"In Forme of Speche" is Anxiety: Orality in Chaucer's *House of Fame*

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'He that speaks, sows; he that hears, reaps.'
English proverb

I

One of the central problems in the Middle Ages, according to Brian Stock, "is the relation of orality to a world making ever-increasing use of texts" in both its social interactions and its ontological explorations (1990:35). Because a contemporary self-consciousness can be reconstructed, Stock observes, "[t]he coming of literacy heralds a new style of reflection. Individuals are aware of what is taking place, and this awareness influences the way they think about communication. . ." (7). The subject of this essay is precisely some of the subjective reactions that the oral-literate interchange provokes in the mind of Geoffrey Chaucer. Working within both literate and oral poetic traditions, the English aureate-laureate also works between them, negotiating their interchange through his acute awareness of their strained fusion[1] In arguing that an anxious ambivalence about writing operates as dynamic subtext in *Beowulf*, Michael Near (1993) suggests that tensions between orality and literacy lie at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon poem. Reading Middle English literature, produced in a time of steadily increasing literacy and in an age wherein written poetry supplants oral poetry, we discover tensions in the oral-literate continuum that are the inverse of those faced by the author and audience of *Beowulf*. In the fourteenth century, these latter-day tensions play themselves out in Chaucer's dream vision, the *House of Fame*.

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[1] I borrow the notion of the aureate/laureate dual role from Lerer 1993.

As the relationship between orality and literacy changes over time, so do the tensions resulting from the clash between their various mentalities and practices. What is more, early and late medieval poets react to these respective tensions differently. Whereas the tensions the *scop* confronts in *Beowulf* threaten his poetic voice, those Chaucer confronts in the *House of Fame* sustain his. To Chaucer, the stylistic and ideological friction produced by the interaction of orality and literacy is nurturing and constructive, not impoverishing or destructive, and his awareness of the cultural encounter leads not to silence but to articulation. To say that the opposing attraction of the oral and the literate is artistically enabling for Chaucer is not to minimize its destabilizing force: many uncertainties arise for the poet and for the literary tradition in which he works. Chaucer's struggle to achieve artistic vision in face of the cultural conflict is nevertheless productive. At times, though, a kind of anxious self-awareness marks the poet's comprehension of the challenges implicit in the oral-literate synergism.

The systematic disparagement of oral tradition in the *House of Fame* reveals Chaucer's poetic reflexivity as he explores the tensions between orality and literacy. Most notably, as I will show, Chaucer satirizes folklore by manipulating the proverbs and proverbial phrases he sets throughout his text. Because proverbial utterances have seemed to offer little beyond their unexceptionable observations, they have been relatively neglected by scholars other than folklorists. But a reappraisal of them reveals that much of the subtle richness in the poem resides in these deceptively common expressions. And more importantly to the matter at hand, not only do proverbial utterances speak to the folk and thereby disclose the latent orality of this medieval text, but in Chaucer's hands they also function as *literary* devices. Through their delicate subversion, Chaucer parodies oral poetic material and technique (cf. Hazelton 1960:376) and offers a metalinguistic critique that resounds within the newly literate culture he embraces. Its key lies in the embedding of orality in the written text, a phenomenon we must approach cautiously.

"Complete genius" such as Chaucer's must have thrived in (and in part been the product of) the "dynamic tension" between the orality and literacy of his world, just as Homer's flourished in the transitional world of ancient Greece (Havelock 1982:9). Unfortunately, modern readers trying to

appreciate Chaucer's talent may get caught in an observer's paradox.[2] Our literacy can blind us to many of the artistic subtleties and concerns Chaucer expressed. Trapped in a literate world in which even our spoken standard is writing-based, we have become desensitized to the oral world. As the equilibrium between orality and literacy has shifted, their interface has receded from our ears and eyes. Regardless of our approbation of it, the fluid linkage of orality and literacy seen in Chaucer's day may be difficult for the primarily literate to conceive.[3]

Before attempting to explicate Chaucer's metalinguistic concerns in the *House of Fame*, we need to consider how modern critical methodology affords us access to his text. As John Miles Foley insists, any abstraction of the oral must be informed by a flexible and synthetic methodology (1985:3).   Only when literary criticism is combined with the multidisciplinary insights of folklore and culture studies can we begin to disentangle the enormous complexity of the medieval oral-literate interchange. Recognizing the ambiguous situation in the European Middle Ages is a necessary first step in that attempt: "interactions between orality and literacy reached perhaps an all-time high" then and yet leave the two in high relief (Ong 1984:1, 11).   It follows that an investigation of the literature of the medieval period should be pursued along the twin axes of orality and literacy (Amodio 1994:4). The critical approach required to gain access to the cultural nexus thus envisioned has an epistemological basis. To appreciate the otherness of medieval texts a modern reader must engage in a creative act of imagination (Zumthor 1984:67-68). The best stratagem may be to use awareness of our own literate paradigm as a point

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[2] Compare Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990:3. Parks (1991) takes this recognition one step further: he concludes that not only scholars' literacy but also their resulting interpretive theories prejudice their understanding of orality. See further Parks 1991 for a discussion of the bias promoting the textualization of orality.

[3] A different intellectual paradigm may also isolate the modern world from the medieval. Accompanying the print and Newtonian revolutions is a cognitive shift that elevates vision as the basis of modern knowledge and belief. Our perception is altered as we are deafened by epistemology and time. This "deaf spot" must be kept in mind when we consider oral poetics. As Hoffman 1986 makes clear, a profound insensitivity underlies the more obvious difficulty of approaching an oral tradition from a literate one. See Kuhn 1970 and Merchant 1989 for historical analyses of the modern scientific revolution; see Ong 1982:36-49 for a treatment of the psychodynamics of orality.

of departure producing in ourselves an openness to the silence in the text; in this way we might respond to orality on its own terms (Parks 1991:59). If we hear the bias in our own voices, the postmodern recognition that "the Other can never speak for itself as Other" may be a place to resume, rather than suspend, reading (Jolly forthcoming).

