NARRATIVE PLAY: MEDIEVAL DREAM NARRATORS AND POETIC PROCESS

By

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This dissertation focuses on the performative actions of the narrators in four Middle English dream visions: *The Assembly of Ladies*, Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupide*, and William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman*. Performance theorists such as Herbert Blau, Sarah Beckwith and Kier Elam anchor the discussion of how tactical and systematic performances enable narrators to seize on binary rifts to create narrative opportunities. I draw on the scholarship of both allegory and theater in order to show how analogous work, whether signifying actors’ bodies or performed narrative gestures, engage social work. I extend the foundational work of other scholars on dream vision to show how the fluidity of the dreamscape authorizes the perspectives of the dream narrator-bricoleur -- the chief semiotician whose performed gestures drive meaning, while abrogating the responsibility of how acts of bricolage are presented in the narrative. This project explores the varying ways the narrator-bricoleur pieces together allegorical representations in the dreamscape to constitute individual and collective meaning. The larger significance of these actions is in how the narrator impacts his/her community while figuring himself/herself as a reformed signifier. I argue that this signification is occurring both within and outside of the frame of the poem. By including
the narrators’ gestures that point beyond the physical poem, these dream visions with their incomplete or irresolvable endings, garner a stronger creative thrust, which takes into account narrative as process rather than end product.
Acknowledgement and Dedication

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Introduction

This dissertation explores the genre of late medieval dream vision to argue that the self-reflective fluidity of the dreamscape can invest the dream-narrative with an unprecedented capacity for exploring narrative’s performative capacities. The dream vision narrator is foregrounded because he or she mediates, like an actor, the open-ended process of narrative construction itself, in all its fragility, authority, friction, and social power. I centralize four late medieval dream visions, *The Assembly of Ladies*, Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupid*, and the later passus of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, to explore the social and subjective range of the narrative capacities. I chose to focus on this genre because it best reflected the narrator’s prowess in occupying multiple levels of the dreamscape, which is translated as occupying multiple levels of the narrative. These texts were chosen because previous critics thus far have not fully taken into account the work of the narrator and the creative opportunities afforded by the poems’ incomplete and often irresolvable endings. The tactical performances of the narrators in these four dream visions are seemingly unrelated but by placing these narrators in conversation with each other, we see a striking resemblance in their commitment to the constitution of self and community.

The design of this project explores the idea of process as self-discovery and incorporates my theories on the semioticization of dreams and theatre. The stage of the dreamscape figures the narrator as the chief semiotic actor. The fluid space of the dream is comparable to a theatrical stage where the constant articulation and contextualization of actors and props are needed to constitute meaning for the audience. The dreamscape is
enriched by the allegorical mode which is ripe with polysemious gestures. These gestures are performative, often staging dual and dueling meanings. These meanings are confounded by the loss inherent to allegory -- a sign of a lost sign. Engaging the performative energies in the dreamscape is a good counter measure to this loss. The actor-narrator engages bricolage as a creative process that allows for reconstitutive actions beyond the often incomplete or unresolved poetic frame of the dream vision. Because meaning extends itself beyond the poetic frame, and is often written outside of, or gestured to as outside of the borders of the dream vision or poem, it is important to focus on these early medieval dream visions as process pieces.

This project centralizes process as a way of making different dream visions talk to each other which enables ongoing exploration and casts light on a wider realization of the genre than has been obvious previously. My design focuses on the malleability and processability of language and history, and the implications of access and lack thereof to authorship.

My main argument in “Dress Rehearsal: Word Play and Narrative Construction in *The Assembly of Ladies*” centers on the materiality of the body as a theatrical text. To establish how the dream vision facilitates the semioticization of peformative gestures, it is important to discuss narrative acts that are made corporeal by a narrator whose investment is in creating both a physical and a textual manifesto. *The Assembly of Ladies* is especially important because of the narrator’s position as a female, but more so because of her physical gesture of joining sleeves at the end of the narrative. While critics devalue this dream vision because there is little resolution offered, more focus must be brought to this narrative, which explicitly utilizes the form of the dream vision to make a
statement about self and social construction. This poem is a narrative about process rather than end product. It accomplishes its goal of process through the physical and psychological dismemberment of the feminized allegorical caricatures; however, the metaphoric gestures within the poem assuage the tensions created by the momentary splintering of the female bodies and voices.

This project emphasizes the importance of voice as collective. This emphasis on the separateness of voices and the necessity of a collective voice is reflective of the writing process where words stand alone, splintered, but gain traction when presented as a collection of words, phrases, sentences, and stanzas. The tensions expressed in *The Assembly* are the tensions of allegory, the semioticization of loss, constructed within a hierarchy of mimetic silence. The dream vision provides a fluid space where ideas of female performance and authorship can be examined. In *The Assembly*, bodies become a speakerly text that interrupts male vocality and subtly questions male authority.

*The Assembly* reflects the intimacy of how one constructs identity using symbols constrained by the current status quo and formulated by the loss of social power. By expanding intimacy to include a communal act of defining a self-consciousness, my analysis provides a heightened awareness of the social consequences of agency. Writing oneself is connected to how we reconstitute history and presence. The act of joining sleeves is a bold narrative gesture; the conglomeration of words presented on bodies or the page, is an act of protest. Words do act. Writing and rebellion are intrinsic to writing one’s process to *become* constituted by letters on a page, stage, or body. A dream narrator, who must wander a maze-like landscape in pursuit of *becoming*, drives that
process. The dreamscape presented by the narrator provides a feminized space of female authorship, a dress rehearsal for word play.

In the “House of Rumour,” Chaucer evaluates the implications of this word play. Reading a fifteenth century unknown dream vision, which seemingly takes few narrative risks in terms of overtly protesting or offering a resolution to the women’s complaint without understanding the motivations of Chaucer’s emphasis on “voys” and its capacity to create infinite narrative and historical perforations, is problematic. My analysis, “Voys Lesson: Whirling Words in Chaucer’s House of Rumour,” looks back at Chaucer’s hyperbolic analysis of the science of sound, by refiguring this early hyperbolic gesture to be linked with the hazards associated with the misuse of words. The Assembly takes into question the idea of authorship even though the gesture is truncated by a political process, which attempts to constrain that gesture. Much like The Assembly, the House of Fame is a poem that questions the idea of poetic access, authorship, and authority. The obstacle in reconstituting allegorical history is at the heart of Chaucer’s poem. My main argument in this chapter is that the narrator redeems narrative gestures by attempting control over language, landscape, and history. The narrator is presented as a passive voyeur, yet his engagement in the allegorical mode, what he sees and recounts, enacts agency. This chapter utilizes ideas of literary bricolage as the narrator’s counter-measure to the chaotic linguistic whirlwind presented in the House of Rumour. This idea links poets to historians, and their narrators are the primary motivating agency of reconstituting history through their engagement in the volatile whirlwind of allegory. The slipperiness of this mode and the volatility of language call into question the viability of gaining authority over text in the face of a volatile landscape. The lability of sound is related to textual
production. Yet all sound (textual transmission and dissemination) is subject to interpretation and made more vulnerable by the mode of communication. At the heart of Chaucer’s question is how does one make fiction, and in so doing, how does one author sound? In response, perhaps to Chaucer’s poem, The Assembly provides one method of authorship, where the embroidery of words becomes a corporeal gesture that attempts to reconstitute a restricted political and social landscape.

The difficulties of inhabiting restricted spaces is further examined in “Offstage Acts: Beyond the Borders of Text and Body in John Clanvowe’s Cuckoo and the Nightingale and William Langland’s The Vision of Piers Plowman.” My main argument is that Clanvowe and Langland use the allegorical fissure between sign and referent to model forms of ritual that fail at any communal transformation but nonetheless reveal the active ongoing constructions of the narrator. Clanvowe and Langland should be read as discourse revolutionaries or resignifiers. They use linguistic fissures or the unreachable past as opportunities to showcase these junctures as fertile ground to make meaning.

The idea of language as metaphysically or physically manifested is linked to the construction of rituals. Rituals are written as a construct for groups who want a certain behavior modeled. Within that modeling is the story of a past unseen. How one authors oneself must take into question how one can rearticulate their actions in the face of that which is expected as a mode of life. This chapter highlights the madeupness of social constructs -- performed gestures. Clanvowe addresses a literary trope and Langland addresses a powerful, ongoing, and historically self-transforming series of institutions bound by dominant and incredibly complex discourses. Yet both authors seize on two necessary vulnerabilities and rechannel the authoritative discourse associated with these
institutions. The analogy between the authors is based on how they offer readers an
opportunity to see citational reiteration of ideologies built on service, mutuality and inter-
relation, extended to include ideas of self-maintenance and self-construction.

The instability of poetic gestures expressed in Chaucer’s *House of Fame* is manifested as a serious example when we see a narrator in pursuit of salvation being restricted because that pursuit involves participation within a hierarchical structure born out of exclusion. *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is a story of access and individual journey. Langland shows us how difficult it is to reconstitute allegory and *form* when greedy vendors propagate authority. The poem is the story of the pilfered poet, a frightening realization of the vulgarity of misused language highlighted in Chaucer. My main argument is that Langland provides a method of reconstitution where disguise allows him to nervously question that which is constructed and coalesced by the populace. His suggestion of reclaiming the narrative mode teeters on apocalypse, but he softens those gestures by showing that *becoming* is a process built on subtle protest. He advocates for good works, which is in fact good writing.

Clanvowe and Langland prove that language can articulate the invisible through written words, as well as through the unwritten and unsaid. The narrator is integral to how these tensions are registered because he or she is the vehicle of the author’s semiotic actions. A narrator who engages and disengages must be paid close attention to, especially when he/she is constructed by authors who are cognizant that poetics extend far beyond the surface act of writing down an imagined vision – well beyond the borders of bodies and stage. Within the dreamscape, players and poets can reconstitute narrative gestures while abrogating authority over that which is called into question. That a
narrator is ever-present is made clear by the violent act of throwing a rock. This violence illustrates the utilization of force as a vehicle to reset language, and it also illustrates the prowess of narrators, as well as an author’s understanding that words are made corporeal through vivid, as well as, subtle actions.

These Middle English dream narrators capitalize on the various narrative and historical rifts highlighted in this analysis; their work and their intimate navigation of the linguistic terrain-- if even momentarily, provide narrative possibilities for both author and reader. The narrator partakes of narrative play along with author, reader, and audience. Process preempts product in the narrator’s play of becoming. Language is unstable, and ultimately although all participants are connected to one another and do create social texts, it is imperative that participants govern (through good practices) their individual narratives. Authors such as the unknown author of *The Assembly*, Clanvowe, Langland, and Chaucer, provide good first steps in reflecting the value of the interior consciousness, muddled, yet displayed within a dream announcing assemblage as reconstitution, the writing of oneself and one’s community as tactical performed emergence.
Chapter 1

Set Design: The Pseudo-Architects of Narrative Play

Abrogated for the moment that seems to complete our dreams is the distinction between fantasy and actuality, desire and the will to power. That makes nothing more crucial in the theater – an event succumbing to dream at its farthest perceptual edge – than the thing which resists it, as in the activity of perception there is, for all the pure sonorous striving, the chafing, the pebble in the murmuring surge, the friction of sight and sound.¹

The dual, and at times dueling, landscapes of waking and sleeping offer a layered approach to narrative dream visions. Both planes interact, enabling access to narrative, philosophical, linguistic, spiritual, and historical issues endemic within these larger topics: the problem of sign and referent, narrative assemblage and dismantlement, historical loss and remaking presence, physicality and absence, corporeality and transcendentalism – methods of reconstituting binary rifts. As a genre, the medieval dream vision gave authors a method to open up narrative landscape while providing systematic support (in the form of the narrator whose performative gestures provide the framework for the larger narrative). The shape of the dream vision is an early model of the conglomeration of the facets of storytelling: focalization, perspective, and contextual incorporations. When critics evaluate The Assembly of Ladies, the Floure and the Leafe, Isle of Ladies, Parliament of Thre Ages, de Lorris’ Romance of the Rose, Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy, Lydgate’s Assembly of Gods and Temple of Glas, Chaucer’s House of Fame, Book of the Duchess, Parliament of Fowls, and the Legends of Good

Women, they typically scrutinize the frame of the narrative, discussing how the dream vision enables the allegorical mode whereby each author’s story gets told. But many critics focus more on the contents of the stories and how these fit within the early tradition and how these stories continue to shape the larger formation of an English literary tradition. 2 While these discussions are essential to understanding the dream vision, they fail to fully illustrate how the genre provided a vehicle for the narrator to act as bricoleur -- one who pieces fragmented narrative across multiple landscapes to make meaning. Dream narrators were able to offer a multi-modal approach to narrative by performing varying levels of allegory. The fluidity of the dreamscape authorized the perspectives of the dream narrator and abrogated the responsibility of how acts of bricolage are figured within the narrative. Creating narrators who suffer dream visions allowed authors to delve into semiotic representation and wordsmithery, which allowed Middle English dream authors such as Chaucer, Clanvowe, Langland, and the anonymous author of the Assembly of Ladies, to reimagine the genre as a performative space in which narrators can be tactically improvised and new social connections can be forged to implicate audiences in different, more interventional, and historically imaginative ways.

Dream Vision and Fiction

The dream visions’ in-between spaces highlight the process of poetry, poet, players, and participants. The fissures in this in-between space make room for new forms, as narrative and the formal assumptions of narrative are unhinged in the dreamscape. Steven Kruger points to the middle vision as fertile ground for fiction. The somnium lies between the divine and the mundane, making space for a sort of in-between space where readers are unable to fully pin down the poetic gestures of the author. In some respects it isn’t only the reader who cannot get good footing; the author also oscillates between what he writes, how he writes it, and what he wants the words to ultimately say or not say. Kruger notes that visions such as “Boccaccio’s Corbaccio, and Langland’s Piers Plowman, are all middle visions [that] evoke the possibility of revelation even as they nervously question their own reliability.” Kruger asserts that the nature of the dream vision lent itself to doubleness, confounded by the inherent question of poetic reliability. He posits that, “Involved in the middleness of imagination, the poetic, like the oneiric, dwells in a region between body and intellect, wedding ideas to a sensible and pleasurable form.” Kruger goes further by examining Pascalis Romanus’ treatment of Macrobius’ Commentary on The Dream of Scipio. Kruger writes: “Enigmatic dreams and figural literature call each other to mind. And more strikingly, every kind of dream evokes, for Pascalis, a literary analogue: as dreams range from the unreliable to the

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3 Steven F Kruger, Dreaming in the Middle Ages, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 130.
4 Ibid., 131.
undeniably true, so literature exists in a realm between the wholly fabulous and the prophetic.\textsuperscript{5} The constant pull associated with the genre is manifested as self-reflexivity. How words act and are received are always at the forefront of this genre. This is critical to my assessment of the work of narrators in the later Middle English dream visions where a large focus is placed on how narrative is threaded and meaning woven. The question of writing down one’s dream becomes a question of polysemy, i.e. what is represented by words dreamt. Kruger posits that “Framing his or her poem as a dream, the medieval author focused attention on a human experience clearly linked to literary process, and the reader of a dream vision was prepared for a poem that, examining dream experience, might also examine its own status as poetry. [...] The middle vision offered writers a chance to explore, in the ambiguities of dream experience, anxieties about the ambiguity of literary art.”\textsuperscript{6} Constance Hieatt points out that “Events in dreams can likewise be shown to refer to more than one event or idea; and, most interestingly, words themselves, either as they occur in the dream or as the dreamer later relates them to the remembered dream content, can be shown to condense two or more meanings or associations.”\textsuperscript{7} This sort of word play reflects the Freudian analysis of how ideas in the subconscious are condensed and fused, and in my analysis, unhinged. Hieatt aptly notes that dreams represent a solitary interiority. That interiority speaks to and on behalf of a larger community. Hieatt points to Jung’s ideas of dreams invested in a “collective unconscious.” She merges Jung’s theories on dreams with Freud’s theories to illustrate

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{6} Kruger, Dreaming, 135.
that symbols that are collapsed in interior spaces are linked to one’s inability to fulfill a wish -- the impossibility of openly expressing concerns. This ties wish fulfillment intricately to social concerns as evidenced by the following analyses of the *Assembly of Ladies* and William Langland’s *Vision of Piers Plowman*. In analyzing the early dream narrators, one must consider the implications of how the narrator performs his role as an individual venture but also as a collective venture.

This analysis is concerned with how the work of the narrator is connected to his community/readers. The narrator is the chief semiotic vehicle; he performs word play on behalf of the author, and he continually attempts to reconstitute poetic fissures. Kathryn Lynch argues that “the medieval artist gained authority […] from the association of his own ‘makings’ with divine acts of creation. Correspondences between the three levels of creation – God’s, nature’s, man’s – were commonplace, as was the metaphor of the world as a book.”

Lynch indicates that the artist’s imagination was intricately tied to *ingenium* where the main concern was how imagination is expressed and in the case of the poet how it is written to reflect the convergence of the epistemological ascent with earthly presence. The liminality afforded by this ascent gave room for paradigms to be reflected upon, and reformulated. Lynch posits that “With its special psychology of ascent, the dream provided an ideal framing device for an art whose narrative sought in part to defend the possibility of ascent and clarification, a poetry that partly by invoking the reader’s participation in an epistemological experience drew upon formal strengths not

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available to philosophy." Like Lynch, Stephen J. Russell sees dreams as narrative events with endless possibilities. Instead of dismissing dreams as born out of a psychosomatic condition, he sees them as significant narrative events:

These dream events in third person narratives constitute proof that everyday dreams are sometimes significant, sometimes, remarkably, vehicles for enigmatic messages from beyond. More importantly, however, these dream-events serve as powerful narrative catalysts: they suggest, inspire, and usually result in decisive, often heroic action, and therefore can be seen as a conventional method of depicting a character’s motivation in the largely externalized literatures of the ancient world.¹¹

Although Russell sees the form as a conventional mode of access, he credits the narrator (“the esthetic center”) and performative gestures (“the drama”) with mobilizing ascent -- the ebb necessary for bricolage and reformation highlighted in my analysis.¹²

Reconstitution is viable only when the narrative persona and the reader recognize their role as they participate in the dream narrative. The shape of the dream vision is intuitive although formulaic:

The dream vision begins by announcing itself to be a certain kind of experience: it does this by introducing a certain sort of persona or speaking voice and determining a specific relationship between that persona and the reader. The text is in the hands of or proceeds from the muse of a specific individual, and all of the words have this person as their ultimate source […] the text’s ultimate (and probably only) subject.¹³

The vision’s seemingly solitary gesture is driven by the conflation that occurs between dream and dream persona. Russell argues that the structure of the dream vision delays (somewhat) epiphany because the trajectory of the narrative is obstructed by the

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¹⁰ Ibid., 72.
¹² Ibid., 48.
¹³ Ibid., 115.
conflation or rather the convergence of descriptions surrounding the depictions of the troubled mind of the dreamer as evidenced by Chaucer’s black knight or Boethius’ imprisoned dream narrator. Russell writes about the hypnotic images at the beginning of dream visions:

[W]e could say that story and plot are indistinguishable, for it is clear from the prologue of the poems that the efficient subject of the poem is to be the dreamer, which makes the dream, the representation of the dreamer’s inner life, the “story.” At the same time, however, the character and development of the text – the “plot,” -- are equally reflections or representations of that same subject.¹⁴

Russell sees this narrative move as the dream vision’s self declaration that will relegate story to a dreamer’s insomnium and his inability to name the cause of his condition.¹⁵ He refers to this conflation as “narrative normalization,” which enables the dreamer and the narrator to fully navigate the events of the story.¹⁶ Yet as Russell sees it, the dream vision undercuts any notion of a universal experience by its retreat to lyric where the dream report is regulated to symptom.

Russell’s ideas of retreat oppose the sensibility that the “undercutting” is a performed gesture – a tactical scaffold for larger poetic gestures. To describe poetry as ultimately a lyrical retreat that points to a solitary experience of symbols does not account for the performative gestures in the dream visions outlined here. The poetic gestures in the Assembly of Ladies, for instance, point more to the development of a collective manifesto than to the solitary experience of the dream narrator. When Clanvowe’s dream narrator throws a rock, it isn’t solely a courtly gesture to save the nightingale and assume a knightly posture. There are larger implications here as abstract, or even sentimental

¹⁴ Ibid., 119.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid., 124.
ideas of Love are threatened by a viable debate. The cuckoo isn’t wholly vile. It is the debate and how it threatens to shift a ritualistic mode that is at stake. Clanvowe’s dream narrator is more interested in gesturing at the malleability of ritualistic frame rather than focusing on the nightingale’s duress. The dreamer also shows that his involvement in the narrative is critical to that which is constructed. The dream narrator is part of the narrative not an “illusionary eyewitness,” as Russell claims. The conflation evident in the normalizing of narrative actually serves to further de-stabilize the idea of narrative process. It isn’t simply an undercutting or folding in on narrative chaos bent on ordering the lyrical retreat of a solitary person’s insomnium. Yet as Russell asserts, the dream narrator’s concluding gesture of writing down narrative begins to indicate that perhaps the story cannot be merely taken as an insomnium. It isn’t the gesture of writing, although important, which indicates that there is some revelation in these fictive gestures. Writing does point to the call for a collective awareness of narrative product as process but seeing how bricolage and reformed signifiers partake of writing show that these processes extend far beyond the boundaries of dreams, well beyond the borders of text and bodies. Writing concretizes these gestures (somewhat) but the processability and fluidity of how one semioticizes meaning points to how one lives, interprets, reads, and who has ultimate authority over these gestures, as integral to process.

The dream-narrator, pseudo-author, is cognizant that what is at stake is more than psychological ordering; it is the ordering of narrative play, which involves the author’s self-conscious effort to create a whole story in the face of a reader who will see the parts of each poetic gesture but also see relevance in the pieces as a conglomerate of narrative process. Chaucer’s House of Fame figures narrative pieces as important; he
creates a dream vision devoted to the lability of words -- how they travel and how they are revered. Sound, a pebble dropped in a pond, with infinite ripples, may be an abstract act caused by mere accident and devoid of intention, but the readers’ perception of this gesture in the face of an ever-changing social context gives rise to meaning. Words and phrases squeezing out of the crevices of the “House of Rumour” are very important as we understand the notion of narrative process and the ultimate investment of author and narrator in concretizing or destabilizing meaning.

Paul de Man recognizes the destabilization of poetic gestures and sees the reader as integral to the process of recuperating poetic loss. He sees reading as an inward retreat bent on reinstating that which is sacrificed in the chasm or the destabilization suggested by the poetic frame. Whitman also takes into consideration the reader’s role in recalibrating allegorical symbols. “The reader is a participant in the fiction, and if he loses his objective freedom – that is, his freedom to treat the allegory and his own responses to it as objects – he gains his own subjective involvement.” These ideas are vital to figuring the dream narrator as integral to the reconstitution of poetics. In the dream vision the dream narrator is figured as a reader of signs and texts. de Man is useful when we see the narrator as a reader engaged in recuperating “all that the inner contemplation had discarded, the opposites of all the virtues necessary to its well-being…. “

dem Man’s suggestions about narrative echo the difficulties outlined by early dream theorists wary of the truth of dreams, the prophetic gesture of deciphering those dreams, and the malleability of content fictionalized but engaged in ascent. de Man:

[...]since any narrative is primarily the allegory of its own reading, it is caught in a difficult double bind. As long as it treats a theme (the discourse of a subject, the vocation of a writer, the constitution of a consciousness), it will always lead to the confrontation of incompatible meanings between which it is necessary but impossible to decide in terms of truth and error. If one of the readings is declared true, it will always be possible to undo it by means of the other; if it is decreed false, it will always be possible to demonstrate that it states the truth of its aberration.19

As we assess the narrator’s complex role as reader, de Man’s conclusions offer a potential truth that readers and authors will always encounter or rather be forced to “confront incompatible meanings.” This is similar to Quilligan’s observation that there is danger in encountering ourselves witnessing the formation of rituals, or Blau’s emphasis on the chasms between the intersection of sight and sound. Russell argues that the deconstructionist mode inherent to medieval dream visions provides an energetic response to the dilemma of Macrobius’ somnium and oraculum by reinstituting the reader as parallel to the dreamer. His dream, his grasping at truth, is the reader’s desire to access or make equivocal the anagogic pull of dream allegory.20 However, this analysis does not fall victim to Hegelian angst expressed as de Man or Lukács’s existential abyss. This analysis seizes on the “energetic response” described by Russell but sees the performative mode of bricolage as more valuable than “rhetorical truth.” These later Middle English

19 de Man, Allegories of Reading, 76.
20 Russell posits “the late medieval dream vision is a consciously constructed anomaly which deconstructs the literary and scientific dream taxonomies by occupying the impossible space between the pathological and the divine, the somatic and the significant. It draws its unique energy and vitality from this deconstruction for, if it were merely a fictive revelation (not somatic), it would then be simply a fictive pronouncement of truth; and if it were merely a somatic dream (not significant), then it would be self-admittedly irrelevant. Thus it is both and neither: the dream vision is the impossible record of one whose life and whose dreams are just like ours, whose dream in the course of its narration becomes ours, a self-conscious fiction that announces and celebrates its fictionality, thereby attaining a higher “rhetorical” truth” (81).
dream authors were not concerned solely with convergence or ascent. They situated the visions in varying fields of folks and communicated that what was at stake was not merely a personal flight towards rhetorical truth but a communal response that engaged participants, readers, authors, actors, audience, priests, and parishioners, converging to create a landscape of subtexts. The viability of that subtext and the processes involved in creating sustainable narratives are at the heart of these exchanges, evidenced by Clavowe’s use of the debate form, the anonymous author of the Assembly’s use of physical convergence as a judiciary procedure, Langland’s recalibration of how one achieves earthly salvation and Chaucer’s diagnosis that textual fixity shared the same vulnerabilities as the lability of sound.

