

CHAUCER AS PERFORMER: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN THE DREAM VISIONS

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ABSTRACT

In the present article, I propose that Chaucer composed *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls* for his own real performance, most likely for evening entertainment, but that he clearly also had a life of the poems beyond one or more social gatherings in mind. I want to support this claim mainly on textual rather than contextual evidence. The main part of this article is thus an examination of the linguistic, communicative and narrative markers of performativity in Chaucer's three dream visions. *The Legend of Good Women* is largely excluded, since only the Prologue is a dream vision, and since Quinn has already covered this from a similar perspective. Finally, an overall assessment of Chaucer's narrative strategy in these poems as compared to his later poetic career is attempted.

KEYWORDS: Chaucer, dream visions, oral culture, narrative strategies.

RESUMEN

En el presente artículo propongo que Chaucer compuso *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* y *The Parliament of Fowls* para representarlos él mismo, posiblemente en el entorno del entretenimiento nocturno, si bien está claro que también tenía en mente que sus poemas tenían vigencia más allá de estos encuentros sociales. La mayor parte del artículo consiste en el examen de los marcadores de representación oral lingüísticos, comunicativos y narrativos en estas tres visiones de Chaucer. Se excluye *The Legend of Good Women* ya que sólo su Prólogo supone una visión onírica y porque ya Quinn ha cubierto desde una perspectiva similar esta pieza. Finalmente, una evaluación conjunta de la estrategia narrativa chauceriana de estos poemas se compara con la de la producción poética tardía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Chaucer, visiones oníricas, cultura oral, estrategias narrativas.

INTRODUCTION

In his *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, Derek Pearsall draws a picture of Chaucer's poetic career taking a step forward between the *Parliament of Fowls* around 1380 and *Troilus and Criseyde* in the mid 1380s, when the poet was obviously experiencing the taste of success and had become more self-conscious about his art (Pearsall

1992, ch. 5). Significantly for my perspective in this article, Pearsall also sees this shifting phase as a movement away from poetry written to be performed in the role of “poet of the court” towards a new kind of poetic communication with direct address to the private reader, fully developed in *The Canterbury Tales*, where, in Pearsall’s phrase, “the author as performer was laughingly self-erased” (Pearsall 1992, 190). Pearsall’s view that *The Parliament of Fowls* depends on rapport with a listening audience finds support in the work of other critics, such as Derek Brewer (1960), Dieter Mehl (1973), Alistair Minnis (1995) and perhaps first of all Paul Strohm, who has contributed significantly to the audience question since *Social Chaucer* appeared in 1989. I’ve been inspired also by William Quinn’s *Chaucer’s “Rehersynges”* from 1994, in which he argues that *The Legend of Good Women* was written for Chaucer’s own performance as part of a festive gathering. (Quinn 1994, 4 and 11).

In two previous articles (Klitgård 1998 and 2000) I have already been concerned with establishing a framework for understanding voicing mechanisms and narrative communication strategies in the dream poetry. The reader is referred to both, but a brief outline of my main argument will serve as an introduction to the focus of investigation, as I consider the three dream poems with a more narrow focus on the markers of performance strategies.

In “Chaucer’s Narrative Voice in *The House of Fame*” I was concerned to show that Chaucer, although “writing in a highly literate cultural code of poetry... manages to do so in a language, style and rhetoric which bear distinct marks of his anchoring in an oral literary culture...” and I gave examples of “bookish wit combined with performance-oriented voicing,” often humorous (Klitgård 1998, 260-1). Further, I characterized the poet’s voice as simplistic and playful, but at the same time with a characteristic seriousness of intent. The self-consciousness of the poet, as indicated by his management of such rhetorical devices as *occupatio*, *diminutio* and *abbrevatio*, shows Chaucer seriously aware of his own role as a poet in appropriating the text of other poets (263-4, Edwards 64). Besides the text-internal evidence I considered briefly the circumstances surrounding Chaucer’s writing and performance of *The House of Fame*, suggesting that, like Froissart, Chaucer might well have written this and other poems for his own performance in instalments on successive evenings, which could also explain why the poem is unfinished, *i.e.* because some disturbance at court prevented Chaucer from taking it out from his desk again to write the last instalment (264-5). Let me now add that the idea of composition and performance in instalments has since generally been favourably received by scholars who I have had response from, but of course it will be impossible to prove. In this article I shall expand the argument for the likelihood of composition for performance, but also offer some further comments on composition in instalments.

