 117

While Paul Strohm suggests a general connection between the Black Knight and Gaunt, he argues that the significance of the comparison lies in the power of poetry to imaginatively reinvent potential dynamics that play with fluctuating notions of class. 118 The dream narrator, without breaking decorum, uses the poetic form to widen the horizon of possibilities for the exchange of class discourse. 119

Chaucer’s position at the court puts him broadly in the same circle as Gaunt, though clearly nowhere near the same status. If Gaunt should be the Knight, it seems

119. Strohm, Social Chaucer, 84.
Gaunt and Chaucer were far enough apart in stature to guarantee a relationship of condescension, while they remained close enough to allow the poet to engage a boundary that had recently become more pliable.

Still, the class dynamic may be the surface reflection of a deeper struggle of interiority. In this context, the Black Knight could be seen as the dreamer’s idealization of a self beyond attainment. As noted, the Knight is a character of significant social estimation and privilege, a figure that Chaucer, the narrator, or dream narrator could never become: “A wonder wel-farynge knyght” (452). The quality of “wonder” puts him somewhere between strange, marvelous, unknown, and extraordinary. But the Knight lives in the dreamer’s vision, making him a literal part of the dreamer or, in other words, a certain projection of the dreamer. But if the Knight is a kind of unattainable fantasy, then the loss of the White Lady represents the loss inherent in a world that inevitably crushes the idea of what his greater self could be. Clearly a tragic figure, the Knight collapses under the weight of his image’s own identity.

If the Black Knight is the unattainable vision of the self, the dream narrator acts as a more instinctual figure who has some freedom from the symbols that haunt the Knight and, by extension, the dreamer. I have argued that the bedchamber acts as a symbolic room for the poet’s youth, revealing the influences that must be overcome and the reliance on imitation that must be abandoned. Functioning with a clear lack of conditioning, the dream narrator does not comprehend the threat of imitation and, appropriately, he enters a world where the symbolic and the literal cannot be distinguished. The stories of Ovid and Jean de Meun are literally painted on the walls!
when the dream narrator arises, but he fails to understand their symbolic function as intertextual figures of influence.

Much has been made of the dream narrator’s naïveté, and the criticism generally focuses on the fact that the dream narrator does not understand the symbolic nature of the Knight’s chess metaphor. He thinks the Knight is talking about an actual game of chess, failing to grasp the metaphorical construction of chess as a vision for fate and fortune. In other words, he cannot distinguish between the symbolic and literal representation of the game. This is not unlike the paintings and sounds of his bedroom; their symbolic and literal functions are indiscernible.

The dream narrator’s inability to comprehend the function of these symbols relegates him to a world of the literal. The Knight’s ambivalent identity, on the other hand, indicates his lack of literal attachment. The way in which the symbols of tragedy control him—indeed, are him—prevent any connection to the demands of reality, and his loss should be understood as a detachment from the world, a separation revealed when the Knight locates his tragedy at the moment of his birth:

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Therwith he wax as ded as stoon
And seyde, “Alas, that I was bore!
That was the los that here-before
I tolde the that I hadde lorn.
Bethenke how I seyde here-beforn,
‘Thow wost ful lytel what thow menest;
I have lost more than thow wenest.’”
(1300–1306)
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The dreamer must mediate the struggle of the Knight and the dream narrator in order to be able to creatively arrange the symbols of his own loss expressed in the prologue.
When he awakens, the dream narrator must find the appropriate balance between creativity, as a symbolic struggle, and imitation, as a literal struggle. Without the latter, his poetry has no meaning, and without the former, it has no beauty. Thus it is little wonder that Chaucer puts so much effort in altering and transforming the essential nature of his source material.

The dreamer is awakened aurally, now something of a theme in the poem: the dream narrator is stirred by the sound of birds, Morpheus by a horn, Alcyone by the voice of Morpheus, and (at the poem’s conclusion) the sound of a bell rouses the narrator. Curiously, the bell originates within the dream (1322). We might think of this as a fading technique, where Chaucer pulls sensations from the poetic realm and extends them into the material world. The technique acts as a metaphor for Chaucer’s larger strategy of using the dream vision to create poetic articulation in waking life.
The Poem’s Conclusion: From Lyric to Life

At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator discovers the transformative capacity of art to sublimate pain. The Black Knight would want to push the poet to become more like himself, rejecting the remedies of Ovid and Orpheus. But the *Book of the Duchess* ultimately witnesses the productive consolation of an artist. With the poem’s conclusion, the reader finds that the poem’s entire necessity for being is predicated on itself:

> Thoghte I, “Thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme.”
(1330–32)

The narrator’s turn to art is an option simply unavailable to the Black Knight, who explicitly disapproves of Ovid and, by extension, Chaucer’s poetic tradition. The Knight’s opposition to Chaucer’s poetic inheritance helps to explain his comparison to Pan:

> “So, throgh hys sorwe and hevy thoght,
Made hym that he herde me noght;
For he had wel nygh lost hys mynde,
Thogh Pan, that men clepeth god of kynde,
Were for hys sorwes never so wroth.”
(509–13)

As I discussed above, the association of the Alcyone and Seys tale with “olde tyme” and “written fables” gives Chaucer some distance from Machaut and a more intimate connection to antiquity’s poetic tradition. About these “fables,” the narrator says that “clerkes” and “other poets” composed the stories “While men loved the lawe of kinde” (56). Fyler notes how the “lawe of kinde” evokes the Golden Age, a time when
nature was governed by an uncorrupted equanimity. In terms of the poetic tradition, the Golden Age represents a fantasy of authority where the poets possessed not merely a superior style but a superior world from which to model art.

The reference to Pan, “god of kynde,” again recalls the Golden Age, and emphasizes its associations to poetic authority by asserting that the ruler of nature is a musician. Appropriately, Pan’s significance can also be found in the *Metamorphoses*. The narrator, like Pan, wants to use art to transform a destructive sensation into a creative one. Poetry becomes a flute for the narrator, and for Chaucer, to find sublimation. Like Pan, the narrator will create the song to relieve his own grief. Such an accomplishment permits the poet, Chaucer, a way to memorialize his own work within a tradition that reaches back into Ovid’s Golden Age. But because he lacks art, the Knight lacks any ability for genuine consolation. Unlike Pan, his sorrows cannot be transformed.

Leaving the Knight, in a sense rejecting the destructive element of his identity that intends on renouncing Ovid, the narrator returns to the Roman poet after the dream concludes. If at any point during his disputation he doubted the efficacy of art, the return to Ovid’s *romaunce* announces his conclusion:

> And fond me lyinge in my bed;  
> And the book that I hadde red,  
> Of Alcione and Seys the kyng,  
> And of the goddes of slepyng,  
> I fond hyt in myn hond ful even.  
> (1325–29)

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120. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, 71–81. Fyler argues that Alycone is a relic from the Golden Age of time and represents a kind of perfection that links her to Pan’s “natural” world. Alcyone’s structural association to the White Lady allows the Knight to exalt the Lady in the terms of primeval perfection.
Chaucer pursues a consolatory art, not an exposition of truth.\textsuperscript{121} For the Black Knight, his inadequate mode of expression reveals that his sorrow can be neither described nor understood. The trauma he experiences precludes the rationalization that he searches for. His image of the world, and of himself, is unbearable. Alcyone, like the Knight, also fails to find any kind of comfort. She perishes in a vivid hysteria, and the silencing that accompanies her end reveals the failure of language to adequately describe the death of the lover or, more significantly, the death of the self. But at the poem’s finale, the narrator returns to poetry and finds an aesthetic reawakening. The narrator alone finds consolation, and he does so through the artistic modeling of Ovid.

For Chaucer, rational explanations of trauma, sex, death, beauty, and love bring little truth and less consolation. Rather, by admitting the fallen state of language, the poet asserts the necessity for metaphor and articulates metamorphoses as a functioning vision for understanding art. The poet discovers that authority, literary or otherwise, cannot attain absolute control of the aesthetic sign. Unwinding the trauma of a Primal Scene functions with the same dynamics as unwinding an intertextual trauma. A new language now must signify and accommodate a symbolic ordering of the world. In \textit{The Book of the Duchess}, the dream narrator walked out of the bedroom because of the unconscious desire of the dreamer, restlessly searching for something beyond the mimetic confinement of poetic immaturity.

Jamie Fumo examines the profound influence of Ovidian mythology on Chaucer, especially as Ovid relates to Chaucer’s self-consciousness as an artist and a poet:

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\textsuperscript{121} Kiser, \textit{Truth and Textuality}, 4–5.
\end{flushright}
In the poetry of Chaucer and his followers, poetic allusions to Apollo confirm the essential intertextuality and artificial quality of myth at the same time that they extend dramatically the implications of such artistic self-consciousness into these poets’ own construction of themselves as vernacular heirs—albeit problematically belated ones—of classical *auctoritas*.122

When referring to Ovid, at the conceptual, allusive, or structural level, Chaucer associated himself with a classical tradition that necessitates intertextual myth-making. The poet becomes a creator humbled by a tradition that he must simultaneously contest.123 Without such dissonance, creation regresses into imitation, boredom, and hollowness. But too much distance is also a problem, threatening the author’s legacy and wrecking the necessary associations to a genealogy of intertextual recognitions; historical self-awareness gave the poet a framework to balance tradition and creation.

The question is how much of his identity is she or he willing to sacrifice to take part in an historical forum that requires self-abnegation in the face of authority. Ovid acknowledged the contested forum of the *canon*, and he reflected his anxiety about the contested nature of legacy, as Fumo notes, “Chaucer’s ambivalent stance toward the powers of his own fiction reflects concerns deeply rooted in classical tradition itself, in which the position of the *vates* is ever-precarious and the construction of authority inherently contested.”124

But the influence of literary authority is, nonetheless, a symbolic construct inside the poet’s self-consciousness. At the forge of creation within the mind, influence battles

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identity. And the struggle never ends, pushing the poet into a perpetual contest with authority that cannot be resolved: “The Apolline artist, as imagined in Ovidian tradition, is poised between mastery of the energy of creation . . . and the gravitational pull of defeat.”125 The artist, bearing the ancient burden of the vates, invests himself with an imaginative inventiveness that necessarily self-destructs under the weight of authority’s illusion, establishing a sense of self that continually lacks total formation, a kind of dynamic that can best be represented by examining the haunting influence that language has on the poet.126

Throughout the Book of the Duchess, Chaucer’s engagement with language reflects his unique appropriation of literary authority and his barely veiled desire to compete with it:

For hit was, on to beholde,
As thogh the erthe envye wolde
To be gayer than the heven.

