

Literary Value and the Customs House: The Axiological Logic of the *House of Fame*

Author(s): Robert J. Meyer-Lee

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## POETIC VALUES

*Thinking Historically after Historicism:  
Essays in Memory of Lee Patterson*



Literary Value and the Customs  
House: The Axiological Logic  
of the *House of Fame*

ROBERT J. MEYER-LEE

**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the relation between Chaucer's socioeconomic location as lay controller of customs and the dazzling metapoetics of the *House of Fame*. It emphasizes the social ambiguity of Chaucer's movement out of court to the customs house and hence what he would have to gain, in an intertwined socioeconomic and aesthetic sense, from the dissemination of this poem. It argues that the latter—in addition to its skeptical and comic engagement with poetic tradition—represents Chaucer's experimental attempt to shift the parameters of the literary field of late medieval English court poetry to better advantage someone in his then rather peculiar, liminal position.

*For when thy labour doon al ys,  
And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,  
In stede of reste and newe thynges  
Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,  
And, also domb as any stoon,  
Thou sittest at another book  
Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;  
And lyvest thus as an heremyte,  
Although thyn abstynence ys lyte.*

—HOUSE OF FAME, 652–60<sup>1</sup>

One of the main lessons to take from Lee Patterson's work on Chaucer is how the proleptic features of modernity that we seem to encounter in Chaucer's texts were in fact shaped by the intersection of specific fourteenth-century historical

contexts. Among the most influential of these features is the idea of the literary as a socially and ideologically autonomous discourse, which Patterson has shown to be a concern Chaucer held throughout his poetic career, one that culminated in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>2</sup> In this article I explore why this concern arises in the first place—what intersection of fourteenth-century contexts impels, in Chaucer's case, this configuration of the literary. For this purpose, I focus on the *House of Fame*, which, if we follow the traditional chronology of Chaucer's literary career, represents a rather startling leap from the *Book of the Duchess*, at least with respect to the depth of Chaucer's meditation on the significance of poetic composition. And even if one dates the poem late, to the end of the period of Chaucer's active appointment as controller of the wool customs in 1385—it remains the most sustained interrogation of the nature and value of literary discourse in Chaucer's oeuvre.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the same time, the *House of Fame* is the only poem in which, as evidenced in the above passage, Chaucer explicitly refers to his nonliterary "labour"—the "rekenynges" of his work as controller. I argue that this coincidence of a profound meditation on literary value and an advertisement of Chaucer's socioeconomic position is no coincidence at all, and that Chaucer's formulations of literary autonomy in this poem are inseparable from the social, ideological, and practical circumstances of his controllership.

When compared to the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame* conveys much more lofty ideas of authorship and poetry, figuring Chaucer himself as "Geffrey" within the ambit of these ideas and the *auctores* of the past who carry them. Between the pseudo-servility of the narrator of the *Book of the Duchess*, and the more grand pseudo-servility of the step-kissing narrator at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, lies the narrator of the *House of Fame*, who envisions the *poetae* of antiquity standing on pillars in the court of Lady Fame, and who apparently declares his artistic

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1. Cited from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987); all subsequent citations of the poem are from this edition and given in the text by line number.

2. See, in particular, Lee Patterson, "What Man Artow?: Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–76.

3. For a discussion of the work's date, see Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, ed. Nicholas R. Havelly (Durham, U.K., 1994), 9–10; and Helen Cooper, "The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour," *New Medieval Literatures* 3 (1999): 39–66. Although I remain persuaded by the traditional (if hardly decisive) evidence for an early date of the poem's octosyllabic meter, and thus will assume here that it most likely represents Chaucer's second major effort, my argument about the poem does not in fact depend on this chronology.

self-determination: “I wot myself best how y stonde” (1878). Most critical accounts of this development understand it as a boomerang response to Chaucer’s initial contact with the *Trecento* authors and especially with Dante’s *Commedia*. On the one hand, so these accounts go, this contact enlarged Chaucer’s perception of the value and ambition of vernacular literature; but, on the other hand, it caused him to be skeptical of just this perception—a philosophically and theologically serious skepticism, however humorously expressed, directed more generally toward the entire literary tradition as Chaucer knew it, as well as toward the linguistic medium upon which that tradition depends.

