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Cosmic Position in Chaucer's *House of Fame*

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Cosmic Position in Chaucer's House of Fame

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In the *House of Fame* (ca. 1378–80), Chaucer uses a dream vision to recount an imaginative journey through a series of spaces inspired by the narrator's immersive readings of classical and Christian sources.¹ The poem builds on Ovid's depiction of the house of Rumor in the *Metamorphoses* and navigates an imaginative and metalinguistic territory similar to those explored by narratives of celestial ascent, including Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, Alain de Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, and Macrobius's commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*.² Such voyages beyond the confines of the earth are expressions of the poetic imagination, but they also occur in medieval and classical literature within a divinely ordained and structured cosmos that included clear and symbolically important distinctions between the earth and the heavens. This essay, then, considers a seemingly obvious, and yet thematically significant, question: "Where in the world is the House of Fame?" Textual details in Book II recounting the narrator's ascent draw from popular conceptions of the universe as a series of interlocking spheres with the earth at the center. The profusion of such details highlights Chaucer's interest in the interconnections of astronomy and poetry. Taken as a whole, such details indicate a sublunar location of Fame's house. Book III features the curious image of names engraved in the "roche of yse" (1130) topped by Fame's house. Considered in relation to ideas about cosmic position and truth or fallibility, these parts of the poem suggest that Fame's vast and capricious power is ultimately limited by divine forces that organize and exert their power on all that lies below the moon. The House of Fame may be sublunar, but the poem positions Fame's house at a point in the universe where superlunary forces work to preserve and destroy written fame.

¹ All quotations from and references to Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson ed., Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988; quotations from the *House of Fame* are cited parenthetically by line number.

² The following provide entry into Chaucer's complex debts to these sources. On *Paradiso*, see B.S. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in The House of Fame*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 1966; William Joyner, 'Parallel Journeys in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Papers in Language and Literature* 12 (1976), 3–19; Mary J. Carruthers, 'Italy, *Ars Memorativa*, and Fame's House', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1986), 179–188; Glenn A. Steinberg, 'Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the *House of Fame*', *The Chaucer Review* 35.2 (2000), 182–203. On the *Somnium Scipionis*, see John M. Fyler, "'Cloude,' — and al that Y of Spak": "The House of Fame," v. 978', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 87.4 (1986), 565–68; W.A. Quinn, 'Chaucer's Recital Presence in the "House of Fame" and the Embodiment of Authority', *The Chaucer Review* 43.2 (2008), 171–96. On the *Anticlaudianus*, see Francis W. Nelson, 'Chaucer's "Airish Beasts"', *Modern Language Notes* 64 (1949), 339–41; J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame: An Exposition of "The House of Fame"*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1968; John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, Yale University Press: New Haven 1979; and Sarah Powrie, 'Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* as Intertext in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *The Chaucer Review* 44.3 (2010), 246–67.

The poem consists of three books and each book details a different location on this quest.³ The poem's presentation of multiple settings is in keeping with conventions of the dream vision; in this genre, as Marion Turner observes in *Chaucer: A European Life*, "dreamers often move across multiple places, which represent the complexity of the landscape of the mind."⁴ Book I begins with a consideration of dreams and their meanings before presenting "a temple y-mad of glas" (120) inspired by Chaucer's reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*. After the dreamer exits this temple, he finds himself in the middle of "a large felde" (482) which provides no cover at all from a giant eagle that transports him so high that the earth seems no more "than a prikke" (907). After the eagle deposits him, the dreamer climbs a rocky crag topped by Fame's palace. As he walks, he notices names written in ice; the heat of the sun and the protective shadow of the palace work to preserve some and eliminate others.

Book II occupies an important structural position in the narrative as it serves as a transition from the earth-bound Temple of Venus in Book I to the otherworldly House of Fame in Book III. While the Temple of Venus and the House of Fame reflect the spatialization of purely imaginative locales that have literary precursors, the eagle's skyward journey presented in Book II draws together both poetic and proto-scientific source material. It is a journey that presupposes familiarity with the imaginative terrain of the earth-centered universe, the *sphaera mundi*, a concept that "was represented and re-conceived so often and so intently ... that a large accretion of ideas gathered about it [to the extent that] it took on an autonomous existence as an object of study independent of any particular text."⁵ Chaucer's depiction of this journey in Book II reveals his debt to writers that represent cosmic ascent within narratives predicated on this model. While the Temple of Venus and the House of Fame, then, build from purely literary models, the eagle's flight in Book II fuses details from the poetic and proto-scientific imagination in its rendering of the realm of air.

The eagle's speech serves as the clear highlight of this part of the poem and takes up nearly the entirety of Book II, which begins at line 509 with an invocation that references famous dreamers such as Scipio, Nebuchadnezzar, and Turnus and ends at line 1090 with the dreamer at the base of the ice rock topped by Fame's palace. The eagle inaugurates his speech with a loud "Awak!" in line 556 and continues, with occasional interjections from his helpless audience, until he bids "farwel" in line 1085. The words of the loquacious eagle dominate Book II; though these are punctuated by specific setting details, these are easily overlooked by the eagle's performance. And yet, Chaucer includes such details to demonstrate that this journey occurs within the *sphaera mundi*, or sphere of the world, a model for understanding the cosmos that extended "from remotest antiquity through the Middle Ages to the time of Copernicus and even beyond."⁶ As the eagle discusses the dynamics of air, it is also significant that he flies to and through the sphere of air, a part of the terrestrial realm that, in the *sphaera mundi*, lay underneath the sphere of the moon, which served as the border between the terrestrial and the celestial realm. This essay argues that the setting of Book II bears further consideration in relation to the poem's putative aim of uncovering the ultimate authority behind fame and renown. This matters because the literary and proto-scientific precursors that

³ See Paul G. Ruggiers for more on the cohesiveness of these disparate parts: 'The Unity of Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Studies in Philology* 50 (1953), 16–29.

⁴ Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2019, 6.

⁵ Edgar Laird, 'Heaven and the *Sphaera Mundi* in the Middle Ages', *Culture and Cosmos* 4.1 (2000), 10–35, at 10–1.

⁶ Laird 2000, 10.

inform the poem accord significance to this realm of air that subordinates it to the ethereal realm that it abuts. As Turner notes, “medieval poets were fascinated by the symbolic and imaginative potential of place.”⁷ While readers intuitively notice the significance of places in dream visions that parallel those of daily experience, such as temples, houses, or gardens, we should not neglect a place, the air itself, that, for medieval writers, was equally notable for its poetic and thematic details.