The Somnium and Allegory

The dream visions used as examples in this reading rely heavily on the use of the allegorical mode to further disguise or unhinge meaning. Language’s symbolic gestures take on a performative role as words are used to present facts but also staged to offer double meaning, blending, and fusion. Hieatt refers to this staging of the content of dreams as a way for the poet to assume a sort of “double authority” – poetic access spawned from what the poet sees and the engagement in divine revelation which was given credence by the theologians and classicists that supported the Macrobian hierarchy of dreams whereby divine revelation could be possible.21 This “double authority” is parallel to Maureen Quilligan’s sensitivity to the “ambidexterity of language” as words

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and images are woven together. This presentation of the slipperiness of words, and the effort to order these words, promotes narrative action. The dream-narrator engages narrative action by becoming a parallel reader who through inquiry participates in the creation of that text but also reads, signs, and symbolizes as he/she navigates the treacherous chasms within the dream vision by stretching across the binaries in question specific to the text and ‘moment’ of being read.

In a dream vision, such as Chaucer’s House of Fame, the dream narrator’s ascent can be read as a reader’s ascent. How does the dreamer make meaning when he/she is positioned as a purveyor of the cacophony of signs and symbols expressed within a violent whirlwind of past, present, and future? Chaucer begins to address reading this upward movement and Quilligan rearticulates this ascent as part of the process – a necessary component of reading allegory:

It would be more precise to say therefore that allegory works horizontally, rather than vertically, so that meaning accretes serially, interconnecting and criss-crossing the verbal surface long before one can accurately speak of moving to another level “beyond” the literal. And that “level” is not above the literal one in a vertically organized fictional space, but is located in the self-consciousness of the reader, who gradually becomes aware, as he reads, of the way he creates the meaning of the text. Quilligan’s reassertion of the role of the narrator ties into the earlier discussion of how the narrator grants access to all participants and readers, including himself. The voyeuristic mode of the early dream visions posits the narrator as a passive purveyor of historical past. Allegories represent history. Engaging with literary past or historical past provides access to origin – the pretext. Quilligan purports that “the pretext is not merely a

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23 Quilligan, The Language of Allegory, 28.
repository of ideas, it is the original treasure house of truth, and even if that treasure house has been plundered and is assumed to be empty, it still retains its privileged status in guiding not only the interpretation but the possibilities of the allegory.\footnote{24} Deciphering allegory is a creative process. This process is not a whimsical engagement; deciphering symbols involves returning to origin and bridging the past unseen with the present, namely, how those symbols are read in present. Allegory then is an engagement with history at the point of presence. Allegory can pronounce the chasm of the past to the present as an irreconcilable loss, a sign of a lost sign. Yet this frustrated movement can be seen as re-constitutive when we focus on the creative process as bricolage, weaving, and self-authoring literary and historical presence. The moment of engagement with texts is a moment of beginning not merely the floundering within an incomplete or unresolved poetic frame as in the *House of Fame*, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, or the *Assembly of Ladies*. That there is little judicial reconciliation, an actualized “auctorite,” or a linear and hierarchal representation of salvation, is not a frustrated gesture on the part of the author or narrator. These three texts focus on beginnings by engaging the question of how we continually begin anew. Whitman suggests:

> At once slipping away from its object and toward it, allegory is always seeking to come to terms with the disparities of its world and its own technique. It is true that the increasing interaction between the two allegorical traditions gradually integrates these problems, but it never fully resolves them. It rather produces increasingly sophisticated ways to refine and articulate its own dilemmas, no sooner generating figures than displacing them, while simultaneously turning that critique into a new starting point for its own creations. In this dynamic process, the technique of allegory seems almost to make a comment not only upon itself, but upon those who explore it—and finally, upon every search for the causes of things. Such explorations are aspiring toward a fulfillment that lies beyond them.

\footnote{24} Ibid., 98.
They may point the way toward an end; in themselves, they remain always a beginning.  

As we consider these ideas of reconstitution as a form of access, an analysis of the *Dream of the Rood* will cement the narrative gestures of the dream narrator. Like *Pearl*, the *Dream of the Rood* presents a multi-layered narrative. Both poems make use of complex wordplay and thus posit many narrative possibilities.

In the *Dream of the Rood*, the narrator inserts himself into the story of Christ’s passion. He closes the past by showing proximity as current:

Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah,  
forwunded mid wommum. Geseah ic wuldres treow,  
wædum geweorðode, wynnum scinan,  
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon  
bewrigene weorðlice wealdendes treow. (13-17)

Magnificent was the cross of victory and I was stained with sins, wounded by evil deeds. I observed that the tree of glory, enriched by its coverings, decked with gold, shone delightfully. Gems had becomingly covered the Ruler’s tree.

Filled with dismay, he witnesses the bloody wounds on the cross. The narrator becomes an eyewitness to the crimes against Christ; his ear becomes a receiver for the pre-textual events. The bloody cross, the key eyewitness, relays the violent event to the narrator:

26 The correct date of *The Dream of the Rood* is unknown. While the manuscript in which the poem appears can be dated to the 10th century, the actual date of the poem is somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries.
27 Sarah Stanbury, in her introduction to *Pearl*, notes the endless linguistic possibilities created by the poet’s use of language. She asserts, “That which appears fixed, stable, and known is not: like the pearl itself, which slips away to transform into something else, words recur throughout the poem with new meanings. The economy of metaphor, or rather its hyper-economy, lies in its uncanny ability to express both equivalence and multiplicity; ostensibly an equation of identity, marked by an equal sign, metaphor also adds up to the sum of its parts.” See *Pearl*, Ed. Sarah Stanbury, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).
They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are visible upon me, gaping malicious gashes. [...]. I was all soaked with blood issuing from the man’s side after he had sent forth his spirit.

The rood aligns himself with Christ; he states that both of them were mocked and pierced. The rood laments, “Bysmeredon hie unc butu ætgædere” (48). Christ’s passion becomes the Rood’s passion and the Rood’s reincarnation of the story of that bloody day, the narrator’s reincarnation of the Rood’s story of Christ’s passion. Acknowledging this early Old English poem whose narrator interviews the Rood – the closest eyewitness, pseudo-participant, and transcendental symbol of the passion provides an example of closing the chasm or prevailing abyss reflected across time. *The Dream of the Rood* is not a poem purely of melancholic loss. In terms of an act of restitution, the narrator reconstitutes the moment of the passion with an intimate perspective. The narrator is involved in creating a sub-text of the pre-text; his access is multifarious in purpose.

Quilligan sees the creative gesture in the use of allegory as a mode of poetic discovery. She indicates that “the pretext is the text that the narrative comments on by reenacting, as well as the claim the narrative makes to be a fiction not built upon another text.” As Whitman suggests, “allegory never produces a ‘definitive,’ much less a ‘perfected,’ text. It rather achieves various states of equilibrium, adjusting to uneven and overlapping

29 “They humiliated us both together (1.48).
31 Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*, 98.
pressures and constantly susceptible to disequilibrium and readjustment.”32 Additionally, “allegory names the fundamental principle beneath the reverberation of words; yet words in allegory not only extend meaning by punning allusiveness throughout individual narratives, they echo across texts, across generations, across time itself.”33

**The Semiotics of Dreams and Theatre**

This energetic thrust of the allegorical mode is comparable to the creative thrust which fuels theatrical performances. Theatre is involved in the constant articulation of symbols, and the performed acts are “susceptible to disequilibrium and readjustment” – staged acts that shift with each performance susceptible to an audience who like the reader can revise and reconstruct the performed gesture.34 Like allegory, which contains polysemous gestures reflecting the cultural norms of the time, performance also attempts to utilize these symbols which hearken back to “the pretext” while reframing these symbols in the context of current lens. Fiction and non-fiction are carved out by words. Words do act. The theatre provides a stage similar to the dream vision, which creates a fluid space for the reconstitution of the semiotic gesture.

To study the early dream vision is to uncover how semiotic fissures are used as spaces for linguistic innovation -- access points. How does one write their story, their eyewitness account to that which is imagined, when dreams belonged either in the realm of pagan and demonic practices or divinity? Stories are born out of imagination;

“Imagination could reflect superficial and mundane desires or it could represent to other

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33 Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*, 98, emphasis mine.
mental faculties images susceptible to the most detailed and profound philosophical explication. Even when divinely inspired, the imagination was a kind of prerational realm of consciousness, and as such, its vision was suggestive rather than conclusive, chaotic rather than controlled.” A medieval author would need to situate these images in relationship to the demonic or the divine, and both situations made presumptions about access and control. Poems such as *The Romance of the Rose* make the language of court culture much more relevant than demonic or angelic pillars. But it never denies its existence; these pillars still remain (subtly) -- arguably a residue of the Macrobium effect. The Macrobium hierarchy of the dream vision from *insomnium* to *oraculum* provided some resolution to these two polar ends of demonic and celestial or false and true. The *somnium* provided a nice middle ground for the convergence of truth and falsity, as a fictionalized version of the truth. The gestures of these early poets who utilized the dream sequence focused on ways to present complex issues, some with scathing political and religious ramifications (evident in the Peasant’s revolt of 1381), while subtly questioning alternate ways of looking at the status quo. The dream vision’s open-ended, often irresolvable, incomplete nature is not a failure of the genre but rather a way these early artists approached their topics while accentuating poetic fissures in the face of the figural reader who also co-writes. How does one write in a tradition and also reshape that tradition? How does one present a story of self when there is no real *bildungsroman* in that period? The dream vision allowed a multifaceted, multi-voiced approach to how an artist is able to engage in the narrative process, albeit through a superficially abrogated stance. The genre provided a fluid space for the poet to create and use the idea of a

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narrative persona who can assume disguises, slip in and out of multiple spaces, perform violent acts, be picked up and flung in a whirling dreamscape, view the past, challenge spiritual doctrine, feminize legal participation, talk to trees, birds, old wood, manipulate natural law or provide consolation to a dying poet. These early Middle English poets illustrate the necessity of the real architects of narrative play – the Narrator – the storyteller, designer, deceiver, manipulator, actor who performs and redirects a poet’s tale. The Narrator can stand still and move narrative: he can be all-knowing, obtuse, violent, calculating, passionate, blundering, voyeuristic, yet whatever his or her stance, the performed role is wholly in service to the story that the poet has conceived. The dream vision as a genre offered new kinds of mobility to late medieval Middle English poets than other earlier continental latinate or vernacular dream visions such as Boethius, Macrobius, Prudentius, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, and Dante. The later Middle English dream authors emphasized the constructedness of fiction and the participatory nature of author, narrator, and reader, as entities in the process of signifying meaning. Dream visions stage their narrators as situationally emerging from the dream – as though they were newly-minted. The newness itself is a product of the performance; there is an illusion of separation from previous dream vision and allegorical traditions, even as the Middle English dream vision draws on them. The literary historical narrator and the performed, diastic narrator are both engaged in similar processes; however, the diastic narrator, as illustrated by the later Middle English dream narrators, were contextualized by dream authors focused more on the act of writing and reading than psychological self-exploration in an isolated garden or abyss. These authors took into question the communal implication of authorship and textual appropriation.
The poetic process enlisted by medieval *Middle English* dream visions resets the reader’s focus to narrative engagement as process rather than end product. Dream visions facilitate the tensions inherent to these ideas of constructing self and society. Writing one’s self or writing one’s identity becomes the creative act that concretizes who we are, past, present, and future. Yet, the instability of writing, how it is interpreted and how it was intended, how it is reshaped and who reshapes it, and whether it fails to write into existence others illustrate that the very tool of creation and preservation is inherently ill-equipped to design and document form – the formative us in each story. With this creative act, prone to erosion and re-articulation, the later Middle English dream authors used poetics as a way to respond to individual and collective concerns about the articulation of self in relation to society. These questions alerted readers, subtly, to the malleability and processability of forms, rituals, and doctrines.

Poets such as Chaucer engaged questions of the formative roles of individual and communal identities, as we see in the breadth of inclusion in the *Canterbury Tales* as also in Langland’s field of folk and the way each narrative persona uses the platform of the pilgrimage as a mode of self-performance. In the *House of Fame* and “Adam Scriveyn,” Chaucer also questions the malleability of creative endeavors. An artist writes, draws, sings, but what does this participation – this endeavor to create – really mean in terms of engaging or shifting an artistic mode? How is narrative participation documented? Langland, Gower, and Hoccleve illustrate that political and spiritual doctrines are malleable. Langland proves that governance (albeit through coercion or democracy, political or spiritual) can decide the course of nations but what does this mean when the course is reset, eliminated, or sullied and how do participants know whether the trajectory
of a course is beneficial? In fact Langland’s answer to this question teeters on anarchy as he calls for a type of self-governance in the pursuit of salvation. Clanvowe illustrates that social contracts and rituals are malleable. Individuals may seemingly accept a society’s modus operandi as it relates to religion, class, or gender, but over time, they often recalibrate how they engage these acts that ultimately cultivate and reinforce social identity. Therefore self as a construction and society as a construction -- rules, regulations, rituals, and doctrine although seemingly static are in fact fluid – ever-changing, subtly. Theorists, such as Walter Benjamin and Benedict Anderson, show that ideas of nationhood are malleable. They press questions that argue the dire nature of geographical and cultural constructions. Who decides the idea of Nation? Who ensures the sustainability of that Nation? Who documents the bloody history of the victor and the captive? Who redraws the lines on the global map?

Amidst these large structural questions, there are further complications when these questions are confounded by the agency of the reader or participant. The readers, viewers, and listeners – the participants of the creative endeavor are susceptible to change in terms of emotional progression or regression. If the reader partakes of “co-writing” the narrative through his/her interpretation, yet he/she has a moving core, how do we take into consideration, that in addition to the inherent disjuncture between referent and sign, narrative meaning is contingent on an ever-shifting reader-participant? The trajectory of these questions suggests that not only do participants act from moments of historical loss, but they also interact with these fissures as a mode of self and social construction. The

above questions in their various forms and contexts are questions of writing -- the attempt to concretize a fluid form; simply put, these questions treat writing as philosophy, a process devoted to inquiry.

Participation in inquiry is bent on reconstituting anxieties and rifts; therefore, failure to close or reshape conjured fissures is an act of unwriting one’s self and one’s history. How authors present these divides, rifts, or junctures accentuates the work of poetry, namely how the narrators, the chief semioticians, weave together, salvage, and reconstitute narrative fissures. Malleability and processability of narrative production and interpretation continually disarticulate forms that are transiently stable, which enables revision, refraction, and reproduction as tactical scaffolding in the act of engaging various regulatory schemas. The genre of dream vision is focused on narrative as ongoing work ripe with fissures that generate possibilities.

Narratology attempts to show how modern-day notions of narrative deal with the fissures inherent in word and sign and the form that culminated gestures – ritual, doctrine, or text use as a mode of presentation. Representing the episodic nature of waking and sleeping and layering narrative action on setting on top of perspective are early formations of the move from epic poetry to autobiographical novel -- text becomes both an external and internal documentation of how the author, narrator, and reader interact with storyline crafted through fiction and reality and premised on authorial importance. Yet how this process is articulated, formed or packaged -- the novel, romance, epic, or tragic-comedy -- also interacts with how an audience perceives that story line. Lukács had a heightened awareness of the tensions inherent in narrative gestures, especially
when these gestures enlist *forms*. Lukács uses the Derridian model of deconstruction where fissures reflected loss:

> We have invented the creation of forms: and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete. We have found the only true substance within ourselves: that is why we have to place an unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world, why all substantiality has to be dispersed in reflexivity on the far side of that chasm; that is why our essence had to become a postulate for ourselves and thus create a still deeper, still more menacing abyss between us and our own selves. \(^{37}\)

The medieval dream visions address the anagogic pull of allegory which created fissures or chasms within narratives, but saw those fissures as the productive ebb of narrative process. Unlike the deconstructionist who sees fissures as the emptying out of narratives, medieval authors such as Clanvowe, Langland, and Chaucer saw these fissures as access to work, process, and product. The gestures of incompleteness, obtuseness, irreconcilable efforts and dreams born from solitary psychological conditions, must be read as performed gestures necessary to facilitate the navigation of narrative process in the face of religious, political, and cultural constraints. To engage narrative process, the Middle English dream narrator is presented as provisionally liberated from authority and self-consistency – whose malleability and self-production beget narrative fluidity rather than existential angst.

*Figuring the Narrator as Actor*

The narrator’s allegorical presentation in the *somnium* creates diverse symbols and meanings, figures the narrator as the central force of semiotics (even if he

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momentarily relinquishes that role), and foregrounds his efforts with set or other allegorical representations. Russell aptly points out “the dreamer is always a character in his dream narrative.”\(^{38}\) The stage of the dreamscape enlist the narrator as a lead actor in the presentation of his *somnium*. The emergent ‘I’ of the early dream visions constitutes the anomalies presented in the dream vision. The manifestations of that I, how the author utilizes this physical presentation, is strategic to creating a tangible response to the reconstitution of linguistic and historical fissures. The semiotic thrust of this emergent ‘I’ is parallel to a dramatis persona. The early dream visions are rich with moments of performed gestures; in fact, one can argue that the dreamscape presented in this genre is a fluid stage where gestures culminate. The theatricality of the dreamscape and the link to the actor provides a necessary component of seeing how performed gestures propel the emergent narrator. Kier Elam’s discussion of indicative gestures provides a good starting place for my analysis of the narrator as actor. Elam asserts that “The ‘I’ of the dramatis persona and the ‘here and now’ of the *dramatic* communicative context are related to the actor’s body and the *stage* context through the indicative gesture accompanying the utterance. Gesture, in this sense, materializes the dramatic subject and his world by asserting their identity with an actual body and an actual space.”\(^{39}\) Blau recognizes the actors’ agency in this effort to become. “Theater is made from this play of meaning in a structure of becoming, the passing form of an invisible force, where we lose meaning by finding it, and there is always something repressed.”\(^{40}\) The Actor then is seen as an agent who constitutes space. “In traditional dramatic performance the actor’s body acquires its

\(^{40}\) Blau, *Audience*, 57.
mimetic and representational powers by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual. This applies equally to his speech (which assumes the general signified ‘discourse’) and to every aspect of his performance, to the extent that even purely contingent factors, such as physiologically determined reflexes, are accepted as signifying units.”

Elam describes the mobile sign of the dramatis persona: He fulfills a primary role; he is agent or patient of plots; he can be classified as a stock-type; he is ascribed a name and social properties; he has a defined relationship with the actual world bearing assumed qualities; he has inter-textual qualities, qualities attributed to him by physical, vocal and gestural characteristics; his pronominal status as speaking ‘I,’ receiving ‘you,’ or referential ‘he,’ and he posits possible worlds using stylized rhetoric force. The constitutive nature of the actor agent lends itself to inter-textuality. How we read his actions are through the lens of past narratives; he acts within the context of what (narratively) came before him.

The dream vision encapsulates this sort of theatrical landscape where mimesis is used as an essential component to make meaning by deciphering the symbols presented in the vision. In both theater and in the dream vision, actors and characters are able to assume roles that are at once passive and active. The narrator is critical to semiotic motion, which is also true of the dramatis persona, but both setting in a narrative or prop in a play can assume agency as seen in the dream visions selected for this analysis. A whirlwind of words, a debate between birds, and a jousting scene, can foreground the narrator’s role. The landscape of the dream vision is fluid, which lends itself nicely to an ever-shifting hierarchy of roles. Elam champions the idea of aktualisace as linguistic

41 Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre, 9.
42 Ibid., 132-133.
foregrounding where “unexpected usage suddenly forces the listener or reader to take note of the utterance itself.” A displaced ‘Ocy’ by a vile cuckoo gains traction, much like Chaucer’s hyperbolic suggestion that sound, evidenced by a pebble which creates infinite ripples, can signify meaning. Narrative can be twisted, and allegory can become characters in a non-linear landscape as a way to force readerly engagement. To decipher, readers must press closely and begin to weave their own meanings as the narrator weaves or unweaves symbols as he/she creates narrative. The idea of an obtuse narrator creating meaning fits with Elam’s analysis of Brecht’s ‘gestus of showing.’ A purveyor in the dream vision could be a way to further facilitate the “estrangement of the signifying process.” But the implication that all is constantly undergoing the semioticization process is necessary. In this sense, theater “involves the showing of objects and events (and the performance at large) to the audience, rather than describing, explaining or defining them” coupled with the dream vision genre and its narrative thrust – an attempt to employ plot through story line if even presented unhinged, creates a fuller reading of the trajectory of the early dream poems and ultimately what the dream narrators accomplish as they drive this force of action. “Conventionally, the stage depicts or otherwise suggests a domain which does not coincide with its actual physical limits, a

43 Ibid., 17.
44 If the theory of “aktualisace” is applied to the quaint ‘Ocy’, this sound represents the ‘strangeness’ referenced by Elam. Elam posits that when aspects of a semiotic gesture is “made strange,” spectators will pay closer attention to who/what conveys this alienated gesture. Elam draws a parallel with Brechtian theatre that often utilizes these types of peculiar gestures. Elam indicates that these gestures are important for their spatial value i.e. how foregrounding is metaphorically represented in a performance (17-18).
46 Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre, 30.
mental construct on the part of the spectator from the visual clues that he receives.”

Thus the stage parallels the dreamscape in its aforementioned description. Blau references the theatrical landscape as the “architecture of perception”:

> There is, as we know functionally in the theater, the distance of looking and the distance of listening, both of which are determined largely by the material arrangement of theater space, the architecture of perception. Sight and hearing are, classically, *senses at a distance*, as opposed to the immediacy not only of touch but of taste and smell. The classical theater, in the tradition of voyeurism, keeps apart the object and the perceiving organ (eye, ear).”

This is the narrator’s primordial gesture where he immerses himself within these symbols as actively shaping or passively viewing while making meaning. Elam argues the semioticization of the theater is involved with “operations of *texts* and the conceptual labours they call from their decoders (readers, spectators, etc.).” Once these labours are underway, “the founding principle of dramatic representation, then, is the fiction of the *presence* of a world known to be hypothetical: the spectator allows the dramatis personae, through the actors, to designate as the ‘here and now’ a counterfactual construct.” This is the mimetic thrust of the performative gestures in the early dream visions whose *actions are often ‘non-linear, heterogenous (‘seen’ and unseen), discontinuous...and incomplete.’* Despite the allegations, the genre hasn’t failed. But it needs to be read with a cipher, a performative lens to interpret “the denotation-connotation dialectic” of the gestures presented in the dreamscape. Theatrical signs are transmutable and depend on social and cultural context. An audience reads the textuality created by the

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47 Ibid., 67.
50 Ibid., 113-114.
51 Ibid., 119, emphasis mine.
52 Ibid., 11.
performance. “Every aspect of the performance is governed by the denotation-connotation dialectic: the set, the actor’s body, his movements and speech determine and are determined by a constantly shifting network of primary and secondary meanings.”

The reader then becomes integral to understanding the shifts in this repository of symbols and must utilize ‘motivated acts of inferences’ as a way to make meaning. The reflexivity of this engagement is parallel to the theatrical audience that makes and shapes meaning – the same type of substitutive semiosis you get in allegory.

Blau sees the engagement of audience with actor as potentially problematic in that it further widens the fissure between sign and referent or spectator and spectacle. The early dream visions are not purely dramatic but rather infused by performative acts, do not fall victim to this “mousetrap.”

What has become apparent through the dispersion –as in the ocular mousetrap of the play-within-the-play – is that all performance occurs within a domain of behavior that is attentive to an absence, the estranging datum of the process of watching, its unnegotiable distance, and the degree to which division – the unstable substance of theater, mirrored in the event – has since become its subject. Whatever, then, the alien thing in sight, it resists and is further divided by the double alienation of the activity of perception. What we are observing today, in the suffusion of otherness, which once defined the actor, is a mutual affliction of both actor and spectator in what seems at times, as in the dream, a (re)lapse or fusion of roles.

Because the narrator is able to present a literal frame and a dreamed frame the fusion of roles is structurally separated -- a narrative of a narrative. For Blau reconstituting those fissures is an effort to read the repressed and the history of that concealment – manifestations of binaries such as “nature/culture, being/becoming, self/other,

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53 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
empathy/alienation, the spectacle and the spectator, gratification and desire.” The dream narrator is reader, narrator, and writer -- a composition in the process of being composed. As participants of this word play, we are also reader and writer, being composed by words but also composing those words for self and society. An understanding of the emergent narrator is contingent on a reading of performance and allegory as parallel vehicles articulated through a dream whose frame positions ideas of becoming as subtly transgressive, quietly pro-testing, continually revising in the face of revision -- a story of process internal yet communal, eternally gesturing backward, present, and forward -- an incomplete medieval novel of self-discovery.