In “Dreme he barefot, dreme he shod’. Chaucer as a Performer of Dream Visions” the performativity of the three poems also treated here was considered further, with a glance at the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*. In that article I took a closer look at what I see as Chaucer’s *familiarizing* strategies in importing classical as well as French and Italian source material for an English audience. Inspired by A.C. Spearing’s idea about “The Illusion of Allusion” in *Troilus and Criseyde*,



and agreeing that the term “appropriation” better than the term “allusion” covers Chaucer’s practice (1990), I argued that “Chaucer’s strategy in the dream poems was first of all to translate in the medieval sense of the word, *i.e.* in Chaucer’s case to rewrite stories in the English language with a gusto and sweep of international rhetoric.” (Klitgård 2000, 508). Briefly analysing conversational gambits, audience-directed self-irony and humour, I considered the question “how much was *private* in the sense of private to the poet alone or to his courtly circle, or *public* in the sense that Chaucer had his wider reputation as a poet of his time in mind at all as he set out to compose a number of evening entertainments?” (511). The answer to that question was not taken beyond its rhetorical implications in the conclusion to the article, which was (in part) that “All four dream poems indeed lend themselves well to oral performance” (511). Here I shall attempt to answer it more specifically, but before that is possible a more thorough investigation of *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame* and *The Parliament of Fowls* has to be undertaken. Performativity is still the key word, but the perspective is now more narrowly on linguistic and narrative markers in the text itself.

1. THE BOOK OF THE DUCHESS

The general narrative stance in Chaucer’s first major poem is determined by its occasion, the death of John of Gaunt’s wife Blanche on 12 September 1368, and the poem is possibly as the Fairfax manuscript suggests commissioned directly by Gaunt. In the genre of elegy there are strict limits for poking fun or undermining the sincere mood required. Even so it has often been noted in criticism that the narrator in *The Book of the Duchess* is “obtuse,” because it takes him so long to interpret the signals of the black knight and understand the occasion for his grief.¹ This obtuseness, on the other hand, may also be interpreted as a deliberate and conventional narrative strategy. The dream vision as such provides a distancing filter where the dreamer is excused for not quite grasping the marvels he is exposed to, and compared to Chaucer’s main inspiration at this point of his writing career, the French love poets and in particular Machaut, the narratorial attitude is not essentially different. Except of course for the fact that the poem is transferred into an English context and shaped so as to fit its purpose of comfort in mourning. This is what makes it possible to detect an early version of that familiar English voice Chaucer uses to take his readers, and as I hope to show listeners, by the hand.

The language of the poem’s opening (1-61) strikes the melancholic note appropriate for its subject matter, both in its lyrical form and in its dominant idioms: “defaute of slep” (5 and 25), “nothyng leef nor looth” (8), “felynge in nothyng”

¹ For a survey of criticism see MINNIS (1995, 73-160) and the introduction and notes by Colin Wilcockson in Benson’s edition of Chaucer’s works (1987). All quotations from Chaucer in this article are taken from this edition.



(11), “sorrowful ymagynacioun” (15), “in sorwe” (21), “melancolye” (24), “hevynesse” (26), “lost al lustyhede” (27), “a sicknesse” (36). Conventional elegiac language, but it should be noted that it is the first person speaker, the dreamer, who establishes an image of his mood here, setting the tone for the main story in the dream, which only follows after the side story of Seys and Alcyone. In other words there is a foregrounding of narratorial self-consciousness and a delay in the main plot. This gives the poet an opportunity to communicate with his audience, first of all by displaying his poetic skills and establishing an elegant version of a conventional genre framework, but also by drawing attention to the role of the story-teller.

Clearly there is some narratorial play with the tradition of the miserable courtly lover, suffering for eight years and wanting the only release possible, procured by the unattainable beloved (30-40). In a performance perspective this would be part of the genre game, where the speaker would have to evoke the fiction of being a forsaken servant of love, but it is also possible to detect a less fictive and less conventional narrative stance in this part of the poem, even to the extent that some critics have seen allusions to Chaucer’s private life. Whether Chaucer in his own life preferred reading to chess or backgammon (44-51) is perhaps less interesting than his claiming so as part of the fiction. It *could* be a joke from the performing poet directed at a court audience familiar with his habits (cp. the image of “Geffrey” the dry bookworm in *The House of Fame*, 652-60, see Klitgård 1998, 261), but whether or not that is the case, it is the mark of a narratorial stance quite consistent in Chaucer’s poetry that reading can be used to “fare the bet” (*The Parliament of Fowls*, 698-9), and that preference should be given to books. The performing poet is also implicitly recommending reading to his audience as a cure for sleeplessness, before moving on to demonstrate how well it works, *i.e.* when he reports how quickly he fell asleep after reading Ovid’s story of Seys and Alcyone (270-5).