The dream, which makes up the bulk of the poem, details a peripatetic quest for the origin of earthly fame and, as such, is in keeping with narrative components of the dream vision, described by Kathryn Lynch as the “genre of the age.”⁸ The object of this quest, Fame’s house, is indicative of the sleeping poet’s concern with the apparently arbitrary machinations that determine one’s place in the present and the memory of one’s name in posterity. For Zieman, this outer frame sets up a tension between “the laborious tedium involved in the ‘rekenynges’ of [Geffrey’s] day job” and the promise of poetic creation to transcend such tedium.⁹ For in fact, a mundane reality frames the poem’s rendition of travel beyond the earth’s limits. The outer frame of this dream and the eagle’s assessment of the narrator’s dreary life, provides details of the quotidian experience of a mid-level bureaucrat. The narrator, referred to directly by the eagle as “Geffrey” (729), operates as a thinly veiled portrait of Chaucer. After long days at the office executing administrative tasks, Geffrey comes home to his books. Rather than enriching his life, these books have, instead, rendered him useless through his long hours of reading. The eagle chides Geffrey on this matter, telling him that “whan thy labour doon al is,” he sits at his books “til fully daswed is thy looke” (652, 658). Though Geffrey is steeped in books that speak of fantastic journeys, he regards the actual journey as something unpleasant that must be endured. For David Bevington, the poem presents Geffrey “as a myopic and recalcitrant passenger who has left his secure world of amiable and idyllic fictions only under the most unwelcome duress.”¹⁰ These characteristics distinguish him from more astute travelers, like Scipio or Dante, who have undertaken similar journeys. Pointing out Geffrey’s mock-heroic features, Turner observes that his “bodily mass resists his elevation.”¹¹ Overworked, dazed, and overfed, Geffrey’s physical conditions effectively limit the scope of his dream journey; what begins as a possible “escape to the spheres leads him inexorably back to a very London-like space.”¹²

At the same time, this juxtaposition of the quotidian and the fantastic is in keeping with other oppositions that characterize the *House of Fame*, described by David Wallace as “a poem perched somewhere between science and farce, the cosmos and the body (with its sound-emitting orifices).”¹³ The poem is not limited to the broad question of the value of poetry. Rather, it presents and presupposes familiarity with a wide range of subjects of interest to a similarly educated and

⁷ Turner 2019, 6.

⁸ Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form*, Stanford University Press: Stanford 1988, 1.

⁹ Katherine Zieman, ‘Chaucer’s Voys.’ *Representations* 60 (1997): 70–91, at 82. For more on Chaucer’s self-representation in the poem, see Thomas J. Garbáty, ‘The Degradation of Chaucer’s “Geffrey”’, *PMLA* 89.1 (1974), 97–104.

¹⁰ David Bevington, ‘The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer’s House of Fame’, *Speculum* 36.2 (1961), 288–98, at 294.

¹¹ Turner 2019, 218.

¹² Turner 2019, 218.

¹³ David Wallace, *Geoffrey Chaucer: A New Introduction*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2017, 33.

bookish audience.¹⁴ The treatment of such subjects, including the plight of Dido, the interpretation of dreams, and the physics of sound, occurs within a narrative that is structured around Chaucer's representation of imaginative and fantastic settings. Wallace points out that Chaucer's poetry frequently mediates such complex terrain and that, as a poet, "Chaucer often, imaginatively, chooses to dwell" in places that reflect the influence of conflicting authorities without affirming the ultimate authority of any one position.¹⁵ Within the dichotomies that Wallace observes, though, the poem's attention to science and the cosmos merit closer observation, particularly given Chaucer's keen attention to these subjects throughout his career.

Chaucer and Science

Chaucer's interest in and control of astronomical theory has been grounds for considerable discussion and speculation. Scholastic consensus on the issue tends to vacillate between a viewpoint that sees Chaucer as incompetent and disinterested or initially disinterested and then gaining in curiosity regarding fourteenth-century astronomy and cosmology. Hamilton Smyser's seminal "A View of Chaucer's Astronomy," for example, argues that works datable before 1380 show no detailed astronomical knowledge on Chaucer's part.¹⁶ Edgar S. Laird and Donald W. Olson develop this discussion in greater detail in "Boethius, *Boece*, and Boötes: A Note on the Chronology of Chaucer's Astronomical Learning."¹⁷ Laird and Olson analyze Chaucer's translation of Boethius' description in book 4 meter 5 of *De consolacione philosophiae* of the rising and setting of the constellation Boötes. This translation, from the early 1380's, precedes Chaucer's later interest in the technical aspects of astronomy. Laird and Olson conclude, based on Chaucer's clear reliance on Jean de Meun's French translation of the *De consolacione*, that Chaucer, "rather embarrassingly, is among those who do not understand this astronomical illusion."¹⁸ They note, in addition, that "in the late 1370s and early 1380s, he appears to have been a man who, like his persona in the *House of Fame* [...], preferred to read about stars in literary works rather than look at them."¹⁹ The planetary

¹⁴ Larry Benson postulates that a public reading of the poem to just such an audience "most probabl[y] ... came some time around December 10, 1379." See Larry Benson, 'The "Love-Tydynges" in Chaucer's House of Fame', in Julian N. Wasserman & Robert J. Blanch eds., *Chaucer in the Eighties*, Syracuse University Press: Syracuse 1986, 3–22, at 13.

¹⁵ Wallace 2017, 33.

¹⁶ Hamilton Smyser, 'A View of Chaucer's Astronomy', *Speculum* 45 (1970), 359–73. Indeed, noting that "England lagged far behind Italy and France in the cultivation of astrology," Smyser observes that "Middle English literature does not warrant an assumption that there was any wide-spread enthusiasm for understanding even the rudiments of astronomy" (360). For more on Chaucer's complex connection to medieval astronomy, see also Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 1970; Johnstone Parr and Nancy Ann Holtz, 'The Astronomy-Astrology in Chaucer's "The Complaint of Mars"', *The Chaucer Review* 15.3 (1981), 255–66; J.C. Eade, "'We Ben To Lewed or To Slowe": Chaucer's Astronomy and Audience Participation', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 4 (1982), 53–85; John North, *Chaucer's Universe*, Clarendon Press: New York 1988; and Alison Cornish, *Reading Dante's Stars*, Yale University Press: New Haven 2000.

¹⁷ Edgar S. Laird and Donald W. Olson, 'Boethius, *Boece*, and Boötes: A Note on the Chronology of Chaucer's Astronomical Learning', *Modern Philology* 88.2 (1990), 147–49.

¹⁸ Laird and Olson 1990, 147.

¹⁹ Laird and Olson 1990, 148. Tim Machan disputes this claim, however, and notes that Chaucer used Jean de Meun's French translation with purpose and understanding. See Tim William Machan, 'The Consolation Tradition and the Text of Chaucer's *Boece*', *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 91.1 (1997), 31–50.

debate scene concerning Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in *The Knight's Tale* (2438–78) suggests a purely mythographic attention to cosmic structure; the short poems “The Complaint of Mars” and “The Complaint of Venus” echo this approach.

A Treatise on the Astrolabe, composed later, between 1391 and 1392, gives direct expression to Chaucer's obvious interest in astronomy. With the astrolabe, users can “tell the time, find compass directions, determine the season, and determine the diameter of planetary orbits.”²⁰ Its operation is based on “a stereographic projection of the stars, in which they are projected onto a plane that rotates around the celestial poles.”²¹ The technical detail of the *Treatise* indicates a high degree of proficiency with the instrument itself and the principles on which it is based; taken as a whole, the document serves as evidence that, by the time of its composition, “Chaucer had made himself familiar with the whole literature of astronomical science.”²² For J.D. North, such expertise, paired by the accretion of astronomical details in Chaucer's writing, shows a consistent interest in the subject and an increase in practical and empirical knowledge over time.²³