57 Ibid., 11.
Chapter 2

Dress Rehearsal: Word Play and Narrative Construction in the Assembly of Ladies

In the erotics of theatre, words are (theoretically) corporeal. They are up there for public scrutiny. The mind’s eye echoes the mind’s ear. Words act. They are elements of the scenic investiture affecting, synesthetically, light space rhythm pattern sound, but they also resound at the deepest level of the mise-en-scène, through self time memory consciousness as well. Mere words, true. Problematic to the last breath of being. The material elements of theater – like the body itself – situate us.¹

The inquiry of the few critics who have addressed the anonymous fifteenth century poem The Assembly of Ladies has been limited to overly simple formulations. Is the author male or female? Is the text “feminist or antifeminist?” Is its genre capable of definition as Chaucerian or non-Chaucerian? Is the poem concerned with judiciary procedures or domestic courtly decorum? Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson note that The Assembly is not particularly well written, or even particularly interesting; other critics have also faulted the poem for its seemingly poor aesthetic quality.² Bradford Fletcher asserts that “The Assembly is by no means great poetry. It is representative of a class of late medieval courtly love poems composed by writers who, for want of a better term, might be called amateurs, despite the essential irrelevance of the word to the period. It is worth reading not because of any insight it gives into the human condition nor for any striking beauties of form, but because of its evident fascination with the details of court

behavior and its frequent flashes of verbal sprightliness."³ Ann McMillan asserts that The Assembly is unusual in contrast to all the dream-visions and garden of love poems from which it derives because the poem has a female narrator. McMillan summarizes this phenomenon of an all female cast:

> It seems almost painfully obvious that these experiences of dreams and gardens, together with those that follow in their tradition, have male narrators and project a masculine point of view. A woman is the object of all this attention, but never is she the governing, shaping “I” of the poem. Whole studies of dream and garden poetry use the collective pronoun “he” for their dream-narrators without any need for qualification. Of course, not all dream-visions center upon sexuality; Chaucer, for example, adapts the form to explore the nature of poetry in The House of Fame. But, whatever the topic, women narrators simply do not appear in the secular dream-visions — except for those in the […] Assembly of Ladies. The above sketch of dream and garden convention focuses on elements which are present in the [poem], but by contrast; rather than male sexuality and seduction, [the poem deals] with female sexuality and chastity.⁴

While these criticisms offer a good starting point for the analysis of the poem, focus must be given to how the fluidity of the dreamscape, by creating a medium, accentuates the corporeality of language. As the dreamer lies still, words float, act, take shape, and ultimately, clothe the participants involved. The corporeality of this construction wrestles with how text comes into being but also with how female “authorship” and female performance are expressed. The Assembly takes its shape as an assemblage of female parts into a readable text. The narrator’s instruction amidst the calling of ‘voices’ to “Rede wele my dreame” is not her final presentation of a group of ladies and gentlewomen assembling but rather of one consciousness: that of the narrator presenting an assemblage, a whole through which readers first see its parts before the narrative of a

single subjectivity emerges (l. 756). The final conglomeration of words: the words signaling the end of the poem, the image of the women linked together by words in line 734, and their final physical assembly, creates a speakerly text. The linking of the sleeves at the end of the poem symbolizes the words of the poem conjoined to form phrases, sentences, stanzas and finally the complete poem that challenges, subtly, male textual authority. Upon conveniently waking from the dream vision, the narrator asserts:

`‘Wher am I now?’ thought I, ‘al this is goon,’
   Al amased; and up I gan to looke.
   With that anon I went and made this booke,
   Thus symply rehersyng the substaunce
   Because it shuld nat out of remebraunce, (Ll.738-742, emphasis mine)`

The narrator thinks her travel has been well spent; it has enabled her to put in words this tale of self-performance for the listening knight. The knight applauds the worthiness of the tale, and excuses himself from further encumbering the “booke’s” progress. Because of the nature of the "booke"/tale, the knight does not respond in a hostile way; he simply asks the name of the "booke." McMillan notes in her argument that perhaps the knight’s response shows his failure to comprehend what he has heard. “Dreams not understood, even by their own dreamers, are a staple of Chaucer’s dream-visions. The disturbing nature of the dream, especially of its commentary on relationships between men and women, seems to have escaped her male listener.”

Disappointingly, McMillan drops the ball here because she fails to recognize the performative platform the poem creates, its gesture, and the need for its decoding.

The dreamscape in *The Assembly* gives the narrator’s subjectivity a theatrical platform where female lived experience is elevated and expressed as a feminized

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5 Ibid., 41.
linguistic performance that interrupts assumptions of male vocality and authority. *The Assembly*, and its inability to adjudicate or even fully articulate the bills, should be valued for its focus on the very physical nature of narrative construction.\(^6\) Physicality, performativity, and investment in self-preservation engage ideas of writing as a form of protest. Treating the poem as a narrative about the construction of a protesting, feminized voice subtly allows its true value to appear. The poem is process-oriented, a showcase of poetic construction as a socially symbolic act. My analysis explores the gesture of collective subjectivity as a site of performed protest. The evaluation of performance theories that treat words as fluid corporeal entities elevates and links the performativity of clothing in the poem to that of poetry, such as similar to how Langland’s *Piers Plowman* was appropriated as a symbol of protest by the peasants in the revolt of 1381. In this instance, portions of Langland’s poem symbolize religious freedom. The parts of the poem that are torn out and carried inside individual pockets illustrate that poetics is valuable whether complete or fragmented. This example illustrates the potency of appropriated poetics and the types of opportunities it grants as a vehicle to engage social issues.

Readers need to focus on the various elements of narrative construction versus the resolution or completion of that process. That the gestures in *The Assembly* are not abrasively political or properly adjudicated is irrelevant. That a narrator wishes for justice but never gains justice is a cause for concern if that narrator seemed invested in a sort of

\(^6\)Examples of the bills are: “Sanz que jamais”; “Une sans chaungier”; and “Oncques puis lever”(Ll. 583-598). “C’est sanz dire” illustrates the double entente of fully articulating the issue of female authority or rather the lack thereof while stating that the problem needs no words. To create a bill one needs to articulate the details of the stated injustices but instead these become partial representations of very large issue. Yet, the inability to articulate could also indicate the magnitude of the problem that women face (L.627).
legal redemption. Yet the intimacy of gathering one’s identity, clothing this identity in a manner that articulates (even if not completely) or captures that sense of self and its concern with feminine authority or lack therof, especially when these remnants become the elements of a written story – a concretized symbol of time, place, identity, and ultimately “shared commitments and beliefs.”

The dreamscape in *The Assembly*, the performative nature of the poem, and its connection to memory echo Herbert Blau’s analysis of performance. Theatre provides a platform for the lyricist’s words to stage meaning. It is here on stage that bodies are removed to expose naked words echoing across the stage -- pages held upright for readers and viewers to see. Blau understands this notion well and deduces that for theatre and all its “presence” there is not much to repeat but the repetition of the repetition -- perchance to dream, relate the dream, point to the dream as source for text, write the dream, then concretize the experience so that readers can read the dream over and over again. Re-dreaming is rewriting and rereading; all three acts represent how stories are conceived, articulated, and revised. Re-dreaming here, like the act of written revision, is communicative -- a performed gesture that utilizes poetics as social criticism.

The dream vision genre in its circular nature is similar to performance because they both hinge on language’s ability to represent in multiplicity and simultaneously (in a fluid space) things seen, unseen, and lost. Yet “the theatre remembers, but there is an urge in the mode of memory –whether that other thing exists or not, […] still, only a dream remembered.” The crux of the dream poet’s work lies within these hinges -- the

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desire to pull apart the seams of history or past narratives, or for some, to thread and reinforce these seams with their words -- to permanently etch themselves as commentators, auctorities of language’s past and future. The narrator’s dreamed state, which at times delineates agency, offers opportunities for subtle social commentary. The author’s artistic creation is not void of a response to his/her social climate. Like theatrical performances, the play of words is received by a given audience, which is affected by time and place. Theatricality is achieved when the audience is able to reconstitute an actor’s semiotic gestures, the business of “making present.” Yet we, the viewers and readers, are merely “constituents of the shifting, vulnerable to time. The reality we refer to in theater, does it exist before or after the fact made present? in the performance? and is the fact that it is a fact an activity, an activity of mind, or a state of being? and did we put it there in the act of perceiving? or was it there before we looked, hiding or withdrawn.”9 That which is out of sight becomes embodied and manifest as words are voiced. Blau gives words the power to metamorphose from ghost-like existence to real life. The voice transforms itself to an image manifested from writing, which precedes speech. The stage amplifies poetics, which, if invested in the social and political, is ultimately tied to the preservation or recreation of history through imitation, rehearsal, and improvisation. Blau notes that, “from the beginning, theater has been concerned with the action of memory trying to remember a beginning. The convolutions of memory are engrained in form: What we never forget is often what never happened. What we always remember is the evidence of what we’ve never done. So memory is the desire of the not-

9 Ibid., 132.
accomplished, the reflex of desire itself, which is located on the stage of being at the
limits of consciousness – the theater in which all things come to be, dreaming still.”\textsuperscript{10}

Like the theatre, the actualizing force of the dream vision violates and confuses
time and reality. Blau argues that, “mimesis is trying to embody, or remember, what it is
that is going out of mind.”\textsuperscript{11} Like the actor, the narrator is able to embody self, time,
memory, consciousness, and desire. It is here in the act of seeming “improvisation” that
the unwritten is spoken or written and that the physical and spatial expression of memory
is less focused on the past and more on where we begin anew. The moment of
“improvisation” where past and present stand still, the moment of being and of dreaming,
the middleness of consciousness and sleep, is where the dream narrator questions,
highlights, rearticulates, redefines, and ultimately makes social commentary\textsuperscript{12}.

These notions of slippage and re-embodiment in performance are not only linked
to dream visions, they are complicated by the use of allegory to reconstitute the
dreamscape. Performance is driven by one’s ability to imbue meaning within gestures,
bodies, and setting, and it is articulated through the semioticization of actors. The actor’s

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Christine Chism applies a similar discussion of the merger between past and present to alliterative romances that dramatize a revived past suspended “between a historic connection and catastrophic rupture” (7). Although my focus is on how the dream narrators imbue meaning in the aforementioned suspended rift, it is interesting to see how the ambidexterity of alliterative romances “energize contemporary issues by projecting them into[...] distant, vast, and spectacular historical theaters” much like the fluid landscape of the Middle English dream visions (9). Chism argues that the alliterative romances “explore a matrix of interests both local and national, both historic and contemporary, both political and transcendental, both conservative and innovative”(9). The work of the romances, how they seize historical rupture and continuity, resonates with the work of the dream visions identified in this analysis. Both genres enact “socially interrogative forces” to reconstitute specific binary rifts. For a longer discussion see Christine Chism, \textit{Alliterative Revivals}, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).
body, in a given context, can either attempt to re-embbody sign (that which it tries to signify) or referent (its historical allusion). Unlike the stage, which plays with embodying or emptying out signs and referents to create meaning, allegory often presents its innate, anagogic pull as antagonistic, a sign which pulses toward an elusive referent point. This pull within the dreamscape adds to the multi-layered setting presented in the competing yet complementary landscapes of sleeping and waking. Allegory disassociates the reader from corporeal referentiality within the dreamscape. Ironically, this detachment is superficial and momentary. For readers to make meaning they must stabilize or make corporeal these ghost-like gestures. The instability of allegory becomes pronounced as language. Or rather its representation oscillates between that which is remembered and that which the senses perceive. “The currency of the theater […] may be neurotic to the degree that it presents or represents what may or may not be fantasies – the elusive line of demarcation being whether they are there as actualities or as if they are actualities…So with the playing out of the desire for origin or source or primary being: what might be felt as radical discontinuity in experience is remembered as an elsewhere or an otherwise which remembers back.”13 This too is the problem of allegory where representations stand in for the past but are read through lenses affected by the visors of our current senses or state of being --a ghostly representation. To inhabit this space of memory the actor or narrator must experience a triggering event, exposure to “one small truth of a particular action…the one small thing, a mote in the mind’s eye, ghostly – no more than a word.

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13 Ibid., 134.
that metonymic thing of difference, ceaseless, catastrophic,… [whose] final place is bound by the law of gravity, that irreducibility.”

For synecdochical significance, one must look no farther than theatrical costume. An actor’s clothing or lack of clothing is integral to demarcating meaning in a performance. Clothing, a physical gesture, speaks. Susan Crane’s points to “the material register” of performance where identity and clothing reflect how self-conception intersects with self-presentation. She argues that “[a] chronicle’s account of a courtier’s disguising offers only mediated access to a historical moment, but its very mediations – its explanations of the behavior, its economy of representation, its judgments – constitute a generically shaped discourse of identity.” Crane traces the uses of clothing in the courts of the Hundred Years War. She illustrates the various uses of embroidered mottoes and other heraldic marks of identity and shows how “talking garments” functioned both as bodily concealment and presentation. The duality and elusiveness of language, a representation of the self-conscious and the sign, reflect the further disparity between word and meaning. This disparity is complicated because “the voiced self […] is already an image, worded, before it is heard; that is, subject to the interior ‘writing.’” Complete access to word and meaning is also difficult as we read clothing. A sign on clothing could serve to mystify by completely concealing the significance of the object or motto. The visibility of signs situates identity, but that visibility is made complex because the wearer’s desires -- although placed on the physical surface for public use and

14 Ibid., 137.
15 Crane, The Performance of Self, 1.
16 Blau, “Prescriptions of Theatre,” 129.
consumption -- are partial (a mystery), thereby resistant to full disclosure or scrutiny. Similar to Crane’s evaluation of Charles VI’s wardrobe, one can gather that if emblematic clothing resembles an assemblage of experiences, some chronicled, others not, then, like a manuscript, complete readings are dependent on survival of the text in full, and meaning is also made from a reader’s interpretation of the visual representation. If one’s identity, the assemblage or gathering of one’s experience, is tied to articles of clothing, it is imperative to link this speakerly text with that of narrative performance and construction, especially when the narrative attempts to question or draw attention to the status quo. Clothing acts as allegory, stitching meaning by way of visual articulation. Like allegory, costume has the ability to become a metonymic disguise or a fully articulated text.

The narrator/actor is intrinsic to how a story is articulated but the earlier analysis also points to the onlooker/audience/reader as an essential component of how meaning is made. These participants receive and “read” the allegorical presentation; authorship includes readers as co-writers. By linking performance theory to the dreamscape and the use of allegory, we gain a heightened awareness of the social agency of language. The magnitude of words, how they act, and that they capture (sometimes) a collective identity is important when the individual concern of one narrator is transformed into a narrative of a larger group. The collection of words, whether expressed through sheaths of cloth or leaves of a manuscript, can be used to give voice to the voiceless. This idea of a “collective narrative” extends far beyond the class of gentlemen and women outlined in

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*The Assembly.* The reader is part of the collective – but the narrator reassembles it from a distance in her own creative way.

By pointing to destruction as a way to get to ideas of constructing self and society – the “collective narrative,” we are mirroring the processes (and vulnerabilities) involved in mining a complete narrative from fragmented visions. The synecdochical parts, referred to in this analysis, represent fragmented allegorical pieces, forever estranged from a past fleeting. Narrative engages a productive energy that enlists the dream narrator and reader to stretch across these narrative wastelands. Perhaps social work is engaging an author’s call for interpretive activism. How one reads a narrative or how one stretches across the abyss of meaning defines how pseudo-authorship is activated. Access to the process of narrative construction and the performance of this narrative were at the core of the peasant’s revolt of 1381. For many, the performance of language through imitation, recombination, and distribution became equivalent to a sort of authorship or directorship. For others the violent ripping apart and burning of these words -- the symbolic destruction of language was their only form of access. Steven Justice explains:

> The rebels sought command, command of their own collective lives and of the institutions that constrained them. And so they sought its medium: writing they could promulgate, could give effect in the political world. It is the sort of writing they took care to destroy, and also create. […] This placed them in what had been defined immemorially as a clerkly space, a space of writing and documentary record marked by specialized forms and formulae, by specialized languages and hands, by all the parchment that flowed into the royal chancery and back out again.\(^\text{18}\)

Linking the gestures in *The Assembly* and the gestures of the peasants is hardly far-fetched idealism in terms of the social actions of poetry. While the poem and the rebel

letters concentrate thematically on very different things, they both use texts to interrupt
the voices of the status-quo. In the case of the revolt, to write is replaced by the
performance of the destruction of that which is written. Writing, as Justice puts it, was a
socially charged symbol of freedom. He argues, the “Media of writing and publication
have their own histories and associations, which is to say that they have social meaning;
the medium, not necessarily the message, is a message that encodes the message. The
oxymoron – the appropriation of literacy by those who theoretically had no business with
it – has (and more important, had) the effect of bringing the medium itself to attention,
visible because apparently so out of place: of making the appropriation a gesture.”

The “un-locatability” of the author or authors of the six letters at the heart of the revolt and
the anonymity of the author of The Assembly of Ladies and his/her usage of pseudo-
allegories both express the corporeality of language’s performance: violent and courtly,
written and woven. The rebel letters and The Assembly both have habitable narrative
spaces; they are easily appropriated because the narrative has communal value -- they
call into question issues of access which galvanizes interpretive activism by the reader
and audience. Both texts gesture to possibilities where narrative construction questions or
reaffirms, through performance, our memories of a past -- fleeting.

Using the dream vision as the medium through which these charges are addressed
in The Assembly would seem to take part in the negative misogynist framework
associated with the patriarchal framework of the genre. However, focus on the creative
and productive endeavor of the poem is important. The telling of the tale, mediated

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19 Ibid., emphasis mine.
20 The genre provided very little representations of female medieval dream narrators; the
latter part of the 14th century did see the emergence of Christine de Pisan but for the most
part, the earlier dream visions focused on “male voices” and experiences.
through the dream vision, serves to provide a performative platform where a lady is able to present her thoughts in a non-threatening way to a male figure. The poem purports to address the theme of truth and loyalty of women and the neglect and unfaithfulness of men. Complaints are put into bills of particulars by five ladies and four gentlewomen who seek redress at the court of Lady Loyalty for the injustices committed against them. The allegory is placed in the framework of a dream, and justice takes on a womanly shape. Considering dresses as text, a reading of these women is imperative to how readers surmise narrative opportunities offered through speaking garments. The ladies leave the court enmeshed; they hold each other by the sleeve and finally link each motto together.

This analysis departs from the criticism that sees The Assembly as lacking in proper aesthetics, or too depressingly patriarchal. My analysis is more in line with Colleen Donnelly’s suggestion that the poem offers “veiled commentary on and criticism of the events, powers, and ideologies of the day.” Donnelly does not stress the performativity of linguistic corporeality but does recognize that the “poet has appropriated a patriarchal form to tell of her own experience.” The meeting of lady and knight is not sexual or hostile. Their exchange of thoughts represents the coming together of the two genders; the frame of the poem enables a knight to listen quietly to a woman as the narrator’s body manifests itself through her spoken words to become a speakerly text, a signifier of injustices done to women. In arriving at this ending, the poem diverges from the depressing closures of romance predecessors such as Yonec, because it seems to intimate that men are ultimately teachable.

22 Ibid., 38.
Criticism of the narrative frame as wholly patriarchal in *The Assembly* is valid. *The Assembly* evokes images of an earlier dream-protagonist in the Breiton lai, *Yonec*. While the lai and *The Assembly* are not from the same genre, one a narrative poem and the other a dream vision, the dream portion of the lai can be used to highlight the successful creative gestures accomplished in *The Assembly* that are not apparent to many critics. The lai can be treated as an early predecessor to *The Assembly*; both have feminized voices and attempt to question the legitimacy of male authority within a dreamed landscape.

In Marie de France’s *Yonec*, the fair maiden who is imprisoned creates a dreamlike fantasy to question male authority; this questioning is ultimately marred by blood. This dreamlike fantasy enables the maiden to evade the powers of her captor by having a physical relationship with a courtly knight thereby violating her forced commitment to her captor. Physically and legally bound to her husband, the maiden constructs an alternative narrative through fantasy to circumvent her oppressive marriage.

Through her laments the maiden envisions her knightly suitor:

Quan ele ot fait sa pleinte issi,  
L’umbre d’un grant oisel choisi  
Par mi une estreite fenestre;  
Ele ne seit que ceo pout estre.  
En la chambre volant entra;  
Giez ot as piez, ostur sembla,  
...  
Il s’est devant la dame asis.  
Quant il i ot un poi esté  
E ele l’ot bien esgardé  
Chevaliers bels e genz devint. (105-115)

When she’d finish her lament  
she saw, through a narrow window,
the shadow of a great bird.
She didn’t know what it was.
It flew into the chamber;
its feet were banded; it looked like a hawk

...When it had been there a while
and she’d stared hard at it,
it became a handsome and noble knight. (Ll. 105-115)

In *Yonec*, Marie de France presents courtly love, a patriarchal construct, as a solution to unhappiness. To participate in this courtly love, the maiden’s physical body bears out the transformative powers of her dream. “La dame a merveille le tint;/Li sens li remut e fremi,/Grant pour ot, sun chief covri” (Ll. 116-118). The coldness of her blood and the shroud of darkness created through fright are comparable to a death scene. This death scene is a precursor to the type of resolution Marie will offer the maiden at the end of the text. Although Marie rewrites the creation story by having the knight proclaim “U Adam nus mist, nostre pere,/Par le mors de la pumme amere (Ll. 151-152). This sort of narrative editing, which breaks the historical mode, is short-lived. The maiden becomes impaled by sorrow as her cuckolded husband becomes a patriarchal hunter. The purity of the maiden’s exchanges with her knight is tainted, and redemptive love is murdered.

Upon the knight’s final visit he is killed.

En la fenestre vint volant.
Mes les broches furent devant:
L’une le fiert par mi le cors,
Li sans vermeilz en sailli fors!
Quant il se sot a mort nafrez,

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24 “The lady was astonished;/her blood went cold, she trembled,/she was frightened – she covered her head”(l.116-118).

25 “That Adam, our father, led us to the bitter apple,” (Ll. 151)
Desferre sei, en zest entrez.
Devant la dame el lit descent,
Que tuit li drap furent sanglent. (Ll. 309-316)

He flew into the window
but the spikes were there.
One wounded him in his breast –
out rushed the red blood.
He knew he was fatally wounded;
he pulled himself free and entered the room.
He alighted on the bed, in front of the lady,
staining the bedclothes with blood. (Ll.309-316)

Although the embodied force of the maiden’s desires does offer temporary fulfillment,
Marie offers readers a despondent world where ultimately patriarchal husbands guard
female bodies, and knightly suitors are killed. The maiden is cast as procreator and bearer
of sorrow whose happiness is ultimately obtained through death. Although the maiden is
offered some revenge through her son, the misogynistic patriarchal frame still premises
death as escape.

Marie’s use of escape through dreams closes down the possibilities of female
discourse as an opportunity to interrupt male authority fully, while the courtly exchanges
in The Assembly engage these ideas head-on. The narrator describes the setting of the
poem as one September noon at the onset of fall. Ladies, according to their fancy, are
perusing the maze in a garden, walking two by two. They are evidently in the company of
knights and squires. Instantly, readers align the high status of the knights with the ladies;
one infers that the ladies are all of worthy character, although one of the knights
questions the presence of the narrator in the garden. By addressing the narrator, the
knight subtly asserts that the garden/maze is a closed space. The narrator recognizes that
the knight’s curiosity about her presence in the maze, as well as his questioning of her paleness, are efforts to define the space. Hence her reply: “I seyde ageyne, as it fil in my thought: / ‘To walke aboute the mase, in certeynte, / As a womman that nothyng rought’”(Ll.16-18). Here the woman appeases the knight by noting her non-hierarchical position in the garden. As the knight notices the narrator’s pallid color and questions whom she is seeking, the narrator redefines her role in the garden. Her reply sets the stage for her performance of the tale. She beckons the knight to abide and listen to the “playne of this matiere” (l. 28). What ensues marks her wanderings in the garden and her ultimate separation from the group. The narrator describes her relief and exhaustion as she reaches a secure and hidden spot in the garden:

And as they sought hem self thus to and fro
I gate my self a litel avauntage;
Al for-weyred, I myght no further go,
Though I had wonne right grete for my viage;
So come I forth into a streyte passage,
Which brought me to an herber feyre and grene
Made with benchis ful craftily and clene. (Ll. 43-49)

McMillan explains the narrator’s exhaustion and separation as a result of the uneven and inconclusive nature of the poem. The uneasiness of the narrator is explained as a reaction to the far from easy lot of women. In this assertion, McMillan is trying desperately to give a smooth reading of the poem. However, the narrator’s seeming uneasiness and separation cannot be equated wholly to the conditions of women nor are these tactical moves wholly negative. In conjunction with these tactical moves, the geography of the

garden enables her physical separation from the group. Although the narrator, like her fellows, shares the confines of the maze, she becomes the sole member of this “earthly paradise” of “sunlight,” “trees, a flowery meadow, rich fragrances and colors, birds’ songs, breezes, and water in the form of a fountain or spring.”28 The narrator does not engage directly with her bewildered fellows; instead she retreats. This retreat figures estrangement as the first step towards establishing an individualized response to a social problem. She describes her solitude:

A litel while thus was I alone  
Beholdying wele this delectable place;  
My felawshyp were comyng everichone  
So must me nede abide as for a space,  
Remembryng of many dyvers cace  
Of tyme past, musyng with sighes depe,  
I set me downe and there fil in slepe. (Ll. 71-77)

Although the narrator describes this fellowship of women who perambulate different parts of the maze, she places emphasis on how the design of the maze enables self-reflection. The narrator speaks of a fellowship, yet emphasis is placed on her separation from it. The women are never clearly described; readers see only fragmented images of the ladies -- indiscriminate women walking two by two. Readers imagine feet jumping rails, feet walking inward, feet walking outward; the women and their feet are pictured far-behind, far-forward, and walking both east and west simultaneously.