Other possible performance markers in the introductory part of the poem include the audience address “And wel ye woot” (16) and the more indirect “But men myght axe me” (30), and perhaps also the formulaic phrases “by my trouthe” (6) and “but trewly, as I gesse” (35). Yet these examples should clearly also be recognized as part of the common stock of idiom in the oral formulaic romance tradition that Chaucer, as well as the French courtly poets that inspired him, was still influenced by. Chaucer, then, is not exactly creating original poetry in such line-fillers, which tend to disappear from his poetry later on, but he is of course using them, as in the English romance tradition, to signal to the audience that communication is taking place not only with them but also with various sources of authority and knowledge. This is partly what I have referred to above as taking the audience by the hand.²

² MINNIS (1995, 88-9) also recognizes the influence of medieval vernacular poetry, which he sees as “generally designed for oral performance, or at least by strategies which had developed to enhance oral delivery.” He adds that “We are dealing with ‘performance texts’ *par excellence*, works which require room to create their effects, long periods to build up their descriptions, since the writer cannot rely on his public reading and rereading a passage until all its significance is grasped...”

The story of Seys and Alcyone (62-299) is rendered in a fairly straightforward and rhetorically simple manner, even at points laconically, as in the dramatic clue, “For certes, swete, I am but ded” (204). Dialogue and brief summary of action dominate this short poetic narrative. However, Chaucer’s narrative voice does draw attention to itself in short passages, first as “I, that made this book” (96), then as an “I” that has told the audience something already, and that may not dwell longer on certain matters (96-100 and 215-18). Partly rhetorical *occupatio*, but also a marker of narratorial presence and concern for the story. Chaucer shares with his audience the fundamental premise that this is of course Ovid’s well-known story, but by such narratorial control signals he reminds the audience that the poet is not only translating it, he is literally reading and commenting on it, and he is going over its points with his own readers and listeners. This becomes especially clear when he makes what amounts to an evaluation of the story (231-269), including an extensive treatment of the subject of sleeping, which is linked up with the first part of the poem. Surely the remarks about the poet-performer not having heard about Morpheus before (231-7) are meant jokingly. Chaucer seems to be entertaining his audience with pleas of ignorance and does his best to negotiate with his audience the *Leerstellen* (blank spaces) of the story they have just been through together.³ Then suddenly, not to make too fine a point of it, he reports that he fell asleep and after making a few learned parallels to the dream of Joseph and Macrobius, respectively, the dream vision proper can begin.

From the point of view of this article, the main part of the poem with the dream vision (291-1323) is not quite as interesting as what we have considered so far, mainly because Chaucer’s poetic performance here is so reminiscent of a poem he had himself translated in part, and which he acknowledges directly as a main source of inspiration (334), namely *The Romance of the Rose*. Not that this main passage is not poetically satisfactory, indeed it contains many elegant turns, besides bearing the marks of skilful composition, but compared to the poetic and narrative control shown in Chaucer’s later poetry, there is little to make it differ from Machaut and the tradition and convention that goes back to Guillaume de Lorris’ and Jean de Meun’s prototypical poem. I shall consequently restrict myself to a few points before moving on to the ending.

The commenting narrator largely disappears after the meeting with the black knight (445), although occasionally we are invited to share the first person speaker’s pity and sorrow (e.g. 710-13). The main reason for the scarcity of comment is that technically speaking the narrator is now a dreamer within the *visio*, rather than the controlling voice outside in the frame. Consequently he becomes a character-narrator, a persona, whose main function is to be the communicative sparring-partner of the knight in mourning. This is the role Chaucer lets him play with quite some obtuseness.

³ “Leerstellen” is a term coined by Wolfgang Iser to signify the open points for interpretation that any story has from a reception perspective. See *Der Implizite Leser*.