It is not necessary to prove that Chaucer is an authority on medieval astronomy to show that he used astronomical motifs for poetic effect. As Kara Gaston observes, “Chaucer's astronomy is not ancillary to his literary concerns, but, rather, intertwined with them.”²⁴ His knowledge of science is often sublimated to poetic, philosophical, and mythographic purposes. In his works, Chaucer “consistently displays a concern more for examining the philosophical problems raised by astrology than for transmitting mathematical data.”²⁵ To this extent, Chaucer “might have accepted astrology as a useful metaphor” for concerns otherwise expressed in the poems.²⁶ This is not to undermine Chaucer's interest in science, however. Rather, his understanding of scientific concepts informs his communication of poetic and philosophical ideas. Chaucer's development and deployment of astronomical *topos* coincides with a medieval belief that the “country of the stars” formed an interpretable text, a series of signs provided by the divine. Simply put, Chaucer “had a strong scientific bent, as is evident already in the *House of Fame*.”²⁷ At the same time, Chaucer's references to astronomy and the natural world, particularly as they are represented in Book II of the *House of Fame*, are often culled from poetic sources, foremost of which is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. While Chaucer gained greater expertise in astronomy in works written after the *House of Fame*, it is invested in and informed by ideas about the cosmos, especially as depicted in the sources that most inform the work. It follows that, as the poem is set within this model of the universe, the generally understood meaning and purpose of this setting should inform or somehow shape our

²⁰ Michael Robinson, ‘Astronomy with Chaucer: Using an Astrolabe to Determine Planetary Orbits’, *American Journal of Physics* 90.10 (2022), 745–54, at 745. For more on Chaucer and the astrolabe, see also J. Allan Mitchell, ‘Transmedial Technics in Chaucer's Treatise on the Astrolabe: Translation, Instrumentation, and Scientific Imagination’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 40 (2018), 1–41.

²¹ Robinson 2022, 745.

²² Florence M. Grimm, *Astronomical Lore in Chaucer*, AMS Press: New York 1970, 10.

²³ J.D. North, *Chaucer's Universe*, Clarendon Press: Oxford 1988.

²⁴ Kara Gaston, ‘Astrology and Astronomy’ in Richard G. Newhauser, Vincent Gillespie, Jessica Rosenfeld, & Katie Walter eds., *The Chaucer Encyclopedia*, Wiley Blackwell: Chichester 2023, 139–42, at 142.

²⁵ Jennifer Arch, ‘A Case Against Chaucer's Authorship of the *Equatorie of the Planetis*’, *The Chaucer Review* 40.1 (2005), 59–79, at 60.

²⁶ Marijane Osborn, *Time and the Astrolabe in the Canterbury Tales*, University of Oklahoma Press: Norman 2002, 315.

²⁷ Smyser 1970, 361.

understanding of what happens within this setting.

As a narrative of cosmic ascent, the *House of Fame* takes place within the imaginary space of the *sphaera mundi*. This earth-centered model of the universe “was enormously durable, its history extending ... from remotest antiquity through the Middle Ages to the time of Copernicus and even beyond.”²⁸ In its most basic form, this model presented the earth at the center of a series of interlocking spheres that, taken together, “constitute the sphere of the world.”²⁹ As Grant notes, “Most medieval natural philosophers would have agreed about the basic structure of the skeletal frame of the world.”³⁰ The earth is surrounded by “a sphere that ‘bears’ the moon, and around that sphere are others, like layers of an onion, bearing the other planets.”³¹ Beyond the spheres of the planets lies “the sphere bearing the fixed stars and, beyond it, one or more others.”³² The spheres holding the planets and fixed stars “were conceived as physically real.”³³

This is not to say that there was one universally accepted idea of all specific features of this model. Laird reminds us that “substantial variations in detail” existed in descriptions of the *sphaera mundi*.³⁴ Cormack stresses that such variations occurred in popular imaginings of the earth as well as the cosmos beyond: “people in the Middle Ages ... did not have a unified understanding of the size and composition of the earthly sphere”³⁵ This can be accounted for by variations in the main textual authorities transmitting cosmological ideas to medieval readers: “conceptions of the structure and operation of the physical cosmos during the Middle Ages ... were dominated by the ideas of Plato and Aristotle,” who themselves are not in complete accord.³⁶ Moreover, these ideas were often disseminated to “enthusiastic and sometimes credulous” medieval readers in digested form through the works of Latin encyclopaedists such as Macrobius, Chalcidius, Boethius, Martianus Capella, and others.³⁷ Discrepancies between classical and Biblical readings also affected the articulation of specific details in this system. Thus, “some interpreted the Biblical firmament as a single heaven that embraced all the planets and fixed stars, while others ... identified it solely with the eighth sphere of the fixed stars.”³⁸

In this model, the logic of concentric spheres extended to the earth itself, conceived of as a domain built from elemental spheres. The earth, made of land, “is surrounded by the sea, which in turn is surrounded by air, as also air is surrounded by fire.”³⁹ These elements are arranged in order of

²⁸ Laird 2000, 10.

²⁹ Laird 2000, 10.

³⁰ Edward Grant, ‘The Medieval Cosmos: Its Structure and Operation’, *Journal for the History of Astronomy* 28 (1997), 147–67, at 151. That said, Grant has also explored alternate models of the universe, such as that offered by Nicole Oresme in his *Tractatus de commensurabilitate vel incommensurabilitate motuum celi*; see Edward Grant, *Nicole Oresme and the Kinematics of Circular Motion*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992.

³¹ Laird 2000, 10.

³² Laird 2000, 10.

³³ Grant 1997, 157.

³⁴ Laird 2000, 10.

³⁵ Lesley B. Cormack, ‘Flat Earth or Round Sphere: Misconceptions of the Shape of the Earth and the Fifteenth-Century Transformation of the World’, *Ecumene* 1.4 (1994), 363–85, at 363.

³⁶ Grant 1997, 147.

³⁷ Grant 1997, 147.

³⁸ Grant 1997, 158.

³⁹ Laird 2000, 10.

weight: earth is heavier than water; water is heavier than air; and air is heavier than fire. The point where the sphere of fire meets the sphere of the moon beyond marked a significant threshold. This liminal zone constituted the area where the sublunary realm of change gave way to higher realms that were regarded as fixed, immortal, and, ultimately, expressions of divine perfection.

Such theological ideas shape the *sphaera mundi* in important ways. In keeping with classical sources, the earth existed at the center due to its weight and density. From a Christian perspective, it also “enclosed Hell,” which, submerged below the earth, existed at the farthest remove possible from “the empyrean, the abode of the Creator, the angels and the blessed.”⁴⁰ Between these poles, position mattered and ideas about such positionality reflected a hybrid of classical and Christian influences. In the visual arts, representations of Christ atop the sphere of the world demonstrated his authority while representations of God as an architect “assimilate ... [the Christian god] to the ancient Demiurge.”⁴¹ This logic of position and perfection suffused the *sphaera mundi* so that “the world was usually viewed as a vast hierarchy of decreasing sublimity and perfection.”⁴² In this hierarchy, “the most perfect sphere is the highest ... because it is nearest the Prime Mover and farthest from the earth.”⁴³ Each descending sphere marked a move away from this perfection. Within this gradual movement away from God, “The continuous descent of perfection ... suffered a radical break at the point where the concave surface of the lunar sphere surrounded the convex surface of the sphere of fire.”⁴⁴ This break between the sub- and super- lunary realms also reflected Aristotelian concepts of change: “The celestial region, where change was unknown, was incomparably more perfect than its terrestrial counterpart, where bodies composed of varying proportions of the four elements ... suffered change incessantly.”⁴⁵ Though the perfect celestial realm existed far beyond transient Earth, “many assumed that celestial bodies governed all activities of sublunary bodies.”⁴⁶ This concept suggests God’s omnipotence, but also stemmed from practical observations, such as “the obvious role of [the] Sun” in providing light and heat.⁴⁷

Celestial Ascent

The thematic concerns and account of ascent in Book II draw from and elaborate on key themes of the *sphaera mundi*, most important of which is its hierarchy of low and high and the attendant significations of these varying positions. This is in keeping with a key characteristic of the philosophical dream vision, a genre that presents “a vertiginous ascent among the stars” as a way of

⁴⁰ ‘Spheres in Medieval Western Europe’, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2019, <http://expositions.bnf.fr/monde-en-spheres/en/spheres-in-medieval-western-europe/index.html>. References to online sources in this article give URLs as they were in March-April 2024.

