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“Al this loude fare:” The Echo of Renown in Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*

Madeline Anderson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

“Al this loude fare:” The Echo of Renown in Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*

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This paper approaches *The House of Fame* through the emerging lens of sound studies and discusses how Chaucer used the developing sonic theories of his day and other literary works as a catalyst for his discussion of fame in his dream vision. Chaucer’s poem shows the fragile and uncontrollable characteristics of lasting fame by comparing it to the Boethian metaphor of sound functioning similarly to rippling water. The construction of *The House of Fame* ultimately becomes an example of this medieval sonic theory as it engages with, incorporates, and echoes themes and ideas from other texts. In exploring the process of fame throughout the narrative and by engaging in that same process as he translates the works of Boethius, Virgil, Ovid and Dante, Chaucer steps into the precarious shoes of his own character, becoming the goddess Fame, by molding his literary predecessors into his own text.

Keywords: echoing, sonic theory, translation, soundscape, medieval sound, medieval noise

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Glory is like a circle in the water, which never ceaseth to enlarge itself til by broad spreading,  
it dispense to naught” —Shakespeare, Henry VI*

Arguably one of the most problematic and lesser known of Chaucer’s dream visions, *The House of Fame* has long been under the scrutiny of literary criticism, especially when looking at his engagement with other authors—ranging from William Quin’s article, “Chaucer’s Recital Presence in the ‘House of Fame’ and the Embodiment of Authority” to Robert J. Meyer-Lee’s “Literary Value and the Customs House: The Axiological Logic of the House of Fame.” When looking at Chaucer’s unique dream vision in the context of the rest of his work, we see yet another example of Chaucer’s engagement with other writers and their works, like Dante’s *La Commedia*. Indeed, Chaucer’s *House of Fame* is so indebted to Dante’s *La Commedia* that this dream vision is often referred to as “Chaucer’s Dante” or “Dante in English.” As this example illustrates, not only was Chaucer sensitive to the literary and narrative elements that his literary predecessors (like Dante) employed, he often used aspects of their work, including narrative structures and literary themes, as a supplemental structure for his own, not just in a literary sense, but also as a means of discussing politics, natural history, and even scientific theory. Following in this critical tradition, this essay approaches *The House of Fame* through the emerging lens of sound studies and discusses how Chaucer used the developing sonic theories of his day and other literary works as a catalyst for his discussion of Fame.

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer shows the fragile and uncontrollable characteristics of lasting fame by comparing it to the Boethian metaphor of sound functioning similarly to rippling water. The construction of *The House of Fame* ultimately becomes an example of this medieval sonic theory as it engages with, incorporates, and echoes themes and ideas from other texts. From the initial eagle’s flight, to the physical construction of Fame’s mansion, to the low

murmurings of the spinning wicker house, we travel with Chaucer's dreamer as he is exposed to the personal and social effects of shared and echoed sound. Further, as Chaucer explores the influence of *echoing* throughout the text he is echoing the words of his forbears—particularly Virgil, Ovid, Boethius, and Dante—and promulgating their fame as he translates their work by placing it in a new linguistic context. In exploring the process of fame throughout the narrative and by engaging in that same process as he translates these preceding literary works, Chaucer steps into the precarious shoes of his own character, becoming the goddess Fame, by molding his literary predecessors into his own text.

#### DEFINING THE SONIC WITHIN A MEDIEVAL CONTEXT

When analyzing a text through the lens of sound studies, one could look at the actual sound generated by the poem, for example, what a reader would hear if it were read aloud.

Unfortunately, there are many complications with this particular approach, considering that we cannot physically hear the sounds of Chaucer's day. However, as we look at the presence of sonic principles at play within the text itself, there is much we can learn about how Chaucer understood the science of sound. As we seek to define the characteristics and narrative weight of the sonic as it is explained and presented within the poem, we see how Chaucer's understanding informs and influences his discussion of how an individual's fame is promulgated.

Some early period authors present the occurrence of sound as an initially violent act, a comprehensible disturbance of silence, including Dante and Boethius. This definition is not limited to scientific writings but occurs in creative literary genres as well. We can see an example of this in Dante's *Inferno* when the dreamer finds himself amidst the grove of the suicides. Here, Dante is only able to communicate with these tormented beings through an act of violence, as the damned souls can only speak when one of their branches is broken off. Thus,

when Dante is encouraged to speak to one of the damned souls, he breaks off a branch and “sí de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme parole e sangue” [from the broken splinter oozed blood and words together] (*Inferno*. XIII. 43–44; Hollander 221). Though less visceral, Chaucer acknowledges a similar discussion of sound as an act of violence within *The House of Fame*. As his dreamer listens to the discourse of the eagle, it claims that “soun is noght but air broken . . . . For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe / The air ys twyst with violence” (*The House of Fame* ll.765, 774–775). Ultimately, Chaucer combines this idea of sonic violence with Boethius and his metaphorical explanation of sound.