Som went inward and went they had gon oute,  
Som stode amyddis and loked al aboute;  
And soth to sey som were ful fer behynde  
And right anon as ferforth as the best;  
Other there were, so mased in theyr mynde,  
Al weys were goode for hem, both est and west.  
Thus went they furth and had but litel rest,

28 Ibid., 28.
And som theyr corage dide theym so assaile
For verray wrath they stept o\(\)ver the rayle. (Ll. 34-42)

Like the synecdochical walking shadows, the narrator provides a fragmented vision of the women’s state of mind; the interiority of the women is reduced to mere adjectives yet this articulation does not present the women’s frame of mind as one-dimensional. The idea of a fragmented female experience provides the mechanisms by which a collective assemblage (the joining of the sleeves), denote an individualized mode of authorship that opens a space of potential feminized experience worth noting. The narrator’s multiple role -- her ability to walk actively, maintain a birds-eye view, as well as maintain an interior view of her fellowship -- actually facilitates the unification of the images presented. The narrator “mediates our experience of the text, but resists interpretation through a single lens, because she does not function as a unified character.”\(^{29}\) This narratorial dispersion of viewpoint is a move toward individuated authorship. Her mediation of the dream, allows the reader to move across narrative frames. Ultimately, that movement will be coalesced by the joining of the sleeves and the concretization of the dream to a literal text. The text becomes the mimetic vehicle where readers can partake of a dreamt dream, with the dream narrator physical removed from the moment of “writing” and dreaming.

This tactical move towards authorship is further made evident by the use and non-use of the mottoes on the women clothing. The women are asked to dress all in blue each with a motto on her sleeve. Unlike Countenance who wears a motto, “\textit{A moy que je voy}”(l. 308), the narrator is dressed only in blue and she indicates that her dress is a

\(^{29}\) Wendy A. Matlock, ”"And Long to Sue It Is a Wery Thing": Legal Commentary in The Assembly of Ladies" \textit{Studies in Philology} 101.1 (Winter 2004), 22.
sufficient reflection of her truthfulness. Although the wearing of blue symbolized truthfulness, dressing in blue seems like a calculated insertion by the narrator to blur the identities of the ladies and gentlewomen. In contrast to my evaluation, McMillan argues that the narrator’s refusal to wear a motto indicates “her sense of differentness and apartness from the other [allegorical females].”

There are varying discussions on the narrator’s refusal of the motto. Simone Marshall sees it as an act transgressing the “architectural and social boundaries of Pleasaunt Regarde.” Marshall goes on to stipulate that this transgression excludes and distances the narrator from a means of communication, and perhaps this is the narrator’s objection to the internalization of masculine values. Wendy Matlock’s ideas are somewhat aligned with Marshall’s because she too sees the refusal as a transgressive move; however, she argues that the narrator is motivated by her unwillingness to comply with the court’s prescribed rules. Matlock misses the mark by arguing that the narrator’s refusal is also an assertion that one must not commit anything to writing unless absolutely necessary, and Marshall fails to see the possibilities of narrative because she sees the refusal as one made by a narrator who cannot represent herself using a feminine voice. Evans and Lesley note the restrictions of the mottoes but they also see both their use and non-use as a way to navigate away from these restrictions. They argue that “the function of the mottoes is also ideological, in that they emblematise, in stark terms, the codes of conduct which shape these women’s lives and the limited positions available to aristocratic women in a dominant male

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30 McMillan, “Fayre Sisters Al,” 39
32 Matlock, "'And Long to Sue,’” 31. Matlock also argues that her refusal could also be a criticism of wealth and refinement displayed at court.
33 Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors,” 179.
culture. [...] The subjectivity of the narrator, then, becomes a focus for the (mild) questioning of a particular form of late medieval femininity which is simultaneously constructed with the text and exposed as a construction.”34 The narrator’s choice not to wear a motto can be tied to her earlier moves towards solitude -- the creation of an individualized creative space. Her solitude and later her refusal to wear a motto are real power moves that re-categorize ideas of vacancy as a self-emptying precursor to universality. It is in this juxtaposition of use and non-use that Donnelly sees the importance of the absence of the motto as a way to purport anonymity that opens up the space of “authorship.” The narrator’s anonymity, the absence of a tie to class or a particular complaint or motto, opens up the possibilities of female narrative through a presentation that enables the “universality of her voice and dream.”35 To say that the narrator’s act of refusal seems to limit narrative scope is faulty; “she will take up the pen rather than a needle to record her experience and make a book, thereby adopting for female uses a normally masculine mode of expression.”36

The narrator’s self-performance and lack of conglomerative relations with the “felawes” is further highlighted by interactions with Perseverance. It is only in the dream that we see the narrator overcoming the sense of isolation by speaking to other women. These conversations occur in the dreamscape to mediate their transgressive potential. By envisioning the participants as sad and demure, the readers are distracted from the intent of authorial interruption.

36 Ibid., 51.
And as I slept me thought ther com to me
A gentil womman metely of stature;
Of grete worship she semed for to be,
Atired wele, nat hye but bi mesure,
Hir countenaunce ful sad and ful demure,
Hir colours blewe, al that she had upon;
Theyr com no mo but hir silf alon. (Ll. 78-84)

The narrator imagines a fictive woman in clothing embroidered with “remember-me’s” (the same flower in her garden of retreat) who wears the motto “very loyally.” Her name is Perseverance. The narrator questions where and with whom she dwells; Perseverance answers that she dwells with Lady Loiaulte, who charged her by her commandment to warn the “felawes” “everichon” to come to her court all dressed in blue ready to plead their case. Lady Loiaulte promises the appeasement of the women’s pained hearts although female authority does not have a viable history of adjudicating matters of the heart.

Perseverance treats the narrator as one on a solitary quest. Perseverance asserts that a woman of wise and discreet conduct, Diligence, will accompany the narrator to Lady Loiaulte’s court. This inference can be made because the other “felawes” are not the ones who will provide the narrator with companionship and direction; it is Diligence who performs this act. Also, it is Perseverance, not the narrator, who hurriedly leaves to tell the other “felawes” the plan of action:

‘… Farwele, now have I done.’
‘Abide,’ quod I, ‘ye may nat go so soone.’

‘Whi so?’ Quod she, ‘and I have fer to go
To yeve warnyng in many dyvers place
To youre felawes and so to other moo,
And wele ye wote I have but litel space.’(Ll. 139-144)
The narrator underscores social conglomeration as a questionable process, and positions self-isolated surveillance of authorship/narrative authority as viable ground for social work. The narrator remains estranged from her “felawes” and it is only after her introduction to Remembrance and Avisenesse that the "felawes" come in two by two, after which they depart to their chambers to put on their guises of blue. As the court begins to gather, there is a conflation of the identities of the women who also enter the court in blue:

   And whan she departed and was agone  
   We sawe folkes comyng without the wal,  
   So grete people that nombre couthe we none.  
   Ladyes they were and gentil wymmen al  
   Clothed in bliew everiche, her wordes withal;  
   But for to knowe theyr wordis or devise  
   They com so thycke we myght in no wise. (Ll. 393-399)

   Like the conflation of the crowd (evident in their dressing in blue and their thickness as a conglomeration), the breakdown of the individualities of the ladies begins to be more lucid as the bill is about to be presented. The narrator again asserts, this time to Countenance, that she herself has nothing to present, but that her clothing of blue is more than sufficient cause to be at court. After Perseverance leaves, the narrator is “left al alone” (l. 190). Diligence, not the fellowship, appears to assist the narrator. Both women embark on their journey to the paradise of Pleasaunt Regard. Again we must ask where are the "felawes"?

   The journey to Loiaulte’s castle involves Pleasaunt Regard, and several more allegorical figures: Countenance, Discrecioun, Aqueyntaunce, Largesse Bealchiere,
Remembrance, Avisenesse, and Attemperance. The narrator, dressed in blue, is approached by her “sisters,” Discrecioun, Aqueyntaunce, and Countenance; they are allegorical props, which enable her smooth transition into Lady Loiaulte’s chambers. Countenance echoes, perhaps, what the knight and readers were questioning as the tale unfolded. Countenance asks, “‘Yowre felawship, where bien they now?’” (l. 296).

The narrator answers:

‘Forsoth,’ quod I, ‘they bien comyng echeone,
But in certeyne I knowe nat where they be.
At this wyndow whan they come ye may se;
Here wil I stande awaityng ever among,
For wele I wote they wil nat now be long.’ (Ll. 297-301)

Instead of further addressing the “absence” of her fellows (as she averts her own attention from the road out the window), the narrator recalibrates the readers’ focal point by musing on Countenance’s dress. Interestingly, it is the narrator who is the bearer of the petition, and it is she who is briefed on the organization of the court. Only the complaints of the ladies and the gentlewomen are accounted for in the bill. This is further evidence as to why, at the onset of the poem, the narrator is the one who is pallid and exhausted because she bears the psychological weight of the fellowship. Yet the narrator positions herself as a naïve female. Self-enfeeblement disguises the transgressive pulses of self-authorship. One example of a self-diminishing stance is when the narrator asks Perseverance whether men will accompany “them” on their journey. Upon Perseverance’s assertion that “‘nat one[…]may come among yow alle’” (l. 147), the narrator reacts almost in disbelief and questions why. However, it is clear that this is a tactic on the part of the narrator, because if she were a supporter of male presence, she

would not have been so perturbed at the onset of the poem, so much so that her duress
(stimulated by her complaints against men) causes her pallor and exhaustion. Quite
appropriately, Perseverance asserts that she does not meddle beyond her duty. This is
obviously a formulaic dismissal.

Less diminutive tactical power moves are evident in the narrator’s encounter with
the images of forlorn women of the early romances. The collage of stories on Lady
Loiaulte’s wall-of-women-deceived mimics the collage of women who present their case
to the court. In other words, the allegorical women depicted as victims of love on the wall
echo the nine women in the hall. The narrator cunningly creates allegorical selves to do to
the poem what the wall does to the stories of women displeased. Her story then becomes
representative of other women as a synecdoche of their lives. Writing on the wall in
Chaucer’s *House of Fame* serves a similar purpose and shows how these types of subtext
bear relevance to the creation of new narrative composition. In the *House of Fame*, in the
Temple of Venus, the narrator recounts the story of Dido and Aeneas. Both the Ovidian
and Virgilian interpretations of the tale are evoked. The ability of language to represent
simultaneously two contradictory interpretations, two contradictory “truths,” allows the
narrator to question the authority of both texts as he reinterprets and posits his artistic
literary truth. By calling attention to the “mediation of the observer/transcriber and the
text he claims as his source” the narrator “assumes [some] authorial privileges.”38
Jacqueline Miller acknowledges that “[t]he wavering and ambivalence that characterize
the narrator’s efforts to assume full authorial rights over the text also restrain and betray

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38 Jacqueline T. Miller, "The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in
Chaucer’s *House of Fame,*" *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and
Literary Criticism*, 17:2 (Fall 1982), 107.
that effort; and they indicate that such a position is as untenable as subservience to an outside source seems to be.\textsuperscript{39} While Chaucer’s narrator in the \textit{House of Fame} attempts to manipulate historical narrative, the narrator of \textit{The Assembly} glosses these stories because they represent mere stereotypes. The narrator in \textit{The Assembly} is able to negotiate the depictions of these types of stories more easily because the author simply allows her to have a veiled version of the story. She illustrates that these stories are not platforms on which to build narrative unless they are partially hidden.\textsuperscript{40} The fragmentary and sketched out synecdoche of grievance is actually much more functional than delving into and getting caught in such narratives – as Chaucer does over and over again in \textit{Anelida and Arcite} and \textit{The Legend of Good Women}.

Wheron was graven of storyes many oon: 
First how Phillis of wommanly pite 
Deyd pitously for the love of Demephon; 
Next after was the story of Thesbe, 
How she slowe hir self under a tre; 
Yit sawe I more how in pitous case 
For Antony was slayne Cleopatrace;

That other syde was how Melusene 
Untriewly was disceyved in hir bayne; 
Ther was also Anelada the quene 
Upon Arcite how sore she did complayne; 
Al these storyes wer graven ther certayne 
And many mo than I reherce yow here - 
It were to long to telle yow al in feere.

And bicaus the wallis shone so bright 
With fyne umple they were al over-spredde 
To that entent folk shuld nat hurt theyr sight, 
And thurgh that the storyes myght be redde. (Ll.456-473)

\textsuperscript{39} Miller, "The Writing on the Wall," 108.
\textsuperscript{40} Partiality allows for the acknowledgement of the stories that came before; it also allows for a template where authors and readers can write a newly edited version of the story.
The Assembly’s veil of allegory, its duality and elusiveness, enables the narrator to question the status quo and formulate a narrative which both calls attention to and offers possibilities for a narrative performance that provides context and makes an experience textual. Marshall asserts that “The veil of umple demonstrates an awareness of the veil of allegory, but it is not the same thing as integumentum. The purpose of integumentum is to discover the truth of a text; it is a means of interpretation that allows one to reveal what lies underneath the narrative. Yet the umple veil does the exact opposite. It is, in every way possible, a feminine version of integumentum, except in its resulting effect. The umple conceals the stories beneath it, it does not reveal them.”

The complaints of broken hearts, broken promises, non-reward of virtue, sadness, instability, ungratefulness and vain labor all point to the general complaints of women. The narrator presents these complaints in a half-obsured presentation so as to promote the ease of transition to the narrator’s current narrative — an individual self-authored encounter that captures the vast social concerns of female denigration made ineffective because of the traditional encyclopedic approach to female-male encounter. This encyclopedic version suffers from the dreariness of repetition that makes readers want to just subsume all these template stories into one grand et cetera. The history entailed in these encyclopedic versions is nonetheless important, hence our ability to read the story through the veil. But piercing the veil and baring the mystery is not The Assembly’s trajectory; this narrative is focused on facilitating a new merger of allegorical tropes into a single subjectivity.

Out of this merger, the fragmentary nature of the poem is illustrated as each bill is presented. In this domestic sphere, the figures are not distinguishable by virtue. We

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41 Marshall, "Interiors, Exteriors,” 181.
never really get a vision of the maidens, only a representation of them via their mottoes. Mottoes such as “One without changing” and “it needs no words” could be read as an affirmation of self-independence rather than aligned to male misogyny. However, these pliable mottoes are too open-ended to stipulate either/or; the thing which is most notable about these mottoes is that they enable the presentation of the maidens’ complaints – by providing narrative space where a story could be written of the everywoman -- a universal tale more focused on construction than resolution. Yet mottoes such as, “Sanz que jamais,” “Une sans chaungier,” “Oncques puis lever,” “Entierment vostre,” “C’est sanz dire,” “En dieu est,” “Sejour ensure,” and “Bien monest” suggest typical virtues that all women must adhere to if they must be chaste, silent, and obedient. Marshall indicates that an earlier poem from the fourteenth century, *What the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, and its idealized masculine rules and virtues resemble the names of the women who inhabit Pleasaunt Regarde. These names act as a “series of masculine regulations to be imposed upon women in which rules of external behavior are prescribed to impact upon the internal state of mind.”

In the latest translation of the Codex Ashmole 61 version of *What the Good Wife Taught her Daughter*, also referred to as *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*, the matriarchal figure spends 209 lines framing a series of directives that encompass how wives must be in servitude to their husbands. There are instructions within these lines that also provide guidelines on how to be a good citizen: being kind to the poor, attending church, and staying away from practices of ageism or idleness. While there are some discussions of what I will refer to as universal virtues, for

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the most part the virtues outlined in this manual frame the overarching idea that divergence from them is akin to harlotry. The matriarch asserts:

My dere doughter, of this take kepe.  
If any man profer thee to wede,  
A curtas ansuer to hym be seyde,  
And schew hym to thy frendys alle.  
For anything that may befawle,  
Syt not by hym, ne stand thou nought  
In sych place ther synne mey be wroght.  
What man that thee doth wedde with rynge,  
Loke thou hym love aboven all thinge.  
If that it forteyn thus with thee,  
That he be wroth and angry be,  
Loke thou meekly ansuer hym,  
And meve hymn other lyth ne lymme,  
And that schall sclake hym of hys mode;  
Thank schall thou be hys derlyng gode. (L.26-40)

These directives provide binding instructions on how to be a virtuous wife and woman. It isn’t necessarily a wholistic approach that covers all facets of human behavior but instead premises wifehood as the defining characteristic as to whether one is a good woman. The Assembly subtly criticizes this compartmentalizing of female behavior by presenting synecdochical virtues -- splintered women walking to and forth. Although the mottoes fit in the framework of the rules of being a good woman, what is interesting is that, although each virtue is seemingly presented by an individual woman, it is conceivable that the women are not “real” women but represent feminine virtues. Conceptually, a woman might possess only one of these virtues, but it seems ridiculous that a woman would be marked by only one virtue, especially women of such high character and "trowthfulness."

43 All quotes will be taken from “How the Good Wife Taught her Daughter,” ed., George Shuffelton in Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008).  
44 How the Good Wife stresses the importance of oral transmittal of directives while the Assembly utilizes orality to express displeasure while figuring textuality as the more provocative gesture, evidenced by the joining of the women’s sleeves.
Donnelly examines the allegorical figures and notes that it wouldn’t be unusual for these figures to have a role in legal courts and that in fact all the figures identified have a servile place in royal households. “The figures’ station in relation to the dream narrator positions them in roles of servitude […] such role reversal is unusual in dream poems, where dreamers are generally presented as subservient to their allegorical teachers. In contrast to that tradition, the allegorical personages of this poem are not teachers but attendants, employed in Loiaulte’s household and court of justice.”

Perhaps the most anti-climatic moment of the poem, the delay in judgment, represents the ending compliance with the order of male power. Readers tread through this awkward dream, yet receive little or no reprieve. The Narrator reveals her state of mind, by showing that this is her personal bill even though she herself has presented no formal complaint to the court.

‘Nothyng so lief as death to come to me
For fynal end of my sorwes and peyne;
What shuld I more desire, as seme ye -
And ye knewe al aforne it for certeyne
I wote ye wold, and for to telle yow pleyne,
Without hir help that hath al thyng in cure
I can nat thynk that it may long endure;

And for my trouth, preved it hath bien wele -
To sey the soth, it can be no more -
Of ful long tyme, and suffred every dele
In pacience and kept it al in store;
Of hir goodenesse besechyng hir therfor
That I myght have my thank in suche wise
As my desert deservith of justice.’ (Ll. 694-707)

When the bills are each read, Lady Loiaulte answers the "felawes" collectively. She recognizes that these complaints are a mere synecdoche of a larger complaint. The excuse

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given by Lady Loiaulte is that “She thought it to moche in hir entent” to reply to the
"felawes" individually (l. 711). Lady Loiaulte replies with a conventional answer to the
complaints. This reply indicates that the narrator does not use the space of the poem to
directly challenge male/female roles. Instead the poem tries to put these roles in
conversation with each other. Lady Loiaulte does not vindicate the wrongs of women; she
notes that they are valid but she delays justice.

‘We have wele sen youre billis by and by
And som of hem ful pitous for to here.
We wil therfor ye knowen this al in feere:
Withyn short tyme oure court of parlament
Here shal be holde in oure paleys present,

And in al this wherin ye fynde yow greved
There shal ye fynde an open remedy,
In suche wise as ye shul be relieved
Of al that ye reherce heere triewly.
As of the date ye shal knowe verily,
Than ye may have a space in your comyng,
For Diligence shall bryng it yow bi writyng.’ (Ll. 717-728)

Matlock argues that the delay in judgment offered within this poem has historical context,
and that the “inept” and “uncooperative narrator” is a reflection of the legal system. She
argues:

When the poem’s irresolution is considered in conjunction with the contemporary
legal system’s delays – a problem of real-life petitioners in actual courts – it
becomes clear that fictional court suffers the same imperfection. In this context,
the disjunction between the idealized presentation of the court and its failure to
dispense justice is jarring, and the poem leaves the discontinuity unresolved. Lady
Loiaulte’s justice is as burdensome and ineffective as her fifteenth-century
counterparts’; the fantasy court is no more successful than real ones.46

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46 Matlock, "'And Long to Sue,'” 22.
Interestingly, Matlock sees delay as a necessary evil as it establishes a system of petitions that offered litigants an opportunity to engage (repeatedly) with the legal system, decreasing the likelihood of violence between both parties. The poem’s weaknesses limit narrative conflict. The women receive catharsis from lodging their complaints and they contribute to a narrative that is more substantial than that of victims etched on a wall.

The narrative that the narrator creates is offered not just for her own use but for “all her fayre sisters.” It creates a locus of female fellowship where pen and needle, the public and domestic, are given some equivalency. The unusual irresolution of the text, its allegorical vacuity, its stereotyped narrative is tactically potential rather than inept. The weaving together of words, the intersection of self-conception and self-presentation, appropriate language and bring to the surface the issues expressed within the writing – the gesture that Justice refers to is here, not in violent form, but present waiting to be decoded and “published.” Perez links embroidery to writing effectively. She states, “embroidery occupied precisely that category of the external and material. Indeed, it not only concealed meaning, as letters could do, but furthermore, it amplified and embellished any surface. Embroidery magnified and exaggerated the superficial excellence of the material and the visual; it was the surface of surfaces, the top of the costume, the ultimate outer layer displaying its own formal beauty and accuracy as a

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47 Legal delays are discussed at length in Matlock who cites the Whilton dispute as an example. See pages 24-27.
unique and essential value, belittling any other virtue.” However, she still notes that readers should not ignore the delay in judgment because it shows the women acquiescing to male authority. Embroidery remains a symbol of captivity; however, the coming together of the women, sleeve to sleeve, expresses ideals far beyond simply embellishment. There is a real move from authorial self-evacuation to a coalescence universal voice, represented by the oral process where the narrator declares to the knight the name of the booke, “La semble de Dames.” These ideals include a woman-centered universality that has the capacity to create new forums, more conducive to their aims, experiences, and voices within the public sphere. Evans and Johnson see the possibilities in this “new” narrative although it offers little vindication. They argue that “attention to the historical contexts of the Assembly of Ladies – to its writers, readers, literary traditions, shaping circumstances – realigns the text and offers us a work which hovers on the edge of critique, which is cautious, not to say unclear, about its position but which opens up a distinctively female space for the exploration of gender relations. The equivocal authorial voice allows for the deconstruction of historical and ideological categories, revealing the possibility that courtly women are not ‘naturally’ submissive, uncomplaining or incapable of protest at the strictures of their social world.”

The narrator’s rehearsal of her “booke” is a dress rehearsal for word play -- narrative construction that enables the creation of a female literary space, written and woven, etched both on fabric and paper. This newly woven anti-normative social space can admit, hear, and eventually offer visions of social justice that acknowledges women’s

agencies and needs. It acknowledges the tradition of its literary precursors -- the
encyclopedic attempts to document the stories of forlorn women, such as Chaucer’s
Legend of Good Women, but suggests that these accounts celebrate unwittingly the
disempowerment of women. The Assembly gives readers an insight into self-authorship,
and shows that, while authorship enlists a communal response and often promises social
implications, writing as protest must first emerge from an individual narrative if social
commentary is to move beyond the antiquated et cetera.
Chapter 3:
Voys Lessons: Whirling Words in Chaucer’s “House of Rumour”

Perhaps language cannot redeem language, so that poetry cannot redeem society; fiction may only entertain. But all allegorists do aim at redemption; and because they must work with language, they ultimately turn to the paradox at the heart of their own assumptions about words and make the final focus of their narratives not merely the social function of language, but, in particular, the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor. They scrutinize language’s own problematic polysemy.¹

The dreamscape of the House of Fame provides access to poetic process while warning against poor poetic proliferation. Few critics have evaluated the full scope of Chaucer’s narrative gesture in relation to the subtle representation of hearing as a performed gesture which links the lability of sound to the dissemination, transposition, and authorship of stories. Fault, however, lies with the poem itself for the lack of focus on this topic. The poem’s incompleteness draws attention to the question of who the “man of gret auctorite” is and whether Chaucer even intended completeness or not. Much has been said about Geffrey’s unsophisticated gestures.