This persona cannot, however, be completely separated from the performing poet Chaucer, and indeed it seems that Chaucer is occasionally playing his trick of ignorance and incompetence through the dreamer-persona's voice, as when he lets him say "Me lakketh both Englyssh and wit" (897). We simply cannot, as in modern novels, distinguish between a persona and the author pulling the strings behind him, rather we have to recognise that Chaucer and his contemporaries see no problem in establishing a distinct persona-voice, then undermining the authority not only of that voice but also of the controlling author behind it by allowing complete identification at the sender end of the literary communication.⁴

At the end of the poem, when the dreamer wakes up, Chaucer inserts a reminder of the book of Seys and Alcyone (1327) to underline its significance for the black knight's consolation. Then follows:

Thoghte I, "Thys ys so queynt a sweven
That I wol, be processe of tyme,
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme
As I kan best, and that anoon."
This was my sweven; now hit is doon. (1330-4)

The poem thus ends with a brief reflection on the strangeness of the dream, inviting the audience to ponder further on it, which is a gentle appeal to the goodwill of that audience, as the elegiac point of it has already been made rather clear. Furthermore, the rather abrupt last line, "now hit is doon," draws attention to the process of writing, or more specifically "to put... in ryme," and thus Chaucer makes sure to impress the mark of his poetic effort on his listeners. The performing poet, it seems, leaves the floor with a short flourish and perhaps a promise of more to follow.

2. THE HOUSE OF FAME

The first book of *The House of Fame* also contains reference to the act of writing down poetry, as in lines 381-382, "And nere hyt to long to endyte, / Be God, I wolde hyt here write." This *occupatio* concerns the performing poet's excuse for not being able to reproduce *in extensio* Virgil and Ovid, who along with Dante make up the main source and genre inspirations. Chaucer, unlike Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, cannot take Virgil or Beatrice by the hand and be led through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, an Eagle will have to suffice, yet he can accommodate the spirit of his grand predecessors in his own dream vision exploration of fame. And

⁴ In *Chaucer's Narrative Voice in "The Knight's Tale"* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 1995, ch. 1-2), I discuss this point further. See also MINNIS 1984, LAWTON, and CHATMAN.

he can make sure, as in the act of referring to his poetic imitation in the example, that his audience will be able to acknowledge the influence of the great poets.

Markers of performativity in Book I, however, are not typically signalled through references to the act of writing, but rather through references to oral communication and a repeated and extensive use of the first person singular pronoun to indicate the presence of the poet-performer. Thus in the proem (1-65) and the invocation (66-110) “I,” “me” or “my” are used 24 times, which is remarkable given the fact that the dream has not started yet, meaning the “I saugh”-formula of the visio is not included in the count. Closer inspection of some of the occurrences of first person markers shows that they are used in various functions. First as so-called disclaimers, half-jokingly and modestly stating that “others know more about oracles and phantoms than I” (12-16) and “But why the cause is, nocht wot I” (52). Then to situate the poet in relation to the dream on December 10th (59-65), and to perform the invocation to the god of sleep (66 ff.). And finally to offer a short prayer before setting out (97 ff.), and to ask the audience to pay attention, “Now herkneth, as I have yow seyed (109). Common to all examples is the self-conscious presence of a speaking and controlling poetic voice communicating directly to, and with, a listening audience as summed up in the last line of the proem, “I wol you tellen everydel” (65), a statement varied only slightly in line 150, “As I shal yow telle echon.” Examples of this type of direct audience communication are of course frequent in popular romance poetry, and Chaucer opens book II with a couplet that could have been taken straight out of the romance opening formula: “Now herkeneth every maner man / That Englissh understonde kan” (509-10); yet, as this kind of idiom is far from dominant in the poem as such, it is hardly more than Chaucer borrowing from the oral-formulaic tradition he knew, using it to uphold contact with his audience. In other words Chaucer here conveniently uses popular idiom to frame an otherwise rather bookish and intellectually somewhat demanding poetry performance.