(405–7)

Here, Chaucer foreshadows Freud’s concluding remarks from The Interpretation of Dreams: “Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past.”127 Becoming a multivalent embodiment of Ovid, the poetic past, Chaucer can model the ancient authority without

125. Fumo, The Legacy of Apollo, 29.
126. Fumo, The Legacy of Apollo, 41.
being strangled by it. Chaucer finds a path for his own metamorphosis, and he discovers a poetic voice that will, in his next creation, be able to enter the house of tradition itself.
Chapter 5: Fear and Loathing in *The House of Fame*

For *The House of Fame*, Chaucer abandons the French landscape that he vividly painted in *The Book of the Duchess*. Instead, he creates a subversive (and neurotic) iteration of a Dantean narrator and places him in a world filled with Ovidian symbolism. The association to Dante directs the nature of influence on the poem, though the recurrent importance of classical authority and, specifically, Ovid reveals Chaucer’s perpetual contestation with antiquity as a means to forge his own authorial identity. Dante notwithstanding, the Ovidian tradition of *ekphrastic* ‘mirroring’ creates a reflective portrait of Chaucer’s self-conscious relationship to the nature of his own craft.

The *House of Fame* is a unique work early in Chaucer’s canon, and, perhaps, it reveals a young poet anxious to substantiate the foundations of his own literary authority and, by extension, a uniquely self-conscious portrait of his own poetic identity. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer portrays the literary tradition, first with ambivalently textual or pictorial representations from some of the most dramatic scenes in poetic history.

The *House of Fame*’s multiple representations of the poet and artist, found in an variety of different forms, are all informed by the poem’s self-consciousness of its own literary construction. The sardonic detachment of the narrator in *The House of Fame* is a far cry from the description of occupational identities listed in the *Parliament of Fowls*:

> The wery huntere, slepynge in his bed,  
> To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon;  
> The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;  
> The cartere dremeth how his cart is gon;  
> The riche, of gold; the knyght fyght with his fon;
Here, the poet’s representation of himself is absent in a brief catalogue of conventional literary figures. If Chaucer had placed a poet here, or simply provided a musician or bard, I imagine the fantasy could be described with a pleasant line or two about the beauty of inspired verse or the passionate themes with the pastoral lover’s harp. But Chaucer’s earlier poems provide evidence that the poet’s dream of self-representation actually denies such a facile expression of wish-fulfillment.

Elaborating on the aesthetic framework established in *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*’s narrator has a dream that reveals the self-conscious nature, often quite unpleasant, of poetic composition. Unlike the hunter, who has exciting visions of stalking his prey through the woods, the poet is riddled with self-doubt and an overwhelming feeling of inferiority, resulting in dream visions that are predicated on the narrator’s self-reflective dread and anxiety, emotions that point toward the nature of the work’s exhaustive and unrewarded labor.

I agree with Robert Hanning, who calls the *House of Fame* Chaucer’s “most profoundly discomfoting poem.” But Hanning’s understanding of Ovidian authority does not accord with my own. Hanning’s assessment of the Roman tradition is linear: “Ovid’s ekphrases are based on, and respond to, Vergil’s.” I also want to pursue the ancient foundations of poetic metamorphosis, but, in order to understand *The House of

Fame, we must emphasize the uniqueness of Ovidian *ekphrasis*, in his time as well as Chaucer’s. To be clear, Ovid’s art is essentially antagonistic to Virgil’s, and Ovidian *ekphrasis* privileges the expression of lust where Virgil would want his hero to repress those urges in the name of some greater good.

The point is not trivial because Chaucer relies heavily on Ovid in formulating his own notion of contested literary authority. Hanning wants to see Ovid building on Virgil, which is inappropriate as the relationship of influence is neither progressive nor elaborative. Rather, Ovid created an aesthetic framework that demanded a renunciation of Virgil’s basic aesthetic assumptions, including idolatry to power, the romanticization of rustic and slave life, and the absolute supremacy of imperialism and the empire. Virgil’s ideas about poetry were little different than the political ends of the Roman state:

The sheer quantity and variety of Ovid’s explanations reminds us that we live in a world surrounded by the metamorphic results of private stories. Such an impression cannot fail to represent a poetic attack on the primacy of Rome.\(^{130}\)

Ovid created an alternative framework of aesthetics, an outline of artistic form that is structured by what I have called Ovidian *ekphrasis*. The most prominent examples are the recursive images of art’s labor, the acts of writing, weaving, painting, singing, dancing, etc.. Such literary images capture art as a symbol and represent the process embodied in a perpetual refiguring of the representation of craft.

Virgil’s *Aeneid* exalts Augustus as a god-king, and the poet represented the despot in the gaudy vestments of boundless virtue, so that the mythical ruler must sacrifice all of the world’s sensual enjoyment, though the sacrifice, it seems to me, is felt hardest by

Dido, who throws herself on the burning pyre of scorned passion. Could Virgil find no other way to construct Augustus’ own peculiarly ascetic mythos of authoritarianism?

Ovid’s representation of influence defines the features for Chaucer’s conception of poetic identity in *The House of Fame*:

Chaucer seems to imply that poetic tradition persists and evolves primarily through opposition, struggle, and discord. It is all but defined by conflict over legitimacy and supremacy, hinging on who are authorized to call themselves authors as opposed, in this case, to fablers. To make their mark, young writers must push into the past established figures who have temporarily stopped the clock.131

But before he confronts Ovid’s influence, Chaucer opens *The House of Fame* by disrupting the generic conventions of the poem’s immediate predecessors. Unlike the confident introductions of some French models, which assure the audience of their dream’s revelatory profundity, *The House of Fame* begins with ambiguity, circumlocution, and, above all perhaps, doubt.

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The Nervous Narrator

The narrator ponders the nature and causes of dreams, and he wavers between the physiological and the spiritual, perhaps suggesting that the poem’s origin cannot be easily sourced to a pastiche of a few generic French or Italian models. Rather dreams may be indecipherable. While I will argue for the essential role of Ovid’s influence on the poem, Lee Patterson states the issue of literary authority well:

We can recognize this double allegiance in Chaucer’s habit of simultaneously positing and undoing a foundational moment. He typically establishes for his poems a legitimizing genesis, an originary absoluteness whose contingency and insufficiency are then relentlessly exposed ... In the House of Fame the foundational assumption is the originality of authority itself, both its location at the beginning of the line of literary imitation and its closeness to the res that authorizes the disposition of all poetic verba.132

Chaucer’s “disposition,” however, has severe implications for the poem’s own hermeneutics.

The opening dubitatio offers no solutions to the problem of interpretation. The poem begins by announcing the problem of its own interpretative origins. In this context, the narrator’s indeterminacy betrays an intellectual hesitancy that is less scholastic than it is self-conscious. Lacking a definite strategy or clear path to follow, the narrator uses a conventional poetic form, the dream vision, to begin his search for an interpretive model for his own dream:

As an inherently self-conscious genre, one in which the narrator is doubly implicated as both reader and narrator of his own dream, the dream-vision provides an ideal vehicle for an examination of poetic activity [...] Chaucer

subverts many of its conventions even as he employs them for his own ends.\textsuperscript{133}

The semantic problem with this device is quite knotted: poetry is attempting to understand a dream that is fundamentally a metaphor for poetry.

Steven Kruger’s history of medieval dreaming describes the important association between the oneiric and the poetic, especially where it concerns the attempt to reconcile mental symbols with sensual perceptions:

\begin{quote}
it was not only the dream that was potentially double in its significance and moral value, but also poetry. Involved in the middleness of imagination, the poetic, like the oneiric, dwells in a region between body and intellect, wedding ideas to a sensible and pleasurable form.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

I generally agree with Kruger’s assessment, though a comprehensive investigation of medieval dreaming will demand some accommodation of emotions beyond the “pleasurable.” This “middleness” is often a place of great anxiety, fear, dread, loneliness, and not least of all death. Neither the mind nor the body will always enjoy the forced recognition of its limitations nor the severe implications of introspective reflection. Such a place can be overwhelming and disturbing, especially for Chaucer, a bureaucrat and a poet.

While the scholarly focus on the relationship between oneiric and poetic rhetoric has proved valuable for the study of Middle English literature and, specifically, Chaucer’s early poems, there is not yet an adequate appreciation for the forces of fear and loathing, emotions that simultaneously lure the poet toward creativity and destruction, a contestation of self-consciousness that motivates the poem’s inner drive for meaning.


\textsuperscript{134} Steven Kruger, \textit{Dreaming in the Middle Ages} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 131.
through the recurrent representation of its own crafting.¹³⁵

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator reveals his inner state of anxiety as a potential motivation for dreaming and poetry. Perhaps appropriate for a clerk, or even simply for a person of letters, his anxiousness emerges within a context of ‘curiousity’ and ‘study,’ states of being that we have seen the Chaucerian narrator in before:

The som man is to curious
In studye, or melancolyous,
Or thus so inly ful of drede
That no man may hym bote bede
(I. 29-32)

Chaucer laments how the obsessive pursuit of one’s labor and craft leads to reclusion and a conflicted sense of interiority, resulting in a form of ‘melancholy,’ a medical condition where the primary symptom appears as the inward projection of alienation. For the narrator, the dream may originate from a source of ‘drede’ that will attempt to transform itself as the poem develops.

The poem’s language of fear and loathing substantially informs The House of Fame’s oneiric poetics. The narrator evinces a simultaneous desire and repulsion of the artistic drive, forcing the poet on an ascetic pilgrimage of invention, a trial of interiority within the looming specters of former poets, all of whom will exacerbate his creative anxieties. Thus, as he ends his prefatory rumination, the narrator’s interiority begins to emerge through a series of unsatisfying rationalizations, considering dreams to have an

origin in “feblenesse of her brayn” or “abstinence or by seknesse” or “gret distresse” or “drede” (The House of Fame, I.24-31). Not only does this recall the anxious narrator of The Book of the Duchess, but it foreshadows this narrator’s pilgrimage in the Dantesque desert as well as his flight through the heavens (an unfortunate though intended excursion for a man fearful of heights).

But as the preface reaches an unsatisfied culmination of indeterminacy, the forces of fear and loathing work as catalysts for the dream vision and consequently the beginning of the poem’s own hermeneutic framework. The same forces of dread that threaten to stymy his craft will recursively emerge when responding to the deafening *aporia* that threatens artistic invention.