Alfred David suggests that “Chaucer gives himself the character of an ignorant imitator of the courtly school of writing, and the work is exactly what we are led to expect from such an unsophisticated pen. The hero works hard to cast a romantic spell over his adventures, but his efforts are constantly being defeated by a scandal-conscious

Dido, a pedantic eagle, or a vulgar goddess.” While David gives some credit to moments where the dream vision is enlivened by the narrator’s awareness of parody, he believes the writing is lopsided in its accomplishments. “Taken as a serious vision poem, it is certainly an unwieldy and sadly disproportionate piece of work. But parody is a form in which the laws of literary craftsmanship are suspended, and the violations of good sense and decorum are precisely what add spice to the game.” David Bevington comments that “the comic perspective […] allowed Chaucer to have his joke both ways: to inform his audience on a series of interesting topics, and at the same time to view all realms of knowledge with humorous detachment, by the device of a befuddled pedant.” Leslie K. Arnovick focuses on the process of telling, the use of “speke,” “seye,” “herkeneth,” and “listeth” as the “mark of human speech.” For her, Chaucer’s anxiety is centered on oral culture: “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.” Ebbe Klitgard sees the lack of an ending as a reflection of a lost audience, “no audience, no end to the poem!” For Klitgard, narrative voice is truncated because of a

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6 Arnovick, “'In Forme of Speche',” 325.
7 Ebbe Klitgård, "Chaucer's Narrative Voice in the House of Fame," *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism*, 32.3 (1998), 265. See also: Ebbe Klitgård, "Chaucer as Performer: Narrative Strategies in the Dream Visions," *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 47 (2003), 101-113. Klitgard indicates that the repeated use of the first person pronoun transforms the narrator into a poet performer. This is similar to David Bevington’s analysis that the use of the first person helps to create a voice or persona. He sees the proem and invocation as a defining tool in the reaction of the
lack of a receptive ear. Similarly, in Elizabeth Buckmaster’s analysis, one can gather a sense of disappointment. She argues that “there are rhetorical flourishes, a scientific lecture, a parade that goes on far too long, a misreading of a classical epic, a parody of Dante.”

This sentiment is echoed by Steven Kruger; “though the poem repeatedly promises divine revelation, it never delivers on that promise … the poem’s complex trajectory tends to collapse on itself and turn back inward, back into self-exploration.”

Kruger does salvage meaning from this collapse by signaling that “Chaucer creates a borderland where he explores the burdens and potentials of humanness and of the human imagination, from a vantage point that allows him to look, and even more, toward heaven, but without forgetting the limitations imposed by human beings’ embodiment as individuals living necessarily among the unreliable things of the world.”

Kruger’s notion of a borderland is a good starting point for my analysis that envisions the author using these gaps and vantage points as rich ground for literary bricolage. This reading takes into consideration ideas of “borderland” and removed vantage point as staged devices which facilitate the narrator’s stance, his ability to shroud himself in obtuseness

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to enter into the volatile whirlwind, engage with uncontrollable language and landscape, while elevating the idea of listening as a critical component of the sculpting of a literary bricolage.

*Countering the Whirlwind*

Literary bricolage is the narrator’s counter-measure to the chaotic linguistic whirlwind presented in the House of Rumour. This whirlwind is facilitated by the dreamscape which provides fluidity to the dream of words and enables the oscillation between the real and the conjured, the past and the present, the writing and the performance of rewriting and rereading. Maureen Quilligan’s description of the tensions between literalness and metaphor exemplifies the texture of the Macrobian *somnium* – a dream space which enables and exacerbates the materialization of fiction. It is appropriate that Geffrey begins his narrative with a discussion of the value of dreams, perhaps questioning their design as a potential vehicle for revelation, and in this argument, the potential for authors to gain access to modes of fame, fortune, and new “tydynges.” Kruger’s position on allegorical usage in the dreamscape parallels Quilligan’s observation of “slipperiness” but goes further to define process (the innate texture of allegorical usage) not merely as modus operandi but more so as a creative space. Kruger posits:

In choosing to represent a dream, an author also chose to depict a realm located between the divine and the mundane. Definable as neither a miraculous revelation nor merely a psychosomatic dream, the middle vision involves both higher and lower portions of the cosmos, taking place on a field of action neither confined to earth nor hopelessly beyond human reach. Navigating a course between unambiguously upward- and downward-looking visions, the middle vision offers
a way of exploring the connections between the world in which we find ourselves and the transcendent realm for which we yearn.\textsuperscript{11}

The position of the house of Fame “[b]etwixen hevene and erthe and see” (l. 715) captures “what so cometh from any tonge” (l. 721).\textsuperscript{12} The house, like the middle vision, is located in a suspended realm that looks upward and downward simultaneously. The Eagle understands that this suspended quality is the nature of artistic language – a language that is built from elements that want to find their “kyndely stede” (Ll.731).

As thus: loo, thou maist alday se
That any thing that hevy be,
As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte,
And bere hyt never so hye on highte,
Lat goo thy hand, hit falleth doun.

... Or smoke or other thynges lyghte;
Alwey they seke upward on highte,
While ech of hem is at his large:
Lyght thing upward, and downward charge.

... Thus every thing, by thys reson,
Hath his propre mansyon
To which hit seketh to repaire,
Ther-as hit shulde not apaire. (l. 737-756, emphasis mine)

The processes that enable language to find its “kyndely stede” are problematic because language is intent on proliferation. Its nature, like a stone thrown on water, creates ripples. This is also the problem of allegory and signification, the innate difficulty of sign and referent to become wholly unified.

And thus fro roundel to compas,
Ech aboute other goyng
Causeth of othres sterynge

\textsuperscript{11} Kruger, \textit{Dreaming}, p. 130.
\textsuperscript{12} All quotations from Chaucer are taken from \textit{The Riverside Chaucer}, ed. Larry D Benson, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
And multiplyinge ever moo,
Til that hyt be so fer ygoo
That hyt at bothe brynkes bee.
Although thou mowe hyt not ysee
Above, hyt gooth yet alway under,
Although thou thenke hyt a gret wonder. (Ll. 798-806)

Vulnerability and Infinity: Writing as Sound

Chaucer suggests that the linguistic mode, the written representation of sound, is volatile. Sound resists stasis and is fueled by its ability to multiply. All writing then is vulnerable to misuse, misreading, and misappropriation. The narrator, a progenitor of sound, attempts to restrict language’s explication beyond the intended signification – his creative thrust which espouses meaning. The rippling of “voys,” “noyse,” “word,” or “soun,” their upward and outward movement into the *House of Fame*, figure the narrator as one whose ear must be receptive to the movement of sound, and its arbitrary hierarchization by those claiming authority over its expression, Fame and Fortune. Laurel Amtower notes the arbitrariness of language imbued with Fame: “These small narratives—those speech genres so powerful in their ability to shape and homogenize behavior—are as arbitrarily established by the laws of chance and human intervention as the canonical texts that make it into the House of Fame.”

Concerning the instability of narrative in Chaucer’s poem, Robert Clifford suggests:

It is important for Chaucer’s exploration of Fame that the narration questions the truth of texts. Fame’s foundations are based in texts. She makes the texts famous and the fame of texts proves that she exists. Events are remembered through texts, poets are remembered because of texts. Authorities become authorities because of the fame of texts and their fame is an example of her power. However, if Chaucer questions the possibilities of those texts and those authorities through his narration, then Fame’s power is considerably weakened, and this is when we get

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close to understanding the way in which Chaucer wishes to portray fame, and his purpose in having the narration disrupted by instability.\footnote{Clifford, "A Man of Great Auctorite," 161.}

This instability highlights the narrator as one who is interested in processes that capture meaning and limit (somewhat) the infinite gestures of language.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer references the hyperbolic science of sound:

Loo, this sentence ys knowen kouth  
Of every philosophres mouth,  
As Aristotle and daun Platon,  
And other clerkys many oon;  
And to confirm my resoun,  
Thou wost wel this, that speech is soun,  
Or elles no man myghte hyt here;  
Now herke what y wol the lere.  
   “Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken;  
And every speche that ys spoken,  
Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,  
In his substaunce ys but air;  
For as flaumbe ys but lyghted smoke,  
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke.  
But this may be in many wyse,  
Of which I wil the twoo devyse,  
As soun that cometh of pipe or harpe.  
For whan a pipe is blowen sharpe  
The air ys twyst with violence  
And rent – loo, thys ys my sentence.  
Eke whan men harpe-strynges smyte,  
Whether hyt be moche or lyte,  
Loo, with the strok the ayr tobreketh;  
And ryght so breketh it when men speketh. (Ll. 757-780)

The structural juxtaposition of the texts of philosophers and the explication of sound can be seen as a strategic and subtle gesture illustrating the relationship between the lability of sound and the textualization of words.
Although sound and text are not the same, Chaucer is making the flexibility of sound consonant with the staged fixity of texts. The lability of sound profits from multiplication while the comparative fixture of textual narrative represents itself as a sort of stasis. In other words, though textuality concretizes the gestures of poetics, it remains vulnerable to the volatility of sound. This idea is illustrated by the whimsical allocations of fame and fortune. Fame (Fama), like Fortune (Fortuna), is not methodical in her ordering of linguistic legacy. There is a textual analogy to the productive multiplication of sound. This mobility is a threat to texts, but more a threat to pretensions to immortal fixedness. Yet the vulnerability of text’s mobility (improper dissemination, erasure, or physical damage), offers a different type of immortality – one that is more morphic and labile, an opportunity to be seized rather than a threat to be overcome. The narrator joins the cosmic engagement with tydynges as the “alderfastest” in the House of Rumour (Ll. 509).

Lee Patterson sees these endeavors as procedures of literary historiography. He asserts that the structures within the House of Fame are falsely presented as stable, while the wicker frame and whirling landscape negate that stability. The static metallic pillars in Fame’s house are like textual prison-fortresses under siege by subsequent and rival writers. Narrative history here is simply a reiteration of itself; it exists through its own vocalization. That reiteration, like Chaucer’s Theban sublimation of Trojan history, is subject to authorial interpretation. Yet an author’s participation in the reiteration and

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reclassification of history is also subject to the fluidity of sound, especially sound that
travels to an outer realm beyond medieval regulatory schema. The classical cosmography
is one such schema, yet Fame cannot wrest English from the bosoms of other literary
traditions nor is she invested in securing it. Similarly, neither Nature nor architecture can
provide a safe haven for linguistic legacies because elements, not of storm, but of mere
sunshine, can melt away, or warp, a writer’s linguistic legacy. The volatility of
language’s feeble foundation, a rock of ice and not steel, and the almost haphazard
ordering of where famous names fall or are etched, leave the question, “What may ever
laste?” (l.1147).

By linking the lability of sound with textual production, sound becomes a stand in
for allegorical metaphors. Textual production, sound multiplication, and allegorical
signification are intimately linked. Textual dissemination partakes of a process similar to
the multiplication of sound where that which is written is no more static than whirling
voices. A poorly written text, the readers’ misinterpretation of a text, the incorrect
summation of a text to other readers, the misappropriated authorial signification of
symbols within a text (inappropriate allegorical indexing), the incorrect transcription of a
text, and fire or simply bad weather can distort that which is signified. Writing is as
permeable and as vulnerable to motion as is sound; motion in this sense is simply the
ways writing is composed, disseminated, and stored. The experience of Chaucer’s
dreamer as he encounters the names etched in ice is equated, by Kathy Cawsey, to a
modern day reader trying to decipher an old manuscript. Cawsey argues that, “In a
manuscript culture, it is the most popular manuscripts that are liable to destruction,
because they are handled, torn, spilt upon, written in, exposed to the elements, recopied
poorly, and textually corrupted."\textsuperscript{17} Cawsey’s description of manuscript reading addresses the real-life erosion of material text. Arguably there is a real connection between how texts are stored (and ultimately treated) and authorial permanence. This dispensation, how texts are transported and read, is linked to the narrator and reader.

The \textit{House of Fame} is invested in engaging the narrator as a necessary figure in the attempt to capture and concretize through writing an anthropological depiction of life to include the various facets of experience: murmurs of life and death and all that occurs in-between. Chaucer wants to listen in on these sounds because in these “tydynges” are the stories of knights, shipmen, porters, and old gapped-teeth women. Chaucer also wants to signal that the act of concretization is momentary and, although presented as a fixed symbol, is no more fixed than sound wishing to escape the fissures and cracks within the frame that temporarily houses it. The wattle construction of the House of Rumour has the opposite structural problem. It is an attempt to imagine a fully penetrable and labile frame, with fissures, that produces its sounds as it whirls. Both text and House are permeable and unstable, even though one articulation is presented as a fixed product.

The transportability of sounds and words is problematic; however, their lack of fixture and their ability to perforate space and time give them libidinal flow. The fluidity of sound facilitates the insertion of the pseudo-author as one who impacts, through narratorial process, the importance of symbols presented in a given historical situation. These “symbols” are reflected as narrative pillars, concretized, socially accepted,

\textsuperscript{17} Kathy Cawsey, “‘Alum de Glas’ or ‘Alymed Glass’?: Manuscript Reading in Book III of \textit{The House of Fame},” \textit{University of Toronto Quarterly} 73:4, (Fall 2004), 975. Cawsey argues that the carvings give readers an understanding of “medieval concepts of writing and book production” while pointing to the “transience of worldly fame and fortune” (972-974).
reference points that signify a past historical moment; these pillars, whether it is a drawing etched on a wall or an old tale, are semiotic objects participating in larger historical narratives. The argument of the House of Fame is not that sound is innately multiple but rather that narrators, the author’s semioticians, reconstitute this multiplication to include the author’s story – the process of authorial self-insertion into preexisting literary traditions. The dangers of a false redemption of literary past and future lie not in the solitude of transposing, but in the various modes of transporting language -- written, sung, thought, or whispered, in the various forms of language, (French, Italian, Spanish, Latin or English) and in the various qualities of language, trouthe or slander. Geffrey’s demand “Now herkeneth every maner man/ That Englishh understonde kan” is an effort to stabilize one aspect of the linguistic mode – the Englishing of Italian, French, and Latin literary models (Ll. 509-510).

In examining the works of canonized poets, Kruger reminds us we are able to focus on the process whereby “authoritative traditions [are] questioned and finished poems themselves unmade and reinvented.”\(^\text{19}\) J. L. Simmons argues that “The choice of Vergil for this exemplum is felicitous in several ways. Chaucer picked what was the most obvious example of a work written expressly to celebrate a country, an age, a particular sovereign.”\(^\text{20}\) In support of the idea that the textual authority of canonical works can be subverted, Clifford claims that the tale of Troy destabilizes the text. “There is no full


\(^{19}\) Kruger, “Imagination and the Complex Movement,” 118.

presence for authority to appeal to, [sic] it will always slip away into undecidables
because language is not fixed.”  

David Lyle Jeffrey indicates that juxtaposing the Aeneid and the House of Fame offers a “historicist lens afforded by Roman culture” intermixed with the “vagaries of human history” – cosmology, philosophy, and mythography.  

Jeffrey evaluates Chaucer’s gestures toward the Aeneid in terms of the creation of a new literary document. “Whereas Dante had used his national poet, Vergil, as an irrefragably ‘authoritative’ interlocutor, Chaucer uses the ‘intellectual’ but more ambiguous eagle. For Dante, the point is that poetic history and its historicist schema becomes a confirmation, a guide to the truth of the theological, or of revelation. For Chaucer it is just the other way around, that a revelation – far beyond the sight of the intellect – would be needed as a guide to the truth value of history or the historical ‘authorities’ one reads.”  

Authors who want to imbue this motion with their creative energies use the volatility of interpretation and the push to circulation through multiplication.

In the House of Rumour, sound has an upward thrust; sound moves to Fame’s chamber, which is similar to the anagogical movement of allegory seeking its transcendental origin. This seeming upward movement of signs in the House of Rumour isn’t purely linear. In fact, De Man argues that allegorical signs point across an abyss to

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23 Jeffrey, "Sacred and Secular Scripture,” 220.
the “nonverbal outside.”

While Fame’s realm does not quite aspire all the way toward the transcendental, the related upward pull of Fame and De Man’s allegories is intriguing.

As I have before proved the –
Hyt seweth, every soun, parde,
Moveth kyndely to pace
Al up into his kyndely place.
And this place of which I telle,
Ther as Fame lyst to duelle,
Ys set amydds of these three,
Heven, erthe, and eke the see,
As most conservatyf the soun.
Than ys this the conclusyoun:
That every speche of every man,
As y the telle first began,
Moveth up on high to pace
Kyndely to Fames place. (Ll. 839-852)

The palpability of this argument is proven by the soaring Eagle who argues that all sound is represented in an upward flight; this idea resonates with the anagogic pull of allegory. Geffrey’s flight towards the heavens presents a splintered landscape – ghost-like snippets of history, astronomy, and philosophy. His flight involves various topical threads which present experiential learning as potentially dizzying. This physical flight also involves a mental flight where varying thoughts flash before Geffrey’s mind as he rises. Fractured signs and symbols that are reconstituted to represent what they attempt to signify constitute allegory. Geffrey’s flight is allegorical; the mechanism of sound, its rippling, isn’t significant when sound is figured through one ripple – a sort of monotone. A pattern of ripples, when grouped and ordered, has the ability to move from cacophony to meaningful gesture.

In many respects, the flight involves several loose threads. This idea resembles Gordon Teskey’s suggestion that allegory without context can represent “an incoherent narrative” – perhaps incoherence does not capture fully this idea of loosely-threaded and contextualized semiotic notes, pillars of a past history. The ordering of sound is parallel to the ordering of words; when conglomerated by literary rules, sound has the ability to create a story from words, to phrases, to sentences, to verse. But how words are chosen, how they are allegorically indexed, is critical to creating a semiotic thread that grants coherent meaning. It isn’t simply enough to order words based on grammatology, (although it is a critical step). Inherent to the usage of these words and grammatical symbols is meaning which can have socio-political impact because that meaning participates communally through reading. The narrator in the House of Rumour presents sound as an alternate mode of authorship, and in the case of the House of Fame, the narrator’s wish to hear new “tydynges” is a precursor to writing within a text that is already written.

Beyond the Conscious Narrator

The architectural landscape, a galactic outer region, suspended and whirling, allegorizes Teskey’s useful analysis of the interplay of language and self. Echoing the writerly process where poets become historians (creators of context), is a parallel process where narrators – the personified authorial subconscious as depicted in the dream-vision genre – become captors of the subtext (guides, architects, and agents of motion). This subconscious narrator is a component of the dream-vision genre, where the explication of

the vision becomes the text of the narrative. The narrator is often presented as one afflicted by an emotional condition that leads to the somnium. Although there is constancy in the genre’s definition of the narrator’s role within the text as dreamer, narrators are still very much conscious literary agents. They are the semiotic agents who attempt to thread together the moving allegorical symbols to capture or craft the subtext of the referent in relation to what the author wants signified.

To capture meaning is to remain on the cusp or rather to gain a vantage point that enables the writer, narrator, and viewer to stand on “‘the fringes of ‘content,’ at the points of intersection between object and subject, between the world and the viewer, where the fundamental energies of fiction are registered.” This conceptual description of narrative engagement is actualized in the *House of Fame* as an authorial and narratorial borderland. According to Teskey, the point where allegory and violence meet is inherent to the process of capture. The narrator’s actions are invested in deciphering and constituting allegorical meaning. This investment is not a smooth endeavor. The crafting of meaning (referred to as the “creative exertion of force” by Teskey) involves the forceful amalgamation of similar or differing objects as a way of directing narrative towards a singular transcendental truth. Teskey describes these actions:

> At the root of the motives for allegorical expression […] is instrumental meaning, meaning not as representation of what already is but as the *creative exertion of force*. We saw that meaning exerts force by driving a wedge into some part of nature in order to make two opposed things, two “others,” or by yoking heterogeneous things together so that one may be thought to refer to the other or both may be thought to refer to different aspects of a single, invisible truth. In every case, however, the object on which the force is exerted belongs to a realm that is intolerably “other” before it is raised to the position of the transcendental “other.” This archaic, negative other marks the point at which instrumental

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meaning exerts force on what is to that meaning a chaos. And just as the transcendental other is the point of contact between allegory and logos, so this moment of instrumental meaning – of what I shall refer to as “capture” -- is the point of contact between allegory and violence.27

Teskey sees this interchange as capture where the driving force between man and his world is articulated through creative energies that temper this innate divide. The act of engaging ideas of instrumental meaning reconstitutes that “rift between self and the world.”28 Teskey argues that the anagogic pull of meanings is “existentially present” and manifests itself as a “rift between the chaotic otherness of the world and the transcendental otherness that we situate above the world in order to make that world, as the macrocosm, coincide with the self.”29 For Teskey, allegory is an oscillation between “a project of reference and a project of capture.”30 And yet the referential text will always remain on the “nonverbal outsides” beyond the borders of meaning. Its meaning is fluid and interpretive, not a semiotic pillar engaged in an anagogic pull.

The whirling landscape of the House of Rumour presents false and true tidings compounded in a game of ‘telephone.’ Rumour’s imaginariun provides an impossible but useful place where false and true tidings are spliced together. This is evidenced by the fight between the lie and the truth at the window, where both intermingle and swear brotherhood to each other:

And, when they metten in that place,
They were achekked bothe two,
And neyther of hem moste out goo
For other, so they gone crowde,
Til ech of hem gan crien lowed,
“Lat me go fir s!” “Nay, but let me!

27 Teskey, Allegory and Violence, p. 5-6.
28 Ibid., 7.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 8.
And here I wol ensuren the,
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,
That I shal never fro the go,
But be thyn owne sworen brother! (Ll. 2092 – 2101)

Complicity complicates the concretized allegorical symbols that come together to form language. Language’s regenerative thrust calls attention to the interpretation and synthesis of “tydynges” as processes involved in deciphering meaning.31

Chaucer shows the cacophony of language, its congruence, and its potential to denigrate truth through rearticulation: “Fayled” syllables “Of every speche, of every soun./Be hyt eyther foul or fair,/Hath hys kynde place in ayr” (Ll. 832-834).32 Geffrey witnesses the lability of mounting language; he relays the congregation of unfiltered language spoken:

And every wight that I saugh there
Rouned everych in others ere
A newe tydynge prively,
Or elles tolde al openly
Ryght thus, and seyde: “Nost not thou
That ys betyd, lo, late or now?”
“No,” quod he, “telle me what.”
And than he tolde hym this and that,
And swor therto that hit was soth –
“Thus hath he sayd,” and “Thus he doth,”
“Thus shal hit be,” “Thus herde y seye,”
“That shal be founde,” “That dar I leye” – (Ll. 2043-54)

Chaucer’s narrator mediates the process of transcoding embedded meaning in multiple texts across structural levels of reality. In the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer will

31 Jameson, The Political Unconscious, 81. Jameson argues that meaning is linked to the generativity of texts, which in itself is problematic because endemic to texts are conjured subtexts.
32 Failed syllables are referred to in book two: “Though som vers fayle in a sillable;/ And that I do no diligence/To shewe craft, but o sentence” (Ll. 1098-1100).
expand this notion as he presents his field of folk (the conglomeration of all classes) and his field of narrative genres (the conglomeration of various modes of representing literature and history) as examples of how language is staged, memorialized, and recast.33

“The Canterbury Tales show us these pilgrims and their whirling speech in action, as Chaucer later in life takes up this challenge in a sweeping narratological experiment, which in its own way challenges authority.”34

There is little suggestion within the House itself that the problems of allegory are at stake, but when the adamant perforation of sound demands attention it becomes necessary to link language’s natural movement towards multiplicity with a narrator who wishes to hear new ideas to create stories. Narrative motion is not limited to the actions of an obtuse narrator as in the Book of the Duchess, where his steady questioning aggravates the Black Knight to proclaim “She ys ded!”(L.1309).35 The motion of narrative is in the ability to engage allegorical fissures, to stabilize and ultimately salvage

35 See Glenn Burger, "Reading Otherwise: Recovering the Subject in the Book of the Duchess," Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies 5.2 (1993), 325-341. Burger suggests that the closure of the Black Knight’s narrative serves as an opportunity to “open a new textualized remembering, one that may better reconstitute its participants – knight, dreamer/narrator, and reader --- as interpretive subjects with room to maneuver and thus to continue the activities of desire/imagination that move a subject into consciousness through otherness”(341).
fragmented discourse as a sort of redaction and bricolage – the threading together described earlier as the work of narrators and narrative. This is an alternate mode to the mystified stabilization of the linear anagogic pulse – impossible in the House of Fame.

That there is a notion of one transcendental truth is problematic especially when we see falsity and “trouthe” forming a brotherhood based purely on transportability rather than content. Falsehood and “trouthe” as expressed by words are one in the same, a whirlwind, which is subject to ordering by the narratorial author who can appropriate true or false meaning to that which is signaled through sound. Both textual production and sound have innate volatility which gives rise to a collusion of meaning. Both true and false statements can gain precedence within Fame’s house which points to the dangerous allocation of linguistic meaning and legacy by Fame; this collusion also calls into question a reader’s interpretation of written sound.

Authorial Authority

Chaucer is preoccupied with this notion of access and authority and his poetics are subtly concerned with which narratives get written and transported. The concretization of the story cannot be the object; authors and readers must pay attention to poetics as process. Poetic malleability ensures the gesture of creativity. But this engagement is not the simple folding of neatly framed creative gestures. There are larger contextual implications when an author can figure himself, or be figured, as an authority on the designed literary bricolage. The author/bricoleur is engaged in crafting the incoherent threads of allegory, rendering visible gaps and fissures to illustrate authorial prowess. But he is also involved in creating a patchwork of past/historical and literary
context alongside his current articulation of that which is signed and re-signified. It is here in these fissures, where authorial gesturing across and beyond is made visible in the allegorical phenomenologies of reading. Using these fissures and gaps enables Chaucer to respond to the fecundity of textual/allegorical instability and transportability.

Geffrey’s attempt to articulate his vision of the *House of Fame* is an attempt to create an authorized bricolage. Shrewdly, he proclaims, “Though som vers fayle in a sillable;/And that I do no diligence/To shewe craft, but o sentence” (Ll. 1098-1100).

Chaucer casts his narrator in a self-reflexive mode where he is viewer, narrator, and ultimately writer. His positioning of the narrator as listener, reader, and viewer is an artistic deployment.