A spatial metaphor oriented in a literate model aids our recovery of the complex interaction taking place in the Middle Ages. Orality, literacy, and their relationship to each other can be envisioned in terms of a continuum, with a primarily oral culture and a primarily literate one at opposite poles.[4] Literacy itself is not an absolute determinant, but is a term or concept that must always be qualified quantitatively to achieve meaning (Havelock 1982:58). Purely oral and purely literate cultures remain at best theoretical constructs, whereas real experience at any one point in time probably entails a mixing of degrees of orality and literacy (Amodio 1994:7; cf. Zumthor 1990:21). This relativity proves all the more striking at the end of the fourteenth century when the print revolution dawns. As Mark Amodio points out, orality and literacy are "integral and interrelated parts of a subtle and complex cultural change rather than (largely) unrelated moments of cultural evolution" (1994:5). Over time, the perceptual orientations they bear become interdependent through their interaction (9).

As a cultural artifact, medieval literature reflects the amalgamation of practices. Literature of the Middle Ages exhibits a confrontation among if not a synthesis of sometimes competing and sometimes complementary oral and literate traditions. The insights emanating from a recognition of this grappling are aesthetic and cultural (Amodio 1994:21; cf. Ong 1984:4):

> [a]cknowledging the tension which informs the medieval oral-literate continuum will enable us to understand more clearly both the mix of oral and literate poetics we discover . . . as well as the 'cultural diglossia' central to medieval English society.

Through approximation, that recognition also hints at the kind of cultural awareness medieval people must have had.

Even though the implications of the literacy revolution were not fully understood at the time, and even though much of the conflict between the oral past and the literate future remained unacknowledged on the battleground of the present, Chaucer and his contemporaries did reflect on changes they perceived in progress. Conceding that people of the Middle

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[4] Amodio 1994:5; compare Ong 1984:1, Bäuml 1980:243, and O'Keeffe 1990:13-14.

Ages are not Janus-faced does not deny their perspicacity. In fact, their consciousness evidences a turning point in the history of English literacy "when the literate mind was able to cast back upon its own oral past" (Parks 1994:173). As more fully (and primarily) literate people of the modern age we must approach the medieval sensibility gingerly. Wisely, Parks warns us not to equate Chaucer's awareness of oral tradition and his treatment of the interaction between orality and literacy with the retrospective vision characterizing modern scholarship on the subject. For one thing, the reality of Chaucer's world proves far more nuanced and subtle than the commonly postulated dichotomy "oral-literate" would allow. Moreover, because modern perspectives frequently verge on the reductive, they propagate anachronism in their retrojection.

Although medieval awareness of the oral-literate interchange may not equal ours (distorted even as it is advantaged by hindsight), medieval people prove cognizant of their changed and changing world. This very awareness constitutes one of the clearest implications of literacy (Stock 1983). Because oral and literate modes constitute complementary world views, the hybrid world of the Middle Ages inspires a hybrid reflectivity. At the junction of the cultural divide a bivalent consciousness originates. More interestingly, in terms of human perception, the cognitive duality raises the possibility "that reality could be understood as a series of relationships, such as outer versus inner, independent object as opposed to reflecting subject" (Stock 1983:531). Experience, as a result, becomes "separable. . . from ratiocination about it" (1990:36). Medieval recognition of paradigmatic differences thus grows out of a culturally determined presumption that there is a basic difference between the oral and the written.

Numerous cultural changes, theological controversies, and phenomenological considerations mirror society's apprehension of the transformation initiated by widespread literacy. Stock has shown, for example, that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries a reflective theology emerges in which "higher religious culture" militates purposefully against the "unwritten." Different levels of spiritual understanding are credited to those literate or illiterate in Latin, just as different levels of comprehensibility are associated with the central truths of religious texts, devotional practices, or sacramental rituals. An additional self-consciousness about this hermeneutic activity is one of the byproducts of literacy. A general linguistic awareness is another. Articulating the new reflection (or what was once more accurately called "perpension"), Anselm of Canterbury, Peter Abelard, and Bernard of Clairvaux each explore the relationships among written language, the reader's intellect, and reality (Stock 1983:523-25). Or again, explicit treatment of the ontological

implications of vocalization can be seen in the meditations of Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic endeavors. Indeed, consideration of the implications of orality and literacy occurs so commonly, Paul Zumthor maintains, as to be implicit in medieval poetic art (1984:75).

II

Chaucer's poetry discloses precisely such an awareness of the oral-literate interchange and the social and literary change it both signals and promotes. Yet consistently critics have misapprehended this awareness as they focus on a Chaucerian preoccupation with the unreliability of language in general. While previous scholarship has revealed a Chaucerian "distrust" of "language," it emphasizes a disjunction between words and meaning. For instance, Robert Jordan (only partially in jest) refers to Chaucer as a *proto*-postmodern writer: the poet exploits the metafictional consequences of admitting a multiplicity of meaning to the written word.[5] More basically, the disingenuousness of Pandarus or Criseyde explicated by Myra Stokes (1983) exemplifies a similar fascination with verbal "trouthe" and the spoken word's potential for ambiguity. On a pragmatic as well as semantic level, claims Britton Harwood (1992), the *House of Fame* and the tales told by the Friar and the Summoner represent the potential deficiencies inherent in any illocution.