The poem’s preface of ambiguity results in a broader philosophical critique. Failing to provide a reliable interpretative strategy for dreams or the poem, the narrator plaintively accepts the limits of human understanding:

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But that oure flessh ne hath no myght
To understonde hyt aryght,
For hyt is warned to derkly –
But why the cause is, noght wot I.
Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys
That trete of this and other werkes,
For I of noon opinion
Nyl as now make mensyon.
(I. 49-56)
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The announcement of humanity’s perceptual limitations carries Pauline undertones, creating an allusive correspondence that sounds a foundational component of medieval philosophy: the confines of sensory experience also restricts the mind and, despite all struggle, leaves one blind to the chain of divine causality (Chaucer will revisit this same
impasse at the end of *Troilus*). As a result, the narrator of *The House of Fame* appears to eschew any attempt at intellection.

Human understanding can only observe the subject matter through a lens “derkly,” a fact predicated on the implicit distinction the narrator creates by his admission regarding “flessh.” I think that the dichotomy is confirmed in a later attestation of *flessh*, in *The Canterbury Tales*, where Chaucer represents the conflict between body and spirit perhaps from the source itself, from the mouth of St. Paul:

“For lo, what seith Seint Paul, ‘The flessh coveiteth agayn the spirit, and the spirite agayn the flessh; they been so contrarie and so stryven that a man may nat alway doon as he wolde [...] Allas, I caytyf man! Who shal delivere me fro the prisoun of my caytyf body?”

(*The Parson’s Tale*, 341; 343)

Paul represents the body’s earthly imprisonment to show a state of tension, an internal contradiction from which the body is unable to resolve or even confront. In *The House of Fame*, the narrator employs *flessh* to represent this tension, a perpetual state of being that has implications on the capacity of intellectual as well as sensory perception.

But the narrator’s Pauline meditation might seem at odds with his enjoiner to “grete clerkys.” As *flessh* has implications on the limits of human perception, the problem is not a subjective one. No matter how ‘great’ a clerk, he would always be ignorant to “why the cause is.” Therefore, I read the narrator’s reference to clerks as a stark shift in tone, a reeling back from the abyss evoked by his implicit acceptance of humanity’s perceptual limitations, the void beyond which reason cannot see. Ultimately, the narrator’s deferral to other clerks is hardly satisfactory and, effectually, does nothing to resolve his philosophical conundrum. If Chaucer’s deference should give the
suggestion of respect for these “grete” scholars, that sentiment cannot escape the irony that none of these authorities could be quoted in the assistance of his distressing existential dilemma.

The narrator’s claim to have “noon opinion” makes his epistemological position even worse. Perhaps the narrator is claiming ignorance, but, given the opening of the poem, the narrator appears to have a fairly substantial amount of knowledge, some of which might even be considered esoteric, regarding dreams and dream theory. His lack of “opinion,” then, is probably not the result of a lack of inquiry, but rather it could suggest the failure of insight in spite of rigorous study, a point which might implicitly provide more evidence for humanity’s limited awareness. On the other hand, the narrator could be withholding his opinion, perhaps with a slight tone of coyness, inferring that the audience should ascertain his perspective through its reading of the proceeding dream vision.

The problem of the poem’s interpretation of itself hardly gets easier when the narrator claims to be reporting an actual dream, which has a precise date, December 10. Initially, one might assume that such an announcement leads the critic toward a portrait of Chaucerian realism and further away from generic literary conventions. If this were the case, one could investigate the dream by looking for other unique temporal and spatial signatures, those moments when the narrator provides distinct information regarding cultural history or the author’s biography.

However, the dream itself is overwhelmed by the images and symbols of the poetic tradition, for example the title, the painting, images of textuality, the statues of the
venerated poets, etc.. From this point of view, the date could be a kind of trick and intended to raise the audience’s suspicions of a reliable narrator; actual dreams, that occur on specific days in our life, tend to lack the formal organization and literary allusions found throughout *The House of Fame* (but perhaps not so for the medieval mind, though we may never know).

If the narrator is lying, then the audience must decide why and, furthermore, which parts of the dream are ‘real,’ if any. On the other hand, the dense literary content of the dream does not necessarily discount the narrator’s realist overtures. In other words, the poetic tradition could have had such an overwhelming effect on his psychology that the images of ancient poetry, routinely expressed in the figures of Ovidian symbolism, have had a profoundly constructive impact on his psychic identity.

But any investigation of the narrator’s interiority forces the audience to return to the displaced expressions of fear and loathing. When the narrator imagines a romance, his own melancholia seeps to the surface:

Or that the cruel lyf unsoften  
Which these ilke lovers leden  
That hopen over-much or dreden,  
That purely her impressions  
Causeth hem avisions

(36-40)

The anxiety produced by the lovers’ unfortunate situation results in “impressions,” sensations felt so strongly as to cause the lovers to see revelations, “avisions” emerging directly from their dread. Linking this dynamic to the poetic process, the use of “avisions” recalls the narrator’s question at the very beginning of the poem:
Why that is an avision
And why this a revelacion,
Why this a dreme, why that a sweven.

(7-9)

Before the formal invocation, the narrator creates a thematic collocation between dreaming, romance, and poetry. These associations have a substantial tradition in the history of medieval literature. Still, Chaucer’s intentionally ambiguous deployment of *avision* allows for designations that are predicated more on correspondence than distinction. When the narrator employs *avisions* a third time, it is under the consideration of prophecy:

That yt forwot that ys to come,
And that hyt warneth alle and some
Or everych of her aventures
Be avisions or be figures,

(45-48)
The Possibility of Aristotle’s (or Galen’s) Influence?

To understand the poetic import of these impressions and avisions it will be necessary to turn to Aristotle, even though the influence of Aristotle’s unabridged works, in England’s Middle Ages, has proven difficult to assess. However, this should not prevent the critic from outlining Aristotle’s foundational importance on the medieval study of psychology, even if one must grant that his influence could have been circuitous or heavily mediated.

For example, I cannot claim that Chaucer had an intimate knowledge of *The Nichomachean Ethics*, which has been, perhaps rightly, overlooked in regards to Chaucer’s dream visions. Nonetheless, Aristotle’s influence on medieval philosophy is, in certain areas, foundational; as result, critics are occasionally justified in referring to his work in order to describe broad frameworks of influence. Speaking on the nutritive and vegetative faculty of soul, Aristotle says,

> The excellence of this faculty therefore appears to be common to all animate things ... for it is believed that this faculty or part of the soul is most active during sleep ... sleep is a cessation of the soul from the activities on which its goodness or badness depends – except that in some small degree certain of the sense-impressions may reach the soul during sleep and consequently the dreams of the good are better than those of ordinary men.\(^{136}\)

So while I cannot make an argument for direct allusion, it will still be necessary to consider *The Nichomachean Ethics* for a moment in order to explicate the broader context for Chaucer’s conception of dreaming.\(^{137}\)

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137. Kathryn L. Lynch describes the *The House of Fame* as Chaucer’s response to the problems of scholastic logic, and she situates the poet more broadly in the philosophical tradition, *Chaucer’s Philosophical Visions* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 61-82.
For Aristotle, virtue is determined by behavior and, according to the philosopher, virtue is conditioned by an action that reveals a mean of appropriate behavior. But an action should be voluntary if it is to be judged virtuous, and it should be predicated on the rational faculty of the soul. Thus, sleep, for Aristotle, offers a bridge between deliberated, or rational, behavior and the irrational faculty of the soul that can be easily moved by “sense-impressions.”

The effect of behavior on the mind has a direct and immediate relationship. In other words, Aristotle says that good individuals are defined by their actions and, as a result of their behavior, they will have ‘good’ thoughts and dreams; while they would mean completely different things regarding the ‘good,’ Freud would not entirely disagree with Aristotle over this point. But unlike Aristotle, Chaucer focuses on a different set of behaviors that seem to effect a variety of conventional and non-conventional dreams: obsession, depression, fear, love, and anxiety. Aristotle is more interested in civic sorts of behaviors and virtues: courage, temperance, liberality, and similar types of action.

Nonetheless, Chaucer’s framework is still vaguely Aristotelian, though I believe it may work through the influence of Galen. For Galen, who had a profound impact on medieval medicine and psychology, emotions like fear and anger overwhelmed the rational faculty of the soul and blinded the individual to his or her own behavior: “error arises from a false opinion, but passion from an irrational power within us which refuses to obey reason.”

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138. Perhaps it is relevant that Machaut refers to “Galen’s knowledge” in Le Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne, a poem we know Chaucer read closely.

demonstration of pride and arrogance that was essentially self-destructive.

Galen spends a considerable amount of time extolling the importance of finding a wise and respected friend who will readily criticize an individual in order to help correct the errors and passions of the soul (after Chaucer, Hoccleve will formulate the importance of friendship in a similar context). In order to avoid selfish motivations, this noble friend should have neither much power nor much money. Furthermore, the individual should consistently press his or her friend for honest and frequent rebukes. Only this way, Galen argues, is one able to correct irrational emotions. In one sense, Galen’s method follows closely on Aristotle as it places a high demand on behavior. But Galen’s method reveals a fundamental problem of Aristotelian ethics: self-perception, or, more to the point, self-delusion.

While Aristotle pushes the individual to consistently follow a golden mean of behavior, Galen suggests that the nature of our subjectivity prevents an objective assessment of how our behavior is fundamentally conditioned:

And there are passions of the soul which everybody knows: anger, wrath, fear... How, then, could a man cut out these passions if he did not first know that he had them? But as we said, it is impossible to know them, since we love ourselves to excess.  

Galen repeats the fable of Aesop that a man constantly carries two bags: in front of himself, he carries the faults of others; and behind him, he carries his own faults. The fable illustrates Galen’s broader critique of subjectivity.

In order to understand the function of fear in *The House of Fame*, it is essential to understand how Chaucer self-consciously approaches his own imaginative employment,

140. Galen, 32.
especially in the oneiric context of poetic invention.\textsuperscript{141} Precisely as Galen would suggest, Chaucer needs a model to guide and rebuke him for his tendency for mid-flight fearful blabbering, both physical and mental, conscious and latent.

Near the beginning of the narrator’s search for meaning and interpretation, he comes across the Trojan exile, Aeneas. Chaucer encounters his portrait on a wall, painted, it seems, at the moment he is being blown off course by the ireful Juno\textsuperscript{142}:

\begin{verbatim}
    Ther saugh I such tempeste aryse
    That every herte myght agryse
    To see hyt peynted on the wall
\end{verbatim}
\textit{(209-211)}

As an aesthetic statement, Chaucer affords art a symbolic power that feels particularly visceral; an image can cause ‘hearts’ to “agryse.” Does \textit{agryse} infer an emotion in the mind or a physical response or a convergence of both? And why would a heart tremble at this painting, and, more specifically, why the ‘heart’ of this narrator. Is Chaucer suggesting the potential of a dramatic realism that can palpably affect the spectator? That seems to be, at the very least, a surface meaning.