This critical narrative of Chaucer’s career—in which the poet, in the *House of Fame*, leaves behind the courtly making of the *Book of the Duchess* (however sophisticated that was), declares his status as a vernacular *auctor* by way of deconstructing that very notion, and in this fashion creates the basis for later works such as *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Canterbury Tales*—I accept.<sup>4</sup> The problem with it, however, is that it charts only the *internal* trajectory of Chaucer’s poetics, detailing the strictly poetic logic of the *House of Fame* in relation to his own writing and to that of his many literary interlocutors. Left out is the social context in which Chaucer wrote the poem and which must have influenced his motivations for writing it and for giving it its peculiar form. The reigning critical narrative, therefore, is necessarily partial and in some points too vague. In seeking to explain, for example, why the *House of Fame* takes the peculiar gambit of self-assertion by way of self-deconstruction, critics have looked to the infantile state of English as a literary language, or

4. Even by the standards of Chaucer scholarship, the body of criticism on *HF* is vast. A. J. Minnis, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (Oxford, 1995), 161–251, offers helpful commentary on the critical tradition; more recently, see David K. Coley, “Withyn a temple ymad of glas’: Glazing, Glossing, and Patronage in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*,” *Chaucer Review* 45 (2010): 59–84, esp. 61n7, his excursus on criticism. Sheila Delany, *Chaucer’s “House of Fame”*: *The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago, 1972), aired at length the skeptical reading of the poem, which has been developed by many critics; to cite just a few: Jesse M. Gellrich, *The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages: Language Theory, Mythology, and Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985), 167–201; Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives* (Durham, N.C., 1989), 93–122; Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer’s Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, 1987), 22–50; and Lisa J. Kiser, *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer’s Poetry* (Hanover, N.H., 1991), 25–41. Coley, in “Withyn a temple,” seeks, to a degree, to counter this prevailing view. A paradigmatic discussion of the *Trecento* influence is David Wallace, “Chaucer’s Italian Inheritance,” in Piero Boitani and Jill Mann, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, U.K., 2003), 36–57; see also, among many such studies, Cooper, “The Four Last Things”; Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads The Divine Comedy* (Stanford, 1989), 20–49; Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1984), 17–21; and Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge, U.K., 1984).

to the personality or attitudes of the poet.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, rather than assuming that this poem was motivated solely by poetic concerns, I assume that such concerns always exist in some relation to immediately experienced socioeconomic ones, and thus the latter also forms part of the poem's meaning.

In this article I locate the poem and its author in their socioeconomic circumstances to identify the conditions that motivated—and even enabled—Chaucer to address the topic of poetry in the way he does.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, I seek to understand what Chaucer had to gain from the remarkably self-referential *House of Fame*, and what relation of values—or what I call “axiological logic”—appears within the poem. To this end, I begin with the simple premise that the logic of a poetic work is necessarily related to the logic of the literary field for which the work is produced. With the qualifications mentioned below, I use the term *literary field* in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, but my aims are not sociological. Instead, I set the poetic logic of the *House of Fame* against the logic of its literary field in order to understand better the poem's conception of the literary. Specifically, I argue that Chaucer's shifting place with respect to the literary field of the English court of the 1370s and 80s—and his related socioeconomic shift out of court and to the customs house—influenced the form of literary value articulated in the *House of Fame*.

### *Literary Field*

In essays collected in *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu develops the concept of literary field with respect to nineteenth-century French literary production and reception. In this context, notions of the literary, as well as the distinctiveness of the institutions and social identities associated with these notions, had more definite, more socially recognizable contours than they did in fourteenth-century England. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's concept of literary field aptly describes particular medieval constellations of institutions and cultural producers that have discernible social and aesthetic boundaries. One of these constellations is what Richard Firth Green has named the

5. For example, Wallace writes, “Dante has shown him what vernacular poetry might resemble; but Dante's Italian has forced him to realize that his own vernacular, English, is, by comparison, a blunt instrument” (“Chaucer's Italian Inheritance,” 41). See also James Simpson, “Dante's ‘Astripetam Aquilam’ and the Theme of Poetic Discretion in the ‘House of Fame,’” *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 39 (1986), 1–18.

6. For another, rather different effort to so locate HF, see Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1986), 15–23. For the relation of the poem to its political context, see Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford, 2007), 8–30.