The liveliness of the audience-directed poetic *monologue* in book I and the proem to book II is replaced largely by a no less entertaining *dialogue* in the main part of book II, the dream. The conversation that the dreamer “Geffrey” (729) has with the eagle is characterized by the idiom of a register which we may well imagine represents face-to-face communication of the kind encountered in the streets of late 14th century London, as in the following quick exchanges:

Quod he. “Noo, helpe me God so wys,”
Quod I. “Noo? why?” quod he.” For hyt
Were impossible, to my wit,
Though that Fame had alle the pies
In al a realme, and alle the spies,
How that yet ye shulde here al this,
Or they espie hyt.” “O yis, yis!” (700-06)

Here, among many other nuances of meaning evoked in the poem, Fame refers to gossip, with its magpies and spies in the streets, and it is only appropriate that the tone then becomes somewhat gossipy or at least jocular and eager (“yis,



ylis!") Elsewhere there is similar rapid exchange of points of view, such as lines 887-8, "How farest thou?" quod he to me. / "Wel," quod I. "Now see," quod he," where only the repeated *inquit* "quod" marks that it is reported speech rather than dramatic dialogue. Often in the poem we are of course reminded of the fantastical nature of the dream and the grandness of the golden eagle, but much of the book comes alive for an audience used to having conversations of a similar kind, where meaning and significance is negotiated through interactive dialogue.

Clearly the eagle is let to have the upper hand in the dialogue, that of the instructor, but that only allows Chaucer to assume as "Geffrey" one of his favourite positions as the rather naïve interlocutor who wants to know more, but is reminded of his inferiority in gaining new knowledge. This also leads to self-directed satire, as when the image of the customs controller Chaucer sitting alone at nights with books instead of learning news from the neighbours is drawn up (641-660), or when "Geffrey," *alias* Chaucer, is said to be empty-headed ("Although that in thy hed ful lyte is," 621). The eagle allows that Geffrey will "make bookys, songes dytees, in ryme or elles in cadence" (622-3), again a reference to the real-life Chaucer, but then adds "as thou best canst" to suggest the dubious nature of the effort. The passage is of a kind similar to the passage in the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women* where Queen Alceste speaks of Chaucer's poetic merits (G 318-431), e.g. "Therefore he wrot the Rose and ek Crisseyde/Of innocence, and nyste what he seyde (344-5). Evidently Chaucer in his early poetry is fond of playing the fool, while at the same time allowing himself to point to his actual capability by drawing up a list of his *ouures*.

Book III turns again from dialogue to mainly monologue, as the poet records his *visio* by listing first the "famous folk" (1338) he comes across in the great hall of Fame, then (1520-1867) a diversity of "companyes" seeking fame, finally to be led back to the eagle by one that "goodly to me spak" (1870). From a performativity perspective the long lists and the elaborate descriptions, although decidedly elegant, may well have been less entertaining for a listening audience than the lively first two books, especially as the performing poet takes one step back to let his poetic presentation flow on with little narratorial intervention. Thus the joking and audience-communicating poetic voice largely disappears after the invocation to Apollo (1091-1109). The invocation humourously invokes the modesty topos:

Here art poetical be shewed,
But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,
Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,
Though some vers fayle in a syllable; (1095-8)

Yet it seems that after this, the poet is more interested in the material itself than in its poetic communication. Conventional framing devices like *occupatio* abound, e.g. "But it were al to longe to rede / The names, and therefore I pace" (1354-5) and "Of which I stynte a while now, / Other thing to tellen yow" (1417-8). These simple transition markers function well as elements in the narrative control, but the self-conscious position of the dreamer is less conspicuous in book III,

except after line 1868 where he again becomes an active character in his own story and enters a new dialogue, not only text-internally, but also by implication with the audience. As we move towards the close of the poem as we have it, it even becomes dramatic in the sense of full of action, with people running to learn more news (2145-54), but this dramatic turn, as well as the mysterious man of great authority in the poem's last line, comes rather late to wake up an audience presumably rather lulled to sleep after this extensive presentation of the House of Fame itself. I am suggesting that book III, as opposed to the first two books, simply does not work very well for a listening audience, and if we are to understand that the book divisions represent the instalments that the poem was composed and performed in, as I've suggested (Klitgård 1998), then it may be added as another simple explanation for the poem's unfinished state that Chaucer realized it was too long and not ideally composed with respect to audience response, thus leaving it in his desk for later revision—which for some unknown reason was never undertaken.⁵

Finally, I would like to emphasize that whereas book III may be less than perfect in audience communication, it has some obvious poetic qualities, besides a wonderfully imagined presentation of the nature of Fame. For instance the comment on famous writers (1460-96) shows Chaucer well aware of the greatness of those he himself admires, but at the same time understanding the reverse side of fame. Chaucer is still struggling with his material as well as his poetry, still learning the art, or as his next dream vision has it, "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne" (*The Parliament of Fowls* 1).