But if the narrator should be seen to represent some aspect of the poet, who must go on to encounter the towering influences of the poetic tradition, then this ‘trembling’ takes on an added dimension. To look on the work of Virgil and Ovid inspires shuddering in the narrator, as if mere observation risks a petrification that denies the poetic invention that the dream vision should facilitate.

Of course, outside the tower of glass, the narrator finds much more immediate

\textsuperscript{141} Edwards, \textit{The Dream of Chaucer}, 95-99.
\textsuperscript{142} Much like Aeneas and Odysseus, Chaucer’s journey in \textit{The House of Fame} is necessitated by diversions and misdirection.

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fears in an undeniably Dantean landscape:

“O Crist,” thoughte I, “that art in blysse,  
Fro fantome and illusion  
Me save!” And with devocion  
Myn eyen to the hevene I caste.  

(492-495)

Perhaps the audience is expected to laugh at the narrator for fearing insubstantial specters, “fantome and illusion.” But the dream, like art, is itself a kind of illusion, and it clearly has the power to elicit strong emotions. In this dream vision, fear crops up, consistently, with phantoms that are not quite real but neither wholly insubstantial, whether it is a dream, a painting, a poem, or some other apparition:

And behold this large space,  
This eyr, but loke thou ne be  
Adrad of hem that thou shalt se,  
For in this region, certeyn,  
Of which that speketh Daun Plato;  
These ben the eyryssh bestes, lo!  

(926-932)

The eagle, well aware of the narrator’s disposition for fright and fainting, warns him to not fear these “eyryssh bestes.” But what does he mean ‘airish beasts”? They must both contain and distinctively lack substance; they seem real and, yet, they are still illusions. Walter Skeat held that Chaucer was alluding to the aerios cives in the Anticlaudianus of Alan of Lille. This would explain the reference to Plato, as these citizens were rebuked for their sophistry. But to trace the source even further back, one might defer to Plato’s Timaeus. The importance of the text with or without the intermediary of Alan of Lille is significant, and I think we should consider the possibility of Chaucer having some

143. It has been argued that the Timaeus had a significant influence on The Parliament of Fowls, see Helen Cooney, “The ‘Parlement of Foules’: A Theodicy of Love.” The Chaucer Review 32, no. 4 (1998): 339-376.
knowledge of Calcidius’ translation of Plato’s *Timaeus*.
Plato’s role in the Poem?

The *Timaeus* is a dense Socratic dialogue that discusses the composition of cosmic bodies, the origins of the universe, and the geometrical makeup of the elements. The work stands out in the Platonic canon for being consistently read in the west during the Middle Ages. In Calcidius’ translation and commentary of the *Timaeus*, Chaucer would have found a justification to discuss the ‘airish beasts’ of the heavens:

Following the pattern provided by Plato’s exposition on the joining of elements, firstly Calcidius announced that there is a need for a mean between the two extreme entities: the divine immortal beings and the earthly, mortal creatures ... he named the daemons as the creatures that meet the requirements ... He assigned as the abodes of the daemons three regions of the cosmos, each corresponding to an element: aether, aer, and humecta essentia. These three middle regions are two extremes and a mean, and the three together form the mean between ignis and terra, the dwelling places of god and man respectively ... Calcidius equated demons with angels.

The connection between Chaucer and Calcidius is further established when the narrator explicitly groans at the prospect of being turned into a star: “Wher Joves wol me stellyfye” (586). Even if the allusion is not direct, Calcidius’ *Timaeus* seems to work under a similar cosmic framework: “coagmentataque mox uniuersae rei machina delegit animas stellarum numero pares singulasque singulis comparauit,” “Soon, having fastened the device of the universal thing, he appointed souls to the same number of stars and he matched every (soul) to each (star).”

But perhaps the allusion is direct. As of now, there are three possible associations between *The House of Fame* and the *Timaeus*: Chaucer’s citation of Plato, the connection

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between ‘airish beasts’ with celestial daemons, and the emphasis by both poets that souls can transform into stars.\textsuperscript{145} While these associations reveal striking similarities, one might still say that they are coincidental; however, I believe Chaucer hides another reference that may verify the influence of Plato’s text.

In \textit{The House of Fame}, Chaucer refers to the fall of Phaethon, and the scholarship has universally assumed that Chaucer is pulling the narrative straight from Ovid. The reference to the Scorpio constellation, for example, is an explicit image that connects Chaucer’s poem to the \textit{Metamorphoses}. Before that however, Chaucer, if he is working solely from Ovid, provides an extremely truncated version of the myth. Chaucer plainly drops some of the most significant elements of the Ovidian narrative, including the argument of friends, the theme of illegitimacy, the mother, the extended discussion with Apollo, etc. But when one compares Chaucer’s version with the story in \textit{Timaeus}, they line up very closely. Compare,

\begin{quote}
Se yonder, loo, the Galaxie, 
That ones was ybrent with hete, 
Whan the sones sone the rede, 
That highte Phetonm wolde lede 
Algate hys fader carte, and gye. 
The carte-hors gonne wel espye 
That he koude no governaunce 
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}(936-945)\end{quote}

with,

\begin{quote}
Denique illa etiam fama, quae uobis quoque comperta est, Phaethontem quondam, Solis filium, affectantem officium patris currus ascendisse luciferos nec seruatis sollemnibus aurigationis orbitis exussisse terrena ipsumque flammis caelestibus conflagrasse.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{145.} Lynch observes that Deschamps referred to Chaucer as Socrates, that Hoccleve called him Aristotle, and that Usk said he was “the noble philosophical poete in Englissh,” 7. 
(Once, there was a story, which is also known to you, that then Phaethon, son of Phoebus, imitating the obligation of the father, mounted the light bearing chariot. By not keeping the chariot to the customary tracks he kindled earthly things, and he burnt the heavens with flames.)

Though some expected change of grammatical structure, it seems possible that the influence of Timaeus is direct. Chaucer could be offering a translation the text. Each of the passage’s narrative structure is comprised of the same elements: the heavens burn with flames, Phaethon is introduced as his father’s son, he is located in his father’s chariot, and finally the narrator describes his inability to drive the horses.

If we keep in mind that “Daun Plato” was cited only five lines earlier, it becomes difficult to cede all of these associations to mere coincidence. When considering the citation of Plato, the reference to heavenly daemons, the stellar orientation of the poem, and the allusion which I believe serves to mask a translation, the influence of the Timaeus should be reconsidered as an important component to the The House of Fame’s philosophical foundations.

However, even if it is assumed that Plato’s influence is much less than I have argued for, his role still needs to be understood in contrast to the Ovidian elements of the poem. In other words, the poem’s gesture toward Platonic intellection works in dialectic relief to its counterpart of Ovidian aesthetics. Both forces serve the poem’s vision of its own poetic invention. While Steven Kruger does not use the same terms, he gives an excellent description of the intellectual framework motivating the imagination of the poet-narrator and connecting the limits of philosophical inquiry with the demands of the aesthetic drive:
The self-reflexive movement of the *House of Fame* keeps opening outward toward the realm of the abstract, universal, celestial, and the poem's upward, revelatory movement keeps being weighted down, pulled back from abstract causes and ideas toward the concrete and mundane toward the body. As upward and downward movements reach an impasse, or moment of poise, the poem tends to turn back inward, to return to the self-conscious consideration of its own imaginative processes. This last movement occurs not just in the strange retreats of the narrator, though it is here that the turn inward is perhaps most striking. At every moment when external revelation seems imminent, worldly phenomena interfere and the poem turns its gaze back to the realm of imagination.147

I share Kruger’s fascination with the narrator’s “strange retreats.” I would add that these gestures of inward withdrawal that Kruger notices can be explained, in part, because the narrator is mostly a stranger to those he encounters and an alien to the poem’s changing landscapes. In this context, the narrator’s emotions are an essential ingredient to the poem’s varied intersections of philosophy and art, the emergence of the same conflict in multiple guises where competing demands threaten to violently tear at the poem’s search for interpretation (and perhaps the unfinished state of the poem suggest they ultimately succeed at doing so).

The Strange, Strange, Bird

During the flight of the eagle, the verbose bird compels the narrator to observe a stark divide of space between the earth and the heavens, a division that embodies the poem’s broader dialectic framework of hermeneutics. As they ascend, the eagle tells the narrator to look back down so that he may try to discern the fleeting objects beneath him:

“Now see,’ quod he to me.
“By thy trouthe, yond adoun
Wher that thou knowest any toun,
Or hous, or any other thing.
And whan thou hast of ought knowyng,
Looke that thou warne me.”

(The House of Fame, II.888-893)

The eagle encourages the narrator to visually scroll the land underneath, pairing a sensory capacity, “Now see,” with another faculty that might infer something more intellectual or abstract, “knowest” and “knowyng.” The emphatic tone of the eagle’s speech swells with the anaphoric emphasis he places on the imperative “Now,” a marker for the successive figures that diminish on the ground beneath them:

And now hilles, and now mountaynes,
Now valeyes, now forestes,
And now unnethes grete bestes,
Now ryveres, now citess,
Now tounes, and now grete trees,
Now shippes seyllynge in the see.

(II.898-903)

The camera lens is pulling out, and the closer the narrator gets to a contrasting cosmic perspective, the less he can discern the world beneath him. The imperative “Now see” initially sets off the alternating images, so it is appropriate that the eagle employs “Now
“Now turn upward,” quod he, “they face,  
And behold this large space,  
This eyr, but loke thou ne be  
Adrad of hem that thou shalt se.”  
(II.925-936)

The eagle symbolically functions as a hermeneutic device, forcing the narrator to confront a fork in interpretation, represented through a contested framework of space, the earth against the heavens, and time, the temporary against the permanent. And while the eagle appears to assure the narrator by telling him not to be afraid of what he “shalt se,” I read this more as a fair warning than an attempt to assuage the narrator. The journey does frighten the narrator out of his wits, and he reveals a specific fear, somewhat oddly from a certain perspective, of being turned into a star or some other celestial object (II.1002).