Such readings buttress a prevailing belief that in Chaucer's eyes language is unreliable. Despite this recognition, critics have neglected an important reason for the poet's skeptical appreciation of language. It is a related linguistic phenomenon that disquiets Chaucer. Apprehensiveness about orality and its ephemeral, mutable substance lies at the center of Chaucer's *House of Fame*. Chaucer's concern with orality is not unique to this poem, but rather proves an abiding one for the poet, one that he pursues directly in later works. As Parks has shown, oral tradition is an explicit subject of the *Canterbury Tales* (1994:150). In a more tentative exposition, by means of allusion and implication, Chaucer explores the limits of orality in his earlier dream vision and exposes the troubled engagement with orality that figures in his later work.

Let us first consider evidence of Chaucer's productive disfavoring of orality before turning to his treatment's cultural moorings. As consideration of oral matter and its presentation reveals, orality is

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[5] Jordan, unpub. ms.; see also Jordan 1983 and 1991 for a discussion of Chaucerian metafiction.

foregrounded only to be subverted in the *House of Fame*. If, following Harwood (1992), we interpret "speche" in the restricted sense of spoken (as opposed to written) genres, we can shed light on Chaucer's linguistic circumspection in the *House of Fame*. There is little doubt that Chaucer is deeply concerned with the world of orality. Frequent references to the process of telling (such as the repetition of first person "speke" and "seye" and second person "herkeneth" and "listeth" in Geffrey's account) mark the activity of human speech.[6] His dream is narrated as an act of aural report (509-11). The eagle's discursus on phonation, articulation, and the physical properties of sound also highlight spoken language (762-822). We are explicitly told, finally, that speech in particular warrants skepticism (765-68):

> Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken;
> And every speche that ys spoken. . .
> In his substaunce ys but air.

Although critics usually generalize and assume that "speche" represents language, we should not too readily dismiss the literal denotations of the word as proffered subject.

Whereas speech is Chaucer's general topic, the poet directs his speculum at oral tradition more particularly and does so in a manner that draws it to our attention. Called forth along with the deity in Book I's invocation is the performance of oral poetry. When the narrator announces that he will relate the dream as it appeared to him, if only the god of sleep will help him tell it "aryght" (79), he launches an elaborate assertion of verbal incompetence (cf. Bauman 1977:22). He apologizes for being a poet who needs help "to endite and rhyme" (520). Developing the motif of the "lewed" poet in remaining invocations and proems, Geffrey demurs (1094-1100):

> Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,
> Here art poetical be shewed,
> But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,
> Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,
> Though som vers fayle in a sillable;
> And that I do no diligence
> To shewe craft, but o sentence.

His composition remains unsophisticated, but its matter is true, the narrator

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[6] This and all subsequent references to *House of Fame* are from Benson 1987.

insists: "Thought . . . wrot al that I mette" (523).

On one level the disclaimer is meant to authenticate the dreamer's dream, to aid a cooperative audience in the suspension of its disbelief. Within the oral world this rhetorical signal also has a clear institutionalized meaning (Foley 1995:81; Parks 1987:47). The pretense is a performance "key" that constitutes a powerful referent of oral tradition. An audience well-versed in oral tradition—Chaucer's audience—would recognize the disclaimer as "*the* conventional means" to announce an oral poetic performance (Bauman 1977:21-22; emphasis mine). Not only does the disclaimer mark an oral performance, but it also initiates one. By denying artistic competence, the poet traditionally enters the arena of oral performance (Foley 1995:79 *et passim*). Even in a written poem, Chaucer's disclaimer engages the performative matrix and summons the oral world for his reader.[7]

With the conventional disclaimer of the oral poet, the narrator embraces the role of transmitter and situates himself within the context of traditional performance rather than creative composition (cf. Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990:33). The self-effacement ploy belongs to a larger folkloric rhetoric. Performance disclaimers of competence and description constitute the stock in trade of oral performers, as do analogies and proverbs (Lindahl 1987:169). Geffrey relies on all of these oral figures to structure his narrative. Because facility with them is characteristic of Chaucer's fictional surrogate, inevitably he becomes identified with the oral poet, a singer whose craft depends on those devices. To this extent (and there may be other applications whose pursuit lies beyond the scope of this essay), he assumes the persona of oral poet. Certainly it is this figure whose traditional invitation opens the second book (509-12):

> Now herkeneth every maner man
> That Englissh understonde kan
> And listeth of my drem to lere,
> For now at erste shul ye here."[8]

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[7] Mark C. Amodio, personal correspondence. Amodio has coined the term "performative matrix" to account for the engagement of performative structures within non-performative poetics.

[8] Compare Quinn 1994:15. Pointing out that members of Chaucer's late fourteenth-century audience all understood English, Quinn reads line 510 as "deadwood" if not "ludicrous." He has no doubt that the entire invitation is designed to mock "mistrelsy" (15-16).

Later on, Chaucer makes the association between dreamer and *scop* explicit. Having tailored his explanation of phonetics accordingly, the Eagle deems Geffrey a "lewed man" (865-867), accusing the love poet of having an unlearned or ignorant ability. Representing the narrator's aureate skill through example and attribution, Chaucer foregrounds oral poetics as the matter of the *House of Fame*.