To better understand Chaucer’s grasp of sonic theory, we can look to perhaps the most obvious connection in Boethius’s treatise, *De institutione musica*. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was a sixth-century Roman who wrote extensively on mathematics and philosophy, incorporating translations of other classical authors, such as Aristotle and Pythagoras. Boethius’s writings, especially *De consolatione philosophiae*, were of great import throughout the medieval period, growing in influence from the ninth century on, as writers began to explore, translate, and establish his work as an authoritative voice not only on mathematics and philosophy but also music. His treatise *De institutione musica*, became a fundamental text in the development of Western musical theory, particularly in his conceptualization of the music of the spheres or *Musica Speculativa*.

We know Chaucer had access to the work of the sixth-century writer; indeed Chaucer translated some of Boethius’s works himself. For example, his famous translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* in his *Boece*. Boethius appears consistently in Chaucer’s work, from the Boethian short poems like “The Former Age” to appearances in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” and *The Parliament of Fowls*. In the fourteenth chapter of Book I of his sonic discourse, *De*



*institution musica*, Boethius extrapolates on his understanding of how humans hear and proposes a visual metaphor:

The same thing happens in sounds that happens when a stone, thrown from above, falls into a puddle or into quiet water. First it causes a wave in a very small circle; then it disperses clusters of waves into larger circles, and so on until the motion, exhausted by the spreading out of waves, the same motion rebounds immediately, and makes new circles by the same undulations as at the center whence it originated.

In the same way then, when air that is struck creates sound, it affects other air nearby and in this way sets in motion a circular wave of air; and so it is diffused and reaches the hearing of all standing around at the same time. The sound is fainter to someone standing at a distance, since the wave of activated air approaches him more weakly. (Bower 21)

Boethius's metaphor not only provides a description of an initial sound, but of echoing as well. Echoing is often simply seen as a repetition of an original sound, but as Mark Smith elaborates in *Keywords in Sound*, "An echo is nothing if not historical. To varying degrees, it is a faded facsimile of an original sound, a reflection of time passed. It invites a habit of listening that not only allows us to locate origin . . . [but also] how illustrative the sound was of the historical moment in which it was produced" (Smith 55). A listener that hears the repetition of an original sound is able to draw conclusions and insights about the occurrence, without having to have been present when the original sound broke the silence. However, a listener that hears an echo must realize that the sonic waves their ears perceive are merely a shadow of the original sound, and that their understanding of the original sound's meaning may be influenced by how they interpret

the echo or what external elements may have acted upon that original sound before it came to the listener's ears.

This principle of echoing within literature allows for sound to be placed in a new context—primarily as it occurs in a different time to a different audience—and subsequently may be manipulated to yield new meanings that the original author never intended or imagined. In his discussion of echoing, Smith continues, “without sufficient appreciation of the context in which the sounds occurred we warp our understanding of echoes to the point of intellectual desiccation” (Smith 56). When an author restates the words or ideas of another, it is impossible to not have the original message or motives be influenced by our own. Chaucer's treatment of his literary forbears within *The House of Fame*, demonstrates this principle as he echoes their words within his own.

#### LITERARY ECHOING AND TRANSLATION

There is no doubting that Chaucer was an informed poet. Though considered the “Father of English Poetry” by many critics, including 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Dryden, even a slight browsing of his works reveals that he was sensitive to his literary predecessors. It is difficult to find any example of Chaucer's work that is not somehow influenced or informed by the work of another, that isn't *echoing* the ideas, principles or even words of a past author. We can assert that just as scientists assert that a sound or echo may continue on forever (though it fades from our audible perception) and thus all sounds are coexistent, so it is with literature. The words of the past are just as present and influential as those currently being written, and though a critical eye may not always discern it, they are in constant communication with each other. Chaucer uses his awareness to bring the words of the past into his present context, not only to just restate them, but to challenge and manipulate their original meaning.

This idea of literary echoing is complicated even more when we consider translation and transcription as a form of echoing; placing a work in the context of a new language poses inevitable reinterpretations and altered understandings of the original text. Spoken words will eventually no longer be audible to a listener's ears, and without some form of recording, the sounds will ultimately be forgotten, and so it becomes necessary for a sound to be recorded so it can be remembered. Though modern technology allows us to render audible recreations of original sound and is often considered the sole method of recording audio, a text can also function as a form of recording and echoing sound. Smith argues,

print itself can do much to capture the spoken word and inscribe the meanings individuals and groups attach (or supposedly attach—for there were and are stereotypes about who made noise and who was a careful listener) to sounds and habits of listening. Aural metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, and everyday descriptions did the work of recorded sound admirably and, used with care, used with attention to context, can tell us a great deal about the meaning of sounds in the past . . . printed evidence and the sensory perceptions recorded by contemporaries . . . constitute the principal medium through which we can access the sounds of the past and their meanings. (Smith 61–62)

When a writer includes, copies, or translates the works of another writer, they are creating an echo, placing the original “sounds” or text in the context of a new one. Though it may not be audible to a listener in the same way the original audience heard it, retelling or writing down the words of another allows them to find the same meanings, or at least, the meanings that the second writer was able to hear from the first. This concept of print as an echo is especially pertinent when considering the transcription of stories or sounds, transitioning their context from

pure audible sounds to words in print, and then again when that recording is translated and echoed again into a new language.