⁴¹ ‘Spheres in Medieval Western Europe’, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2019, <http://expositions.bnf.fr/monde-en-spheres/en/spheres-in-medieval-western-europe/index.html>

⁴² Grant 1997, 151.

⁴³ Maurice De Wulf, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, vol. 1. P. Coffey trans., Longmans, Green, and Co.: London 1909, 44.

⁴⁴ Grant 1997, 151.

⁴⁵ Grant 1997, 151. For more on Aristotle and cosmology, see also Istvan Bodnar and Pierre Pellegrin, ‘Aristotle’s Physics and Cosmology’, in Mary Louise Gill & Pierre Pellegrin eds., *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, Blackwell Publishing: Malden, MA 2006, 270–392.

⁴⁶ Grant 1997, 162.

⁴⁷ Grant 1997, 162.

justifying the “elevated perspective on the Earth” that the protagonist gains through such a journey.⁴⁸ In this genre, as Steven Kruger points out in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, the dream and the vision of the universe correspond based on the idea that “dream, soul, and universe are all, in some sense, coextensive.”⁴⁹ The proximity to divinity that occurs within the dream lends itself to an inspired depiction of a divinely created cosmos. The motif of ascent narrativizes this interconnection of dream, soul, and universe. Such upward movement occurs continuously through Book II as Geoffrey lays immobile in the claws of a golden eagle sent by Jove to transport him away from Earth. The book begins as this giant bird descends from the sky and steals the narrator in “hys grymme pawes stronge” (541). It is not until the end of this book that the eagle releases Geoffrey and sets him “faire on my fete” (1050) so that he can walk directly to Fame’s “paleys” (1090). Michael R. Kelley’s reading of the poem as a medieval precursor of science fiction, a distinctly modern genre, hinges on this description of cosmic voyages and otherworldly locales that begins in Book II.⁵⁰ Kelley is correct that such features occur in the poem; as a work informed by scientific ideas, it gestures, particularly in Book II, to popularly received ideas about astronomy. At the same time, the representation of this voyage as a transit from one mythologically-informed setting to another also connects it quite directly to the dream vision. Such generic hybridity is evident as well in the poem’s reliance on specific sources in its various parts.

The basic parameters of Book II mark another generic change that reflects, less literally but more literarily, this theme of ascent. This generic shift is, like the physical movement of the protagonist and eagle, a move from lower to higher. If Book I reflects the themes and concerns of love poetry, a “lower” genre in its focus on sex and the body, Book III concerns the headier realm of philosophical poetry. The Temple of Venus embodies features of the former and the House of Fame, in Book III, of the latter. Book II, with its fart jokes and astronomical allusions, is somewhere between these two and the eagle’s speech, at turns pedantic and ironic, is itself a fusion of genres. In terms of source material, Book II marks a transition from Virgil to Ovid as Chaucer’s primary authority.

The representation of ascent at this point of the poem accompanies a transition from one textual authority to another. For Steven Kruger, the various parts of the poem are “held together not so much by central themes or unities as by a consistent, if complicated, pattern of movement.”⁵¹ Ovid’s evocation of the House of Fame supplants the Virgilian preoccupations of Book I as Geoffrey leaves the Virgil-inspired Temple of Venus and begins his movement to the Ovid-inspired House

⁴⁸ Dale Kedwards, ‘Astronomy, Literary Criticism, and Medieval Literature: An Introduction’, *Interfaces* 8 (2021), 7–13, at 7.

⁴⁹ Steven Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1992, 34.

⁵⁰ While these are also features of the dream vision, the question of correspondences between these genres is beyond the scope of the current essay. That said, Chaucer has provided inspiration for later generations of science fiction writers for his employment of these and related motifs. For more on Chaucer’s “reception and refashioning in science fiction” by later writers, see T.S. Miller, ‘Flying Chaucers, Insectile Ecclesiasts, and Pilgrims Through Space and Time: The Science Fiction Chaucer’, *The Chaucer Review* 48.2 (2013), 129–65, at 129.

⁵¹ Steven F. Kruger, ‘Imagination and the Complex Movement of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*’, *The Chaucer Review* 28.2 (1993), 117–34, at 117. Kathryn McKinley concurs with the thematic significance of movement: “His narrator’s movement involves ongoing reflection on the scenes and objects he passes.” See Kathryn McKinley, ‘Ekphrasis as Aesthetic Pilgrimage in *House of Fame* Book 1’, in Nino Zchomelidse and Giovanni Freni, eds., *Meaning in Motion: The Semantics of Movement in Medieval Art*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2011, 215–32, at 216.

of Fame. At the end of Book I, Geoffrey simply leaves the building after “I had seen al this sighte in this noble temple” (468–69). He stands in a desert “nas but of sonde” (486) and turns his eyes to heaven after he offers a prayer to Christ “in blisse” (492). At that moment, an eagle, recalling the eagle of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, swoops down and abducts the narrator.⁵² Jove, who has observed his obsequious and unrewarded poetic fealty to Cupid and Venus, has selected Geoffrey for higher things than the pointless love poems that have “daswed” (658) him into a mute and tedious existence. The god bestows the trip as “som recompensacioun of labour and devocioun” (665–66) for service rendered.

The eagle recites minutiae from Aristotelian physics and astronomical lore as he takes Geoffrey upward.⁵³ Such details place the ascent within the narrative space of the *sphaera mundi*. In the first part of this journey, the eagle offers an extended proof that words are sound (762), sound is air (768), like seeks like (823–29), and therefore, words spoken on Earth “hath his kinde place in aire” (834).⁵⁴ The discourse on air matters because, in the *sphaera mundi*, the sphere of air is itself a place, figured here as a likely end point of the ascent. Satisfied that he has convincingly established air as the natural realm of sound, the eagle then draws Geoffrey’s attention to the changing view below. The two ascend for the duration of his speech. In the space of ten lines, Geoffrey moves from a place where he can see “riveres, ... citees, ... tounes and ... grete trees” (901–02) to an even higher point where he cannot identify “any toun or ought thou knowest yonder down” (911–12).