3. THE PARLIAMENT OF FOWLS

Chaucer's narrative stance in *The Parliament of Fowls* as an outsider in relation to his subject matter, as signalled in the beginning of the poem, e.g. line 8, "For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede," is similar to both the position taken in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, and is also an early version of the even further removed position of his narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde*, that of the servant of the servants of Love (*Troilus* book 1, 15). Conventional as the outsider position may be in medieval love poetry, Chaucer uses it actively and consistently to create distancing effects, and as we have seen already to display self-consciousness as a poet, and to meta-communicate with his audience. The beginning of the *Parliament* is one of the most striking examples of this. Chaucer, again echoing the image of himself as a bookworm in *The House of Fame* (652-60), invokes the fiction that since he has no practical experience and knowledge in love, he will have to turn to his books. He also makes sure that he has his audience with him by making a

⁵ For further discussion of the unfinished ending see also Larry D. BENSON 1986.



meta-communicative statement in the form of a rhetorical question: “But wherfore that I speke al this?” (17) Having explained this and illustrated it with a proverb (22-3), he then cuts himself short and gets to the point: “But now to purpos as of this matere” (26).

Compared to especially book III of *The House of Fame*, the *Parliament* is generally written with more economy of style, perhaps also occasioned by the tighter metrical form of the *rime royal*. Rhetorically this is signalled by quick transitions such as the example just quoted and a similar remark in line 372, “But to the poynt.” Even the business of reading a book and then falling asleep to be able to have a dream vision is over and done with very quickly, although we are afforded a short glimpse into the troubled mind of the poet:

The day gan faylen, and the derke nyght,
That reveeth bestes from here besynesse,
Berafte me my bok for lak of lyght,
And to my bed I gan me for to dresse,
Fulfyld of thought and busy hevynesse;
For bothe I hadde thyng which I nolde,
And ek I ne hadde that thyng that I wolde (85-91)

Chaucer’s audience are thus invited to speculate with the poet about what it is he has and does not want, and what he does not have but wants. More significantly than suggesting what that might be, the passage draws attention to the act of pondering on deep matters, such as the ensuing dream of Scipio. The melancholy mood becomes an eloquent introduction to the representation of that dream, but at the same time the performing poet is concerned with a display of a meta-fictional device, that of showing an image of himself going to bed at night, still struggling with the difficult task of transforming knowledge learned from old books into new poetry. The audience is reminded of this image of the poet in a process of reading and thought at the very end of the poem, when the dreamer wakes up, again rendered in a brief and rather abrupt passage:

I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
To reede upon, and yit I rede alway.
I hope, ywis, to rede so som day
That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare. (695-99)

It may be that *The House of Fame* is the most “bookish” of all of Chaucer’s poems (cf. Boitani in Boitani and Mann 1986, 43), but *The Parliament of Fowls* certainly also celebrates books and reading by foregrounding this image of the poet at work. And the question is once again whether we are not to understand the passages quoted as maintaining, but at the same time also breaking down the fictional contract conventionally inherent in the dream vision, so that the “I” becomes also the real Chaucer performing for an audience familiar with his concern with books, reading and thought? Whether a poet can in fact speak in his own real



voice in a work of fiction may be ruled out by modern literary theory, but then again Chaucer and his contemporaries did not know this ruling.

Chaucer performing with clear reference to his real self is of course not the only game he plays. Just as often the poet stages an image of himself which is just show or pretence, as when once again he enters the typical dream vision speaker situation of being led by a guide, this time Affrican. As with the eagle in *The House of Fame*, Chaucer assumes the position of an open-minded, but rather naive learner, who is dependent on his guide. So much so that Affrican is allowed the remark “although that thow be dul” (162), suggesting that the dreamer and by implication the real Chaucer, who has put on this show, is not exactly sharp-witted. Surely much amusement in the audience will have resulted from this attitude.