The narrator’s fear of being ‘stellified’ emerges because the eagle, despite his assurances, had related the calamitous story of Phaethon in the immediate aftermath of the poem’s interpretative dividing line.148

On the surface, it is clear that he is afraid of death, but the Platonic inflection should suggest that he has no reason to be; stars are the eternal and ideal homes for souls. Of course, other branches of cosmic mythology reveal a long list of mortals who, for some act of pride or hubris, merit the death penalty and then are placed in the sky as either a warning or a shrine (depending on one’s interpretation) for any earthling that might dare imitate their behavior. My argument is that Chaucer is conscious of both

traditions, an awareness the poet reveals when, after the Platonic synopsis of the

Phaethon tale, he embellishes the myth with Ovidian details:

‘Til that he sey the Scorpoun
Which that in heven a sygne is yit.
And he for ferde loste hys wyt
Of that, and let the reynes gon
Of his hors; and they anoon
Gonne up to mounte and doun descende,
Til bothe the eyr and erthe brende,
Til Jupiter, loo, atte laste,
Hym slow, and fro the carte caste.
Loo, ys is not a gret myschaunce
To lete a fool han governaunce
Of thing that he can not demeyne?’
And with that word, soth for to seyne,
He gan alway upper to sore

(I. 948-961)

I have quoted at length, but this passage should reveal that Chaucer actually repeats most of what he had just said in the Platonic allusion to Phaethon. I suppose one could charge Chaucer, the inveterate bureaucrat, for a little poetic inefficiency and redundancy. On the other hand, the repetition of similar details could provide further evidence that Chaucer is pulling the Phaethon myth from two different sources. Neither Plato nor Ovid repeats these elements of the myth before moving forward with the story; they simply narrate it.

If, however, the two sources are being yoked together, then Chaucer’s source material and recitation can be further explained by the poem’s interpretive framework. Chaucer’s juxtaposition of Platonic and Ovidian sources provides authoritative foundations, though not always without irony, to the poem’s contested hermeneutics.

From Plato, he works under a philosophical tradition that seeks intellection. From Ovid, he works under an aesthetic tradition that encourages emotional and sensual
representation.

In attempting to marry intellectual philosophy with aesthetic motives, Chaucer, witnessed through Phaethon, risks wrecking the chariot of poetic invention, a “carte” the son inherited from a literal father figure, Apollo, the idealized literary model par excellence, who constantly forces the poet to question the ability of his or her own “governaunce.” However, not even Apollo will prove a reliable source for interpreting the poem’s sense of its own meaning:

In a celebrated Ovidio-Dantean apostrophe, Chaucer invokes Apollo at the beginning of Book Three of the House of Fame for poetic guidance in his versification of the climactic scenes of his dream: his tour of the houses of Fame and Rumour. But Apollo – invoked here for the first time in English – proves to be a most unhelpful authorial guide.150

Now the question of fear begins to come into focus: when Chaucer sees Virgil’s painting, he trembles; when he enters Dante’s desert, his fear surfaces; the approach of the Dantean eagle causes him to faint; when he takes on the competing struggle of Plato and Ovid, he projects himself onto the figure of Phaethon, potentially crashing into the earth from a lack of control, an inability to navigate the medium of two extremes, a space of fearful liminality that the eagle forces onto his dangling passenger, who “for ferde loste hys wyt” (950).151

The divide between Plato and Ovid is especially interesting because Chaucer is trying to explore the risks that intellectual philosophy forces onto the poet and, more

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149. Though Lynch and I have very different understandings of this poem, she efficiently contextualizes The House of Fame as “Both love vision and philosophical vision,” 62. Also see Boitani, 196.
151. Boitani calls Phaethon “the fool,” which I think understates his importance as a figure for the poet who strives beyond his ability, 184.
generally, the artist. The turn to Plato inevitably recalls the introduction’s lament over the limits of interpretation; even in the world of the dream vision, which would attempt to surpass the veiled perspective of waking life, the image of self-destruction confronts the narrator, who embodies the instinct of survival more than conquest, subsisting in the desperate borders, the outer limits, of his poetic ability. In this framework, the tragic figure of Icarus fearfully resonates within the self-consciousness of the artist who understands failure as a component of his or her interiority:

Ne eke the wrechche Dedalus,
Ne his child, nyce Ykarus,
That fleigh so highe that the hete
Hys wynges malt, and he fel wete
In myd the see, and ther he dreynete

(919-923)

I wonder about the irony here; though Icarus could not find the ‘middle way’ between the sun and the sea, he lands “In myd the see, and ther he dreynete.” After the fall, the symbol of Icarus continues to wade just beneath the poem, and it finds a recursive association in Boethius as Chaucer pursues the competition of philosophical and aesthetic traditions of authority:

A thought may flee so hye
Wyth fetheres of Philosophye,
To passen everych element

(973-975)

“Philosophye” looks upwards, spatially toward the heavens, temporally towards eternity. But the distant echo of Icarus, whose own “fetheres” failed him, leaves open the suggestion that philosophy’s inadequacies, which the narrator plaintively observed at the beginning of the poem, continue to haunt the narrator with the image of his own thought
process crashing into the dark and thunderous ocean of aporia. This dissonance continues
the poem’s progressive struggle in representing a conflicted, but ambitious, desire of an
artful poet trying to accommodate philosophical concerns.\textsuperscript{152}

The fall of Icarus resonates through the unfinished conclusion to the poem, when
the narrator reaches the labyrinth constructed by Icarus’s father, Daedalus. Daedalus is a
master craftsman, a fact confirmed both in the construction of Crete’s labyrinth as well as
the mechanical wings that allow him to escape the island. By his design or some other,
the narrator fails to escape the labyrinth of the poem.\textsuperscript{153} I would not be the first to argue
that the Domus Daedaly may be responsible for the poem’s stunted conclusion. For a
poem that contains so many moments of \textit{ekphrasis}, the potential for the content to have
had such a dramatic and immediate effect on the form is, potentially, intriguing.

The House of Fame appears to codify the poem’s broader theme of fear and
loathing, emotions that potentially overwhelm the poetic drive. The narrator hears, from
a distance, the imposing sounds that enter and leave Fame’s abode:

\begin{quote}
Quod y, “ayen the roches holowe,
Whan tempest doth the shippes swalowe,
And lat a man stonde, out of doute,
A myle thens, and here hyt route;
Or ells lyk the last humblynge
After the clappe of thundringe,
Whan Joves hath the air ybete.
But yt doth me for fere swete.
(1035-1042)
\end{quote}

For the narrator, the noise from the House of Fame suggests a destructive storm,
“thundrine,” a sound that connotes the destructive potential of both natural phenomena

\textsuperscript{152} John Fyler, \textit{Chaucer and Ovid} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 1-25.
\textsuperscript{153} See, for example, Boitani, 7-17.
as well as mythological vengeance. As it concerns the artist, the looming myth of Phaethon, who dies from Jupiter’s bolt, infers that the threat of destruction persists.

Earlier, at the end of the Ovidian allusion, Phaethon is struck down by the god of lighting:

\[
\text{Til bothe the eyr and erthe brende,} \\
\text{Til Jupiter, loo, atte laste,} \\
\text{Hym slow, and fro the cart caste} \\
\text{(II.954-956)}
\]

At line 1042, the image of Jupiter, or Jove, reappears and the narrator feels threatened by lightning, which is marked by its dreadful sound, causing the narrator “for fere swete.”

The reemergence of Jupiter, as well as his association with lightning, maintains the poet’s identification with Phaethon; he fears the thunder because he perceives the audacious nature of his desire to enter Fame’s house. To fully explain the point, it will be useful to track the poem’s recurrent representations of authority and lightning. The eagle and Jove are clearly associated:

\[
\text{“First, I, that in my fet have the, [...]} \\
\text{Am dwellynge with the god of thonder,} \\
\text{What that men callen Jupiter,} \\
\text{That dooth me flee ful ofte fer} \\
\text{To do al hys comaundement.} \\
\text{(606-611)}
\]

But the association is actually foreshadowed earlier when the eagle is introduced:

\[
\text{To se the beaute and the wonder;} \\
\text{But never was ther dynt of thonder,} \\
\text{Ne that thing that men calle foudre,} \\
\text{That smot somtyme a tour to powder} \\
\text{And in his swifte comynge brende}^{154}
\]

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154. On 954, Phaethon ‘brends’ the earth; the Eagle’s motion from the sky to the earth is described with the same verb.
The destructive potential of Jupiter is described by the comparison to the destructiveness of warfare. But the god’s association with the eagle creates an ambivalent relationship to the narrator and the poet. To make the point clear, the narrator fears being ‘struck’ by the eagle, Jove’s messenger, who is described with lightning imagery (II.534). Even though the eagle attempts to assuage the narrator, the Phaethon allusion maintains the theme of Jove’s potential wrath.

And there is some ambivalence even as the eagle tries to calm Geffrey; when the narrator worries, loudly, about being turned into a star, the eagle replies, “For Joves ys not theraboute --/ I dar wel putte the out of doute --/ To make of the as yet a sterre” (II.597-599). I wonder how much comfort the eagle’s “as yet” is meant to provide the frightened narrator.¹⁵⁵

Later, when the eagle releases Geffrey, Chaucer uses the eagle’s association with Jupiter’s lightning to create another veiled reference to Phaethon; without any coincidence, I believe, the sound of thunder (1040) directly precedes the eagle’s release of the narrator:

And with this word both he and y
As nygh the place arryved were
As men may casten with a spere.
Y nyste how, but in a strete
He sette me fair on my fete

(1046-1050)

¹⁵⁵. Chaucer also uses the Eagle from Dante as symbol for poetic glory, see Boitani, 160-163. Karla Taylor explains how “Chaucer also appropriates the heavenly version of Dante’s dream eagle ... Chaucer borrows not words, but an image and the process by which it is formed,” *Chaucer Reads ‘The Divine Comedy’* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989): 22. She goes on to describe how the image of the Eagle is Dantean, while the sound (for my purposes, the “thonder”) is distinctly Chaucerian, 34-49.
Given the connection of Jupiter to bolt throwing, the ‘casting the spear’ simile is aesthetically appropriate. Detailing the sequence of events might be illustrative: the narrator hears the thunder, the poet employs the spear simile, and then the eagle drops the narrator on the ground. Like Phaethon, he falls from his winged ride to the earth, but the pathos of the fall is undercut by Chaucer’s sly deployment of irony.

Though it will not be useful to entirely reopen the debate on the December 10 dating of the poem, the astrological significance of Jupiter should be noted:

Of basic astrological importance to Chaucer’s dream from Jupiter is that the sun on December 10 is in the sign of Sagittarius, the mansion of Jupiter, and the ninth of the twelve houses of the zodiac. Like the other houses, the ninth is assigned special attributes or “influences” that have acquired value as Christian symbols. As distinguished from the others, the ninth house is the house of faith and religion, and its powers, we are told, are exerted especially in such spiritual matters as prophetic dreams, pilgrimages, and heavenly tidings.\footnote{156. Benjamin Granade Koonce, \textit{Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in The House of Fame} (Princeton University Press, 2015), 65.}

However, unlike Koonce, who makes a valiant attempt to resurrect Robertsonian assumptions regarding Chaucer’s “allegorical method,” I do not see Jupiter’s importance through a liturgical lens. Rather, the dating of the poem is primarily informed by the poetic and literary self-consciousness of the poem’s own craftsmanship, which constructs itself, in part, by recurrent allusions to Jupiter.