Once past this point where land is no longer recognizable, the poem moves beyond the interplay of earth and air. Allusions to mythical and legendary figures who attempted to fly beyond the earth position the journey in a higher and more dangerous territory. The eagle refers to this region as “this large place, this air” (926–27) helping to establish their location within a model and tradition that locates air above land and water but below the sphere of fire, itself produced by “the swift motion of the upper air,” and the cosmos beyond.⁵⁵ In this part of the speech, the eagle points out areas beyond the realm of air; he draws Geoffrey’s attention to constellations (948) and the Milky Way (937). Here, Geoffrey’s mind turns to Boethius (972), Martianus Capella (985), and Alain de Lille (986), writers who identify a purer zone “above the globe of the immense sky, leaving the clouds below.”⁵⁶ Though the eagle begins Book II by methodically connecting earthly sound to the realm of air, this latter section reminds readers that, for Boethius, thought, unlike sound, can transcend the sublunary realm by “climb[ing] above the globe of the immense sky.”⁵⁷

⁵² Dante dreams in Canto IX of *Purgatorio* that this eagle “swooped, snatching me up to the fire’s orbit” (30). His dream of ascent toward the sphere of fire foreshadows his later movement through this threshold and into the earthly paradise. Dante, *Purgatorio*, Allen Mandelbaum trans., Bantam: New York 1984.

⁵³ The eagle cites well-known authorities who provide the imaginative basis for much of the work. As Lara Ruffolo points out, the significance of these lists of authorities and information cannot be overlooked. Instead, “they point to the connections between audience, authors, and authority” and highlight Chaucer’s own desire to write himself into these series of connections. Lara Ruffolo, ‘Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*: Destruction and Definition through Proliferation’, *The Chaucer Review* 27.4 (1993), 325–41, at 338.

⁵⁴ For a consideration of the eagle’s representation of the materiality of air and ways that the eagle’s speech in this part of the poem bears on the figural representation of language in book III, see Sean Gordon Lewis, ‘Airy Bodies and Knowledge in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*’, *Enarratio* 23 (2022), 52–68.

⁵⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Richard Green trans., Macmillan: New York 1962, 76.

⁵⁶ Boethius 1962, 76.

⁵⁷ Boethius 1962, 76.

This possibility of movement past the limits of earthly understanding, past the physical realm of objects and sounds produced by living people, isn't directly mentioned until the pair have left the earth far behind. Geoffrey faints immediately after the abduction and only comes to much later: "I longe in his clawes lay til at the laste he to me spak" (554–55). When he regains consciousness, Geoffrey initially responds to the opening salvo of the eagle's cosmological conversation with genuine fear. He fears a potentially violent transformation enacted by a journey beyond the mortal realm and anxiously wonders "wher Joves wol me stellyfye or what thing this may sygnifye" (586–87).⁵⁸ Geoffrey's fear regarding stellification, a process wherein Jove transforms and transcribes him into the superlunary sphere, demonstrates the poem's consistent intermingling of astronomical fact and poetic mythography. Geoffrey immediately compares himself negatively to other figures from myth and legend who have been thus transformed: "I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye, ne Romulus, ne Ganymede" (588–89). Partly this reflects the comic subtext wherein the eagle comments that the portly Geoffrey is "noyous for to carie" (574); unlike the characters he mentions, Geoffrey is not heroic and patently unfit for such a journey. The eagle assuages Geoffrey's fear by telling him Jove has no intention of transforming Geoffrey, to which he adds "as yet" (599), a phrase that leaves the possibility open.

Such moves early in Book II "create a space ... where language-culture exists alongside science-nature in ways that move the traditional genre of dream poetry into an entirely new realm."⁵⁹ The poem figures Geoffrey's ascent in a way that mixes his search for poetic material with evocations of the universe beyond the writing desk. Chaucer's use of "sygnifye" to rhyme with "stellyfye" in lines 586 and 587 suggest this juxtaposition of concerns. To "stellyfye" involves a form of signification that takes place within the realm of science-nature. The term "stellification," then, implies a kind of star writing that has both literal and figurative implications.⁶⁰ While mythology is filled with tales of heroes written into a universe imagined as a kind of textual tapestry, the stars and constellations themselves exist. The stories locked in the stars "can be perceived only when imagination connects the dots."⁶¹ Moreover, the reference to stellification signifies the two main divisions of the medieval universe.⁶² Stellification involves transcription from the sublunary and into the superlunary realm. Imagined as the realm above the sphere of the moon, this largely unchangeable part of the universe exists beyond time, language, and motion.⁶³ Star writing implies a kind of permanence vastly at odds with the poem's rendering of Fame as capricious and arbitrary. Read within the

⁵⁸ This fear of abduction has been read by critics as an expression of the poem's sexual politics. For more, see Geoffrey W. Gust, *Constructing Chaucer: Author and Autofiction in the Critical Tradition*, Palgrave: New York: Palgrave 2009 and Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio*, University of Toronto Press: Toronto 2006.

⁵⁹ Jessica Rezunyk, *Science and Nature in the Medieval Ecological Imagination*, PhD thesis, Washington University in St. Louis: St. Louis 2015, 59, https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/677.

⁶⁰ Describing the poetic and social significance of this process, I have argued elsewhere that the poem's musings on fame and astral enshrinement denote a fear that "poetic achievement may turn into a kind of poetic subservience." See Dean Swinford, 'Stellification and Poetic Ascent in the *House of Fame*', *Modern Philology* 111.1 (2013), 1–22, at 3.

⁶¹ Quinn 2008, 181.

⁶² For more on these divisions and their evocation in Chaucer's poetry, see Alexander N. Gabrovsky, *Chaucer the Alchemist: Physics, Mutability, and the Medieval Imagination*, Palgrave: New York 2015.

⁶³ Such star writing necessarily involves a transformation of the changeless superlunary realm, but this action can only be undertaken by divine powers.

context of Chaucer's most significant sources for his representation of astral ascent, this reference to stellification seems indicative of an attempt to stake out a cosmologically plausible, yet somewhat indeterminate, location for the House of Fame. As Kathy Cawsey describes this, Chaucer places Fame's house "on an island in the sky."⁶⁴ Indeed, while the *House of Fame* expresses a deep thematic concern with human language and its limits, it employs astrological tropes to structure and shape its exploration of this theme.

The general consensus among editors and critics of the *House of Fame* is that, despite Geoffrey's fear of superlunary transcription, the eagle's voyage leads to a sublunary location. Chaucer's reliance on Ovid as a model for this part of the poem helps to solidify this claim in that Rumor's house, as presented in the *Metamorphoses*, is decidedly terrestrial; though it sits high in the sky, it remains bound to *terra firma*. Positioned on the "summit of a lofty tower," its connection to the earth is not in question.⁶⁵ In describing Geoffrey's ascent, Benson notes that, "Chaucer, unlike several of his visionary predecessors, never rises above the sublunary world; the House of Fame is in the air, which in the medieval universe is below the element of fire, and very definitely below the moon."⁶⁶ Fyler adds that this inability to transcend the sublunary realm "underline[s] the differences" between the *House of Fame* and its source texts.⁶⁷ So, though Geoffrey's fear of stellification necessarily entails the possibility of ascent into the supralunar, this cosmic transcription does not come to pass.