That al the men that ben on lyve  
Ne han the kunnynge to descrive  
The beaute of that ylke place,  
Ne coude casten no compace  
Swich another for to make,  
That myght of beaute ben hys make,  
Ne so wonderlych ywrought;  
That hit astonyeth yit my thought,  
And maketh al my wyt to swynke,  
On this castel to bethynke,  
So tha tthe grete craft, beaute,  
The cast, the curiosite  
Ne kan I not to yow devyte;  
My wit ne may me not suffise.  
But natheles al the substance  
*I have yit in my remembrance* … (Ll.1167-1182, emphasis mine)

Geffrey is the architect of narrative – an authorial stance. By positing that no one else can describe the “tydynges” he has witnessed, Geffrey positions himself, instead of the invisible man to whom he gestures, as the “man of gret auctorite.” He makes meaning from jangling by presiding over the “tydynges” he sees. Geffrey asserts:
That al the folk that ys alyve
\textit{Ne han the kunnynge to discryve}
The things that I herde there,
What aloude, and what in ere. (Ll. 2055-2058, emphasis mine)

The narrator is critical to the design and explication of narrative. The “alther-fastest” narrator of the whirling House of Dedalus articulates the volatility and violence of the house (l. 2131). We envision him, standing within, arms outstretched reaching for sound waves as he collects these “tydynges” for future narratives. The \textit{House of Fame} is a generative landscape where motion becomes form. Although the “tydynges” are presented as more embodied than the narrator, his listening ear is paramount to the articulation and visualization of the events occurring in the landscape. Geffrey participates in the volatile whirlwind to gather the experience needed to create fiction.

Experiential learning is necessary for the poetic endeavor; learning, as described by Chaucer, engages the multifarious components of narrative, false and true, that insist on being proliferated:

\begin{verbatim}
This hous was also ful of gygges,
And also ful eke of chirkynges,
And of many other werkynges;
And eke this hous hath of entrees
...
And on the roof men may yet seen
A thousand holes, and wel moo,
To leten wel the soun out goo.
And be day, in every tyde,
Been al the dores opened wide,
And be nyght echon unshette;
Ne porter ther is noon to lette
No maner tydynges in to pace.
Ne never rest is in that place
That hit nys fild ful of tydynges,
Other loude or of whisprynges … (Ll. 1942-1958)
\end{verbatim}
Language’s reproductive energies are presented as prolific. Yet language’s scope is problematic because its proliferation is not governed by “man of gret auctorite” -- leaving no porter to manage output and classify content. Navigation of this copious environment involves tireless efforts by the narrator. Geffrey must navigate and break down symbols and context to engage the poetic process. This accounts for the breadth of dichotomies included in Chaucer’s descriptions. This whirling house made of twigs is all-encompassing in its “tydynges.” It echoes wars, peace, marriage, voyages, death, life, love, hate, praise, health, sickness, cure, trust, doubt, wit, folly, victory, starvation, ruination, good and bad government – the “tydynges” of historical past and present.

And over alle the houses angles
Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles
Of werres, of pes, of mariages,
Of reste, of labour, of viages,
Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,
Of love, of hate, acord, of 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. (Ll. 1959-1976)

Chaucer’s narrator quarries for new “tydynges” – cultural treasures of the past, present, and future. With them, he can consciously possess a collection that looks forward while remaining cognizant of the ever-shifting literary and historical landscape. “[B]y juxtaposing so many terms, it is apparent Chaucer wanted to get between the simple
opposites and the issue is not simple presence and absence but goes into the area of undecidables, neither one nor the other but everything.”36 Chaucer’s narrator-bricoleur seized narrative opportunity by engaging this penetrable house of twigs.

Both the author and the reader engage in the collection of ideas. This collection is a physical response as presented in this particular poem, but collection is not only relegated to a physical gathering of ideas. The act of reading involves a sort of interior collectivity, where the reader makes meaning from the symbols and interpretations presented. Narrative emerges from a private place, that of the author writing. However, this privacy is shared as the reader and narrator co-write. This act is confounded by the fact that the interior script from which the author writes is not a unified document nor will his explication be unified or received and digested as a unit. The poet writes. But writing is not merely writing. The endeavor of documenting “tydynges” enlists an anthropological approach where the narrator writes about his experiences in the context of those sharing and creating the physical space involved in forming the unhinged landscape – a linguistic marketplace of shipmen, pilgrims, and couriers. By showing Geffrey in Rumour’s whirlwind, Chaucer is able to posit that a narrator, a pseudo-author, is able to partake of experiential learning (through hearing and seeing) to inform the creative process. Experiential learning allows the narrator to become aware of the multiple realms of writing and expression, interiority, the social and political climate, the problem of semantics and allegory, the problem of history, the problem of linguistic sound – faulty interpreters, authors, expenders of language, and the Gods – the twist of Fortune that can take a seat in Fame’s domain. Chaucer recognized that cognizance does

not necessarily negate these processes. But it does allow the narrator to relay to his readers (and audience) that his participation is occurring in the face of both visible and invisible linguistic whirlwinds.

The *House of Fame* makes visible the authorial landscape by creating a physical representation of the dilemma of listening and writing. The narrator values the excavation of new narrative landscapes; listening becomes the precursor to writing and writing is figured as a method that can close the rift between self and society – Kruger’s authorial borderland. The process of hearing to mine the treasures/“tydynges” is the first step in the process of writing. That we never see the narrator writing is irrelevant to these claims. His hearing is the poetic precursor of the written aggregation of ideas. The landscape of volatile language is ripe with authorial opportunities, even surprising and innovative ones because of the infinite ways meaning can be articulated. But Chaucer also shows that this terrain is treacherous by giving equal access to generative and unproductive forces. The generativity of narrative can be as problematic as narrative infertility. That textual production and sound can be fruitless, uncreative, sterile, or void of libidinal flow endangers the authorial possibilities afforded by the outward movement of narrative. Stasis implies the desolation of war, destroyed pillars of historical and literary reference, and perished authors lying motionless on a silent and barren wasteland. Although Chaucer reengages ideas of stasis in his dream visions, his literary exploration of genres in *The Canterbury Tales*, illustrates (fully) the necessity of textual and labile fecundity in ensuring language’s regenerative thrust.
Jameson and the Reemergence of the Author

The frailty of textual production as a fixed symbol of the poetic process does not limit the innovative energies of the author-bricoleur. Chaucer’s innovations seize a potentially fatal flaw in textual production and sound mobility to create a social situation for his text. This productive endeavor figures Chaucer as a crafty auctorite. Although these intonations are subtle in the House of Fame, Frederic Jameson’s ideas on language as a socially symbolic act are useful when considering Chaucer’s poetic description of how narrative produces effects, how it functions, and how the author and narrator must perform in the face of sound’s genetics.

Jameson refers to the self-reflexive mode of narrative’s symbolic gesture; his description articulates the work of narrative bricolage that responds to a pre-text but wants to be read as a newly crafted, innovative and renewed interlacing of narrative threads. He writes:

The symbolic act therefore begins by generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own projects of transformation. The whole paradox of what we have here called the subtext may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. ³⁷

That the I, the architect of fiction, must capture context and subtext only to show the power of text to generate them retroactively is suggestive of the restorative power of narrative – language literally creates the historically situated fields in which it performs.

The self-reflexivity of the dream narrator allows readers to explore the crafting of poetry, and its concern with literary art’s ambiguities. These ambiguities are not individuated psychological responses; they also include the socio-political language of possibilities.

Jameson argues that producing symbols is intertwined with transformative emergence by continual rearticulation. This echoes the narrator whose navigation of the slippery slopes of language is premised on a seemingly absent voyeuristic stance and an ever-present participation. The narrator shifts agency continually, which allows readers to partake of the process of making meaning. The voyeuristic static narrator, the listener, gives rise to reader participation. As the narrator listens, so do readers listen and engage in the process of ordering the images that flash before the narrator. As pseudo-author, the narrator wants the reader to give meaning as he/she witnesses both writers (actual author and his pseudo-self) struggling to collect and capture narrative “tydynges.” David Lyle Jeffrey posits that “Chaucer presents his protagonist-persona as a fictive ‘reader’ engaged in reflective exegesis of a text commonly held by ‘actual’ readers, allowing them, in turn, to ‘over-hear’ the fictive reader struggle toward interpretation and meaning.”

The fictive readers are both narrator and audience; both make meanings. Chaucer’s narrator must be cognizant of the poetic process to alleviate his surrender to the inevitable motion of language as too fluid to be reconstituted, even momentarily.

The author-bricoleur intermingles the role of the poet’s personal journey with his political and socio-historical context. Chaucer is aware that partaking in the poetic process as a creative endeavor involves the alteration of literary history. That remaking is devised through experiential learning, the engagement with sights and sounds, not merely

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38 Jeffrey, "Sacred and Secular Scripture,” 209.
through the evaluation of texts. The poetic process must include the exposure to all facets of life, including the mundane, in order for poets to generate new stories. Generativity of narrative is not at fault here. Chaucer’s problems with textual transmission, dissemination, and interpretation do not limit the process of transporting or communicating meaning; he simply wants participants to exert some responsibility when they engage in the process of making meaning.

It is in this vein that “Chaucer’s Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scryveyn” provides binding instruction to all “auctores” who establish themselves through the words and works of “olde bookes”:

Adam scryveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe;
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
And al is thourgh thy negligence and rape. (Ll. 1-7)

This inclusion of Chaucer’s words to his scribe may seem in opposition to ideas of the lability of sound and the stability of textual narrative, but in fact, this included directive to Adam illustrates that Chaucer was well aware of the palpable nature of both text and sound. Chaucer’s ideas of authorship included written texts where he wanted the utmost care in transposition, and sound; he wanted readers to understand that the unwritten, the whirlingscape outside of posed textual fixity, is also prone to lability.

Chaucer through his befuddled narrator is able to stretch across the borderland of sign and referent amidst a wide spatial chasm to create an historical allegory.39 By

presenting a soaring Geffrey, Chaucer gives a physical example of how a reader, presented as a narrator who wants to witness new “tydynges” through new experiences, encounters and deciphers history, philosophy, and science. Voyeuristic exploration gives way to all-hearing which translates to new encounters – conceptual ideas of experiential learning are set aside for real encounters of hearing and seeing. Chaucer was very invested in presenting a narrator who utilizes his perception. He was also committed to engaging the reader, who by experiencing the various perceptive qualities of the narrative, namely seeing and hearing, is made constantly aware that a reader is “an observer of another’s observations.” Yet this “kaleidoscopic approach,” the barrage of sound and visuals in an untamed whirlingscape, complicates the very notion of direct access to “philosophic-visionary authorities.” The narrator’s perceptual engagement in this landscape, creates a personal reality effect for both himself and the reader, but Chaucer stresses that this “reading” is potentially problematic because he undercuts these experiences as comical and dubious, unlike the “careful processive vision of Dante or Alanus.”


40 See John Finlayson, “Seeing, Hearing and Knowing in The House of Fame,” Studia Neophilologica 58 (1986), 51-57. Finlayson suggests that unlike The Book of the Duchess and the Parlement of Foules, the seeing and hearing presented in the House of Fame are presented as important “sensory perceptions of the narrator.” Finlayson sees this “urgent reporting” as a proclamation that the narrator’s experience, his physical and emotional reaction is tantamount to how he experiences and categorizes the whirlwind before him.

41 Ibid., 48.

42 Ibid., 50-54.
Yet Geffrey’s indulgences are not simply an investment in transcription or closing narrative rifts. Though his poetic agenda seems singular, its contextualization can include a larger audience. Geffrey longs for the realization of the fruits of his heart – the correction of Lady Fortune – a good narrative not at the mercy of her whimsy. His stirrings are described,

But sith that Joves, of his grace,
As I have seyd, wol the solace
Fynally with these thinges,
Unkouthe syghtes and tydynges,
To passe with thyn hevynesse,
Such routhe hath he of thy distresse,
That thou suffrest debonairly –
And wost thyselfen outtirly
Disesperat of alle blys,
Syth that Fortune hath mad amys
The [fruit] of al thyn hertys reste
Languisshe and eke in poynyt to breste –
That he, thrugh hys myghty merite,
Wol do the an ese, al be hyt lyte,
And yaf in expres commaundement,
To which I am obedient,
To further the with al my myght,
And wisse and teche the aeryght
Where thou maist most tydynges here. (Ll.2007-2025)

This seemingly individualistic attempt at literary process as a mode of refuge is superficial. Jameson notes that there can be no true individual indulgence:

To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom – whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions – is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political.\(^\text{43}\)

These ideas bind poetics, policy, and politics as particulars of the collective commonplace. Chaucer never directs his efforts on the corruptibility and vulnerability of governing documents (laws, treatise, and constitutional papers) as susceptible to the same types of misappropriation of artistic articulations (poetry and narrative). The *House of Fame* engages ideas of legacy and authority. Yet his failed corrective gesture in the *Legend of Good Women* illustrates his cognizance that writing can provide restitution by vindicating individuals presented poorly though history or artistry. Writing is subject to rewriting. Interpretation is subject to reinterpretation. Rewriting a past narrative with new rhetorical flourishes involves subversion which is similar to Jameson’s observation that allegorical interpretation lends itself to the impoverishment of one narrative through the rewriting and assuming of a master code or Ur-narrative. Its imposition as the unconscious meaning of the narrative in question suggests a poetic process engaged in multiplicity and subversion.\(^4^4\) The movement of “tydynges” in their own acts of subversion is relayed:

> And somtyme saugh I thoo at ones  
> A lesyng and a sad soth sawe,  
> That gonne of aventure drawe  
> Out at a wyndowe for to pace;  
> And, when they metten in that place,  
> They were achekked bothe two,  
> And neyther of hem moste out goo  
> For other, so they gonne crowde,  
> Til ech of hem gan crien lowde,  
> “Lat me go first!” “Nay, but let me!  
> And here I wol ensuren the,  
> Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,  
> That I shal never fro the go,  
> But be thyn owne sworn brother!...”

\(^4^4\) Ibid., 22.
Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned
Togeder fle for oo tydynge. (Ll.2088-2109)

The narrative movement seen here is representative of the conglomerative mode of language. This section of the poem is most interested in the transportability of words. But the movements of these “tydynges” in competing to escape warrants some thought. Mounting “tydynges” and the push to squeeze through the fissures suggests how stories and the subtle competition to recast and reconstitute the literary frames that came before the contextualized reading in question are articulated. Chaucer’s investment in allegory is suspect because, as Jameson puts it, “allegory is here the opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated as so many levels and as so many supplementary interpretations.”45 Jameson and Quilligan outline historical totality to include isolation and privileging interpretation. These ideas are recognizable in Chaucer’s works where he points to the potential for narrative tensions (as expressed in the House of Rumour where each sound attempts to outrun and subvert competing sound).46 The idea of linguistic distance, allegorized sign and referent, is further confounded by spatial distance as “[u]ndifferentiated discourse becomes objectified, reified into things that travelers stuff into their bags and take away.”47 And who are these people who carry these bags of words? That language can be transported by shipmen, pilgrims, pardoners, and messengers locates language on the ground where laymen participate in the appropriation of language. It is not only the learned society that has access to the rewriting and recasting of narrative; perhaps Chaucer is indicating that it

46 Ibid., 28.
is the people in the trenches, the “workers” who are embedded within the community, who also participate with and create narrative as “[e]very topic or genre of discourse used in human speech – gets turned about and formulated by the work of common, every-day people … the makers of texts, whether those texts be composed of truth or fictions. They are authors in the sense that they, too, use discourse and transform it until it takes on narrative and meaning of its own; they are readers in that they listen and transmit themselves the stories that they hear from others.” For Chaucer, an engagement in poetic process is to be part of the field of folk who are doing the work of creating and enriching a social sub-text.

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.
O, many a thousand tymes twelve
Saugh I eke of these pardoners,
Currous, and eke messagers,
With boystes crammed ful of lyes
As ever vessel was with lyes.
And as I alther-fastest wente
About, and dide al myn entente
Me for to pleyen and for to lere,
And eke a tydynge for to here,
That I had herd of som contre
That shal not now be told for me –
For hit no nede is, redely;
Folk kan synge hit bet than I;
For al mot out, other late or rathe,
Alle the sheves in the lathe … (L. 2121-2140)

Chaucer depicts the voices of a singing nation; here literary and socio-historical narratives are sung, signified, rehearsed, and produced by rote. Although Chaucer

48 Amtower, “Authorizing the Reader,” 278.
illustrates this act of rehearsal somewhat whimsically, the transportability of these songs that escapes through textual holes, demands authors, readers, and listeners to pay attention to labile sound. The songs represent the idea of “collective commonplaces,” places where cultural beliefs are deposited and retrieved. Chaucer highlights the frailty of these “commonplaces” as dissolvable because of how muddled they get as they are transported. Yet Chaucer acknowledges that in the transporting of language there are experiences to be discovered and reveled in as expressed in the caravan of stories, the Canterbury Tales. The language of moral evaluation is subtly present but mostly disregarded in lines 2121-2140, previously cited. Chaucer figures participation as paramount to a personal judgment of who gets to be represented as storyline and storyteller. To claim morality is problematic when he foregrounds arbitrariness and transportability as the main culprits of why things go awry.

The listening stance correlates to the anthropological gesture of collecting “tydynges” as a critical component of a good pseudo-author. This gesture’s academic and observational quality suggests a science of poetics similar to the earlier-discussed science of sound. The narrator’s stance figures poetics as a process where one’s narrative is enriched by experience; that experience isn’t relegated to agential acts. Listening is a viable component of figuring meaning when that meaning is presented through sound. The everyday sounds of life – life’s all-encompassing cacophony – participate in the Bakhtinian gesture of “everyday discourse.” There is productivity in this act of listening. New stories are brought forth – both generative and destructive representations of the past re-contextualized. Narrative flows. The representation of texts as a static

49 Arnovick, “In Forme of Speche,” 332-339.
50 Ibid., 276.
production is faulty. Textuality must assume the same lability as sound un-authored because there in the dash, the semi-colon, the comma, the period, is the punctuation of sound – a momentary attempt to make fixed a form which cannot be fully stabilized or reconstituted.
Chapter 4

Offstage Acts: Beyond the Borders of Text and Body in John Clanvowe’s *Cuckoo and the Nightingale* and William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman*

underlying all rituals is an ultimate danger, lurking beneath the smallest and largest of them, the more banal and the most ambitious -- the possibility that we will encounter ourselves making up our conceptions of the world, society, our very selves. We may slip in that fatal perspective of recognizing culture as our construct, arbitrary, conventional, invented by mortals.¹

In non-theatrical medieval literary works like John Clanvowe’s *Cuckoo and the Nightingale* and William Langland’s *Visions of Piers Plowman*, the physical and metaphysical semioticization of language by the narrator-actor adopts performative dimensions. These performative gestures reconstitute the fissure between sign and referent while highlighting the vulnerability of their congruence. The performative natures of these two medieval-English dream visions bring out the narrator-actor as dramatis personae showcasing the constructedness of social norm and poetics, to make and retool meaning. The fictive frame of a dreaming narrator allows the author to delegate diagesis. In the *Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, Clanvowe highlights the vulnerability of the classical and natural world by debating the rationale for servitude to the God of Love, an iconic figure whose rules are made on whimsy yet a definitive component of reproduction and sustainability – both courtly and classical. In *The Visions of Piers the Plowman*, Langland highlights the frailty of sacramental ritual (such as the

sacrament of the Eucharist) by illustrating the necessity of a more intimate process-driven salvation, the new wafer taken away from the commercial hands of priest and ingested eternally, privately. This essay pulls together two differing methodologies employed by narrators engaged in physical and metaphysical approaches to engaging ritual fragility. In some sense, both authors prove that what is at stake is not the congruence or the stability of rituals, but rather how we begin to discuss the uses of language and the processes involved in stretching across the abyss of meaning to ensure that self-reflection, which is critical to the constitutive endeavors of a dream narrator, is not trapped by Hegelian angst. The Hegelian experience of fissure, the vulnerability of sign-making – its awareness of its own constructedness – is productive rather than paralyzing. The repetition of ritual is one way of tempering the divergent energies associated with signing to make meaning. Ritual as a tool that encapsulates a performed social construct, a systematized moment of congruence, is put into question by both authors. Yet highlighting the formative nature of ritual underscores the notion that self and society are mere constructs. Since language constitutes making – that which exists can be described – an attempt to articulate a transcendental signifier is problematic because the persona or moment of origin becomes a construct outside of language. By gesturing at this impossibility, these narrators draw attention to the constructedness of ritually enacted

2 Allegory in a ritual context broadens the gestures of the allegorical mode by making concrete communal participation and acceptance of that which is being allegorized, much like the relationship between theatre and its audience or church and its congregation. The act of sacrament gives presence to that which is unseen (the transcendental). The semioticization of the Christ figure enacted through the Eucharist reflects the tensions between the visibility and invisibility of Christ – the disjunction between persecution and restoration. The continual semioticization of Christ’s body is performative; this performance is tied to ritual which concretizes ideologies embedded within the act.
meaning and its success in constituting communities. This analysis allows the pulling together of phenomenological gaps between theater as a communally shared sacrament, church ritual, which attempts the same universal transformative outreach, and in the case of Langland, the aforementioned gaps coupled with, author/narrator textual production.

*Clanvowe* and Piers use the allegorical fissure between sign and referent to model forms of ritual that fail at any communal transformation but nonetheless reveal the active ongoing constructions of the narrator. Allegory is a key component of the dream vision genre in its ability to simultaneously represent multiple layers of any given story – the cacophony of sign and referent superficially formulated to create meaning enriched or corrupted by interpretation and misinterpretation. The narrative tensions, which will be highlighted in both poems, involve readers partaking of the performative play of narrative actively “stretching across” linguistic and historical fissures. This stretching is represented as physical and metaphysical engagement with the narrative played out by the narrator. Readers are spectators and participants as readers watch the poet make meaning while reinterpreting those meanings to create individualized and collective readings. This self-reflexive gesture is at times whimsical in *Clanvowe* and Langland, but there are subtle reminders of the dangers in encountering self and society as mere constructs, even when these performative gestures encourage audiences to make new meanings – “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the

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4 It is possible to understand a poet’s construct outside of an individualized reading. In fact there can be a “collective” reading – an accepted interpretation by a group not contingent on that “individual interpretation.” My argument is that as authors reveal the vulnerability of literary and historical text and situate these literatures and histories “on the ground,” exemplified by the move towards the field of folk or caravan of story tellers, authors want a more intimate and democratic response to their work.
effects it names.”5 Judith Butler hones in on this idea of bounty beyond constructed ideas, language, and form. She understands that bodies, the performed or defined human form or self, are in fact constantly engaged with that which is constructed by “regulatory schemas”; yet her analysis points beyond the realm of the constitutive form to the body absent from these schemas, “the domain of unthinkable, abject and unlivable bodies.”6 It is this dynamic that points to the volatile boundaries of that which is named and that which stands outside this defined realm. While Butler focuses on ideas of sex transmitted to schemas of gender, the volatility she mentions and the process of materialization she wants readers to focus on as a way of sustaining boundaries and illusionary fixity, is analogous to the process highlighted in this essay. Langland and Clanvowe are actively engaged in materialization and subtle momentary erasure of authority to illustrate that authorial participation/reiteration in courtly or religious ritual is not fully an acceptance of these forms but rather queries or forays into what lies beyond the fixed trajectory -- the materiality of doctrine and the exegetical interpretation that is engaged or relinquished as authors and readers interact.7 Both Langland and Clanvowe question feudal systems and servitude to those systems, albeit devotion to church or devotion to courtly love.

For Clanvowe, an allegorized debate forum within a dreamscape provided the sort of resource illustrated by Hewett-Smith and later argued for by Beckwith in reference to the Corpus Christi cycle. Beckwith writes:

the Corpus Christi pageants have found the means to explore the paradoxical and

6 Ibid., xi.
7 Ibid., 35.
strenuous command to love through the semioticized, phenomenal body of Christ, and in doing so they have realized theater not as obstacle but as opportunity and resource. They have done this through the gap between visible and invisible that is at once welcome, incitement, invitation, and promise, but also exile, lamentation, and reproach, what we stretch across and what we fall between.\(^8\)

The use of allegory allows authors to imply that absence is dominant – that all presence is representative of something else. Hewett-Smith posits:

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\text{[I]n its most potent guise medieval allegory incorporates material reality into a spiritual or intellectual design, its goal to interpret the palpable and physical in immaterial, celestial or eschatological terms, to reveal the translucency of the things of world to the logos – its project one of containment, idealizing, hierarchizing.}\(^9\)
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The allegorical landscape of Clanvowe’s bird debate registers these tensions between love as healer and injurer, corporeal and transcendental, present yet absent simultaneously. Hewett-Smith notes the multi-layered inter-textuality of the anagogical ascent activated in allegorical performative play.

Allegoresis makes possible what our fallen natures disallow – the revelation of divine mysteries within the objects of the material world….For Augustine, the central (and inevitable) Christian tension between visible and invisible, temporal and eternal, corporal and spiritual is resolved by imagining a hierarchy in which we ascend toward truth, by the idealizing power of allegory.\(^10\)

Narrative participates in this ascent but tries to bridge the divide between these dichotomous energies. Narrative’s ability to assuage the tumultuous and temperamental energies associated with a hierarchical ascent is not always smooth. In fact, an author such as Clanvowe uses its volatility to create a poem that engages violence as a resolution

\(^8\) Beckwith, *Signifying God*, 71, emphasis added.