The importance of December 10 works in thematic collocation to these allusions in a way that further substantiates my thesis. Given that \textit{The House of Fame} utilizes the destructive impulse of Jupiter as a theme, the dating of the poem creates a layered image of fear and paranoia. As Phaethon and, by association, the narrator live under the constant threat of the god’s destructive lightning bolt, so the poet writes under an
ominous astrological map, where Jupiter, ruling over the heavens, hovers above the
scorched remnants of his son as well as the poet, now a trembling figure who fearfully
identifies with Phaethon’s audacious failure. Chaucer seems to be representing his own
fantasy of self-destruction.

Of course, not all of Chaucer’s literary forbearers are ancient; indeed, Chaucer
seems to feel that Dante lives too close, too nearby. Not unlike the aesthetic antagonism
that Ovid has for Virgil, Dante’s uneasy proximity pushes Chaucer to confront Dante in
the terms of irony and contestation:

Chaucer’s awareness of Dante’s role as poet of ‘the fame of helle’ and of the
Commedia’s moral framework has been recognized ... Over the course of three
hundred lines or so – from the murmurous ‘noyse’ of the first ‘grete companye’ of
petitioners (lines 1520-9) to the blasting of Aeolus’ foul ‘blake trumpe’ which
proclaims the last group’s infamy to ‘the worldys ende’ (lines 1861-7) – Fame
presides over a Dantean number of encounters and judgments (nine). Her
arbitrary judgments, occasional brutality and the honesty with which she admits
that there is ‘in me no justice’ (line 1820) all contribute at this point to Chaucer’s
‘damnation debate with Dante.’

And I agree that,

Much as Virgil is for Dante, Dante is for Chaucer an important and useful
precursor in the poetic traditions available to him. The literary field of Chaucer's
day was a complex and potentially dangerous site of multiple, layered conflicts.
Chaucer was part of what Richard Firth Green has called a "literary revolution" in
the later Middle Ages.

But this “revolution” not so much offered as forced Chaucer to confront Dante with more
antagonism than reverence, though the conflict can appear in the guise of parody:

157. Nick Havely, “‘I wolde ... han hadde a fame’: Dante, Fame and Infamy in Chaucer’s House of Fame,”
in Chaucer and Fame: Reputation and Reception, eds. Davis, Isabel, and Catherine Nall (Suffolk: Boydell
& Brewer, 2015), 50.
158. Glenn A. Steinberg, “Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the ‘House
Chaucer must wrest from the Italian humanists "the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer" and "the monopoly of literary legitimacy." He must establish his provincial English poetry as worthy of recognition and consecration. Chaucer chooses to accomplish this feat through good-natured parody and humor.\textsuperscript{159}

So, while Chaucer cannot avoid the Commedia when composing The House of Fame, the narrators are very different, much more than simple contrasts of each other, especially in regards to their emotions of fear and loathing. Dante seems much more confident trekking through the depths of hell than Geffrey does taking a brief ride on an irascible bird. But there is a moment in each poem where fear overwhelms the senses of the respective narrators, and both pass out from the sight of an awesome spectacle.

For Chaucer, the initial vision of the eagle renders him unconscious. For Dante, it is the sight and sound of Charon, the notorious ferryman of the underworld who, for a price, carries the newly deceased across the Styx. Significantly, both figures, the verbose eagle and the eternally silent Charon, serve to guide or transport their respective narrators, facilitating a crossing, or a fracturing, of liminal space. In both cases, the need to traverse a substantial and significant boundary is paired with an ellipse of the narrators’ subjectivity.

Though I have gone a long way from Galen, the question of subjectivity, or in his case negative subjectivity, will warrant a return to the poem’s philosophical inquiry. Chaucer, working under an Aristotelian framework modulated by Galen, would have understood fear and loathing as passions that overwhelm the rational faculty of the soul and, as a result, blind the individual and obscure self-perception. In such a context,

\textsuperscript{159} Steinberg, 196-197.
Chaucer’s fear of the literary tradition risks a stymied exploration of his own interiority. He trembles at the sight of Virgil. He faints in the figurative landscape of Dante. And, in trying to mediate the philosophical/aesthetic divide, he fears, like Phaethon, the deadly hand of Jupiter, who is both a figure of the counselor, as he is associated with the eagle, and also a representative of absolute destruction, as he sends Phaethon, and possibly the poet, to his doom. Furthermore, the role of the *Metamorphoses* is central to this dynamic:

> The eagle’s characterization of the *Metamorphoses* as Geffrey’s “oune bok” should alert us to the fact that *HF* is an exercise in transforming literary antecedents – a venture in what we might call applied metamorphosis – and a warning about the limitations inherent in such procedures.  

Unfortunately, the incomplete nature of the poem makes pushing the point further impossible. Whether or not the narrator would have conquered his fear and felt accomplished in his self-awareness depends entirely on who the supposed authority figure is and what he or she would have said.

Boitani sees a direct allusion to Dante and argues that the man of “gret auctorite” should be associated with the great classical poets of Limbo. Following this general instinct, I think my arguments would suggest that Ovid’s significance should be privileged above Virgil, Homer, Statius etc. But there is still that other figure, the so-called interlocutor, who remains a complete mystery to me and many other critics of the poem. This ‘second guide’ leads Geffrey toward the House of Rumor, and he is described by Boitani as a figure not unlike Joyce’s torturously enigmatic man in the mackintosh.

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Nabokov, in his unauthorized lectures on *Ulysses*, guesses that the man in the mackintosh could be the veiled portrait of the author, James Joyce.

While we are clearly in the world of speculation, is it not out of the question to allow Boitani and Nabokov to inform our understanding of this mysterious guide as an authorial figure, a Chaucerian portrait, who returns the narrator to the very subject of poetry now that he has an appreciation for where his compositions are destined to go, for better or for worse. Indeed, Chaucer’s many self-portraits in *The House of Fame* have confounded the strongest critics of the poem, even recently. Alastair Minnis says that Chaucer’s “most puzzling presentation of himself” appears in the poem and comes across through a slightly veiled proverb:162

> For no such cause, by my hed!  
> Sufficeth me, as I were ded,  
> That no wight have my name in honde.  
> I wot myself best how y stonde;  
> For what I drye, or what I thynke,  
> I wil myselven al hyt drynke,  
> Certeyn, for the more part,  
> As fer forth as I kan myn art’.  
> (1873–82)

The narrator, whatever he may “drye” or “thynke,” will ultimately be the one responsible for ‘drinking it all up.’ Experience and reflection serve to emphasize the loneliness that defines subjectivity and, in such a moment of self-representation, it is significant, especially in terms of the aesthetic framework for fear and loathing that I have tried to describe, that the proverb bears some association to sorrow and isolation:

The suggestion of imbibing one’s own woe is strong in these examples; drinking

one’s own drink, the drink one has brewed for oneself, is not a happy experience. [...] In like wise, Geffrey stands alone, sets himself apart. The pose he has adopted has definite negative implications, but in this case—in contrast with all the
instances cited above—the speaker relates the proverb to himself, rather than
having it imposed upon him by moralistic outsiders. How should the tone be
interpreted: is this (yet another) instance of Chaucerian self-denigration, or a
petulant and/or aggressive statement of the ‘I’ll do it my way’ variety?163

However it is interpreted (in response to Minnis I would say, ‘a little of both’), the
proverb still gives the audience an image of authorship that accords with the sort of
‘mirrors’ of authors that *The House of Fame* repeatedly supplies.

Steven Kruger, in his historical outline of medieval dreaming, describes two
general views that were often in conflict with one another: a dream could be interpreted
as a mundane, purely organic phenomena or as a divine revelation of extra-sensory
transcendence.164 Ultimately, the poem fails to resolve the narrator’s hermeneutic
conflict, instead offering the unfinished portrait of an artist who fearfully searches for
interpretation on the contested grounds of literary influence and identity: “Chaucer’s
ambivalent stance toward the powers of his own fiction reflects concerns deeply rooted in
classical tradition itself, in which the position of the *vates* is ever-precarious and the
construction of authority inherently contested.”165 Chaucer’s consistent returning to Ovid
as an attempt to explicate an ontology for art is not peaceful. Chaucer tried to hammer
out a history of poetic consciousness, but his pilgrimage seems to have failed. At the
very least, it is clear that with Chaucer’s unwillingness to finish the poem, the narrator
remains stranded in the labyrinth, waiting to be victimized by a wandering Minotaur,

figurative or otherwise, in a state of perpetual fear and loathing that prevents the
consummation, and apparently completion, of poetic invention.
Chapter 6: Reflections and the Mirror of *Ekphrasis*

At the end of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the author anticipates the immortal life of his poem, which he symbolizes as a constellation and fantastically catapults into the heavens. The poem appears to share the fate of so many of its tragic characters, banished to the sky, giving subsequent generations a celestial model, both a shrine and tomb emblazoned with accounts of humanity’s relentless audacity.

The end of Chaucer’s *Troilus* echoes the conclusion of the *Metamorphoses*. Chaucer prophecies an eternal legacy for his poem, which allows him to reflect on his own authorial identity. At the end of the *Metamorphoses* and *Troilus*, the fracture between finite and eternal time mirrors the division between the historical author and the representation of a timeless poetic legacy. Ovid and Chaucer contrast their bounded existence against the eternal legacy of their stories and, specifically, the afterlife of their authorial self-consciousness, an Ovidian construction for poetic self-awareness delineated with the images of Ovidian *ekphrasis* throughout the Middle Ages.

Ovid’s *ekphrasis* recursively symbolizes the nature of craft and the aesthetic effect that the author illuminates as the constitutive and constructive element for the poem’s historical memory. The *Metamorphoses, Tristan, Sir Orfeo, The Book of the Duchess,* and *The House of Fame* utilize *ekphrastic* emblems, in part, to delineate the representation of poetic identity, foregrounding a mirror for the authorial subconsciousness.
By no coincidence, these five poems are defined by a structural framework that ruptures a linear timeframe in reverence to the golden phoenix of poetic legacy. The Boethian meditation at the conclusion of Chaucer’s *Troilus* intrudes on the temporal framework in order to reorient the hermeneutic framework of authorial self-awareness. The protagonist withdraws himself from the aesthetic conventions of the preceding genre and delivers an existential reflection interrogating the ontological justifications for the poem he has played centerstage.
The Medieval Spring

While I am not necessarily arguing for a direct line of influence, the cyclical form of Ovidian cosmogony reveals interesting comparisons to the medieval initiation of spring, where symbols often inferred the recycled perception of regrowth and the celebration of rebirth. *Sir Orfeo* begins with a burgeoning vernal stage, a conventional introduction for late medieval poetry across many genres. Like Ovid’s cosmogony, the symbolic representation of spring implicitly invokes a cyclical anticipation for the form of the narrative. Unlike Ovid, the seasonal framework for time feels more localized, geographically as well as generically, in *Sir Orfeo*.

