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“Be Careful What You Wish For: Geoffrey Chaucer’s Object of Desire”

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If there is one concept that we might consider central to medieval poetry, it is desire; whether it is celestial bliss for theologians, love for courtly love poets or fame for many aspiring artists. In this lecture, I propose to focus on England’s most famous courtly love poet, namely Geoffrey Chaucer. But it is not love that will interest me today, but a different object.

If trying to get is indeed, as Elizabeth Anscombe remarked, the primitive sign of wanting, then Chaucer was, despite his use of self-mockery and his modesty, as guilty as anyone of looking for his fifteen minutes of fame. He was no Petrarch, who turned self-promotion into an art, but we can still find in Chaucer’s life and poetry the signs of a wish to leave the shadows of Aldgate, where he worked for so many years as a controller of customs, and to be heard. Yet, Chaucer was also profoundly critical of the desirability of fame. I will not be psychoanalyzing a poet who has been dead for 600 years, but one may wonder if the ambiguity of his desire provided the poet with a motive for action or if the subsequent realization of his desire was merely an accident that would have struck Chaucer as deeply illusory. For if desire was indeed at the heart of medieval poetry, it is, in fact, its unattainability that made it philosophically relevant and artistically inspiring.

The poem that most clearly illustrates Chaucer’s most intense reaction to the object of his desire is *The House of Fame*, which he composed sometime after his return from Florence in 1373. It is during his time in Italy that Chaucer discovered Dante’s poetry, and most notably the *Divine Comedy*, but as important as this particular poem might have been for Chaucer and the history of English literature, one cannot help but notice that both poets had a completely different understanding and vision of the world. More importantly, they apparently did not share the same approach to fame-seeking. Dante had indeed greatly developed and written his own legend with the *Comedy*, while Chaucer seemed to be profoundly critical of this need of recognition.

The House of Fame invites us to follow a narrator unsurprisingly named Geoffrey within a dream vision: the poet's persona wakes up in the temple of Venus and finds himself face to face with paintings illustrating various scenes from the *Eneas*. He goes out of the temple, realizes he is lost and is then snatched by an eagle that takes him to the House of Fame, where the poet will strongly criticize the vanity of other artists and underline the very limits of the human mind and its implication in the creative process. The eagle is undoubtedly the most significant motif borrowed by Chaucer to Dante, who meets this golden-feathered eagle in the ninth canto of the *Purgatorio*. Yet, although the eagle is in appearance quite similar in both poems, it becomes quite clear here as soon as it starts talking that Chaucer had no intention of following Dante any further. The flight of the eagle had a deep theological and philosophical meaning in the *Comedy* for it helped the narrator get physically and spiritually closer to God and Heaven. But in *Fame*, it has a radically different role since it will systematically be used by Chaucer to present an ironic counterpart to Dante's attitude. Faced with elevation, Chaucer chooses a lowering process, an artistic principle at the very heart of grotesque realism and of carnivalesque laughter. When the eagle takes off with Geoffrey in its claws, for instance, it gently reminds the narrator how fat he actually is: "Seynte Marye, / Thou art noyous for to carye!" (II. l. 572-574). And whereas Dante wondered if he was worthy to follow Virgil, noting that he is neither Eneas, nor Saint Paul (*Inf.* II, l. 32), Geoffrey asks himself:

Wher Joves wol me stellyfye,
Or what thing may this sygnifye?
I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye
(II. l. 586-588)

The eagle obviously has its own opinion of the question and answers "Thow demest of thyself amys" (II. l. 596). Jupiter has no intention whatsoever of turning poor Geoffrey into a star. As we can see, Chaucer adopts an openly ironic attitude and does not hesitate to mock Dante. He does not share the Tuscan's interest for fame and even seems to show true contempt for such a need for attention.

When Geoffrey finally arrives on the steep pick upon which is built the house of Fame, he notices that the House's foundations are made out of ice. Describing the frailty of those foundations, Geoffrey remarks that the builder has very little reasons to boast (III. l. 1128-1135). Worst of all, the ice, covered with the name of famous people is starting to melt, thus erasing the inscriptions that cover its surface. When Geoffrey finally moves closer to the