\(^10\) Hewett-Smith, “Nede Ne Hath,” 235, emphasis added.
to the disruption of courtly decorum. This is the story not of a lover’s love but of sacrificial love where to be, to exist, to feel, involves teetering between the moment of ultimate love and ultimate loneliness. Love in this frame is ethereal, forever fleeting. Clanvowe’s *Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, a sacramental and ritualized piece, depicts a narrator who uses violence as a way to show frustration with vile speech. In the poem, nature stands in as the audience. Emphasis is placed on the idea of sound: what the narrator hears and wants to hear, and the cuckoo’s and nightingale’s songs battle as they, according to the narrator, debate the value of servitude to love. The debate represents a performance of words in the tradition of French dream visions, specifically debate poetry.\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) The poem follows the traditions of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Romance de la Rose*, Guillaume de Machaut’s *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*, and Alain de Lille’s *de Planctu Naturae*. Middle English examples of these poems are *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *The Clerk and the Nightingale*, and Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls*. By choosing to work within this tradition, Clanvowe illustrates that his poetry has roots in this rich tradition of courtly love; yet by drawing attention to these ideas, namely through his use of the debate form, he posits Love and courtly romance’s ideas of service as susceptible to inquiry. Machaut, a prolific poet in the 14th century France uses the allegorical figures of Fortune and Love to engage ideas of courtly romance and love. Machaut follows the tradition of the *Romance of the Rose*, and his influence is evident in later Chaucerian pieces such as *The Book of the Duchess* which Steven Davis notes is a break from courtly poetry -- the collective/langue to a more individualized history/histoire. (See Guillaume de Machaut, “Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, and the Chaucer Tradition,” *The Chaucer Review* 36, (2002), 391-405. Machaut utilizes the rich Ovidian tradition to create music and poems dealing with forlorn love. He contributes to this tradition by leading the growth in secular chansons of the period. His troubadoran twist energized, and further popularized, ideas of courtly love. Machaut’s efforts fit nicely with James Schultz’s ideas that courtly love is the love of courtliness. (See James A. Schultz. *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2006). Clanvowe’s take isn’t the lovely melodic expressions of love, but rather the violent and bloody aspects of a raped and bloodied Philomena momentarily signified and erased by the narrator’s knightly actions. The *Romance of the Rose* is intricately interwoven with Machaut, Chaucer, and Chaucerian poets such as Clanvowe. William Calin sees the interwoven Machaut as a sort of “artistic mise en abyme.” *The Romance of the Rose*
At the onset of the poem, homage is aptly deserved for a God who can “bounde and unbounde” (l. 10). The God of Love is described by Clanvowe’s narrator as “might” and “grete” for his ability to make “low hertys hie and high hertys low” (Ll. 3-4). Through six uses of “make” in the first three stanzas and one use of “do,” the narrator emphasizes that enforcing love literally involves forceful acts. This concept also suggests the narrator/pseudo-author is actively involved in the process of “making.” A narrator shapes, changes, combines, interprets, and reinterprets through engagement with the textual material created by the author. By being such a knowing participant, Clanvowe’s narrator engages in an exchange with the doctrines of the God of Love. By beginning the poem with such homage, the narrator’s abilities are shown as parallel to those of the other implicit debater, the God of Love, whose might becomes paramount in May.

May is ritualized and presented as a month where gentle hearts begin to stir, some joyfully, others mournfully. Nature births new life which comforts its participants, but that comfort is tainted by the gnawing misery of desire -- flaming hearts brimming in great distress. Spring marks a new beginning but it also finalizes the death of that which came before it. To reproduce indicates a re-creation of that which came before the present. The narrator uses this productive energy; he assumes an authorial stance by presents these ideas of necessary servitude and the hardships of that service to the God of Love. Calin argues that readers need to pay close attention to how the Narrator emerges as a listening and shaping I, who rearranges and reasserts his role as courtly knight without absolute “courtliness.” (See William Calin, "Machaut's Legacy: The Chaucerian Inheritance Reconsidered," Chaucer's French Contemporaries: The Poetry/Poetics of Self and Tradition, (New York, NY: AMS, 1999), 29-46. Clanvowe uses his poem as an opportunity to reshape the constraints of the French tradition by continuing the anglicizing of these earlier works adopted and remodeled by Chaucer.

12 All quotes from The Cuckoo and The Nightingale are taken from The Boke of Cupide, God of Love, or The Cuckoo and the Nightingale, ed. Dana M. Symons, Chaucerian Dream Visions and Complaints, (Medieval Institute Publications: Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2004).
positing that his experiential learning, despite his now “olde and unlusty” heart, allows him to describe the fever that accompanies every May (l. 37). He enmeshes these experiences with the “comune tale” that lovers would rather hear the nightingale than the lewd cuckoo (l. 48). Here, a past reference is used to prompt the move from inertia to walking outwards into a land of white and green. The narrator’s solitude is maintained as he went “forthe allone prively” (l. 59). Yet, where he finds himself is not a solitary place, but rather one where Nature is an active community built on the exchange of pairs. The beauty of spring is its expression, born out of Nature’s ability to reproduce itself. But what ensues if this reproductive element is unable to come to fruition? May’s dual emotion, reproductive and idyllic, yet barren and distressed, is explosive and apocalyptic showing that ever-present in Nature’s abundance is potential lack – a world where unrequited love or the absence of the courtly exchange fosters brutal and violent acts. Nature’s presence teeters on the actualization of ritual acts and the always-loomi

Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff propose that readers see the value of rituals within the paradigm of culture versus chaos. This lens allows readers to view a ceremony “as a cultural statement about cultural order as against a cultural void.” Like Moore and Myerhoff, Blau argues that “our reflexes seem formed by the estrangement of an essential fracture. Whatever ritual has done to heal wounds or seal the divisions of cursive time, it is this fracture that seems ritualized in desire, the anxiety of an absence that we glut with representations. The psychopathology of everyday life is polysaturated with them, as natural as breathing, an overmastering convention, the image of

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performance as fundamental need. In this context, ritual is myth, another representation. Even when ritual appears to be purely ritual it still depends on representation, a system of exchange in which divinity can be attested to by the power of its signs.”  

The ceremonial nature of May and Saint Valentine’s Day reflects how embedded ritual constitutes the actions of a society as against the meaningless violence and fecundity of nature. The gala and fever associated with May support Moore and Myerhoff’s ideas about the role of ceremony in concretizing ritual. “[Ceremony] banishes from consideration the basic questions raised by the made-upness of culture, its malleability and alterability. Every ceremony is par excellence a dramatic statement against indeterminacy in some field of human affairs. Through order, formality, and repetition it seeks to state that the cosmos and social world, or some particular small part of them are orderly and explicable and for the moment fixed.”  

The ideological work of social ritual is no different from the ideological work of formal court poetry. Both articulate values and ideologies, and like theater, use allegory to propagate and ritualize ideas. Blau sees the evaluations of the ceremonial forms of culture as a way to access “ideas of community, missing energies, psychic liberation, desublimated sexuality, carnival spirits, structures of participation, the redemptive side of repetition, or an awakening festival that relieves us of it […] an alternative theatricality.”  

Clanvowe’s garden represents this idea of “alternative theatricality” where the landscape of the birds, the debate, and the violent resolution utilize an almost comedic setting to address serious issues of gender relations, servitude, biological reproduction,

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16 Blau, *Dubious Spectacle*, 143-144.
and judicial authority. The narrator’s suggestion that he is “not al on slepe, ne fully wakyng” calls attention to this in-between space of Clanvowe’s dream vision as the ripe ground for theatricality that relays the tangential laws of natural and social exchanges (l. 88). The narrator’s passive stance, that of voyeur watching a landscape, will also be obscured by the foregrounding of the God of Love as an iconic figure against the narrator’s experience of vacuous or unfulfilled desires, his move from sleep to wakefulness, from passive existence to active participant, absent to ever-present. The narrator comes to shape and drive movement, unbinding the chaotic chords of cacophony; he is not merely a stumbling observer of nature’s beauty. He moves because of literary past (the old adage or commune tale), not solely because of personal experience. The narrator enlists a multisensory engagement to capture his dreamscape.

He describes his movements and the landscape before him:

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Ther sat I doune amonge the feire floures
And sawe the briddles crepe out of her boures,
Ther as they had rested hem al nyght.
They were so joyful of the dayes lyght,
That they began of May to don ther houres.

...
Ther was mony a lovely note:
Somme songe loude, as they had pleyned,
And somme in other maner voys yfeyned,
And somme al out, with a lowde throte.

They pruned hem, and made hem ryght gay,
And daunseden, and lepten on the spray,
And evermore two and two in fere,
...

And the ryver that I sat upon,
Hit made suche a noyse as hit ronne,
Acordaunt to the foules ermonye.
Me thoght hit was the best melodye
That myght be herd of eny man. (Ll. 66-85)
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This idyllic landscape is soon interrupted by the lewd cuckoo whose “foule voyse” punctuates the stealthy air. The Narrator laments the evil bird and cries out “Now God,” quod I, ‘that died upoun the Croise, / Give sorowe on thee, and on thy foule voyse, / For lytel joy have I now of thy crie’’( Ll. 93-95).

The Narrator calls attention to God’s bloody death by forcing readers to re-imagine the moment of sacrifice. Prior to the resurrection, biblical despair was pegged violently onto a cross to create “the visible [sign] of an invisible grace.” Calling attention to the sacrificial moment is not merely a naming or clarification of which God he calls on for help, but more so, a tactful push to remember a past moment where Christian history faced an apocalyptic jolt. The threat of the cuckoo and the inclusion of Christ’s death as donative of sacrificial love -- a powerful and theatrical speech act – highlight the bloody misfortune in love. By including God as an example of sacrificial love, Clanvowe is showing that sacrificial love as expressed through the body of Christ is necessary to the narrator’s and thus the reader’s understanding of why love heals and hurts.

The appearance of the nightingale counteracts the seemingly solitary existence of the Cuckoo and provides a physical manifestation of the idea that sacrificial love provides binding and sustainable rewards. The nightingale is reminiscent of Ovid’s

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17 Beckwith, Signifying God, 90.
18 Beckwith highlights the productivity of Christ’s body in sacramental theater; she indicates that “Christ, then, in this reading and in this playing is not simply a sign of love, but in the fundamentally donative nature of sacrament, makes it present and effects it. It is in the very signing that a sacrament causes, and it is in the causing that a sacrament signs”(90). Similar to sacramental theater, referencing the cross “actualize[s] the body of Christ in its complex appearing and disappearing, absence and presence, past and future temporality”(90). Beckwith’s use of the Corpus Christi indicates narrative convergence.
Philomene who is brutally raped and tongue severed, yet regains the ability to take flight away from the brutality of courtly decorum gone awry. The nightingale’s ability to sing shows that her tongue is not a symbol of loss; she gains wings and voice, and in so doing Philomene’s commitment to love (and retributionary dinner of flesh) absolves the brutal crime. Clanvowe’s narrator’s rock will become the rock Philomene wishes her heart could stir as a sort of defense as she is attacked with brute force.19 Yet Clanvowe is not

19 And now the voyage ended, and the vessel
   Was worn from travel, and they came stepping down
To their own shores, and Tereus her with him
To the deep woods, to some ramshackle building
Dark in that darkness, and he shut her in there,
Pale, trembling, fearing everything, and asking
Where was her sister? And he told her then
What he was going to do, and straightway did it,
Raped her, a virgin, all alone, and calling
For her father, for her sister, but most often
For the great gods. In vain. She shook and trembled
As a frightened lamb which a gray wolf has mangled
And cast aside, poor creature, to a safety
It cannot quite believe. She is like a dove
With her own blood all over her feathers, fearing
The talons that have pierced and left her. Soon
As sense comes back, she tears her loosened hair,
She beats her breast, wild as a woman in mourning,
Crying: “O Wicked deed! O cruel monster,
Barbarian, savage! Were my father’s orders
Nothing to you, his tears, my sister’s love
My own virginity, the bonds of marriage?
Now it’s all confused, mixed up; I am
My sister’s rival, a second-class wife, and you,
For better and worse, the husband of two women,
Proce my enemy now, at least she should be.
Why not have been murder? That crime
Would have been cleaner, have no treachery in it,
And I an innocent ghost. If those on high
Behold these things, if there are any gods,
If anything is left, not lost as I am,
What punishment you will pay me, late or soon!
Now that I have no shame, I will proclaim it.
given the Ovidian Philomene (now figured as a nightingale) a total victory. Instead, his nightingale engages in a legitimate debate with a cuckoo – an exchange, where each sound counteracts the other sound – the battle of a sound that fosters love and a sound that ails.

The cuckoo argues that his voice is plain and true and that the nightingale’s quaint cry is meant to deceive. The cuckoo questions the meaning of “Ocy! Ocy!” Here the cuckoo is pointing to language’s own inability to assign complete meaning to the birdsong. And although the nightingale, because of her alignment with Love, will have authority over her interpretation of service to love, readers must question who writes “meaning” when language is presented in a way that could potentially signify anything.

The nightingale claims:

“O fole,” quoth she, “wost thou not what that is?
When that I sey ‘Ocy! Ocy!’ iwisse,
Then mene I that I wolde wonder fayne
That al tho wer shamefully slayne,
That menen oght agen Love amys.” (Ll. 126-130)

The narrator’s access to the language of birds and his facilitation of a debate that questions the benefit of love while referencing the ultimate figure of sacramental love in Christian history shows that he has access to and authority over efforts to make meaning. He reconstitutes animal and human language and subtly redirects how readers perceive love – both the everyday experience and the transcendental gesture of what it means to

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Given the chance, I will go where people are,
Tell everybody; if you shut me here,
I will move the very woods and rocks to pity.
The air of Heaven will hear, and any god,
If there is any god in Heaven, will hear me.” (Metamorphoses V1 Ll. 520-550, emphasis mine)
This semiotic impasse between the nightingale’s call for blood and the cuckoo’s call for plain speech figures the narrator as a sort of interlocutor between the nightingale’s war for sovereignty and the cuckoo’s desire for democracy not hinged on servitude. The cuckoo sees the nightingale’s desire for death and starvation to those not devoted to Love as a strange and quaint law. This irrational law of love denotes devotion or death, but for the cuckoo being in love is being servile, a sort of death. He posits:

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ywis, this is a queynt lawe,
That eyther shal I love or elles be slawe.
But I forsake al suche companye,
For myn entent is neyther for to dye,
Ne while I lyve in Loves yoke to drawe. (Ll. 136-140)
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For the cuckoo, those in servitude to love suffer the most:

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For lovers be the folke that lyven on lyve,
That most disese han, and most unthrive,
And most enduren sorowe, wo, and care,
And, at the last, failen of her welfaire.
What nedith hit agens trweth to strive?” (Ll. 141-145)
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The nightingale debates this notion by asserting that there is no greater delight than to be in servitude to Love:

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For in this worlde is noon so good servise
To every wight that gentil ys of kynde.

For therof truly cometh al goodnesse,
Al honour, and al gentilnesse,
Worship, ese, and al hertys lust,
Perfyt joy and ful ensured trust,
Jolite, plesaunce, and freshenesse,
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Louelyhed and trew companye,
Semelyhed, largenesse, and curtesie,
Drede of shame and for to don amys;
For he that truly Loves servaunt ys,
Wer lother to be schamed then to dye. (Ll. 149-160)

The rampant aristophilia that underwrites this speech indicates, as Schultz puts it that, “courtly love offers not only the opportunity for reflection but also the hope of reward and restoration.”21 The nightingale argues that servitude to love grants real aristocratic dividends because of its ennobling powers.

Yet Love causes injury. The cuckoo aptly observes that, for the young, Love is rage and in old age “grete dotage” and “Who most hit useth, most he shal apeyre” (Ll. 168-169). Sacrificial Love dictates that to partake of Love is to be injured by it -- physical suffering becomes the greatest symbol of Love as reflected by Christian history. In Courtly Love, “suffering, like service, is invoked as proof of love.”22 Shultz argues that “courtly love is the love of courtliness” and one of the components he describes as a driving force of aristophilia is Love’s desire to publicize its ennobling possibilities. Schultz asserts that “the courtly setting in which these men and women appear amplifies their own courtliness at the same time their appearance electrifies the ritual of which they stand in the center. The court responds. Their response turns to fame and circulates throughout the courtly world, where it can be enough to provoke love.”23 The visibility of that nobility is corporeal; inherent to this visual reward system of glory and distinction is the tumultuous sacrifice innate to its structure. Schultz writes:

21 Schultz, Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, 186.
22 Ibid., 107.
23 Ibid., 170.
Courtly love is not a preexisting threat that is recognized and tamed but rather a threat that is produced. Just as Christian writers invented concupiscence, a threat to salvation rooted in universal human sinfulness, so courtly lovers invented a particular sort of love – an individual subjection to which noble men and women are uniquely vulnerable. Having constituted this threat, courtly texts then propose a number of ways of it can be managed, thereby producing the forms of courtly love that we know: the single singer, the chivalric couple, the secret lover. Courtly texts produce a certain kind of threat, which is love, and at the same time a certain kind of discipline, which is courtly.\footnote{Ibid., 161.}

With Love (according to the cuckoo),

\begin{quote}
…cometh disese and hevynesse,
Sorow and care and mony a seknesse,
Dispite, debate, angre, and envye,
Repreve and shame, untrust and jelosye,
Pride and myschefe, povert and wodenesse. (Ll. 171-175)
\end{quote}

While earthly existence does allow the fallacy of love, the nightingale claims that Love amends all things and that there are people who want to assuage loneliness and be filled with the good associated with Love’s service. The cuckoo stresses that to be in servitude to the whims of the God of Love, a blind God, is to be a victim:

\begin{quote}
For Love hath no reson but his wille;
For ofte sithe untrew folke he esith,
And trew folke so bittirly displiesh,
That for defaulfe of grace hee let hem spille. (Ll. 197-200)
\end{quote}

The nightingale’s brief catatonic and tearful response, in lines 208 and 209, illustrates that the cuckoo has made a valid argument. In fact, the debate has come to a standstill because for every good that Love creates, there are counterproductive repercussions because Love is unsustainable.\footnote{Ibid., 161.}
L. O. Aranye Fradenburg extends these ideas of courtly sacrifice by recognizing that people are enjoined to sacrifice to love because they will get back (transcendently) all kinds of surplus and cultural capital. Fradenburg posits that “[courtly love] performs in the theaters of exchange the loss of the artifact that is interdependent with its creation, true whether the artifact in question is an abstract instrument (the euro) or the recollected subject. Courtly love sublimes the very relationship between jouissance and the movements of the signifier that generate kinship systems, economies, and desiring subjects."\(^{26}\) Participants gain dividends by participating in the unrelenting quest for wish fulfillment; yet the nature of desire, similar to the nature of ritual, is to reiterate that which desirers seek: desire itself.

The enjoining of the communal platform of theatre and ritual, and the private efforts of the individual reader discussed earlier, is best summed up by Fradenburg’s suggestion that “Courtly love and psychoanalysis are different means of making spectacularly apparent the materiality and mobility of desire, its dependence on the signifier and the Law, and our constitutive vacillations between sentience and insentience, subjectivity and objectivity, exteriority and interiority, the orders of the corpus as text and as body.”\(^{27}\) By pushing these two ideas together, love and injury as refining and nobility as a byproduct, the narrative collapses momentarily and the narrator must reinsert himself to temper the linguistic rift between two participants who make equally valid arguments. Both arguments cannot be sustained and one argument has to be subsumed because of the potential implications of a suggestion that love in the classical


\(^{27}\) Fradenburg, *Sacrifice your Love*, 24.
sense involves nonsensical servitude and love in the celestial sense leads to a sort of unrelenting quest for courtliness, a grasping at a God who is perpetually absent and constituted purely by ritualistic gestures.

The narrator shows his frustration and his deep sympathy for the speechless nightingale:

Then *toke I* of the nyghtyngale kepe.
She kest a sighe out of her hert depe,
And seyde, “Alas, that ever I was bore! I can for tene sey not oon worde more. (Ll. 206-209, emphasis added)

The nightingale is unable to speak one more word, conceding defeat to the cuckoo. Her words dissolve into tears and her heart is injured by the plain and true words of the cuckoo. The narrator swiftly assumes the role of courtly knight by becoming the nightingale’s protector. His voyeuristic stance is replaced with a hunter’s prowess.

Me thoght then that I stert out anone,
And to the broke I ran and gat a stone,
And at the cukkow herlty I cast,
And he for drede flyed awey ful fast,
And glad was I when that he was gone.

And evermore the cukkow as he fley,
He seyde, “Farewel, farewel, papyngay,”
As thogh he had scorned, thoght me.
*But ay I hunted him fro tre to tre,*
Till he was fer al out of syght away. (Ll. 216-225, emphasis added)

For the cuckoo to win the debate is problematic because victory would rewrite the expectations of May, and by extension the ritualized coming together of pairs would no longer be the dominant expression. The vast implication of love’s possible defeat demands a violent response by the narrator. The violent insertion by the narrator is smoothed over by dialogue that spans 35 lines and indicates that the nightingale remains
in servitude to the narrator for rescuing her from the “strong lesing” of the cuckoo’s
tongue (l. 238). Yet her commitment to the narrator is tangential. Ironically, the
nightingale hopes that the God of Love will send a lover to the old and unlusty narrator
this May. Yet the nightingale’s medicine cannot provide balm for what ails the narrator.
In fact, he wanders out into the land of green not prompted by desire, but because of the
commune tale of the soothing effects of the nightingale’s song. These events alert readers
to the vulnerability of ritualized acts within the natural world that also has its own set of
rational constructions with its own assumptions and productive discourses. The narrator’s
violent protective gesture is met with some trepidation because we know his insertion of
himself into the narrative, while necessary and providing some resolution, is untenable.
The nightingale turns to other birds in the natural world to seek refuge and retribution
from the vile cuckoo. The nightingale begs, “I prey yow al that ye do me ryght/Of that
foule, fals, unkynde bridde” (Ll. 269-270). Resolve must be made in the natural world,
yet the birds call for a judicial parliament to occur on the morning of Saint Valentine’s
Day to adjudicate matters. This delayed judgment and folding of natural and earthly
judicial systems together point yet again to the disjuncture between the multi-layered
landscape of sleeping and waking. The narrator is a passive voyeur, violent hunter, and
dying participant exiting the folds of life. Meanwhile, the narrative continues in the
unwritten subtext of the pending parliament with an awakened narrator absent, standing
on the exteriors of a dreamed land of green and white.

By focusing the end of the poem on this outer realm, Clanvowe makes fissure into
a narrative opportunity by contradicting discourses of love’s service and creating an
alternative theatricality. The gesture of a knightly stone-thrower is insufficient to ease
the continued dangers of the vile cuckoo. The gesture of extending the text beyond the borders of the page, beyond the corporeality of a warrior’s gesture, implies a sort of crossing over to the absence beyond the end of the written text and after the sidelining of the narrator as “reader-stand-in” to a communal parliament. As communal transactions intervene in social dynamics and attempt to transform them, this parliament is delayed but imaginable and extended to the whole natural world – a genuinely communal gesture analogous to theatrical performance and sacred ritual. The tyrannical constraints of courtly love, as a sort of regulatory schema, push this communal performance outside of the text, beyond narrative boundaries.

The performative movement within and outside of the text, as seen in Clanvowe, is key to how the narrator figures himself in relation to the actions of the dream vision. Clanvowe’s narrator redundantly attempts to insert himself into a dialogue he is already part of, while seemingly distancing himself from it. Langland’s narrator redundantly tries to remove himself from the narrative, while calling attention to himself, as the ultimate desirer of sacramental symbols (rearticulated as Piers). In both texts, allegory is the uncoverer and/or constructor of layers within the text. The allegorical energies of both, within and outside of the texts, energize the performativity of the narrator’s movement across textual abysses as he reclassifies and reforms narratives of authority.

The allegorizing of the Passion and the Harrowing of Hell in William Langland’s The Vision of Piers the Plowman is essential to an understanding of how he encounters and unbinds Christian history to create a reformed referent point – an individualized doctrine connected to history but predicated on and renewed by self-journey. A dreaming narrator who actively engages and disengages himself from his duties retells these events.
Elizabeth Kirk sees the narrator’s movement as a means by which “[t]hree highly disparate kinds of authority are juxtaposed in the poem’s chameleon hero: the experiential authority of the worker on whose labor all the rest of society depends; the intellectual and sacramental authority of the medieval church; and the Word which was with God and was God.”28 Kirk’s delineation of these three authorities alerts readers to cultural, religious, and now narrative ritual; yet the dream narrator assumes his authority circuitously by placing Piers diegetically outside of the text – the object of desire. Piers is a fairly situated character – an upright and rather authoritative ploughman, who is figured as the enforcer of a conservative, participatory social order (an authoritative stance); yet his role is later transmogrified through absence into a type of Christ, at least for the narrator, who comes to crave him. Will sees Piers and falls into a love dream – Piers is the object of Will’s desire, no different from the desired responses of those in servitude to courtly love. Within this love dream Will begins to question Charity’s relation to the Trinity. The natural world is evoked where the catastrophic winds continually attempt to rip the blossoms from the tree, clearly illustrating the vulnerability and frailty of humanity. The wind manifests itself as fleshly desire that threatens to make bare the leaves. The violent insurrection of evil (against good) is presented as a thieving Devil who stealthily removes fallen apples.