Chaucer engaged with this form of echoing, especially as he interacted with earlier texts like Boethius's *De Musica*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Dante's *La Commedia* within *The House of Fame*. This separation of sound from its original context and its subsequent new meaning or conversion lie at the heart of Chaucer's discourse on renown in *The House of Fame*. As he engages with and translates these previous authors, he echoes their words in the context of his own writing. His poem functions as both a literal and figurative example of the Boethian metaphor of sound functioning like rippling water. As Chaucer enlists classical literary architects, Ovid, and Virgil, to help him build Fame's house and as he includes concepts from Dante, he reinforces his connections between sound and fame.

The dream narrative begins when Chaucer's dreamer (named Geoffrey), is brought into a beautiful glass temple to Venus. Scenes from the *Aeneid* are painted on the walls, and he finds tablets inscribed with that epic story. As he leaves the temple, Geoffrey is then approached by an eagle. Charged by the gods to bear the dreamer to Fame's palace, the eagle begins to explain the scope of Fame's influence and the nature of her palace. He tells Geoffrey that she has "alle the espies," and that every "soun not mot to hyt pace" (*The House of Fame* ll.704, 720). The eagle attempts to explain the laws of sound and its movement throughout the world to the dreamer, telling him that everything has its "kindly stede" and is moved through a "kindly inclining" (*The House of Fame* ll.730, 734) as it travels from its origin. We can see the connection to Dante's Beatrice in *Paradiso* who says,

Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline  
tutte nature, per diverse sorti

piú al principio loro e men vicine;  
 onde si muovono a diversi porti.

[in the order whereof I speak all natures are inclined by different lots, nearer and less near  
 unto their principle; wherefor they move to different ports] (*Paradiso* I.109–112;  
 Singleton 11)

In the context of *Paradiso*, Beatrice's commentary refers to a sort of heavenly gravity, that things will be drawn to their origin, that humanity will be drawn to the divine. These diverse ports are part of "lo gran mar de l'essere" [the great sea of being] (*Paradiso* I.113; Singleton 11). Just as Beatrice claims that humanity is drawn to God, Chaucer's eagle shows that all sound finds its way to Fame's palace and then ripples back out into the world. He even compares sound to rippling water, saying:

every speche, or noyse or soun  
 Thurch hys multiplicacioun. . .  
 Mot nede com to Fames House  
 I preve hyt thus . . .  
 For yf that thow  
 Throwe on water now a stoon  
 Wel wost thou hyt wol make anoon  
 A litel roundel as a sercle  
 Paraunter brod as a covercle;  
 And ryght anoon thow shalt see wel  
 That whel wol cause another whel  
 And that the thriddle, and so forth brother,

Every sercle causyng other  
 Wyder than hymselfe was;  
 . . . and multiplying ever moo  
 Til that hyt be so fer ygoo  
 That hyt at bothe brynkes be

Although thou mow hyt not ysee (*The House of Fame* ll.783–797, 801–804)

Chaucer's eagle emphasizes the idea of multiplicity and expansion that Boethius introduced in *De Musica*. The eagle justifies his claim that all sound makes its way to Fame as he explains this sonic principle: all sound reaches Fame because sound functions like a ripple, ever multiplying until it reaches her. This reinforces Chaucer's handling of Boethius and *De Musica*, as it metaphorically explains echoing as a ripple in the water.

Just as he adapts this Boethian metaphor to discuss the nature of sound as it functions within *The House of Fame*, the physical nature of Chaucer's goddess and her palace is heavily influenced by classical texts, primarily Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. As critic J.A.W. Bennett points out in his analysis of Chaucer's handling of these Latin narratives in his book *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, the goddess "appears . . . to be the essential classical Fama, indistinguishable from Rumour, and sharing her magnifying power" (Bennett 96). Though both classical texts only offer brief glimpses of Fame's character and abode, their descriptions can be traced into Chaucer's own construction. Where Chaucer has placed his goddess "right in the myddes of the weye / betwixen hevene and erthe and see" (*The House of Fame* ll.714–715), we see Ovid's palace in "orbe locus medio est inter terrasque fretumque caelestesque plagas, triplicis confina mundi" [a place in the middle of the world, twixt land and sea and sky, the meeting-point of the threefold universe] (*Metamorphoses* XIII.39–40; Miller 183), and Virgil's goddess

“ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit” [she treads the ground with head hidden in the clouds] and she flies “medio terraeque per umbram” [midway between heaven and earth] (*Aeneid* IV.177,184; Fairclough 435). This placement of the palace literally, between heaven and earth reinforces the divinity of its inhabitant, it also suggests that it functions as an *axis mundi*, a connection between heaven and earth, mortal and immortal.