*Sir Orfeo* initiates a cyclical structure with the introduction of an idyllic atmosphere: “Bifel so in the comessing of May/ When miri and hot is the day,/ And oway beth the winter schours,/ And everi feld is ful of flours,/ And blosme breme on everi bough/ Over al wexeth miri anought’ (57-62). The repetitive emphasis on “everi” and “al” suggests a superabundance of growth and blossoming, and the hyperbole of the image may hint toward its own literary construction. In any case, the poem is less concerned with a realistic image of the spring season than it is with an idealized portrait that utilizes different symbolic figures in order to draw the reader’s eye towards art’s hermeneutic relationship to temporality. That the poem opens in a springtime idyll is generic and not isolated. Nonetheless, conventions found in secular as well as religious poetry appear to inform the scene. So both biblical and classical sources are probably at play, as well as a handful of French and Italian poets.
Still, while the conventional springtime scene of countless medieval poems can be traced to a variety of traditions, the structural associations with Ovid’s unique representation of poetic identity in *Sir Orfeo* and Chaucer make the Roman poet a possible source of authorial self-awareness in two poets who seemed distinctly obsessed with representing artistic displays and who, on multiple occasions, announce their inheritance to Ovid. When considering the various elements of Ovidian allusions that I discussed above, it is worth noting how Ovid’s structural influence might have informed a constructive effect on the poems’ composition.

For example, if springtime is frequently called upon as a preface for medieval poems, it is not merely conventional as a precipitating force of initiation in *Sir Orfeo*. The additional intertextual significance of the poem implicitly evokes the cyclical Ovidian tradition, which can be documented by the harp, a symbol for the poem’s form and, by no coincidence, also an emblematic marker for the protagonist to represent the self-consciousness of his poetic identity. The conclusion of *Troilus* likewise encourages the reader to ‘rede’ Ovid, as if the self-awareness of the author relies on his association to a particular species of poetic legacy.

But the blossoming of spring bears with it the subconscious anticipation of winter, withering, barrenness, and death. Broadly speaking in medieval narrative, the structural introduction of spring prefaces the repressed master plot of decrepitude. The existential burden of loss expresses itself in ritualization, an attempt to console the metaphorical and literal representation of death. Beyond the cognizant awareness of the characters, the poem commemorates a persistent desire for resolution, for plotting, in a sense the
peculiar drive for its own burial, with dark ceremonies supplying an aesthetic solemnity
to the characters who must sacrifice their own identity in service to the poet’s
exploration of self-awareness:

   Ac, as sone as sche gan awake, 
  Sche crid, and lothli bere gan make; 
  Sche froted hir honden and hir fete, 
    And crached hir visage — it bled wete — 
    Hir riche robe hye al to-rett 
    And was reveyd out of hir wit. 
   (Sir Orfeo, 77-82)

The effects of melancholia and hysteria are undeniably tragic and difficult to read. But
her behavior is also a heavily invested intertextual performance of mourning that one can
find in ancient Greece, perhaps most famously in Euripides’ Electra:

   Take this pitcher from my head and put it down, so that I may cry aloud the night-
   time laments for my father. A wail, a song of death, of death, for you, father, 
   under the earth, I speak the laments in which I am always engaged, day by day, 
   tearing my skin with my nails, and striking my cropped head with my hand, for 
   your death.166 
   (Electra, 140-145)

In inflicting physical violence onto her own body, Electra forces the audience to witness
the unutterable nature of her trauma and grief. The audience must share a collective
sense of semantic repulsion that can be redeemed only if the play elevates the existential
pain into a ceremony of dramatic recognition. The audience witnesses Electra’s
performance, and they must confront the shock and repulsion expressed in the rites
compelled by her mourning.

166. Euripides, edited by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. in two volumes. 2. Electra, translated by
Medieval Rituals of Poetry

Likewise, the beginning of *Sir Orfeo* presents a series of apparently formal customs, historical and intertextually invested rituals, and a spectacle that converts a mostly aristocratic form of lethargy into a literary orchestration, commemorating the veneration of the poetic drive. Again, sleeping in the “orchardside” (134), Heurodis is kidnapped into a parade, a large procession meant to illustrate a formal initiation of narrative and the framework for plotting:

Tho com her king, also blive,
With an hundred knightes and mo,
And damisels an hundred also,
Al on snowe-white stedes;
As white as milke were her wedes.
Y no seighe never yete bifoere
So fair creatours y-core.
The king hadde a croun on hed;
It nas of silver, no of gold red,
Ac it w as of a precious ston —
As bright as the sonne it schon.

(*Sir Orfeo*, 142-152)

The conventional hyperbole in a medieval springtime is much more than a trivial embellishment, a light touch to lull the reader into a false sense of bliss. Rather, it allows the text to foreshadow the fracture of its own idyllic preface, and thus paves the lane for the *circus* of narrative, the confrontation of decline, Eden’s recurrent exit, and in the end the ceaseless symbols of death that cannot be ignored.

The narrative represents a model for constructive meaning by establishing a series of *ekphrastic* metaphors emphasizing symbiotic associations of authorial identity and
material displacement. Ovidian stories appear to rely on a specific set of structural assumptions acknowledging the existence of aesthetic time, peered darkly at the convergence of authorial self-awareness where temporality and ekphrastic imagery intersect for paradoxical necessity.

For example, part of Sir Orfeo's recurrent use of classical structural forms includes the catabasis, where an obligatory descent results in a series of nightmarish visions inverting the portrait of time. The frozen temporality briefly perverts the lens of hermeneutic guidance. In the context of interpretation, the images have less to do with repulsing the audience than they do with representing the traumatic world of narrative without plot. If spring were everlasting, could there be a counterpart for an everlasting winter, unending pain, ceaseless dying? The emblems of frozen time are iconographic to the extent they interrupt the broader structural framework of the poem’s cyclical fantasies with frozen nightmares:

The alternate time and memory of the Otherworld are associated with the dynamic border between eternity and time … The environmental phenomenologist Erazim Kohák describes a “natural time” of the earth that goes beyond either subjective or objective human temporalities and overlaps with a distinctively human experience of eternity. Such natural time is “set within the matrix of nature’s rhythm which establishes personal yet nonarbitrary reference points.” Experience of eternity involves “awareness of the absolute reality of being, intersecting with the temporal sequence of its unfolding at every moment” … And that overlapping of reader, modes of being, time and non-time, and topography in storytelling as landscape here becomes iconographic.¹⁶⁷

Sir Orfeo's iconography evolves with the author’s progressive delineation of craft, especially as it becomes motivated by an anxiety regarding mortality. Ironically, the

poet’s mirror of human decrepitude secures us from the everlasting pain found in *Sir Orfeo*’s Underworld and perhaps, as Calabrese notes, not so far from Ovid’s own unfortunate biography:

Here we must consider Ovid himself, who, like his surrogate storyteller Orpheus, suffers exile and sorrow. The Pardoner and Ovid are both exiles, and out of each of their struggles comes the haunting figure of death — death in life, death of the body and of the spirit. In the *Tristia*, as Ovid reflects on his own art, morality, and banishment to the Black Sea, he constantly refers to his exile as death, and even once while praying for salvation from a storm at sea on the way to Tomis, wonders if it is possible “for one already dead to hope to escape death” (*si modo, qui periit, non perissse potest*). This death in life that Ovid suffers immediately recalls the state of the Pardoner, who is, as critics like R.A. Shoaf have argued, dead spiritually, the literalization of “the metaphor of the sinner’s living death.” Alienated from the human community, both Ovid and the Pardoner “die” before the actual death of the body.  

Initially, the conclusion of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* appears to offer the conventionally obsequious acknowledgement of the reigning despot: “Iuppiter arces/ temperat aetherias et mundi regna triformis,/ terra sub Augusto est; pater est et rector/ uterque,” “Jupiter maintains the citadels of the sky and the kingdoms of the tripartite realm. Augustus takes the earth below. Each is father and ruler” (*Metamorphoses* XV, 857-860). One might suspect that Ovid is even nodding to the idolatry of his contemporary’s *Aeneid*, which, if it can be genuinely believed, employs much less subtlety, conjuring up a pseudo-prophetic legacy, attempting to connect the bloodline of Aeneas to a divine-like Augustus.

In any case, it is impossible to take Ovid’s praise for either the Roman god or Augustus seriously. Ovid’s poem consistently undercuts authority and specifically the

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authority of Jupiter, often serving as an only a slightly veiled figure for Augustus. In the end, the final praise that the poem bestows will be unto itself:

IAMQUE OPUS EXEGI, QUOD NEC JOVIS IRA NEC IGNI
NEC POTERIT FERRUM NEC EDAX ABOLERE VETUSTAS.
CUM VOLET, ILLA DIES, QUAE NIL NISI CORPORIS HUIUS
IUS HABET, INCERTI SPATIUM MIHI FINIAT AEVI:
PARTE TAMEN MELIORE MEI SUPER ALTA PERENNIS
ASTRA FERAR, NOMENQUE ERIT INDELEBILE NOSTRUM,
QUAQUE PATET DOMITIS ROMANA POTENTIA TERRIS,
ORE LEGAR POPULI, PERQUE OMNIA SAECULA FAMA,
SIQUID HABENT VERI VATUM Praesagia, vivam.

(Metamorphoses, XV 871-879)

(Now I’ve finished this work, which will not be destroyed, not by Jupiter’s rage, not by fire, not by the sword, not by insatiable time. When it comes (who knows when?), that day will end, it will retain nothing except my body. An unknown amount of time is left to me. But then my better shall be born, held above the stars, my name will remain forever. Wherever Roman power holds sway, I shall be read in the mouths of the people. And if the poet’s prophecies are truthful, I shall live in eternal fame.)

To praise Jupiter ironically is strikingly defiant. Scholars generally assume that the *carmen* that warranted Ovid’s banishment was the *Ars Amatoria*, a poem he wrote seven years before his forced exile. And yet, while there is much playful vulgarity in Ovid’s early poetry, nothing in his canon approaches the hostility to authority that he exhibits in the *Metamorphoses*. The author enacts the deferential nod to the ‘patron of patron’s,’ but ultimately undercuts that authority, quite bluntly, and the poet privileges the *ekphrastic* representation of art, an idea or rather a drive, a poem, over the transitory historical character who becomes a satirized caricature in the hands of Ovid’s personal cosmic narrative.
The conclusion of Chaucer’s *Troilus* likewise creates a monument to its own narrative legacy. Classical influence in the late Middle Ages emerges in seemingly countless forms, but it is remarkable how Chaucer marks ancient mythology as he self-consciously represents his own authorial identity within the poem:

Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!
Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.