Ovidian Influence

Chaucer is not unique in his poetic handling of this cosmic positioning. His primary source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, works in a similar fashion. When he ascends far beyond the ground, the eagle reminds Geoffrey that "thyn owne book" (712) by which he means the *Metamorphoses*, describes this location.⁶⁸ Here, Geoffrey is both reader and *auctor*; he has reached a place mentioned in the book he reads. To use A.J. Minnis's formulation, he is also *factor*.⁶⁹ Though Minnis uses this term as indicative of the poet's skepticism regarding his own authority, it also illustrates Geoffrey's role as a self-aware character in a fictionalized place. The eagle threatens celestial transcription, but Chaucer himself has transposed his likeness into the heavens. The direct reference to the *Metamorphoses* emphasizes Ovidian influence at the moment that Chaucer's narrative reimagines and moves beyond that influence. Though he draws from Rumor's house in *Metamorphoses*, XII, "Chaucer amplifies and transforms the Ovidian *materia* by translating it into a visual, mnemonic language."⁷⁰ One area of transformation comes from his reference to Fame's location and his evocative reading,

⁶⁴ Kathy Cawsey, "'Alum de glas" or "Alymed glass"?: Manuscript Reading in Book III of The *House of Fame*', *University of Toronto Quarterly* 73.4 (2004), 972–79, at 972.

⁶⁵ Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses in Fifteen Books*, Samuel Garth ed. and John Dryden trans., Heritage Press: New York 1961, 390.

⁶⁶ Benson 1988, 984.

⁶⁷ Fyler 1986, 567.

⁶⁸ *The Book of the Duchess* also includes this connection between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the dreamer.

⁶⁹ See A. J. Minnis, with V. J. Scattergood and J. J. Smith, eds., *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1995, 248.

⁷⁰ Alexandra Cook, 'Creative Memory and Visual Image in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', in Susanna Fein & David B. Raybin eds., *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park 2016, 23–38, at 35.

influenced in part by other source texts, of the point in the sky where he becomes aware of his position in relation to a topographic view of this journey.

Indicating the point best positioned to receive sound, the eagle tells Geoffrey that Fame dwells in a place “set amyddys of these three, heven, erthe, and eke the see” (843–45).⁷¹ The eagle’s phrasing mirrors that found in Ovid, but alters the arrangement of the various parts of the world. Ovid names land, sea, then the heavens: “Orbe locus medio est inter terrasque fretumque caelestesque plagas, triplicis confinia mundi.”⁷² The phrase that Ovid uses after naming earth, sea, and heaven, “triplicis confinia mundi,” or three confines of the world, serves as a shorthand of a model or idea of the universe and the way that these three components exist to form a greater whole. These three divisions constitute the world and also demarcate its limits. The sequence is presented as an inverted hierarchy, beginning with land, the terrestrial home of fallible humans, and ending with the heavens. This is in keeping with Aristotelian conceptions of the “weight” of these spheres: “Earth was the heaviest, water less so, and air and fire the lightest.”⁷³ Ovid’s “caelestesque” suggests the heavenly and divine, though it encapsulates both heavens, which are divine, and air, which is not.

As Sheila Delany notes, though the eagle implies that Ovid’s Latin text is “thyn owne book,” Chaucer most likely uses the ordering found in the French *Ovide moralisé*: “Uns leus fu entre ciel et terre/ Et mer qui seoit droitement/ Ou milieu dou monde egalment.”⁷⁴ For Delany, differences from the Latin, such as this change in ordering, show that “Chaucer worked primarily from the classical narrative with some details of description and style adapted from the vernacular.”⁷⁵ Chaucer’s ordering, stylistically modeled on the *Ovide moralisé*, serves to set off his two main realms of concern, the heavens and the earth. In the *Ovide moralisé*, the enjambment sets “mer” slightly apart from “ciel et terre.” In Chaucer, the phrase “and eke the see” occurs in the same line as heaven and earth, but the conjunction “and” puts this third component of the world to the side.⁷⁶ The narrator’s recollection of the sights he sees as he travels also ends with the sea, so that a sequence of land features, such as “feldes and playnes” (897), “hilles, and now mountaynes” (898), ends with “shippes seylynge in the see” (903). This line comes right before the narration emphasizes the point that the eagle has flown “so hye” (905) that they have entered the high air, or “large

⁷¹ Andrew Lemons identifies “that universal intersection of land, sea, and heavens [as the place that] Lady Fame has chosen for her home.” See Andrew Lemons, “The Poetic Form of Voice in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *The Chaucer Review* 53.2 (2018), 123–51, at 130.

⁷² *Metamorphoses* XII, 39–40. A survey of various translations shows ways that articulations of this phrasing indicate differing representations of the mythopoetic cosmic model thus evoked. For A.S. Kline, this place “is at the centre of the World,” while Michael Simpson uses the more celestial-oriented phrase “the middle of the universe.” While Michael Simpson describes the three parts as “earth, sea, and sky,” identifiable as the divisions of the mortal realm, Henry T. Riley identifies the last part as “the regions of heaven,” suggesting a more metaphysical understanding of the phrase. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, A.S. Kline trans., Poetry in Translation: Manchester 2000, XII, 39–40, <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Ovhome.htm>; Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Michael Simpson trans., University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst 2001, 200; Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Henry T. Riley trans., H.G. Bohn: London 1858, 415.

⁷³ Carl Sagan, “The Elements in Aristotle’s Cosmic Model,” Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/static/collections/finding-our-place-in-the-cosmos-with-carl-sagan/articles-and-essays/modeling-the-cosmos/ancient-greek-astronomy-and-cosmology.html>

⁷⁴ Sheila Delany, “Chaucer’s *House of Fame* and the *Ovide moralisé*,” *Comparative Literature* 20.3 (1968), 254–64, at 258.

⁷⁵ Delany 1968, 256.

⁷⁶ Winston Weathers, “The Rhetoric of the Series,” *College Composition and Communication* 17.5 (1966), 217–22, at 218.

space” (926), a place that Chaucer identifies with Scipio (916), Dedalus (919), and Ykarus (920). At this point, then, the poem’s involvement with the movement away from the earth occurs in terms of plot, as a physical process; through dialogue, as part of the eagle’s disquisition on sound; and syntactically, in the phrase “hevene, erthe, and eke the see,” through the direct reference to the various components of the world below the sphere of fire.

This brief reference to the various parts of the world has little bearing on Ovid’s rationale for mentioning the house of Rumor. Rather, Ovid’s Rumor figures into a recounting of the conditions leading to the war for Troy. The description of this house sits between the substitution of Iphiginia for a sacrificial hind and the Trojan’s realization that “the Grecian fleet [is] descending on the town.”⁷⁷ Delany characterizes Ovid’s initial rendition of the house of Rumor as “an extended rhetorical ornament, a figure of thought.”⁷⁸ The twenty lines or so that Ovid devotes to the description do not “form part of the narrative proper” and merely indicate that “news of the impending invasion reached Troy before the Greek fleet itself arrived.”⁷⁹ Taken in this regard, Fame’s house is little more than an example of Ovid’s poetic skill.

That said, Ovid’s tripartite phrasing suggests some areas of indeterminacy that have bearing on the eagle’s efforts to tell Geoffrey “where [Fame] duelleth” (711). Of these three, land and sea are the least problematic in that, together, they constitute the large part of the mutable world. The third category, sky, however, is not as simple to isolate. To translate Ovid’s tripartite phrasing into the divisions of this model, “sky” denotes the superlunary realm, while land and sea constitute parts of the mutable world.⁸⁰ At the same time, the conceptualization of space distinguishes between “sky” and “air.” Importantly, air itself is not superlunary while sky is.