In terms of the sonic, the placement of Fame’s palace allows that “what so ever in al these three / is spoken, either privy or apert, / the way therto ys so overt” (*The House of Fame* ll.716–718). Ovid states that Fame has the ability to “unde quod est usquam, quamvis regionibus absit, inspicitur, penetratque cavas vox omnis ad aures” [From this place, whatever is, however far away, is seen, and every word penetrates to these hollow ears] (*Metamorphoses* XIII.41–42; Miller 183). Chaucer’s goddess and palace have these same characteristics, “every speche of every man, / As y the telle first began, / Moveth up on high to pace / Kyndely to Fames place” (*The House of Fame* ll.849–852). All sound finds its way to Fame. The palace is not only able to receive all sound from heaven and from earth, but it is also able to expel and echo sound throughout these realms. The goddess is able to listen to the tales of an individual’s feats and then echo them—whether for their fame or infamy, to both the gods and the gentry. Bennet argues, “the environs of this gorgeous palace turn out to be the kindly stede, the natural locus, not only of all sound, but of irrationality and confusion” (Bennett 125). The result is a rumbling confusion and cacophony, especially as it extends to the confusion of the gossips in the wicker house neighboring Fame’s palace.

As established by its literal placement between earth and heaven, all sound reaches Fame’s palace and continues echoing throughout its golden metal walls—inspired by Ovid’s brass palace walls—until it is no more distinguishable than the “betynge of the see,” the “last

humbling / After the clappe of thundringe” (*The House of Fame* ll.1034, 1039–1040). The simultaneous sounds echoed throughout both Fame’s palace and the wicker house create a tumultuous and uncertain environment, a chaos—a setting similar to the one that Dante encountered in the *Inferno* as he entered the grove of the suicides:

Io sentia d’ogne parte trarre guai  
 e non vedea persona che ‘l facesse;  
 per ch’io tutto smarrito m’arrestai.

Cred’ ïo ch’ei credette ch’io credesse  
 che tante voci uscisser, tra quei bronchi,  
 da gente che per noi si nascondesse.

[Lamentations I heard on every side but I saw no one who might be crying out so that, confused I stopped. I think he thought that I thought all these voices in among the branches came from people hiding there.] (*Inferno* XIII. 22–27; Hollander 219)

No meaning or understanding can be distinguished in these utterings until Dante creates an additional disturbance, the plucking of a branch, which allows the soul trapped within the tree to speak. Likewise, Chaucer’s dreamer cannot distinguish any particular voices or words in either Fame’s palace or later when he enters the wicker house. When approaching the wicker house he claims that “the noyse which that I herde, / for all the world ryght so hyt ferde / as dooth the rowtyng of the ston / that from th-engyn ys leten gon” (*The House of Fame* ll.1931–1934). The house is filled with “tydynges, / other loude or of whispyrings / and over all the houses angles / ys ful of rounynges and of jangles” (*The House of Fame* ll.1957–1960). It is only when the dreamer speaks to the eagle and the eagle replies, that Geoffrey, the dreamer, receives a burst of clarity that disrupts the muffling noise and educates us on the nature of the wicker house. The



dreamer was unable to discern any distinct sound because of all the other voices overlapping each other; only a new clear, piercing, direct voice was capable of giving him any insight.

The dreamer's confusion in the wicker house alludes to another principle of sound: the longer that a sound extends into the world, the quieter and less distinct it becomes, especially when it has to compete with other sounds that may be louder. This becomes another metaphor for Chaucer's overall discussion of fame as echoing throughout the poem, implying that though human attempts to achieve renown may be little more than an initial violent breaking of the water's surface, its strength wanes as it spreads, ultimately fading back into the calm glassy surface it was before. Boethius also touches on this theme in his *De consolazione philosophiae*. In *Consolatione*, Boethius recognizes that an individual's life is subject to events and conditions beyond their control, and the question remains of how an individual can best navigate the uncertainty of a temporal world (13). In partial answer to this question while, discussing fame and fortune, Boethius says, "Speciosa quidem ista sunt, oblitaque Rbetoricae ac Musicae melle dulcedinis; tuin tantum, cum audiuntur, oblectant . . . Itaque cum haec auribus insonare desierint, insitus animum maeror praegravat" [These things make a fair show and being set out with pleasant rhetoric and music, delight only so long as they are heard . . . Therefore when the sound of these things is past, hidden sorrow oppreseth the mind] (*Consolatione* II.iii). The renown of an individual lasts so long as there are others willing to tell their tales.

In the *Inferno*, Virgil asks the damned tree:

Ma dilli chi tu fosti, sic he 'n vece  
 d'alcun' ammenda tua fama rinfeschi  
 nel mondo sú, dove tornar li lece.