House, his vision illustrates the very state of literature during the XIVth century. Poetry had indeed reached a key moment in its development, half-way between oral and written transmission. Chaucer was more than anyone else conscious of this duality and expresses it in his description of the house of Fame. The exterior is thus dedicated to oral culture: not only does Geoffrey see Orpheus, Orion and other legendary harpists playing music, along with musicians of lesser rank, but he also meets magicians, illusionists, and soothsayers (III. l. 1201-1281). Besides, even though the inside of the temple is dedicated to written literature, Chaucer keeps reminding us that the two forms of expression are complementary. Geoffrey hears, for example, the poets who immortalized the Trojan War argue about the *Iliad*, with some spirits defending Homer, while Trojan supporters accuse him of having favored the Greeks (III. l. 1477-1480). Despite their glory and fame, these artists are condemned, as souls wandering in the limbos, to pass the eternity in conflict with one another. As a result, when a spirit asks Geoffrey what is his desire, he answers that he has not entered the house looking for Fame, on the contrary, he had rather “[t]hat no wight have my name in honde” (l.1877) after his death. He is aware of his own value and does not need to be admired. He seems thus far to have Dante’s pretension and makes sure that we know it. Whereas Dante had prayed Apollo to be worthy of his laurels (*Par.* I, l. 13-18), Geoffrey explains – not without self-mockery – that he would be happy to just kiss Apollo’s tree (III. l. 1091-1108). He then guides us out of the House of Fame and straight to the House of Rumor, which is described by the narrator as a whirling wicker cage where gossip is filtered. The air going through this maze produces a whistling reminding Geoffrey of the sound of a stone being launched by a catapult (l. 1916-1955).

In the end, the news, or “tydings” going from the House of Rumor to the House of Fame are merely verbal creations. The eagle had explained Geoffrey that sound “ys noight but eyr ybroken” (II. l. 765): the words uttered in our world are, in other words, compressed air reaching the Houses of Rumor and Fame and there taking a physical shape. But Chaucer’s description of sound as “broken” air, that is to say of form of flatulence, gives us once more a pretty good idea of what he thinks about fame. He does not hide his aversion for other artists’ fame-seeking and tries to represent himself as a discreet man, writing merely for his own pleasure.

But although part of this representation of Chaucer is probably true, we must ask ourselves what does that tell us about the artist? Did Chaucer really despise fame so much in his early career, or should we perceive this mockery as a sign of envy? If we look at the archives, we

notice that the poet was a relatively minor figure in his own time. Amongst the 493 official documents gathered in the *Chaucer Life-Records*, none mention his career as a poet and it seems that his most powerful supporters at the court were none other than his wife Philippa, one the Queen's *domicella*, and his sister-in-law, Katherine, mistress and future wife of John of Gant. Chaucer was, in other words, evolving on the fringes of the court. His artistic career evolved in the shadow of his official missions: as a true Juno, Chaucer presented himself to the world with two faces: one secret and artistic; the other public. But this duality must have been terribly frustrating for such a talented poet. His only audience was probably a small group of friends, yet his poems surely deserved the attention of the court. *The Book of the Duchess* was, in this regard, clearly written with this aim in mind: shortly after the death of Blanche of Lancaster in 1368, Chaucer composed this dream vision – his first major composition in English – in which he symbolically attempts to comfort Blanche's husband, John of Gant. Why would Chaucer then try to attract the attention of one of the most powerful men in England, if fame was so inherently despicable to him? Was he only trying to be rewarded by the prince? If so, being paid for his poem would mean being officially recognized as a poet, and not merely as a civil servant. The fact that he remained anonymous after the composition of *Duchess* might have profoundly disappointed him. His subsequent visit to Italy, and more precisely to Florence, could, therefore, be considered as an aggravating factor. Indeed, Chaucer discovered in Florence a city-state in which artists and poets were celebrated and respected, where art was loved. One can easily imagine the shock felt by a man coming from a country that was still to make its first steps towards the Renaissance. England was in perpetual war with France and its court sadly more easily impressed by feats of arms and military exploits than by beautiful poetry. As Judith Butler then asks, “what sort of journey is desire if it leads to such an impasse? And what sort of vehicle is desire? Does it stop elsewhere before reaching its mortal destination?” (Butler, 2011, 17) Chaucer's reaction in *The House of Fame* becomes then easily understandable, for the desiring subject follows a journey made of illusions and failures, but also of occasional moments of acknowledgment perceived as a source of temporary redemption. Chaucer, however, was yet to experience such moments. Having failed so far to fulfill his desire, he had no other choice but to try to domesticate it. He had to desire to do something with desire, whether it is controlling it or silencing it, if he were to find some sort of inner harmony (Butler, 2011, 22).

A moment of temporary redemption eventually presented itself to the poet with the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde* in 1385-86, some twenty years after *The Book of the Duchess*. Despite his attempt to silence his desire for fame, Chaucer found himself in a situation that would have profoundly surprised the Geoffrey wondering in the House of Fame. When he started translating Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Chaucer probably did not anticipate that he was about to produce one of English literature's most important work. As Paul Strohm remarks,

Chaucer responds in an agitated way to an idea that appears to have just occurred to him, or that is striking him with unprecedented force: He has written a poem deserving of broad admiration, a poem that may circulate to present and future audiences in manuscript form, and thus be read without his superintending presence and beyond his personal control (2014, 209).