( *Troilus and Criseyde*, V. 1852-1855)

The self-effacing posturing for the legacy of Chaucer’s “litel bok” is a far cry from the confident proclamation that Ovid makes at the end of the *Metamorphoses*. Nonetheless, in both cases, we can observe an intent to manufacture authorial identity through poetic memory.

“This ich quen, Dame Heurodis/ Tok to maidens of priis,/ And went in an undrentide/ To play bi an orchardside,/ To se the floures sprede and spring/ And to here the foules sing” (63-68). Maintaining the appearance of conventionality, the narrator appears to remain in an idyllic world of space and time. But the plot will not permit itself to languor in the tedious embellishments of an Eden-like garden. The “orchardside” presents a repressed image, and the symbolic status of the orchard foreshadows the impending sequence of narrative progress that the structural self-awareness of the author will simultaneously exhibit and conceal due to the anxiety incurred over the necessity of plotting and the consequential reflections of mortality.

When *Sir Orfeo’s* Heurodis recounts the dream to her husband, she specifically recalls sleeping in the morning, “under our orchardside” (134). The use of the possessive
may not be essentially important, but it at least shows that the spatial context for the orchard is neither alien nor arbitrary. Rather, it has some association to the estate and, by extension, the family. In *Floris and Blancheflour*, the medieval orchard is likewise situated within an idyllic, and still markedly contained and restricted, setting. Like the temporal framework for the conventional generic opening, it is as if the spatial setting demands a liminality of structural aesthetics, ethics, and political ideology.

Significantly, the orchard is again represented as a place of confinement and boundary, this time much more garishly so, as it is surrounded with a crystal wall:

> An brenge hem into on orchard,  
> The fairest of al middelhard;  
> Ther is foulen song,  
> Men mighte libben ther among.  
> Aboute the orchard goth a wall,  
> The weste ston is cristal.  

(*Floris and Blancheflour*, 648-653)

And again, it is little coincidence that hyperbole works as a figure to highlight an implicit self-awareness of artificiality.

Notably, the symbol of the orchard’s boundary is textually engraved, revealing the limits of our spatial awareness as reconfigured visual metaphors on a crystalized relief of images and symbols: “Ther man mai sen on the ston/ Mochel of this werldes wisdom” (*Floris and Blancheflour*),” (654-655). Supposedly then, the space beyond the crystal boundary forever remains the threatening wilderness of existential aporia.

Schopenhauer pondered the metaphorical associations between the will of nature and other artificial forms of gardening, bizarre floral arrangements, and exotic landscape designs. Comparing a variety of examples, his observations are provocative, though
there is something more poetic than analytical in his style, seeming to lack traditional philosophical rigor. Rather, his writing reflects the essence of what it conveys.

Schopenhauer reflects metaphorically on gardens while the style of his writing exhibits the same conception of ‘will’ that he finds in a blossoming landscape:

Yet how aesthetic nature is! Every little spot entirely uncultivated and wild, in other words, left free to nature herself, however small it may be, if only man’s paws leave it alone, is at once decorated by her in the most tasteful manner is draped with plants, flowers, and shrubs, whose easy unforced manner, natural grace, and delightful grouping testify that they have not grown up under the rod of correction of the great egoist, but that nature has here been freely active … the will of nature, as it objectifies itself in tree, shrub, mountain, and stretch of water, is brought to the purest possible expression of these its Ideas, and thus of its own inner being. In French gardens, on the other hand, only the will of the possessor is mirrored. It has subdued nature, so that, instead of her Ideas, she bears, as tokens of her slavery, forms in keeping with it, and forcibly imposed on her, such as clipped hedges, trees cut into all kinds of shapes, straight avenues, arcades, arches, and the like.169

I have little expertise in gardening and less in philosophy. Still, my feeling is that the previous passage feels closer to Goethe than to Kant. Regardless, the implications on authorship and ekphrasis inferred from Schopenhauer’s essentialist fantasies for cultivation reveal the uniquely informative symbolic information contained in representations of craft, crafting, labor, and production.

The landscape of his ‘French’ gardens represents a hermeneutics of repression, manufactured by the author in order to subjugate the narrative and the audience to a priori symbols conceived in an inflated imagination that enlarges the author’s desirous subjectivity beyond the toleration of nature’s aesthetics.

But in the war between Seneca and Epicures, artists defer to the latter. Otherwise, the inability to represent the nature of subjectivity’s desire takes the mercurial wand of *ekphrasis* and contorts it into the ageless baton of the prison guard. Forced to look into the frightening two-way mirror of absolutism, the artist’s instinct for aesthetic self-awareness must sacrifice itself on the alter of imitative bondage, a symbolic fetish intended to affectively compel some unalterable brand of discursive influence.

The aesthetics of *ekphrasis* will remain a threat to any structure of absolutist symbols, including Augustus’ tyranny or more modern appeals to Fascism. By no coincidence, Ovid’s hostility to political authority defines the *ekphrastic* nature of his art.

Occasionally, artists are dangerous to the powerful because artists believe the representation of pleasure and pain is more honest than the representation of Truth. If there is to be a class-conscious revolution, it will more likely be inspired by a work of art rather than a political demagogue or a chain of logical arguments deduced from an economic textbook.

But as propaganda goes, we must admit that many in the audience might enjoy viewing, for example, Minerva’s tapestry or Schopenhauer’s so-called ‘French gardens’ (as I do). But it is similar to the pleasure we take in the fantasy of the individual’s subjugation to the unconquerable abstraction of time. The symbolic rigidity for a uniform value system displaces the individual’s subjectivity for a fetishized abstraction of time.

To imagine oneself outside of time and to repress the linear inevitability of death perhaps offers a brief respite from existential dread; at the very least, the symbols we
have come to believe that are greater than us still live on. But such indulgences in the buried memories of semantic paralysis circumscribe our own relationship to history, plotting a clean grave before we were ever born.

The irony of such a fantasy is that the progression of plot is required to delineate a character’s subjectivity, so the fantasy of any ‘authoritarian garden,’ requires its subjects to displace an aesthetic subconscious of individual desire with the uniform symbols of value abstractions, where fantastic idols attain a certain timeless and unalterable stature. Like a frozen god, the portrait of power might contain much awe and beauty, but it will forever be framed in the cold lines and grey stonework of fear and subjugation. For the art of repression to be appreciated, the audience must assume its own subservience to the constitutive symbols of a canvas that they may never hold a brush to.

In opposition, Arachne’s subjectivity announces its desire through the representation of its *ekphrastic* primal drive, a deconstructive inquiry into the authorial mirror of subconsciousness. The demands of the *id* renounce the cultural repressions of need, which would otherwise project self-erasure onto the objective will of the text, be it a garden, a painting, a novel, a play, or a poem.

Unlike the fantasy of subjugation portrayed in Schopenhauer’s authoritarian garden, the will of nature can emerge by representing its own modes of construction. Likewise, an author portrays him or herself by recurrently utilizing *ekphrastic* imagery:

Revelation of that Idea which is the highest grade of the will’s objectivity, namely the presentation of man in the connected series of his efforts and actions, is thus the great subject of poetry … whenever the inner nature of mankind itself is disclosed to us in history or in our own experience, we have apprehended this experience poetically, and the historian has apprehended history with artistic eyes,
in other words, according to the Idea, not the phenomenon … Our own experience is the indispensable condition for understanding poetry as well as history, for it is, so to speak, the dictionary of the language spoken by both.\textsuperscript{170}

Understanding human subjectivity in the context of the “connected series” of actions compels the poet to explore authorial legacy in relation to a simultaneous endowment and detachment from temporal confinement.

The “artistic eyes” of Homer, Ovid, Béroul, the \textit{Sir Orfeo} poet, and Chaucer reflect a self-awareness of poetic identity, an \textit{ekphrastic} drive, a representation of craft as instinct, in part a primal need for narcissistic reflection, an organic function of will and its formulation of language and gesture:

The metaphysical solace which, I wish to suggest, we derive from every true tragedy, the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable, this solace appears with palpable clarity in the chorus of satyrs, a chorus of natural beings whose life goes on ineradicably behind and beyond all civilization, as it were, and who remain eternally the same despite all the changes of generations and in the history of nations.\textsuperscript{171}

For Nietzsche, the Greek chorus in Attic tragedy possessed a lamentable foreknowledge.

The characters within the play can only suffer the choral chanting of the chorus’ fatalistic omens and haunting prophecies. Eerily, the protagonist follows the trail of fatalism as he or she must simultaneously hear and not hear the collective of stentorian actors who declare fate in a singular and ominous voice.

Yet, perhaps the audience appears only a little better off. While it does not endure the same tragedy as the protagonist, the audience too must overhear the chorus’ fatalistic


overtures, and its recurrent odes to humanity’s unalterable design. Even the chorus’ mere existence reveals our relegation to a tragic design:

The sphere of poetry does not lie outside of the world, like some fantastical impossibility contrived in a poet’s head … The contrast between this genuine truth of nature and the cultural lie which pretends to be the only reality is like the contrast between the eternal core of things, the thing-in-itself, and the entire world of phenomena; and just as tragedy, with its metaphysical solace, points to the eternal life of that core of being despite the constant destruction of the phenomenal world, the symbolism of the chorus of satyrs is in itself a metaphorical expression of that original relationship between thing-in-itself and phenomenon … The chorus is the ‘ideal spectator’ inasmuch as it is the only seer (Schauer), the seer of the visionary world on the stage … a self-mirroring of Dionysiac man; the clearest illustration of this phenomenon is to be found in the process whereby a truly gifted actor sees with palpable immediacy before his very eyes the image of the role he has to play. The chorus of satyrs is first and foremost a vision of the Dionysiac mass, just as the world of the stage is in turn a vision of this chorus of satyrs; the strength of this vision is great enough to render the spectator’s gaze insensitive and unresponsive to the impression of ‘reality’ and to the cultured people occupying the rows of seats around him. The form of the Greek theatre is reminiscent of a lonely mountain valley; the architecture of the stage seems like a radiant cloud formation seen from on high by the Bacchae as they roam excitedly through the mountains.172

Authors who represent the primal ekphrastic drive and utilize the sublimating potential of art attempt to liberate our aesthetic desires, freeing the collective chains of cultural repression and its absolutist symbols, the bondages of political ideology and all other confinements that restrict the individual’s ability to take the brush of subjectivity and hold it to the canvas of history.

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