[Now tell him who you were, so that by way of recompense, he may revive your fame up in the world, where he's permitted to return.] (*Inferno* XIII.52–54; Hollander 221)

The soul submits the fate of his memory to Dante, and in doing so highlights a notion of dependency in the construction of fame. With no one to echo their stories and refresh their existence within the world, the feats of an individual's life fade away until they are forgotten, just as an initial ripple will eventually fade away until the water returns to a smooth, glassy surface.

Chaucer explores this notion of an individual's fame (or voice) fading away until they are indistinguishable as he describes the names etched in the ice of the foundation of Fame's palace. He describes the "feeble fundament," noting that it was

A roch of yse and not of stel . . .

[And] sawgh I al the half ygrave

With famous folks names fele,

That had iben in mochel wele

And her fames wide yblowe. (*The House of Fame* ll.1128–1130, 1136–1139)

Those who have not been hidden in the preserving shade of the house are exposed to the harsh heat of the sun, and have melted to the point of illegibility. The rock becomes a symbol of Fame's instability and fleetingness. Robert R. Edwards argues that Chaucer's reference to this instable foundation amplifies the theme of Fame's transience, "The ice foundation contains a text that exists physically within a world of change, an objective entity inseparable in kind from other 'thynges.' Unlike the interior of the glass temple, though, the rock does not fix a text absolutely in memory" (Edwards 112–113). Chaucer shows that the retention of these names—and subsequently the works and accomplishments of these individuals—in the foundation of ice is

powerless when acted upon by the natural forces of the universe, in this case time and the heat of the sun. When approaching Fame's house, the dreamer observes:

But wel unnethes koude I knowe  
 any lettres for to rede  
 Hir names by; for, out of drede,  
 they were almost ofthowed so  
 That of the lettres oon or two  
 Was molte away of every name,  
 So unfamous was wox hir fame (*The House of Fame* ll.1140–1146)

Their lasting effect on the frozen water they initially disturbed has been erased to smooth, icy glass. Any attempt to solidify their name and fame cannot withstand the overwhelming heat of the sun that gradually smooths away any impression they wished to leave on the foundation of Fame's palace. Their loss of recognition on this icy epitaph functions as a sort of second death, the first being of their physical body, the second of their place in the memory of others. Boethius was also sensitive to this idea in *Consolatione*. His companion, Philosophy, shows him that the blessings of Fortune are a source for "false happiness, for they are transitory and must be surrendered at death, if not before" (Cherniss 14). Perhaps this is what inspires Chaucer to ask "what may ever laste?" (*The House of Fame* l.1147)

Just as the sounds humans make eventually fade to a "wave of struck air" that our ears can no longer hear, they are also fragile when acted upon by a challenging force, implying that sound—or the content of the sound—can be changed, manipulated, muted, or misunderstood when being heard. As individuals approach the throne of the goddess Fame, they have little control over their fates. As she listens to their stories, Fame then calls for Aeolus, god of wind,

and asks that he bring his clarions. At her command, he “sette hyt to his mouth, / And blew it est, and west, and south,” spreading either their fame or infamy for all the world to hear, whether it be truth or falsehood (*The House of Fame* ll.1679–1680). As Bennett says, “Fame, we have lately learnt, is the kindly place of sound but sound is caused by change and has no fixed and stable existence . . . but actually consists in a movement or change” (147). Just as sound is instable, like a ripple of water on the surface of a pond, so is a man’s reputation and fame. The walls of Fame’s palace are decorated not only with depictions of “alle maner of mynstralles”—those that embody and represent the transmission of sound as well as bear the charge to sing of and echo the songs and tales of the past—but also of “jugelours, / magiciens . . . tregetours . . . charmeresses, / Olde wicches, [and] sorceresses” which allude to the often illusory, and subsequently instable, aspects of both sound and fame (*The House of Fame* ll.1197, 1259–1262).

These characteristics are perhaps even more apparent in the goddess herself. When the dreamer first beholds the goddess, he is unable to grasp even the goddess’s size. He says

Me thought that she was lo lyte

That the length of a cubite

Was lengere than she semed be.

But thus sone in a whyle she

Hir tho so wonderliche streighte

That with hir fete she erthe reighte,

And with hir hed she touched hevene (*The House of Fame* ll.1369–1375)

Geoffrey compares the goddess to the beasts that John described in the apocalypse. Fame has countless tongues, eyes, and ears, with partridge wings on her heels. On her shoulders she bears the names of Alexander and Hercules, two epitomes of fame in reality and fiction. Her body

becomes a physical representation of the seen, spoken and heard aspects of fame. Not only can her palace receive and disperse all sound, but she also can as well. She is surrounded by richness, praise and “hevenyssh melody” (*The House of Fame* l.1395). She is approached by groups of individuals from all over the world, who seek to have her make their deeds and name known. Despite all attempts at flattery, praise, or any justification of their works, Fame is quick to turn most of them away without any explanation or justification.