The lore of the folk also provides the shape of the dream's creation. Just as people of the Middle Ages were culturally disposed to perceive "what folklore tradition and religious ideology imposed" whether they were awake or asleep (Gurevich 1984:52), so Chaucer gives his dream vision verisimilitude by peopling it with the figures and voices of lore. Epic heroes reenact their stories before his eyes. Even more significantly, the subject matter of the overheard speech is the property of oral tradition. The eagle assures Geffrey that he will learn much about love in Fame's edifice, and the passage starting at line 675 attests to the talk promised. We logically assume, since we are never informed otherwise, that the "sawes" and "lesinges" enumerated are those heard in Fame's house (675-99):

> And of Loves folk moo tydynges,
> Both sothe sawes and lesinges,
> And moo loves newe begonne,
> And longe yserved loves wonne,
> And moo loves casuelly
> That ben betyd, no man wot why,
> But as a blynd man stert an hare;
> And more jolytee and fare
> While that they fynde love of stel,
> As thinketh hem, and over-al wel;
> Mo discordes, moo jelousies,
> Moo murmures and moo novelries,
> And moo dissymulacions,
> And feyned reparacions,
> And moo berdys in two houres
> Withoute rasour or sisoures
> Ymad then greynes be of sondes;
> And eke moo holdynge in hondes,
> And also moo renovelaunces
> Of olde forleten aqueyntaunces;
> Mo love-dayes and acordes
> Then on instrumentes be cordes;
> And eke of loves moo eschaunges
> Then ever cornes were in graunges.

Both subjects and their manner of presentation belong to the realm of

orality. In accordance with a standard figurative operation in oral poetry, the stereotypical summary of love's themes functions metonymically, as objects, individuals, gestures, and illocutions stand for the more complex state or story underlying them. Here, for example, "berdys" (689) represents all the deceptions of love, "murmures" (386) all its intimacy. These signifiers also possess a traditional referentiality (not unlike intertextual literary discourse) shared by oral works as well as oral-derived texts (Foley 1991:7). In other words, given their "echoic" contexts, Chaucer's subjects resonate metonymically within the poetic tradition known to the audience. The aches and joys and games of love live in the popular stories of lore. The motive for agglutinating these associations here is oral tradition. Adopting a technique meaningful to an oral audience or a literate one familiar with oral tradition, Chaucer announces that the multiform voice of orality will be heard in the house of Fame.

Conventional idiom may reside in Fame's house, but it is not celebrated in the poem. Nor does the substance of oral tradition escape Chaucer's critique. In a sense, the medium is the message that proves worrisome to Chaucer. Offering a sophisticated analysis of the *House of Fame* in light of the grammatical theory that informs it, Martin Irvine shows that the voices of the poets are rendered in *vox confusa* by Fame (1985:868; cf. *House of Fame* 1477-80, 1514-19); all Geffrey hears is "a ful confus matere" (1517). Further confusion originates in a grammatical joke that literalizes an illogical linguistic structure. Orality's subjects appear to be dislocated from its propositions. Subjects fly around Fame's house as their entailments ricochet through Rumor's. The comic relegation of oral predication to the palace of Rumor subverts the efficacy of the tidings murmured there (Harwood 1992:345). Jangles speak (1961-76),

> Of werres, of pes, of mariages,
> Of reste, of labour, of viages,
> Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
> Of love, of hate, acord, or stryf,
> Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynges,
> Of hele, of seknesse, of bildynges,
> Of faire wyndes, and of tempestes,
> Of qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes,
> Of dyvers transmutacions
> Of estats, and eke of regions;
> Of trust, of drede, of jelousye,
> Of wit, of wynnynge, of folye;
> Of plente, and of gret famyne,
> Of chepe, of derthe, and of ruyne;
> Of good or mys governement,

> Of fyr, and of dyvers accident.

Reduced to predicates lacking subjects, as Harwood describes them, these "words of mouth" are divorced from reference and meaning (1992:345).

That these predications lose their affirmations along with their subjects poses one problem. That these universal human experiences are also complementary introduces another. Ultimately they cancel each other out: peace quiets war, love subdues hate, and life balances out the whole. Out of profusion, often a source of delight in a medieval work,[9] comes only nullification. Heaped up in this contradicting manner, capacious metonyms become bland itemizations instead of bright evocations. Such is the "raw stuff of reputation and of history," the tidings of which fame and oral tradition are made (Howard 1987:249).

Chaucer's diminution of orality in Book III leads Harwood to suspect outright attack on "the oral poetry that must have appeared to him to monopolize the English vernacular" (1992:345). The attack continues as Chaucer questions both the nature and the source of that primacy. On the one hand oral tradition conveys fame and rumor; on the other it carries the stories of the oral poets. Fame, rumor, and story share a fundamental quality and one ultimate limitation as oral genres: they are essentially ephemeral. The physics of the spoken word means that it is transitory, as the eagle memorably informs us in Book II. What is said out loud soon dissipates as vibrating airwaves naturally diminish over time and space. A second disadvantage is the difficulty of recall. Subsequent verbal reconstruction of the vocal sign (in memory or report) relies on the exigencies of another oral performance. The original utterance eludes repetition in the end:

> O, soth ys, every thing ys wyst,
> Though hit be kevered with the myst,

the sentence announces (351-52). It is not the voice but its recollection that becomes doubtful.

In Jupiter's eagle, a bird of prey who hunts memory, we then find Chaucer joking with his audience. The irony arises from twists on literary tropes recognizable to Chaucer's audience (cf. Carruthers 1993:896). Conventionally, caged birds represent memory contained in the perfection of the human mind while metaphors of hunting prove traditional for the

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[9] Cf. the catalogs of mysterious facts in the bestiaries.

process of recollection (Carruthers 1990:246-47).   The perfect memory hunted here (by a bird which has flown the coop if it were ever caged at all) cannot be found in either the houses of Fame or Rumor.

Literary tradition as a whole, as well as oral tradition, suffers the vicissitudes of fame and rumor, of course. Irvine argues that in the *House of Fame* Chaucer makes exactly that larger complaint about the arbitrariness of literary discourse (1985:871). In Geffrey's dream, letters appear engraved in ice that melts or freezes as Fame casts her shadow (1136-64). However, although the written seems under scrutiny at this point in the poem, it is the names or reputations of the famous and infamous that suffer impermanence, not their texts. For the books that preserve the words of Dante and Virgil, Geffrey expresses admiration as he evokes their stories and cites their authority (448-50).