This point of separation is not unique to Ovid; other writers who influenced Chaucer’s celestial imagination articulate the significance of this boundary between realms. In his *Cosmographia*, for example, Bernardus Silvestris indicates this distinction by remarking “all that lies beneath our turbulent sky is to be regarded with mistrust by virtue of its imperfect and fluctuating condition.”⁸¹ Sky itself, often cloudy and beset by shifting winds, marks a boundary and characterizes the fallen condition of all below it. Describing Plutarch’s articulation of this division in *De facie*, A.P. Bos notes that “the Moon appears to be located on the border of two spheres. And the Moon itself, as a heavenly, divine figure, has authority over the crossing of this border.”⁸² The division, then, is both empirical and quasi-spiritual.

Building on this understanding, Chaucer positions Fame’s house somewhere within the realm

⁷⁷ Ovid 1961, 391.

⁷⁸ Delany 1968, 254.

⁷⁹ Delany 1968, 254–55. The relevant passage occupies 24 lines in Ovid and 43 in the *Ovide moralisé*.

⁸⁰ See Gale C. Schricker, “The Psychic Struggle of the Narrative Ego in the Conclusion of “Troilus and Criseyde””, *Philological Quarterly* 72.1 (1993), 15–31 for more on the way that Chaucer develops a specific listing of cosmic spheres that stands in contrast to the more general dual partition employed in classical texts. In this case, he uses a formulation from Boccaccio in a way that, for Schricker, “suggests a Christian rather than a pagan ascension for Troilus.” She draws from John M. Steadman’s analysis of classical depictions of apotheosis to conclude that Chaucer’s specific reference to the eighth sphere in Troilus “fits thematically” though it is not necessarily correct. See also John M. Steadman, *Disembodied Laughter: Troilus and the Apotheosis Tradition*, University of California Press: Berkeley 1972.

⁸¹ Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, Winthrop Wetherbee trans. and ed., Columbia University Press: New York 1990, 105.

⁸² A.P. Bos, *Cosmic and Meta-Cosmic Theology in Aristotle’s Lost Dialogues*, Brill: Leiden 1989, 48.

of air. Though it is most likely sublunar, despite Geoffrey's anxious musings to the contrary, it has been, unlike Ovid's house of Rumor, completely unmoored from the earth. Ovid's description makes no pretension of the house escaping the land. Rather, its position on the top of an earthly tower makes it the ideal vantage point to observe and receive all worldly messages: "From there is seen all things that anywhere exist, although in regions far; and there all sounds of earth and space are heard."⁸³ Though it does receive sounds from space, as this is the house of Rumor, the sounds from the earth are far more salient to its machinations. Also, understood with Ovid's mythological context of depicting the Trojan War, the sounds from space, possibly the gossip of divinities regarding their favored earthly heroes, differ in kind from the celestial sounds emanating from the classical model with Christian overtones familiar to medieval audiences.⁸⁴

Beyond the Earth

While Chaucer leans heavily on Ovid's earth-bound house of Fame, the poem also shows the influence of Cicero, Macrobius, and Alain de Lille, who raise their attention beyond the sublunary realm.⁸⁵ The influence of diverse representations of cosmic ascent reveals the extent to which the poem is "stitched together from conventional literary sources" while maintaining its own distinct identity.⁸⁶ In line 914, Chaucer directly positions Geoffrey's journey in relation to those of his literary precursors. The eagle proclaims that they have traveled twice as high as a host of mythological and literary characters whose accounts clearly depict movement beyond the sublunary sphere.

In Cicero, for example, Scipio's position allows him to hear the music of the spheres, thus demonstrating that he has surpassed the grip of the earth. In this way, though "the eagle's flight cannot escape the realm of air," the narrative reveals the imprint of those that do.⁸⁷ In a move away from Ovid, Chaucer's eagle shifts his attention from sound properties so that he can "telle thee how fer that thou art now therfro" (894–95). This passage echoes the language used by Scipio Africanus as he shows Scipio his celestial vantage point.

Scipio Africanus critiques Scipio for allowing his thoughts "to dwell upon the earth" because it shows his ignorance of "the regions to which [Scipio] ha[s] come."⁸⁸ For Macrobius, "the place where Scipio thought he was in his dream is the Milky Way."⁸⁹ In chapter IV of the *Dream of Scipio*,

⁸³ Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses in English Blank Verse*, Brookes More trans., Cornhill Publishing Company: Boston 1957, 559.

⁸⁴ Some critics, such as Cook, see Fame's house as definitely terrestrial. Comparing the two, she notes that, "like Ovid's, Chaucer's house is perched on a mountain; and, like Ovid's, Chaucer's house contains muttering voices that sound like the waves of the sea." For Cook, Chaucer's description alludes to all three sublunary components and makes no pretension of movement past them. See Cook 2016, 35. Most critics see the journey in Book II as a transition from earth to sky.

⁸⁵ In most of his references to the *Dream of Scipio*, Chaucer seems unaware that Macrobius is commenting on a book by Cicero. Besides his use of the work in *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer presents Macrobius as the author, and not as a commentator on Cicero.

⁸⁶ Ashby Kinch, "'Mind like Wickerwork': The Neuroplastic Aesthetics of Chaucer's House of Tidings", *postmedieval* 3 (2012), 302–14, at 311.

⁸⁷ Quinn 2008, 192.

⁸⁸ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, William Harris Stahl trans. and ed., Columbia University Press: New York 1990, 72–73.

⁸⁹ Macrobius 1990, 94. While Dante establishes the sphere of fire as an important threshold that the pilgrim initially fears to cross, Scipio's dream does not.

Cicero emphasizes Scipio's distance from the earth and provides a brief primer on the geocentric model. Like Scipio, who keeps "turning my eyes back to earth" despite his grandfather's entreaties, Geoffrey reflects on the earth far below, noting that "al the world as to myn eye no more semed than a prikke"⁹⁰ While Chaucer's subject is the sublunary realm, the narrative at the end of book II soars well past the plausible heights of Ovid's fully grounded house and emphasizes, instead, a celestial position more in keeping with the fully fledged astral travelers that the eagle catalogues for Geoffrey: Alixandre Macedo, Scipio, Daedalus, and Icarus (915–20).

As Book II comes to an end, Geoffrey and the eagle ascend even further. Though the pair seem to have arrived at the sublunar threshold, they somehow continue ever upward. After passing the "eyryssh bestes," the two "gan alwey upper to sore" (961). The passage through the realm of the "eyryssh bestes" has generated some controversy as to which phenomenon Chaucer actually means. The options, moreover, are, on the one hand, a superlunary possibility of astronomical bodies with mythological significance and, on the other, a sublunary option of supernatural creatures that signify or connote meteorological phenomenon. For Skeat, the eagle refers here to the signs of the zodiac; these constellations and others that are named after animals exist as "bestes" that dwell in the "air," here a reference more to space than air, given that these beasts, as stars, exist beyond the mortal realm.⁹¹ W. Nelson Francis bolsters this argument by pointing to lines 940–56, which are located between the two references to the beasts in 931 and 965. These lines provide a "condensed paraphrase of the Phaethon story, as told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, II, 47–313."⁹² Ovid's rendering of Phaethon's fateful journey refers directly to constellations, including Leo, Scorpio, and Cancer, as "ferarum," or beasts.⁹³ Moreover, Ovid unequivocally locates these constellations in the "caelo," a heavenly, and not "airish," locale.⁹⁴

For Robinson and W.P. Ker, however, these beasts are decidedly sublunar in location; they are, as Francis describes, "daemons of the air, intermediaries between the gods and men."⁹⁵ Fyler supports this view, arguing that "the stars are, after all, not in the air."⁹⁶ The first reference to these beasts connects them directly to Plato and, as Ker points out, Chaucer also calls these beasts "many a citezeyn" in keeping with language used in the *Anticlaudianus*.⁹⁷ The second reference to these beasts in line 965 is followed by a list of meteorological phenomena, including "cloudes, mystes, and tempestes,/ snowes, hayles, reynes, wyndes" (966–67). The phrase either equates these beasts with the weather, or it indicates that daemonic beasts and harsh rains occupy the same strata of the realm of air.