In his discussion of the goddess, Bennett points out that “an element of japery and jugglery will prove to be part of Fame’s character . . . . We are here being further alerted to the arbitrariness of Fame, who evidently takes no account of [actual] worth and makes a mock of those who expect her to be consistent” (124). She and her palace function as the creators and perpetrators of every echo; it is only through her command that any sound or renown can be released back into the world, and her consistent manipulation and transformation of the sounds or deeds brought to her reinforce her inconsistency and japery even more.

#### ECHO AS TRANSLATION IN CHAUCER’S WORKS

Chaucer was sensitive to this aspect of sound and echoing, and experiments with this idea of manipulating echoes not only in the *House of Fame*, but also within *The Canterbury Tales*. In these texts, Chaucer’s use of echoing and translation provide interesting commentary on the notion of tale telling and the act of translation as a form of echoing. Given that no languages will directly translate word for word when moving from one to another, we realize that when a text is translated into a new tongue, changes of meaning and interpretation are inevitable. Thus, the understanding and even reception of a text can be manipulated as a writer translates it from one language to another, just as sound is easily affected when acted upon by another force. Chaucer’s approach to the concept of echoing in both *The Franklin’s Tale* and *The House of Fame*

reinforces the notion that translation is a form of echoing, but one that is affected by both the new speaker's own purpose and interpretation as well as by the new audience of listeners. When an author quotes, or translates the work of another, they are echoing it, subsequently placing it in a new context, and thereby they are proposing a new understanding of the original text.

Elizabeth A. Dobbs analyzes this principle of sound at length, as it plays out in *The Franklin's Tale*. She is sensitive to Chaucer's handling of Ovid's original myth and points out how Echo is able to manipulate Narcissus's original speech to serve her own purpose and achieve her goals of communication. Dobbs connects these mythical characters to those of Aurelius and Dorigen in *The Franklin's Tale*, drawing specific attention to their conversation at the garden party. Aurelius compares himself to Echo—ironically, since he employs many forms of speech to woo Dorigen—and Dobbs points out that “the prominence [Chaucer] gives to Echo and her reflected speaking, rather than to Narcissus, for instance, is striking when compared to other references to the mythic narrative found elsewhere in medieval poetry” (Dobbs 289).

In Ovid's myth, the nymph is introduced as “resonabilis Echo” [resounding Echo] and is known for her inability to hold her peace (*Metamorphoses* III.358; Miller 149). After offending the goddess Saturnia, she is cursed to only be able to “ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat,” [repeat back words that she hears] (*Metamorphoses* III.368; Miller 151). Ovid recounts “natura repugnant nec sinit, incipiat, sed, quod sinit, illa parata est expectare sonos, ad quos sua verba remittat” [But her nature forbids this, nor does it permit her to begin; but as it allows, she is ready to await the sounds to which she may give back her own words] (*Metamorphoses* III.376–378; Miller 151). Though she can do no more than respeak what she hears, Ovid makes clear that she gives back her own words and through a repetition of what was previously said, new meaning is derived. Dobbs states that “the difference in meaning more exactly comes into play

because what is echoed has been separated from its original context . . . ‘what seems to be mere repetition is really the creation of new meaning’” (Dobbs 303; Ferster qtd. in Dobbs).

Acknowledging translation as a means of creating a potential new context or meaning of a text, is magnified when we consider certain images that Chaucer creates within *The House of Fame*. Though never blatantly referring to translation, Chaucer shows an awareness of the malleability and fickleness of sound (and subsequently fame) as he describes the depictions of musicians (those who embody and represent the transmission of sound) and of magicians and other performers. Geoffrey, the dreamer, sees:

Magiciens, and tregetours . . .

Olde wicches, sorceresses,

That use exorisacions . . .

That craftily doon her entetes

To make, in certeyn ascendentes,

Yimages, lo, through which magik

To make a man ben hool or syk. (*The House of Fame* ll.1260–1270)

These figures are popular images of magic, manipulation and even transformation; their presence within the narrative alludes to the often illusory and subsequently unstable and, fickle aspect of fame, a characteristic evident even in the goddess herself.

It is important to note that this use of translation as a form of echoing and a way to manipulate meaning is not necessarily Chaucer’s own construct, but could potentially be an example of how he seeks to connect to these other authors. Chaucer could be drawing inspiration from both Ovid and Dante and their own methods of translation within their respective texts. In his chapter, “Models of Translation: Ovid and Dante,” Warren Ginsberg points out that “In Ovid,

translation is a mode that performs the meaning of metamorphoses; in Dante it performs the meaning of conversion” (Ginsberg 22). Ovid begins his *Metamorphoses* with the words:

In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas  
 corpora; di, coeptis . . .  
 adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi  
 ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen!