Orality's inherently mutable substance comes under sustained attack in the poem. The most successful line of offense is still to come, and it is covert rather than overt. An important folk device recurs throughout the poem, representing orality only to inform against it.   The dreamer's repetition of proverbs and proverbial phrases, the originally oral sayings of the folk, skillfully undermines the integrity of the oral tradition from which they descend.   Insidiously and ironically Chaucer will contextualize proverbial expressions in a manner that deconstructs them (cf. Hutcheon 1989:102).

III

In turning our attention to Chaucer's use of proverbial material we must recognize the problems of identification that arise because proverbs participate in the general commerce between the oral and the literate (Mann 1984:94), a traffic Chaucer exploits.   Jill Mann reports that in the *Franklin's Tale*, his presentation of a proverb carefully links it to both popular and learned tradition (1984:94). Only after we have evaluated any one dictum can we surmise Chaucer's purpose in incorporating the saw into his poetry. To some extent, it is possible to trace the oral tradition underlying a written version of a proverb. Analysis in light of literary and folk tradition may clarify genre and source, isolating provenance from conveyance. Proverbs can be distinguished from sentences—aphorisms transmitted by writing—and their divergent traditions separated. Written proverbs and proverbial phrases finally remain artifacts of the oral world. Even their appropriation by literate convention may not preclude oral attribution. While medieval rhetoricians such as Matthew of Vendôme and

Geoffrey of Vinsauf recommend that literary works begin or end with the citation of a proverb (Whiting 1934:17-19), learned practice probably followed popular custom.   B. J. Whiting has demonstrated that the rhetoricians codify a widespread fondness for proverbial citation (19-20). They sanction a vernacular custom, not an elite eccentricity.   Chaucer's tendency to poke fun at rhetorical forms and aims can mislead critics about his point in quoting the proverbial. It is tempting to suspect ridicule of the rhetorical when a proverb is in Chaucer's sights, but the more fundamental orality may be the real target disguised by rhetorical placement or ornamentation.

As the poet's disparagement of proverbial utterances capitalizes on their peculiar properties, we must consider their oral essence. Then we can examine Chaucer's application of the proverbial in the *House of Fame*. Although "sayings" are often associated with folk tradition, their connection with orality runs deeper than mere affinity.   Walter Ong stresses oral culture's dependence on proverbs: it actually "*thinks* its thoughts in mnemonic patterns" (1981:123). Because only what can be recalled can be known, oral noetic processes are by definition formulaic; formulaic design allows the storage and retrieval of the thoughts and beliefs that constitute culture. Collective commonplaces necessarily characterize oral poetic style (*idem*).   Inasmuch as folk culture bases itself in community experience (Lindahl 1987:10), its lore will be experiential. Thus can proverbs partly be defined, in Whiting's words, as "the rich pawky wisdom of the folk" (1934:4).

Whiting identifies six proverbs or records of popular sayings in the *House of Fame* (1934:35-37).[10]   In addition thirty-one grammatically flexible proverbial phrases appear (155-94). While they do not generalize and offer the concrete morals typical of proverbs, they employ similar idioms. In a particularizing mode, many of these conventional phrases state analogues in order to compare the unfamiliar with the familiar (cf. Whiting 1968:x-xvii).   The presence of both kinds of proverbial material typifies writings that characterize the folk (Taylor 1962:172).   Traditional set phrases, according to Derek Brewer, help formulate a familiar, collectivist style that actually constructs as well as reflects ideal community (1988:87-88).   There is more here than meets the ear. On a superficial level the distinctive sayings of the folk provide a communal and comfortable, folkloric texture in the poem.   Chaucer's use of them, however, inverts

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[10] I would like to thank Stephen Partridge for his assistance with textual criticism and proverbial sources. I am also grateful to Iain Higgins for his consultation about Gower's and Lydgate's use of proverbs.

their standard function of stating popular lore. In an important but neglected study of "Catoniana," Richard Hazelton remarks that their mouthing by Chaucer's characters frequently deprives *proverbia* and *sententiae* of significance or applicability (1960:379-80). Based on the *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, Hazelton's judgment applies equally well to the proverbs and proverbial phrases found in the *House of Fame*.

Chaucer uses proverbial material plentifully and strategically in his text. Often he marks its presence with a pronouncement: "Therfore I wol seye a proverbe" (289); "But men seyn" (1147); "Folk kan synge hit bet than I" (2138). Other times he trusts the careful reader to notice its artful management, as when the relativity of its numerical concentration alerts us to its manipulation. Both the presence and the absence of proverbs fit a pattern. Of proverbial material in the poem, the lowest frequency occurs in Book I, the highest in Book III. The least material, two proverbs and two proverbial phrases, depicts the Temple of Venus, while three literary sentences are enlisted for that purpose in the first book's 508 lines. When the dreamer arrives in the House of Fame, oral material begins to dominate *sententiae*. Of Book II's 581 lines, one proverb and six proverbial phrases complement one sententious remark. A disproportionate number of the former prevail in the 1067 lines of Book III, however. Twenty-three proverbial phrases and three proverbs contrast with three sentences in that book and with the lower proverbial density of the earlier divisions. In absolute terms, almost four times as many orally transmitted utterances construct Fame and Rumor's abodes. In relative terms, with book length taken into account, twice as many can be counted.[11] The correlation of subject matter and verse source strikes us at once. Comparatively few proverbs are found in the temple walled in writing. But in the dwelling places of the spoken, oral sayings abound.