This sudden realization of the value of his poetical production was bound to unravel the control he had over his desire. His attitude towards the circulation of his poetry slowly began to change as he realized that to reach the audience he deserved, he had to embrace a brand new method of diffusion. Up until that moment, he only ever dealt with a small audience, which strongly limited the fulfillment of his desire but granted him control over the reception of his work. Yet, the larger diffusion of his poetry in manuscript form implied losing the control he had during public readings. Although he strongly desired recognition, he did not want his fame to be conditioned by a falsification of the real produced by a bad diffusion of the transmitted poetical information. He managed, however, in the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde* to let his 'litel bok' go and seek its own fame. If Chaucer had previously thought himself unworthy of Apollo's laurels, he now started to reflect upon his place in a literary tradition going back to the classics of the Antiquity:

But litel book, no making thou n'envye,
But subject be to alle poesye;
And kis the steppes wher as thow seest pace
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.
(V. l. 1789-1792)

He does not take the title of *auctor* but presents himself in these lines as a possible heir to those great names. He remains worried by a bad diffusion of his manuscripts (l. 1793-1798) and preys that his poetry might be understood properly and not perverted during its transmission.

Looking at Chaucer's career, we can easily define him as a Hegelian subject on a journey of desire based on experience. Chaucer evolved as he grew older and experienced failures and successes: if we put it in philosophical terms, the subject that encounters an object or experiences an external and ontologically disparate element of the world cannot be considered identical to the subject that eventually sees himself reflected in those external phenomena (Butler, 2011, 29). The subject needs, in other words, some form of auto-reflexion or he will keep on considering himself as more limited than he potentially is. Chaucer's frustration after the composition of *The Book of the Duchess* and the subsequent silencing of his desire in *The House of Fame* could thus be seen as the result of a lack of auto-reflexion. The change of perception seen in *Troilus and Criseyde* shows, on the other hand, an evolution one might consider as the result of the poet's reflexion on his relation with the world. Experience allowed him to reach a broadened conception of his poetry and of his place in the literary world. But it is important to understand that the Hegelian subject is not a fixed subject traveling from one ontological position to another; on the contrary, he embodies his own journey and *is* each position in which he finds himself. Desire is in this regard the very principle of the reflexivity of consciousness, and Chaucer's own journey through dissatisfaction shows how the Hegelian subject internalizes the world he desires and deploys himself to integrate external elements perceived as Other. The final satisfaction of desire is, to quote Butler, the "discovery of substance as subject, the experience of the world as a confirmation of the feeling the subject has about the immanence of his metaphysical position" (2011, 29). Chaucer's ontological position at the end of his career shows the progress of his journey. His ambitions and his desire were freed from any form of domestication and he managed to adapt his creation to the dramatic changes he faced in 1386, when he suddenly lost his work as controller of customs, his lodging at Aldgate, and was forced to leave London, effectively cutting him from his audience. But instead of succumbing once more to frustration and dissatisfaction, he integrated those changes and these new experiences; he internalized his new position and used it as an inspiration in the creation of his magnum opus, *The Canterbury Tales*. If he could not reach his audience, he would create one in the form of a group of pilgrims, and travel alongside them. When Hegel wrote that "self-consciousness is

desire' (§167, p.164), he underlined the importance of the reflexivity of consciousness in desire. Consciousness has to become Other, it has to become self-consciousness. It provides the Hegelian subject with a mediation allowing him to understand his own structure. The subject must become Other and be outside of himself, and this reflexive movement is necessary for the subject to know himself. Chaucer had previously used avatars in his other poems, but in *The Canterbury Tales* he appeared outside of himself inside the narrative as the Chaucer pilgrim, whose poetry is both admired and criticized by the other characters. The exotopic perception of himself as an artist, this self-consciousness of his own successes and failures as a poet led him to the end of his journey of desire, and to its mortal destination.

Chaucer's death in 1400 prevented him from witnessing the larger diffusion of his work. Though unfinished, *The Canterbury Tales* became his most famous creation, the one that would ensure his reputation. It is difficult to imagine what would have been the poet's reaction to the realization of his desire: it might have struck him as deeply illusory, as he so eloquently remarked in the poetry composed after his return from Florence. Or, he might have found some sort of peace, for when we desire, we question the metaphysical situation of human identity; the satisfaction of this desire gives us an answer to that question (Butler, 2011, 30).

Chaucer was discreetly buried in Westminster Abbey. No matter what he might have thought of the end of his journey of desire, he probably never anticipated that his grave would become the foundation of the Poet's Corner, where he would later be joined by Edmund Spenser, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Dryden, and many others. After having fought his desire, he became the founding member of his very own House of Fame, showing once more that you really should be careful what you wish for.

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