The tone of the narrative voice in *The Parliament of Fowls* is generally good-humoured and suited for the pleasant occasion of St. Valentine’s Day. The audience is entertained with many elegant poetic descriptions, including beautiful gardens and allegorical figures like Delyt and Gentillesse (224) besides gods and goddesses of love such as Cupid, Priapus and Venus, all of which sets the atmosphere for the presentation of the love-birds. After an extensive listing of birds, the poet finds that enough is enough (“What shulde I seyn?” 365), and gets to the main point, the debate.

The debate in the bird parliament represents a drama of voices, including the cacophony of the lower birds, which undoubtedly Chaucer will have taken special pleasure in performing:

The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also
So cryede, “Kek, kek! kokkow! quek quek!” hye.
That thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho.
The goos seyde, “Al this nys not worth a flye!
But I can shape herof a remedie,
And I wol seye my verdit fayre and swythe
For water-foul, whoso be wroth or blythe!” (498-504)

The noise through the ears of the poet is transmitted straight on to the audience in what appears to be a parody of the voices from the commons. The allusions to the actual parliamentary and general political debates of Chaucer’s day are clear here as well as in the utterances of the nobler birds. Familiar registers of human language are skilfully displayed, from the cackling sounds in the quotation here to the highflown rhetoric of the noble speakers. From an entertainment perspective *The Parliament of Fowls* is thus clearly the most succesful of the three poems considered here.

4. PERFORMATIVITY: SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is a qualified guess that *The Parliament of Fowls* was performed more than once, most likely also by Chaucer himself. The occasion of St. Valentine’s Day, probably not on February the 14th, but on the 2nd of May (Kelly 1986), would have allowed Chaucer to celebrate spring with this poetic performance once a year



or more, and the fact that some manuscripts include the roundel at the end, and others do not, suggest the idea that some years saw musical accompaniment and others did not. Allowing that Benson may be right in his revival of the old theory that the poem also refers implicitly to the marriage negotiations that eventually led to the marriage treaty between Richard and Anne concluded on that day, the 2nd of May 1381 (Benson 1982), I share the skepticism expressed by Minnis regarding the possible significance of such a reference, even though it would fit in nicely. Minnis sees the *Parliament* as “a performance text, a work meant to open rather than close debate” (1995, 312), and I agree that reading the poem chiefly as contemporary allegory reduces its meaning potential.

My investigation of performativity in all of the three poems allows for the possibility that they may all have been conceived as occasional in the sense of written for a specific first performance, but that Chaucer also had in mind the possibility that not only would the poems survive in written form, but also as manuscripts to be pulled out of the desk for later performances, both for new and old audiences. *The Book of the Duchess* is the most likely candidate for a one-off performance, being so clearly connected with one specific occasion, the death of Blanche, but even as a young man it seems that Chaucer is aware of his potential, because this is more than mere conventional elegy, a highly intense poetic performance that could be repeated as well as studied in manuscript form. *The House of Fame* is more difficult to determine, but I conclude on the text-internal evidence discussed that if the poem was intended for readings in instalments, as I’ve also suggested, then books one and two would work better with an audience than the unfinished book III, in which Chaucer might simply have lost interest, as he did with *The Legend of Good Women* with its rather too narrowly conceived framework. *The Parliament of Fowls*, in conclusion, becomes Chaucer’s most successful and thus repeatable occasional poetic performance before he turns to the next step in his career, writing more for readers than listeners.⁶ *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* are both works that demonstrate Chaucer’s new venture as an assured and self-confident poet, who is no longer so focused on his immediate and presumably chiefly local court audience.⁷ Having made his mark and earned his reputation he can now allow himself, while still maintaining his role as court poet and performer, to kiss the footsteps of the great poets and produce the two main works that will ensure his lasting genius.

⁶ William A. QUINN is of a similar opinion, i.e. that “the *Parlement*... [is] apparently Chaucer’s first major success as a court poet.” In “Chaucer’s Presence as Pre-text” (forthcoming article kindly shown to me by Professor Quinn), Quinn carefully examines the manuscripts of the poem from a performativity point of view and argues that what we have is “a speaking Chaucer.”

⁷ In a paper entitled “*The Canterbury Tales* and Medieval London Club Culture” given at the London Chaucer conference on Chaucer: Cities, Courts, and Provinces, April 2002, Derek Pearsall developed some of the ideas referred to at the beginning of this article, and suggested that Chaucer’s early audience was more mixed than that of *The Canterbury Tales*, which abound with in-jokes directed at a chiefly male audience, presumably Chaucer’s first audience for readings of the tales.

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