Appropriately, the stories engraved in Venus's shrine are told with little proverbial matter. Following the story of Dido, for instance, when Chaucer recounts tales of love's betrayals and other events recorded in Virgil, Ovid, Claudian, or Dante (388-467), no oral material is employed at all. Proverbs are applied to the story of Dido and Aeneas only (272-73; 290-91; 362-63), where, as I will suggest, their use contradicts any wisdom they might seriously contribute. Instead the passage relies on literary *sententiae* for its commentary (265-66; 351-52; 361). This exemption of lore contrasts dramatically with the concentrated presence of oral matter

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[11] To be precise, Book I has a frequency rate of .0079 proverbs per line; Book II has a frequency rate of .012 per line; Book III contains .024 per line.

used in creation of Fame and Rumor's domains.

Fame's sanctuary, where oral art and performance dwell, is literally constructed from orality, through idiomatic verbal collocations whose structure and contents have currency in oral tradition.[12] Obvious as well as familiar proverbial comparatives constitute most of the folkloric building material. Their job is to draw an analogy with some thing or quality already known to the reader and thereby to ease depiction. Traditional, iterative phrases index common folk experience. Their hyperbolic language also lends the flavor of "animated, informal conversation" to the narration, just as Brewer contends it should (1988:97-99). Chaucer's ethnographic artistry proves subversive, however (cf. Lindahl 1987:159). Form reinforces content in this passage, but also vitiates it. When examined carefully, the composite description looks vapid rather than vivid. There are as many windows in the castle as "flakes falle in grete snowes" (1191-92), more seats "than sterres ben in hevene" (1254). The walls of beryl shine "ful lyghter than a glas" (1289). Sides, floors, and ceiling of the great hall are of gold set with as many exquisite gems "as grasses growen in a mede" (1350-53).

Fame herself is painted with the same predictable comparisons. Her hair shines like burnished gold (1386-87). She has as many eyes as there are "fetheres upon foules" (1382) and as many ears and tongues as there are hairs on beasts (1389-90). The lady's messenger, Aeolus, whom we meet next, elicits another concatenation of proverbial expressions. Awaiting her instructions, the god stands still as stone (1605), while the winds he commands roar like bears (1589). His black trumpet of slander is fouler than the devil (1637-38), its noise sounding as swift as gunshot (1643-44). Smoke rising from its blast stinks like the pit of hell (1654). When the Wind changes and Laud, his gold trumpet of praise, is blown, it conventionally rings as loud as thunder (1681). Later Black Clarion calls as the wind blows in hell (1803), its tone as full of mocking as apes are full of grimaces (1805-6). Suffering the "sory grace" (1790) of Fame's punishment thus, the undeserving are heard to laugh as if they were crazy (1809).

In this way, folkloric collocation is heaped upon folkloric collocation. Fittingly the oral realm of Fame is constructed with the easy, exaggerating, and empty whispers of orality. And in the manner of the

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[12] Due to the heterogeneity of its application and the elusiveness of the language it delimits, I avoid the term "oral formula" in my characterization of the proverbial phrases Chaucer uses here. Foley 1991:14 *et passim* explores shortcomings in the use of the concept within Oral Theory.

commonplace, ill repute and great renown are meted out by Chaucer. So he mitigates Fame's power, rendering it as ephemeral and immaterial as it is capricious. The substance of the goddess and her minions reduces itself to nothing more than cliché in the end; her house proves as insubstantial as the broken air of Fame's essence.

Proverbial utterances do more than reinforce meaning structurally. Their presence often has comedic effect that uproots the folkloric. Overuse of formulae in the "Manciple's Tale," Hazelton observes, contributes to its comedy: proverbial phrases are used so frequently as to seem overdone.[13] Here too, in Hazelton's words, is proverbial citation carried to "parodic excess" (1960:378). One result is an inflation of use and meaning. In Geffrey's mouth lore is transmuted from popular truth to meaningless cliché; his conscious literary usage bleaches the traditional wisdom from the proverbial and leaves it bereft of meaning.[14]

The literalization of the oral represents only one way of decontextualizing it. Like proverbial phrases, independent proverbs are deconstructed by their quotation in the poem. Chaucer undercuts the wisdom of one proverb through its incongruous placement within the narration. Interrupting his description of Fame's house, the dreamer employs a device of oral performance and complains that he saw more splendor there than he can report, "For ese of yow and los of tyme" (1256; cf. 1299-1300). So goes the oral storyteller's standard disclaimer of descriptiveness. Chaucer carries the performance disclaimer to ridiculous extreme when he chases it with the saying, "For tyme ylost, this knowen ye, / Be no way may recovered be" (1257-58). Subsequently, of course, he delays his listeners for some additional nine hundred lines. The absurdity of the citation becomes clearer when we consider the axiom's conventionally earnest application. Contemporary poets invest this proverb with moral weight and use it in serious contexts. Gower intones (*Confessio Amantis* IV 1485-87; cited by Whiting 1960:595-96),

Men mai recovere lost of good,

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[13] The contradictory aesthetic of overabundant formulaic language in a text is well known. The overaccumulation of appostitive phrases in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* episode *The Death of Edgar* excoriates their contents, for instance (Greenfield and Calder 1986:247-49).

[14] See Foley 1995:7 on the mechanics of this literalization. When the performance arena or field of reference "shrinks from tradition to text," metonymic context is divorced from oral form. Cliché, a bleaching impossible within an oral referring poetics, thus derives from the assimilation of oral models by written models.

> Bot so wys man yit nevere stod,
> Which mai recovere time lore.

Similarly, Lydgate admonishes ("Evil Marriage" 456; cited by Whiting 1960:595-96),

> Take hede and lerne, thou lytell chylde, and se
> That tyme passed wyl nat agayne retourne.

Chaucer, in contrast, trivializes the wisdom by using it in the context of a poet hesitating to hold an audience assembled for that very purpose. Rewritten by its usage the proverb has become ironic: "Of myspent tyme a fole may *weel* compleyne" (Lydgate *Testament* 248-50; cited by Whiting 1960:596; emphasis mine). With a chuckle Chaucer implicates the traditional oral poet immediately embodied in the persona of Geffrey, satirizing his poetics.