For evere as thei dropped adoun the devel was redy,
And gadrede hem alle togideres, bothe grete and smale –
Adam and Abraham and Ysaye the prophete,
Sampson and Samuel, and Seint Johan the Baptist;
Bar hem forth boldely – nobody hym lette –
And made of holy men his hoord in Limbo Inferni,
There is derknesse and drede and the devel maister. (XVI Ll. 79-85)

Will describes the bloody joust between Piers and the Devil, as Piers angrily attacks him. Anne Middleton associates this movement with the combative nature of the poem as a whole. “In its most basic form, the episode in *Piers* presents a combat. Whatever the visionary scene, whatever the identity of the instructor or expositor, whatever the philosophic question that initiates the encounter, at some point the interaction becomes charged with opposition.” This is similar to the combative role that Clanvowe’s narrator assumes as he figures himself as the knightly protector of Love.

These tensions grow more compact and intensify as the narrative shifts to a reinterpretation of the incarnation and death of Christ. The ritual of attending mass is degraded by Will who falls asleep in the midst of these ceremonies and envisions Piers as a eucharistic symbol.

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In myddes of the masse, tho men yede to offryng,
I fel eftsoones aslepe – and sodeynly me mette
That Piers the Plowman was peynted al blody,
And com in with a cros before the comune peple,
And right lik in alle lymes to Oure Lord Jesu. (XIX Ll. 4-8.)
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Hewitt-Smith posits “There is little narrative progress in this part of the poem – almost a sense of stasis. The dreamer himself is more a witness to than a participant in these visions, saying and *doing* less than he has at any other point. Indeed, narrative interest in Will’s quest has been subsumed by an attention to the adventures of Christ, and Piers.”

Yet one should wonder if this is not merely a calculated move by Langland who points to

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30 Hewett-Smith, “Nede Ne Hath,” 237.
the problem of the invention of the Church as an institution, while retracting these ideas as he comes close to questioning the nature of ritual and their sacred designers. Nicholas Watson argues, “The church was imagined in a number of ways: as a Noah’s ark, protecting the people of God from evil (especially through the liturgy, the daily round of religious services performed in churches and monastries); as the vehicle of God’s continuing revelation to his people (especially through the teaching of his word by the clergy to the laity); as the body of Christ, sustained in being by the sacraments (especially baptism, confession, and the mass).”

Piers participates in doctrine (the written articulation of sacramental acts) by proposing alternate ways of interpreting it, which ultimately will be written by the eyewitness – Langland’s dream-narrator.

By stressing Piers’ preexistence, echoing a past biblical narrative paramount to the entire existence of Christian history, the narrator links himself to the referent of the signed text. He becomes the recounter of the pretext and context of the allegories used to theatricalize the sacrament presented in Langland’s *Visions*. The prior reality of Piers creates a narrative fissure that the narrator actively stretches across to create a new contextual experience while participating in the regulatory schemas of the Church. The narrator stretches that participation to include the rewriting of a self-exploratory doctrine built on individual work that remains nevertheless communally relevant. This is reminiscent of the work of the Clanvowe’s narrator who transmutes communal participation to offstage resolutions.

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In *Piers*, the narrator preempts authority by highlighting how susceptible the church is to mercantilism and Need. This is exemplified in passus XIX, where the Barn of Unity, emblematic of a church, is presented as a place of protection and healing. Yet Conscience calls for a physician and is met by a Friar. The Friar’s actions associate the Church with a corruptible space where poor intentions decimate the symbol of Holy Church. The sacrament is replaced by commerce, indicating that Need and his agents will forever have a foothold on one’s accessibility to Grace if individuals are vested in an institution versus an individual journey that warrants constant guard against the frailty of desire. This argument does not deny that the individual journey is also susceptible to Need; it stresses that an individual’s investment in finding an authentic *Activa Vita* is less contingent on the actions of others who may not be as committed to that pursuit.

Langland rewrites the idea of church by premising the importance of Piers’ body to Christian history and current interaction with the doctrine. To come into contact with textual history, the narrator is presented as dreaming. The dream state resonates with the readers’ lack of access to celestial certainties in history, which becomes an incentive to produce and reproduce sacramental/liturgical connections whereby the transcendent is denied by direct routes to Christian social communities. Langland’s “debate” is subtle; it is not declaratory. Instead the alternate theatricality of biblical text presented includes the weaknesses of church structure, which opens up a subtle debate about how one serves an institution whose very existence is made possible only through service and reiteration, a design fraught with weaknesses and structurally unable to take into consideration ideas of service to self.
Although Will oscillates between dreaming and waking, his journey is one of self-conscious exploration. “Langland initially represents his poetic ‘I’ (who crystallizes into the character Will), first as a critical observer of, then as a sinful participant in, the world of his poem, maintaining an extraordinarily flexible relationship between poet, poem and world in which the intellectual quest of the poet, the spiritual journey of the narrator, and the historical development and decline of Christian society are presented in ever-changing balance.”32 In some sense, Langland is indicating that these concepts are difficult to articulate; his use of a narrator who engages and disengages reverberates the tensions involved in allegorical stretching. Moving from historical referent to sign involves actions similar to a performer whose exemplification is scripted but inevitably staged in a different way every time that script is performed. Unification through signification is problematic as seen by the dream-narrator who is eclipsed by a jousting Jesus, his ultimate death, and the harrowing of hell. The dreamer falls asleep, awakens, and falls asleep repeatedly, creating a series of frustrated episodic movements in response to Will’s journey of self-exploration. As the dream narrator begins to participate in this highly-allegorized landscape of Christ’s incarnation through death, he endures more episodic moments of sleeping and dreaming. The dream-narrator sublimates himself as a way to be removed from the narrative. His interactions frame the investigation of Christian history. Will becomes almost obtuse as he asks, “Ac yit am I in a weer what charite is to mene”(XVI Ll. 3.) He moves the narrative by exclaiming that “‘I wolde travaille,’ quod I, ‘this tree to se, twenty hundred myle./And to have my fulle of that fruyt forsake al other saulee”( XVI Ll. 10-11).

His physical body is present but his only engagement is a distant intellectualizing of the events that unfold before him. Will is figured as the recchelees journeyman in passus XVIII:

Wolleward and weetshoed wente I forth after
As a recchelees renk that of no wo reccheth,
And yede forth lik a lorel al my lif tyme,
Til I weex wery of the world and wilned eft to slepe,
And lened me to a Lenten – and longe tyme I slepte;
Reste me there and rutte faste til Ramis palmarum. (XVIII Ll. 1-6.)

The melodic praise of Hosanna is short-lived. Readers are flung into a chaotic and vicious world of people screaming for the death of the Christ figure. His bloody murder is described:

The Jewes and the justice ayeins Jesu thei weere,
And al the court on hym cryde ‘Crucifige! sharpe.
Tho putte hym forth a p[e]lour bfore Pilat and seide,
‘This Jesus of oure Jewes temple japed and despised,

To fordoon it on o day, and in thre dayes after
Edifie it eft newe – here he stant that seide it –
And yit maken it as muche in alle manere poyntes,
Bothe as long and as large a loft and by grounde.’
‘Crucifige!’ quod a cachepol, ‘I warante hym a wicche!’

‘Tolle, tolle!’ quod another, and took of kene thornes,
And bigan of kene thorn a garland to make,
And sette it sore on his heed and seide in enyve,
‘Ave, raby!’ quod that ribaud – and threw reedes at hym,
Nailed hym with thre naiiles naked upon the roode,
And poison on a poole thei putte up to hise lippes,
And beden hym drynken his deeth-yvel – hise dayes were ydone—

And [seiden], ‘If that thow sotil be, help now thiselve;
If thow be Crist and kynges sone, come down of the roode;
Thanne shul we leve that Lif thee loveth and wol noght lete thee deye!’
‘Consummatum est,’ quod Crist, and comsede for to swoune,

Pitousliche and pale as a prison that deieth;
The lord of lif and of light tho leide hise eighen togideres.
The day for drede withdrough and derk bicam the sonne.
The wal waggede and cleef, and al the world quaved. ( XVIII Ll. 38- 61)

An eyewitness to one of the most brutal moments in Christian history, Langland’s narrator reclaims the historical past as he gives this account of Christ’s death. Yet by articulating this version of “origin,” he proves that he is in fact dramatizing the evidence of that day, quaking earth and all. The recounting of that day as per biblical history is chronicled by the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. His retelling, although artificial or rather crafted, puts him as an eyewitness to the crucifixion. He becomes figured momentarily as a fifth gospel, recounting the actual words of the crowd through the use of alleged direct quotes. The narrator illustrates the role of language on the day of crucifixion; it contributed to the slaying as much as the violent nails. The crucifixion was very much about linguistic humiliation as evidenced by the crowd’s mockery and attempt to defame and denounce Christ’s body as the ontological symbol of Christianity. Yet, it is Christ’s transcendence beyond the borders of grave, text, and body that enriches Christian history and figures it outside of human regulatory schema. But the artificiality of the narrator’s retelling reminds readers that all things, visible and invisible, are invariably constructs – fictions, bodies or articulations beyond the borders of themselves.

Encountering the structural forms outlined here, a reader is plagued by the innate fissure of how ritual, which encapsulates history and is constituted by language, is read, revised and performed. The very intensity of reenactment (or re-presentation) of this passional moment is what communicates its constructedness.33 Hewett-Smith argues that

33Simpson discusses the shape of the narrative where “the logic of rhetorical change follows that of epistemological change: as the poem exhausts the capacities of the
“the final visions move from abstract truth being conveyed by experiential acts to a more intellectualizing mode. Allegories are used as a referential point with a heightened effort to advertise the process of signification.”

Herein is the problem of creating a real Christian community on earth. To engage salvation involves creating an individualized referent point from doctrine. To participate in the passion is not to stand outside of it.

Eucharistic feeding – a ritualized gesture – is necessary. The nature of Christianity and penance, which creates rituals that feed off the need to dramatize or recreate Christ’s bleeding body, is the perpetuation which encourages Eucharistic feeding. This remarkable gesture reflects the fundamental principles of salvation as sacrificial love. But Langland sees the need for a richer experience where the symbolic digestion of flesh is tied to the ingestion of a spiritual life that transcends the tropes of church as an ideological space. The endless nature of desire and the corruptibility of theology by friars who contaminate the doctrine, and the performance of deprivation can only be resolved by yet another pilgrimage, the gesture of walking outwards wider and wider towards and beyond the borders of the text.

analytical, rational faculties of the soul, so it moves to the affective faculty of the soul, the will, and with this movement the modes of the poetry themselves change to become metaphoricus, symbolicus, parabolicus.”

Simpson highlights the text’s ongoing exploration (and exhaustion) of the means by which humans engage with the world – starting with the brain and moving, when the brain is exhausted, to the heart. At this moment the poetry of the text becomes more allusively referential to things it can’t encompass except by analogy. See James Simpson, “From Reason to Affective Knowledge: Modes of Thought and Poetic Form in Piers Plowman” Medium Aevum 55:1 (1986), 20.

Hewett-Smith, ""Nede Ne Hath,"" 238.

Piers is absent at the end of the narrative. To find Piers, Conscience must embark on a pilgrimage but Piers resides in the dreamer’s desire for him. Conscience cries, “I wolde become a pilgrym/And walken as wide as þe world lasteth/To seke Piers the Plowman” (XX Ll. 381-383). Denise Baker signals the necessity of this widening movement as the direction of the anagogical desire of the allegory. “Langland repeatedly takes his readers back over the same ground, but each time he gives them a more comprehensive perspective. The scope of the poem widens from the social focus of the *Visio*, to the moral analysis of *Dowell*, the typological vision of *Dobet*, and the anagogical view of *Dobest*.” The desire for salvation will always warrant the perpetuation of the embodiment of Christ. Salvation then becomes a recounting of the past – a nostalgic grasping at an absent figure. Langland’s text, his spiraling out beyond text and bodies, shows that penitential ritual is non-linear and engages, as Beckwith puts it, the “almost irreducible tension between visible and invisible in the sacrament of the eucharist when it is physical rather than metaphysical reality that is being considered.” This notion is illustrated by the figure of Charity. Yoon looks at the tensions between the metaphysical and the physical representations of Christ’s communal body: “Charity, the very attribute of Christ, cannot be found, unless it is made visible in Piers; the tangible manifestation of

charm is the human form of Piers, like a mirror of the unseen and intangible essence of charity."

The unquenchable desire for salvation is interwoven as the narrator’s meta-identity. Will’s connection to Piers is illustrated as Langland overtly gives the power of binding and unbinding, a role subtly taken on by Clanvowe’s narrator, to Piers. Langland writes:

‘And whan this dede was doon, Dobest he [thou]ghte,
And yaf Piers power, and pardon he graunte
d: To alle maner men, mercy and foryifnesse;
[To] hym, myghte men to assoille of alle manere synnes,
In covenaut that thei come and kneweliche to paye
To Piers pardon the Plowman –*Redde quod debes.*
Thus hath Piers power, be his pardon pai
d,
To bynde and unbynde bothe here and ellis,
An assoille men of alle synnes save of dette one. (XIX Ll. 184-191)

By referencing Peter the 10th priest, Langland implies that Piers also has binding power. While Piers is endowed with this binding power, Will is documenting the activities of Piers. From his staged absence, Will reconstructs rituals by putting on parchment what he has witnessed. Yet we never see Will writing; he gestures to the author-narrator beyond the boundaries of the diegesis of text and body where that writing is supposed to be occurring. This pointing to the body that gestures beyond itself is analogous to the early staging evident in the dream-narrator who presents himself as “shoo[ping] into shroudes as I a sheep were/In habite as an heremite, unholy of werkes,/ Wente wide in this world wondres to here”( Prol., L1. 2-4). Kathryn Kerby-Fulton notes “the narrative is only loosely held together by the narration of the dreamer, ‘Will,’ whose very name is loaded with both allegorical and self-referential significance, and whose voice shifts in tone and

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authority without warning.”

E. V. Gordon discusses this idea of the narrator as an eyewitness. He asserts, “Tales of the past required their grave authorities, and tales of new things at least an eyewitness, the author.” Similarly Anne Middleton infers that “Sometimes the ‘I,’ the narrative subject, is chiefly an observer of this conflict, as he is in the first dream of Lady Meed, the final dream of AntiChrist and the climatic Easter dream. These episodes are all imagined in the form of judicial duels, for which the dreamer’s narration is, like Book’s testimony, the authenticating report of a witness.”

The authenticating narrator imbues these staged actions through his style of silent reportage, creating a more urgent “reality effect” that energizes the literary and allegorical theatricality of this contrafactual recounting of biblical history as personal vision.

Piers’s and Will’s efforts to recreate these liturgical connections are related to Langland’s larger statement about the connectivity of “making” language and salvation. For Langland, salvation is a matter of individual authorship as long as the text, one’s Activa Vita, uses Christian history as a referent. The author then is producing historical truth by participating in the telling or retelling of an event but is also creating a narrative in response to events that came before. Denise Baker posits that Langland’s design “forces […] a journey of discovery” on the readers. That Langland rewrites moments of biblical history through a narrator on a personal journey and uses this new-history as a

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communal point of reference illustrates the connection between transcendence, corporeality, ritual and communal consumption. The dream-narrator’s self-conscious exploration of Dobest revisits the history of Christian theology and shows that salvation involves actively participating in recreating an absent God. Middleton postulates that the narrator “does, suffers, and interprets as well as reports actions, simultaneously composing and reading them as personal history, a ‘horizontally motivated’ narration.”

Middleton figures the narrator as both “Actor and Spectator.”

Rewriting the commandments or tearing the pardon in the B-text suggests that words written by traditional clerics are insufficient to fully appreciate the ideas of love or Dobest. This is evident in the tearing of the pardon which also concretizes the troubling, yet productive fissure implicit in official discourses and their ineffectiveness. Langland illustrates that some threads of Christian thinking are faulty because of the difficulty of a communal effort to Dobest. Perhaps the dreamer’s creation of a more accessible version of Christian thinking will call attention to the difficulties of fully engaging a community whose participants are tasked to respond to a sign (doctrine) whose referent (the historical Christ) demands to be removed from the earthly signer (the audience/reader). Langland

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attempts to address this tension of one’s spiritual, intellectual and communal life. He chooses to navigate theology through poetics by proving that a more fulfilling experience involves writing as a way to express one’s true *Activa Vita*. Yet that experience of writing (although private) must be communally relevant, whereby engaging one’s *Activa Vita* involves the seizure of ritual fragility and the rechanneling of the authoritative discourse that accompanies these vulnerabilities.

For Langland, engaging one’s *Activa Vita* involved the crafting of words – writing became a way of channeling ideas of Dobest. Langland’s act of imbuing words with the power to create a mode of loving is no different from Christian history that recognized the constructive ability of words. This alignment, who held language, defined authorial power and prowess. Langland understood this power dynamic and expressed it through the intricate relationship between Will and Ymagynatyf. Will’s encounter with Ymagynatyf closely aligns dreaming with documenting stories. Ymagynatyf, the mind’s image-making faculty, creates images which “are most vivid in dreams, whether prophetic or retrospective, and it is as though the Dreamer is facing the power that makes him a dreamer (and a poet).” Karnes notes that “[Will] becomes an expert interpreter, 

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47 As per Christian history, God’s spoken word is formative: “And God said: Be light made”; “And God said: Let there be a firmament made amidst the waters: and let it divide the waters from the waters”; God also said: “Let the waters that are under the heaven, be gathered together into one place: and let the dry land appear”; And he said, “Let the earth bring forth the green herb, and such as may seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, which may have seed in itself upon the earth” (Genesis 1: 1-31). These instructions were followed by five additional moments of speech that spanned the formation of water, creature, and man. Saint John concretizes the creative power of God’s words. He writes: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word” (John 1:1). See *The Holy Bible: Translated from the Latin Vulgate, Diligently Compared with the Hebrew, Greek, and Other Editions in Divers Languages*, (New York: P.J. Kenedy, 1914).

48 A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
integrating himself into Biblical narrative and translating the events of his life and society into Biblical terms. Ymagynatyf, then, not only tells Will how to make better use of his natural faculties, but is the very mechanism by which he does.”

Ymagynatyf questions Will’s meddling with “making”/poetry. Will indicates that “his ‘meddling with makings’ is no more than recreation, and as such may be harmless or even beneficial […] and that if someone could tell him what Dowel, Dobet and Dobest are, he would devote himself to prayer.” This claim indicates that Will must activate his imagination to find the answers to Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest because the correct mode is an individual construct – a creative endeavor. This endeavor, creating poetics as a response to participating in salvation, both individual and social, takes the place of penitential prayer evidenced by Langland who cannot pray and instead writes – an individualized gesture that posits narrative as pseudo-autobiography.

A. C. Spearing posits that spiritually inspired books provide guiding principles for those in pursuit of Dobest. Spearing explains that “the ignorant need the learned to lead them to heaven, and books are written by men but inspired by the Holy Spirit – a possible defence of Langland’s own book…a further hint that poetry such as Langland’s may be inspired.”

Spearing further deduces:

Thus the Dreamer is assured that the quest for Dowel is worth pursuing. But what has happened in B XI-XII is not only the solution of a philosophical problem; it is also that the Dreamer has come to see himself more clearly, thus carrying out the programme implied by Scripture’s *multi multa sciunt, et seipsos nesciunt*. Plunging into the depths of his own mind, where thoughts and impulses swirl unguided by logic, he comes to see that he must change himself before he can

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51 Ibid., 156.
change the world; and, as poet, he comes to see that the difficulty of writing his poem must itself be part of the poem’s subject.52

It is difficult to separate Langland from his poetic production. Ralph Hanna, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Anne Middleton take up this question of the autobiographical nature of the C Version, which involves the dreamer’s extended self-defense/apologia. Hanna argues that Langland represents himself within his poem as a member of a specific vocational group – he is a hermit – but he chooses that social designation precisely to adumbrate a particular variety of poetic career. Hanna wants us to take note of the biographical nature of the tale, more so for its discursive function which motivates large sections of Piers Plowman. Similarly, Kerby-Fulton notes Langland’s sensitivity to audience as he changes his text from B to C. Kerby-Fulton writes, “After telling Will that love is ‘\(\text{e plante of pes}\),’ Holy Church adds that he should ‘preche it in \(\text{in harpe/}\)’ […]”. Later in the poem he is projected as almost scribal in nature.”53 Here Langland figures Will as legal scribe and the importance of "envoicing" stories and writing narrative is aligned with the importance of Langland’s poetic endeavor. The non-resolution of *Piers Plowman* suggests, as Harwood argues, “knowing the law of love does not entail obeying it and does not suffice for salvation. Neither is one saved because one has actually loved.”54 The dreamer remains in a tangential existence – caught between the corporeal

52 Ibid., 157.
and transcendental gesture of salvation. He is both Sign and Referent, Eucharistic Host and Churchly Consumer, Actor and Performer, Witness and Writer, Engaged and Disengaged, as he shapes and is shaped by the past and its recounting.

As Langland struggles to stretch across celestial history to reconstitute and enrich that past with the documenting of the personal story, his poetry also reflects that struggle; his attempts to temper the divergent energies of signaling an absent God are reflected by a swooning narrator who falls in and out of sleep. Langland tries to articulate the difficulties involved in this task by using a disguised, half-awake dream-narrator to encounter salvation. Ideal systems are constructed and corruptible; they warrant an ongoing critical lens because these systems can hinder one’s participation in the construction of ritual acts. Writing becomes a mode that helps to concretize the morals and values of a society – its ritual acts – with flourishes of individualized creativity. By showing how a social text is potentially produced, Langland, the failed priest, creates a model for how readers can engage linguistic and historical fissures. Langland’s narrator is the eyewitness who facilitates the process whereby salvation can become an individualized journey through dreaming and waking and dreaming and waking. These acts of engaging and disengaging, similar to the actions of Clanvowe’s dream narrator, who at one point violently flings a rock and at other points simply watches, facilitate and restore the dream of words that form the basis of these poems that are solely invested in sheepishly illustrating the constructedness of rituals, as bendable staged gestures: love, morality, spirituality -- performed constructs -- in and beyond the world of text and bodies -- manifested as dreaming, waking, writing, and when necessary, rock-throwing.
Conclusion

My analysis of the Middle English dream narrators allows for a broader discussion of how the genre engages narrative process. Focus on performance, as intrinsic to that process, offers an additional way of excavating the work of allegory in the dream vision. This analysis enlists two poems not often discussed by scholars of the genre, Clanvowe’s *Boke of Cupide* and the anonymous *Assembly of Ladies*. By engaging these texts, my analysis adds to the foundational work already done on the genre of the medieval dream vision and reclaims its often irresolvable or incomplete ending as a tactical space gesturing beyond the material register of the poem.

The corporeality of words are presented as rich ‘theatrical” expressions of active narrators vested in stretching across the binary rifts intrinsic to allegory. What is at stake isn’t merely how the narrator stretches across time and space to create meaning, but rather how he or she constructs self amidst cultural norms, and the regulatory schemas that govern these ideologies. It is never that these authors and their narrators are trying to construct themselves outside of hegemonic schemas; some authors do protest subtly, but authors such as Chaucer and Clanvowe were more concerned with how the audience or readers engage the “constructedness of meaning” -- a process that announces its vulnerability as fertile ground for creative writing and reading.

“Voys Lessons: Whirling Words in Chaucer’s House of Rumour” provides a good starting point for my reading that seizes on narrative fissures. The lability of sound and
text are made parallel in my discussion of how the whirling House of Rumour figures text as unhinged. While Chaucer illustrates the dangers of colluded tidings, he does illustrate that meaning is built on double meaning, blending, and fusion. One cannot control who will author words, how these words will act, how they will be revered or not, or how they will be sustained, but by seeing the whimsical processability of language, readers and the audience are more cognizant that narratives, in all its forms, albeit literary or historical, are mere constructs partaking of intimate telephone games not always visible to the naked eye. Whirling words and whicker frames do provide caution but they also provide a fecund setting for creativity and reformation.

The narrator of *The Assembly* seizes on the reformatory nature of poetics. She understands that synecdochical parts of a narrative, when authored correctly, can create a body of text that challenges male vocality and authority. This analysis brings renewed interest to a poem that is often seen as poorly written. By making *The Assembly* conversant with Marie de France’s *Yonec*, readers are able to see the possibilities of female discourse as an opportunity to interrupt male authority; *The Assembly* delays justice but enlists discourse mechanisms not engaged by the lai. *The Assembly* makes a legitimate move towards authorship evidenced by the narrator’s naming of her text, “La semble de Dames.”

John Canvowe’s *Cuckoo and the Nightingale* and William Langland’s *The Vision of Piers Plowman* have not been put together as visions that share similar traits. But this analysis shows that both narrators utilized a multi-sensory approach to illustrating how servitude and sacrificial love are intimately woven together as ritualized gestures. Both narrators seized on ritual fragility, one through a whimsical debate, the other through a
“self-pilgrimage” and yet both poems posit that the gesture outside of the text and beyond the body -- offstage acts -- are as vital as the actions occurring within the poems. Langland and Clanvowe engage the “unwritten parts of their narrative,” not as a volatile space, but as an oasis to narrative stasis. Perhaps one’s Activa Vita must point to the “outside” because it is there in process -- the moment of actually doing -- where form becomes formative -- a verb rather than a stationary pillar subject to the elements of time.
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