[My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms. Ye gods . . . breathe on these my undertakings, and bring down my song in unbroken strains from the world’s very beginning even unto the present time.] (*Metamorphoses* I.1–4; Miller 3)

He informs his readers that his purpose is to tell of changes, of the conversion of one form to another. It is crucial to recognize that Ovid’s accounts of myths can be traced back to other authors, such as Hesiod. Ginsberg points out that Ovid’s work “do[es] not simply contain metamorphoses; they are metamorphoses . . . Ovid lets us glimpse avatars from earlier accounts undergoing transformation in his” (Ginsberg 38). We can therefore trace the multiple ripples, or echoes, of these myths from their originators, through Ovid, and finally in Chaucer. Being familiar with Ovid’s work, Chaucer would have known that the classical writer was involving other authors as well. Chaucer recognized this act of translation, this echo, and participates in this tradition himself, as if he were Aeolus, or the man with the power to inscribe names in the ice of literary tradition.

Chaucer’s understanding of translation, especially as a means to reinterpret or manipulate meaning, may also have been influenced by Dante’s work in *Purgatorio*. In *La Commedia*, Dante uses his words to represent more than just their literal meanings; he wants them to reflect the divine order of his subject matter and imply the process of divine justice and salvation.



Translation then, according to Dante, allows the meaning of one text to be elevated and even holy, as a Christian context allows the original work to be drawn to divinity. This is evident in the episode with Statius. Dante uses Statius to both echo and separate Virgil (a pagan) from his own texts, all while claiming that the actual message of the *Aeneid* functions as a biblical analogy and is therefore capable of speaking Christ's word. Statius claims that,

Al mio ardor furor seme le faville,  
 che mi scaldar, de la divina fiamma  
 onde sono allumati piú de mille;

De l'Eneïda dico, la qual mamma  
 fummi, e fummi nutrice, poetando.

[The sparks that sowed that ardor in me came, and my own warmth was from the divine flame from which more than a thousand have been kindled. I mean the *Aeneid*, which was to me my mother and my nurse in poetry.] (Inferno XXI. 94–98; Hollander 357)

By making Statius, a sinner, the vessel for a translation and conversion of an older text from pagan to Christian—and even going so far as to have him fall down in worship at Virgil's feet, acknowledging him as the man that facilitated his conversion (*Purgatorio* XXI.130)—Dante suggests a reevaluation of Virgil's text. Ginsberg points out that Chaucer would also have been sensitive to how Dante uses Statius to manipulate the meaning of Virgil's work (Ginsberg 41). Just as Chaucer's supplicants appeal to the goddess in *The House of Fame* and rely on her glorification (or translation) of their works to prolong their renown, "Dante would agree that translation elevates the original" (Ginsberg 47).

CHAUCER AS FAME

This separation of sound from its original context and its subsequent new meaning—or conversion—lie at the heart of Chaucer’s discourse on renown in *The House of Fame*. Fame is the place of sound “full of tydynges, / bothe of feir speche and chidynges, / and of fals and soth compounded” (*The House of Fame* ll.1026–1029). Sound is both caused and manipulated by movement or change and, just like the melting base of the goddess’s palace, has no fixed foundation. Just as sound is unstable, so is a man’s reputation and fame. When sound, personified as the individuals approaching the throne, approaches Fame, it is placed in a new context, and then she restates it again for her messenger Aeolus to echo throughout the world.

Indeed, as Virgil writes, Fame “tam ficti pravique tenax quam nuntia veri. Haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat” [clinging to the false and wrong, yet heralding truth. Now exulting in manifold gossip, she filled the nations and sang alike of fact and falsehood] (*Aeneid* IV.188–190; Fairclough 433). This theme continues in Chaucer’s wicker house, when the dreamer sees all manner of people speaking and gossiping. Irrespective of its actuality, the dreamer observes that

thus north and south

Wente every tyding from mouth to mouth

. . . til al a cite brent up ys.

And whan that was ful yspronge,

and woxen more on every tonge

Than ever hit was, went anoon

Up to a window out to goon. (*The House of Fame* ll.2075–2076, 2080–2084)

When Fame listens to the accounts and gossiping of the individuals that approach her, she echoes them to her messenger, but the retelling of these words happens according to her own whim,

regardless of what the original speaker intended. Gossip is recontextualized, restated, and reformed in the wicker house, as it moves from mouth to mouth and eventually fades out with the next wave of conversation. This is the inherent weakness of fame, that as we echo the stories of those before us, they are powerless over what is said about them or how it is said. So it was with Echo, so it is for the souls that the dreamer sees in the vision, and so it is with those previous authors whom Chaucer engaged with when creating the poem.