Francis suggests that either possibility—constellations or daemonic agents—are plausible and that, quite possibly, "both were in his mind."⁹⁸ Familiar with Chaucer's poetics of ambiguity, he

⁹⁰ Macrobius 1990, 74. Quinn characterizes the earth and all it encompasses as "a pointless point." Quinn 2008, 181.

⁹¹ W.W. Skeat, ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1900, III, 263.

⁹² W. Nelson Francis, 'Chaucer's "Airish Beasts"', *Modern Language Notes* 64.5 (1949), 339–41, at 340.

⁹³ Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, F.J. Miller ed., Harvard University Press: Cambridge 1916, II, 78.

⁹⁴ Ovid 1916, II, 193.

⁹⁵ Francis 1949, 340.

⁹⁶ Fyler 1986, 568.

⁹⁷ W.P. Ker, 'Chaucer, "House of Fame" (ii. 417–26)', *The Modern Quarterly* 1.5 (1899), 38–9, at 38.

⁹⁸ Francis 1949, 341.

wonders if “Chaucer himself did not quite know whether he intended to describe daemons or zodiacal animals.”⁹⁹ The repetition of “bestes,” like Ovid’s repetition of “ferarum,” suggests, ultimately, that these creatures of the zodiac “were dominant in his mind.”¹⁰⁰ If this reading is accurate, then Geoffrey and the eagle soar through and beyond a series of stars which are superlunary and in the eternal, unchanging realm. In other words, the house in Book III exists past this threshold. On the other hand, if Chaucer’s “bestes” have nothing to do with Ovid’s zodiac signs and are, instead, through Alain de Lille, indebted to Plato’s ideas of atmospheric incursions, then the house is firmly sublunar.

Chaucer’s indeterminate placement of Geoffrey and the eagle does not lessen the significance of its unmistakable non-earthly positioning. Chaucer’s poetic technique eschews faithful translation of his sources. Quite possibly, Francis is correct in surmising that Chaucer, interested more in reading about stars than actually observing them, was more invested in the accretion of literary allusions in this passage than in resolving the apparent discrepancies between these various sources. As Fein and Raybin point out, “Chaucer’s vernacular poetry is ultimately based in synthesis: it generates new material precisely by supplementing and refiguring the classical texts it memorializes.”¹⁰¹ Moreover, because the journey occurs within a dream, it is less invested in a factual rendering than an exploration of the ways that space and language overlap. For Powrie, Alain and Chaucer represent astral voyages as part of a rhetorical strategy that allows each writer to “enter an uncharted space of poetic innovation.”¹⁰² While Powrie here means “space” in the more general sense of a place, her phrasing is even more significant when such evocations of uncharted celestial space are considered in relation to poetic innovation.

Soon after Geoffrey and the eagle pass through this zone, their journey ends. The eagle deposits Geoffrey on solid ground and bids him to “walke forth a pas” (1051). Geoffrey is astounded that Fame’s house is built on a “feble fundament” (1132) of ice. Moreover, he notes that one side of the ice rock is covered “with famous folkes names fele” (1137). While the letters are legible to Geoffrey, he quickly observes that “of the lettres oon or two was molte away of every name” (1144–45). These names betoken fame but Geoffrey initially thinks that the melted letters signify a lessening of this fame. In fact, he identifies a decrease in earthly fame as the reason for the obscured letters: “Hir names ... was molte away ... so unfamous was wexe hir fame” (1142, 1145–46). The direct connection between this process of melting and fame makes Geoffrey aware of the transience of all things: wistfully, he wonders “what may ever laste?” (1147).

In the next stanza, however, he realizes that something greater than earthly fame is responsible for the melting letters in the ice. Geoffrey realizes that “they were molte away with hete” (1149). The natural process of the sun shining down on the rock has caused these letters to melt away. Conversely, he soon passes other names that, lying in a shadow cast by Fame’s castle, are “conserved with the shade” (1160). Sun and shadow, natural phenomena with deeply resonating metaphysical significance, compete to trace, erase, and preserve the names Geoffrey observes in this

⁹⁹ Francis 1949, 341.

¹⁰⁰ Francis 1949, 341.

¹⁰¹ Susanna Fein and David B. Raybin, ‘Preface: Visual Approaches to Chaucer’, in Susanna Fein & David B. Raybin eds., *Chaucer: Visual Approaches*, Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park 2016, xv–xxiii, at xviii.

¹⁰² Powrie 2010, 252.

rock that serves as the very foundation of Fame's house. In her examination of this image, Kathy Cawsey contends that "more seems to be at work [here] than simply a commentary on the transience of worldly fame" and suggests that the mutual work of sun and shadow reflect a pattern of multiplicity and synthesis that characterizes the poem as a whole.¹⁰³ I add that this image of melting names, given its placement after Book II's protracted series of references to the *sphaera mundi*, complete with air, stars, and constellations, should be understood as an action produced by the heat of the sun.

This process demonstrates a direct action produced by astral influence. Here, a star in the superlunary realm of permanence exerts its power on a space in the transitory sublunary realm. Though the sun and Fame both operate to preserve and eliminate these names, the sun's action here, paired with an understanding that this action reflects the sun's position above the House of Fame, demonstrate that Fame's power is subordinate to that of higher superlunary forces. Chaucer's allusions to sublunary and superlunary distinctions, then, operate as a subtle reminder that Fame's house, mighty as it may seem, is simply a floating island set within an organized and stratified cosmos.

Conclusion

The ongoing series of place details in Book II encourage readers to consider the very air that Geoffrey and the eagle move through as a setting equal in imaginative depth to the Temple of Venus or the House of Fame itself. Though these place details are often overpowered by the force of the eagle's philosophical monologue, this essay demonstrates Chaucer's moves throughout Book II to describe air itself as a place. While conceptualizing of immaterial air as a place may seem paradoxical to modern readers, the medieval model of the *sphaera mundi* defines air in this way and details the extent to which the value of that place is predicated on its relation to the other parts of the world that surround it. The image of melting letters in Book III further reinforces the poetic significance of this relationship. Ambiguous or contradictory references in Book II to the exact point at which the sphere of air becomes the sphere of fire or sublunary air gives way to superlunary space are not specific to Chaucer; rather, such ambiguities and contradictions occur in philosophical texts that describe the cosmos for proto-scientific purposes as well as in literary texts that deploy similar cosmic motifs for their poetic significance. Such references matter for our understanding of the poem, however, in that they call attention to Chaucer's hybrid poetics. Though scientific concepts are subordinate to their poetic implications in this poem, these details enrich the narrative motif of the cosmic ascent that Chaucer borrows from previous writers. In this way, a greater understanding of Chaucer's fusion of the scientific and the poetic enhances scholarly attention to areas of overlap between science fiction and the dream vision.

¹⁰³ Cawsey 2004, 975.