Elsewhere the humor is more explicit, as when Chaucer robs another proverb of its sententiousness by presenting it as a *double entendre*. On one level line 290 merely remarks that Dido's ignorance of Aeneas leads to her downfall: "'he that fully knoweth th'erbe / May saufly leye hyt to his yë'." The analogy of admitting only the trusted medicine seems apt. Yet the citation also introduces a sexual pun on "yë," a word finding echoes in the related form, "nether ye" (cf. the "Miller's Tale," 3852). Dido certainly would have spared herself much grief if she had known the Trojan's true nature before laying him to her "lower eye." The likelihood of this reading suggests itself in the motivation ascribed in line 287: nothing less than "nyce lest" causes her fall.

In light of the medieval proverb's closest analogues, Chaucer's bawdiness seems purposeful. A citation of the generic proverb can be found in Usk (26.114-15; cited by Whiting 1960:280), who employs "smertande sores" instead of "eye," a variant wording that prevents the pun even if it does not preclude a sexual interpretation. "Eye," however, is the recorded term in what may be the literary antecedent for lines 290-91. Partly on the basis of the same proverb's presence in Nicole de Margival's *Panthère d'Amours*, Albert C. Baugh argues that the earlier French romance serves as one source for the *House of Fame*. Baugh assumes that Usk borrows the lore from Chaucer who takes it from Margival (1960:59-61). We must concede the possibility that the diction results from literal translation rather than original choice. Nonetheless, Chaucer's offering of

the proverb as commentary on the story of Dido and Aeneas remains, and that fact is suspicious in itself. For when the same lovers appear in another of Chaucer's poems, erotic word-play frequents their tale. In the *Legend of Good Women* a cluster of copulatory homophones imbues Dido's tragedy with sexuality (Delany 1985:194). The subversive function of *double entendre* in Chaucer's second version of the epic (Quinn 1994:95-112) suggests its motivation in the *House of Fame*. Through an ambiguous term's placement in a passage on romantic love, the poet twists folk matter to comic effect.

An ironic feature of their own oral essence may make proverbs vulnerable to such perversion. "It is in the nature of proverbial wisdom to exist in separation from a context, and to find one only transiently," Mann observes (1984:105). As they do in the *Ysengrimus*, proverbs in the *House of Fame* celebrate their own "habitual separation from the realities they claim to represent." The "impersonal force" of their orality grants them a resiliency to survive even such "subversive contexts" as Chaucer provides them only to be repeated in another conversation or literary text (106-7). They cannot be abused, in other words, but neither will they ever truly fit immediate experience. What is resurrected in the new and different versions of an individual proverb is as much its oral impetus as any immutable content.

A third example of Chaucerian citation leaves no doubt about the subversion of the oral in the *House of Fame*. Near the end of the poem, Chaucer quotes a proverb one final time to summarize the argument he has made. In Rumor's house truth and lies become indiscernibly confused with each other. Lines 2121-25 characterize the voices inhabiting the cage of twigs:

> And, Lord, this hous in alle tymes
> Was ful of shipmen and pilgrimes,
> With scrippes bret-ful of lesinges,
> Entremedled with tydynges,
> And eek allone be hemselve.

This proverbial stereotype combines two related proverbs: "Shipmen are liars" (Whiting 1960:516) and "Pilgrims are liars" (446; cf. 492). It is medieval commonplace, in other words, that each one typically lies.[15] Furthermore, "there is no difference between a liar and a great teller of

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[15] Recalling this truism, Hill (1991) considers the tidings brought to Canterbury by Chaucer's pilgrims in light of the truths they carry.

tidings" (134), an overlapping maxim observes. Another contemporary truism extends the syllogism. Lies and folktales are themselves so commonly linked that the word "tale," meaning both "artful fiction" and "malicious falsehood," bespeaks their equation (Lindahl 1987:38). Prevarication arrives with the tidings and tales both kinds of travelers bring from afar. The implication is clear: oral tradition lies just as fame and rumor lie. Using proverbial lore to establish this truth, Chaucer completes his derogation of orality. Cleverly, the poet calls upon orality to impugn itself.

                                    IV

     Prevailing attitudes and assumptions about the written and the oral provide a cultural context for Chaucer's disparagement of orality in the *House of Fame*. His interest in the obfuscation of truth and the possibilities of oral and literate conveyance reflects larger social concern; his ambivalence about speech and the traditions associated with it finds support in the popular writing of the time. John Ganim's (1994) reading of *Handlying Synne* points to a common medieval anxiety about the disproportionate efficacy of the spoken word. Speech contains pitfalls in addition to its unreliable reconstruction. Because it possesses a power beyond its substance it is inherently dangerous. The fourteenth-century tract's proscriptions of uncontrolled and malicious speech divulge the considerable, almost magical power accorded verbal utterance. In the same text we see that the writing down of the spoken word, here associated with "anarchic everyday urges" like slander and backbiting, seems to neutralize its power. When a recording of a potent witch's charm is read aloud by a bishop in an incident Mannyng relates, it fails to work, for example. Even though writing cannot counteract magic in reality, it is the urge to use it that way that proves significant, Ganim shows. The attempt to coopt voice and control speech arises out of faith in the technology. While spoken and verbal illocution might have an equally powerful potential, Ganim concludes, the actual use of spoken media arouses distrust in medieval man (111-12, 121).
     According to contemporary belief, the advantages of the written counteract the deficiencies of the oral. While the written, like everything else in life, is subject to Fortune's changes, it may not be quite as mutable as the oral. Writing fixes a text, whether or not the page or book produced survives intact. That textual fixity delimits written discourse at the same time it establishes it. Both textual discourse and the authority of the text

proceed from the "death" of the author (cf. Barthes 1977). "The trouble with a written composition is that it becomes detached from its author, and goes off on its own, so to speak," concedes Carruthers (1990:30). Its reception and transmission remain uncertain in this respect. Yet both may also be protected to some extent by learned practices intended to stabilize communication. As Carruthers demonstrates, the ideal of medieval reading entailed "a highly active . . . hermeneutical dialog" between and among texts and readers.[16] Textual memory, trained and nurtured during this period, is thought to mediate the phenomenological relationship between language and truth. A collective social process safeguards the integrity of writing and the written.