As Chaucer has restated, revived, and reinforced the words of other writers, thus promulgating their fame, he is putting their work in a new context, his own. In his analysis, Edwards concludes that the glass temple and its foundation as well as the happenings within Fame's palace "give an account of how language creates and preserves texts within an economy regulated by natural law" (118). In order for an author's words to transcend his time and language, Chaucer must echo the voices of other authors to transpose his work for a more modern audience. The legible names inscribed in Fame's foundation are "as fressh as men had written hem here / The selve day ryght" (*The House of Fame* ll.1156–1157). It is up to other men to write their names into history. Just as the names in ice are subject to the heat of the sun, and the individuals who approach Fame are subject to her caprice, so are the texts Chaucer uses subject to his own interpretation and iteration. By splicing together the messages of these texts *The House of Fame* becomes an experiment in which Chaucer shows us that the fame and remembrance of writers and texts are also subject to the laws of time and of a reader's or translator's designs.

As he constructs his dream vision, Chaucer shows us that he has control over which works are used and how they are used within his text. It is intriguing to note that when he begins his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid implores the gods to preserve his words, that they may continue on as

“unbroken strains” (*Metamorphoses* I.3; Miller 3). One could connect this with the many individuals that approach Fame in Chaucer’s poem, who upon visiting with her ask “that [she] graunte [them] now good fame, and let [their] werkes han that name” (*The House of Fame* ll.15559–1556). And yet, just as this group of individuals are subject to the whims and caprice of the goddess, so does Chaucer have total control of how Ovid’s accounts are represented and translated within his own works. Though he is pointing us to previous writers, Chaucer is also controlling how his reader will interpret or *hear* these stories, breaking them up into consumable bite sizes. As he does so, we are reminded that according to Chaucer’s narrative, only one being has the ability to disrupt or extend the resonance of an individual’s fame: his own goddess. So, he becomes Fame.

His echoing manipulates their fame as he uses it as a framework for his own work. Just as Fame had control over what was heard and how it was heard, so does Chaucer meticulously give his audience access to other writers, but only as he wants them to be heard, and only as they support the purposes of his poem. Thus “every tyding [went] streght to Fame, / and [Chaucer] gan yeven ech hys name, / After[their] disposicioun” (*The House of Fame* ll.2111–2113). The noisy and chaotic framework of Chaucer’s poem becomes his own palace, where he sits amidst the din as his goddess does, controlling how his audience interprets past writers, reshaping the ripples they have left on the literary tradition by recontextualizing them within his own text.

#### CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF ECHOING

Mark Smith concludes his discussion of echoing by recognizing that “it is impossible to experience those sensations [or sounds] in the same way as those who heard these sounds in the past” and yet, “printed evidence and the sensory perceptions recorded by contemporaries nevertheless constitute the principal medium through which we can access the sounds of the past

and their meanings” (Smith 59, 62). The act of echoing, of repeating the sounds of the past has always been problematic; an initial sound can never be placed within the same context in which it originated, because it is now in the past. And yet, when authors write or translate words spoken or written in the past—when we echo them—we can gain a greater understanding of the world with which we now communicate, and we are able to listen to and build off of the words spoken by our forebears. It is crucial that we recognize the importance of print as a means of recording, that even though they may no longer be audible, the sounds of the past can be brought back through writing. Thus, we connect the sounds of the past and present together, drawing out new epistemological and ontological meaning and conclusions about ourselves.

In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot says, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Eliot). I argue that Chaucer’s continued relevance and contribution to modern criticism and literature is due, in part, to his awareness and use of his literary forbears. Indeed, within *The House of Fame* his discussion of both sonic and literary echoing suggest that he was also aware of this relationship between a writer and his predecessors as he echoed the words and ideas of Boethius, Dante, Ovid and Virgil. By pulling from these other writers, Chaucer implies their continued relevance and importance within his own literary context, but rather than just restate them or blatantly point his reader in their direction, he only allows them to speak through his own mouth.

Chaucer’s echoes of these writers do indeed reinforce Eliot’s notion that “no artist has his complete meaning alone,” but this doesn’t just apply to the worth of a current or modern writer. As Chaucer’s narrative and goddess show throughout *The House of Fame*, even the meaning authors may prescribe to a writer from the past is not entirely based on their own merit—rather,

we as modern readers, writers, and echoers, add meaning to their words by reviving them within our own contexts. The writers that Chaucer echoes within his text receive additional new meaning because he is echoing their words for his audience; he is telling his readers how to receive, interpret, and understand these writers, he is prolonging their fame. Though they may have carved out the literary traditions that Chaucer employs, these writers from the past are at the mercy of their descendant. Their fame relies on his echo.

Chaucer uses this principle of sonic manipulation and translation within *The House of Fame* to create a metaphor that proposes that humans have no control over their own fame, and subsequently that authors have little control on the longevity or reception of their own work. Just as Chaucer's dreamer saw that the fame or infamy of the individuals brought to Fame's feet were subject to their own whims and interests, so it is with past authors as well. Their fame is partially dependent on the retelling of succeeding authors, lest they become another muffled voice in the chaotic din of those desperately seeking to be remembered before their names melt into obscurity on the epitaph of literary history.

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