Ultimately, medieval faith in the text extends beyond this trust. Arguing that with widespread literacy the written text becomes the "operative factor in all social discourse," Stock documents a cultural realignment wherein everything not written seems subjective (1990:46; cf. Stock 1983). Medieval authorities, he observes, "were convinced that written communication . . . was directly reflective of reality, but that purely oral exchange, when it was not backed up by a text, was not" (1990:43).

This reification, asserts Havelock, results directly from the adoption of the alphabet, an invention which converts speech into language and, in turn, renders language into artifact. The technology's "causative function," as Havelock calls it, transforms language into an object of reflection and analysis (1982:8-9). In written form language achieves physical materiality as well. A document's tangibility, its status as object, grants it another kind of integrity. Even if a text allows various interpretations or inspires divergent reputations, it possesses a presence contrasting with the evanescence of the spoken word. From a literal "objectness" comes a figurative objectivity we now take for granted. The opposition between the oral and the written mushrooms. Once the written achieves permanence and canonicity, the oral world is reanalyzed: custom and transience become orality's limitations (Stock 1983:530).

An artistic ramification of the perceptual shift sheds additional light on the writerly anxiety seen in the *House of Fame*. The advantages of the literacy revolution for the writer were also assessed at the time. In short, medieval poetic theory elevates written poetry over oral poetry because it facilitates attributability and individualizes authorship. "Poeseye" is to Chaucer and his fellow writers, as Lerer reminds us, "writing freed from the controlling ideologies or codes of conduct that made all forms of

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[16] 186. For an exploration of the reception of texts by medieval listeners as well as readers, see Green 1994.

commissioned literature acts of performance" (1993:31). Writing has the possibility of approaching this ideal in a way that oral "making," performance-based poetry, does not. The latter, rooted in the expectations of its audience, is thereby limited. Whereas "poeseye" approaches autonomy in its creation, "making" remains "socially constructed ritual" (Lerer 1993:31). The former is unique, the latter anonymous; the author of a written poem can confer on it new contextual meaning instead of having to refer automatically to an inherent and inherited meaning (cf. Foley 1991:6-8). While written literature can itself become traditional, communal property (cf. Zumthor 1984:77-78), oral poetry epitomizes the enactment of cultural constraints. The goal of "poeseye" is to escape those bounds and achieve a transhistorical prospect (Lerer 1993:31). Through "poeseye," poets hope to transcend the time, place, and perspective of composition as a creative act.

As we have seen, the shock waves of literacy's new assumptions are felt throughout the duration of the Middle Ages. If the ideal establishes polarities, tensions between the oral and the written abide. The tenaciousness of common proverbs, folk stories, and oral poetics serves to undermine the neat dichotomies. While the habitual and unoriginal may be devalued by converts to literacy, the oral somehow refuses to go away. Although speech is a transitory medium of expression, its matter obtains an enduring opacity, for the folk continue to grant authority to the voice of experience heard in these verbal artifacts. The written may transfer *knowledge*, but the oral conveys *wisdom*. In common usage, Jesse Gellrich (1988) reiterates, the oral habits of the earlier period prove "persistent," even exerting "dominion over writing" in a literate age. Grounded in a "potent medieval mythology," preference for oral modes is sustained well into the morning of print culture (470-72).

The rivalry between the two modes fascinates Chaucer, a poet writing verse meant to be read as well as heard. To this poet's ears the oral can be ephemeral, mutable, unreliable, and insubstantial. Sometimes oral tradition proves immaterial in both senses of the word and therefore fungible. It may deserve neither the credence nor the respect nor the fame it itself conveys. Eventually the unwarranted power of oral tradition prompts Chaucer to parody its poetics. For Geoffrey Chaucer, the pen proves mightier than the voice.

More laureate than aureate in the last analysis, Chaucer's role is not without anxiety. Nor might his poetic backlash be unexpected. Hazelton (1960) points out that parody comes about during periods of artistic transition such as that found at the waning of the Middle Ages. Parody can be a response to a changing social reality that is no longer adequately

reflected by the existing mimetic representations. When "art can no longer be pious to either the journey or the pity in the old forms, and has not yet found the means to settle on new forms," then parody tempts the artist (R. P. Blackmur, quoted by Hazelton 1960:380). At such historical junctures, parody offers a tool for both deconstruction and construction, criticism and creativity.[17] Medieval parody—double-edged in the *House of Fame*—functions much as one critic claims postmodern parody functions: challenging through irony the authority of cultural continuity while acknowledging that continuity through an awareness of its need to adapt to changing formal demands (Hutcheon 1989:107). In his fight to establish new forms in English poetry, Chaucer voices his culture's inchoate ambivalence about the basis of its literary tradition. By doing so, he secures the autonomy of English poetry.

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[17] Hutcheon 1989:98; cf. Hutcheon 1985:8. While Hutcheon examines parody primarily as a defining feature of postmodernism and explores its political and aesthetic implications within postmodern art forms, her account sheds light on Chaucerian parody. Jordan 1983 already identifies parodic technique among shared medieval and postmodern literary practices.

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