“court of Cupid,” which was socially bounded by the royal household and aesthetically bounded by the loose set of French and English genres that we now collect under the term “courtly romance.”<sup>7</sup> Although in no way the only arena in which compositions that we now call literary were produced, the court was nonetheless a prominent and visible one, and, since Chaucer in his early career was so much identified with the court, it is particularly relevant to the transition from the *Book of the Duchess* to the *House of Fame*.

In *The Field of Cultural Production* Bourdieu famously argues that an artistic or literary field depends on belief in literary value for its very existence as a distinct field of cultural production; and at the same time, belief in artistic or literary value is the field’s most essential product.<sup>8</sup> Hence, to understand fully the specific concept of the literary that Chaucer develops in the *House of Fame*, we must set it against the normative beliefs about literary value in the literary field in which Chaucer was active. Moreover, as Bourdieu emphasizes, fields take shape in some structural relation to other fields, and thus the logic governing one field takes on its full significance only in light of the logic of those fields with which it is related. For this reason, an articulation of literary value as found in the *House of Fame* cannot be fully understood in the terms of its target field alone, since literary value is itself just one position in a differential system of multiple field-specific value definitions, in which the full meaning of any one articulation of value emerges only in light of the whole system of fields.

Of course, to seek the relation of values in the whole system of fields relevant to the production and reception of the *House of Fame* is hopelessly quixotic. By way of a shortcut, I narrow my focus to the field most relevant to the literary laborer as an alternative domain of value-producing labor—or, to put it simply, to the relations between poetry and the poet’s day job. Since poetic composition necessarily occurs within the poet’s socioeconomic location, the poetic logic of any given composition must have some relation to the logic governing the field of the poet’s socioeconomic position. And this particular relation is especially relevant to analysis of literary value, if for no other reason than the high likelihood that a poet would be aware of it. After all, the time and energy involved in writing and disseminating a poem incurs a real

7. Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1980); see esp. 101–34.

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York, 1993), 37. Anticipating my application of Bourdieu to HF, but toward rather different ends, is Glenn A. Steinberg, “Chaucer in the Field of Cultural Production: Humanism, Dante, and the *House of Fame*,” *Chaucer Review* 35 (2000): 182–203.

personal cost, in effect an opportunity cost that may be measured against the rewards earnable by applying the time and energy elsewhere. In order to grasp why the *House of Fame* takes the form it does, therefore, we need to look not just in the poem and back to its *Trecento* influences, but also out across to the early Ricardian court and to the Woolwharf on the Thames.

We may begin with the observation that, although the *House of Fame* may have been prompted by Chaucer's initial encounter with Dante, the resulting poem is quite different from anything Dante wrote, or from any *Trecento* pre-text. This distinctiveness is significant, since we know that Chaucer was capable of close imitation. Apparently, Chaucer also chose *not* to translate the *Aeneid*, but instead to use an abortive translation of that epic as the thematic launching point for the *House of Fame*. This, also, is significant: as Chaucer was likely already the "grant translateur" (Eustache Deschamps's phrase)<sup>9</sup> of the *Roman de la rose*, and soon-to-be or concurrent translator of Boethius, the *Aeneid* would have made a logical, if ambitious, addition to his dossier. While it may well be the case that Chaucer did not attempt an English *Commedia* or *Aeneid* because of the unsuitability of his linguistic medium or because he was not personally disposed toward such projects, he was certainly also limited by the target literary field of the English court.

These limitations are a matter of the social recognition of what, in this field, constitutes vernacular literature, and in this regard the social constituency of the field is crucial. Thanks in large part to the work of Paul Strohm, Patterson, and others before them, we have a good sense of this constituency: from Chaucer's vantage point, the field radiated outward in all social directions, not from the king, but from the circle of courtiers and ladies with whom Chaucer interacted in his role as esquire of the royal household—the "fellow knights and esquires of the household and ladies of equivalent station."<sup>10</sup> In particular, this field was centered around the chamber knights who were Chaucer's acquaintances and who were positioned socially at the top of this group.

In this field, of course, the normative literary models were primarily French. How Chaucer sought to adapt his English models to these is an old

9. Eustache Deschamps, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. A. H. E. Queux de Saint-Hillaire and G. Raynaud, 11 vols. (Paris, 1880), 2:138–39.

10. The quotation is from Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 55; see more generally in this volume 1–83, and also Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience," *Literature and History* 5 (1977): 26–40; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, 1991), 32–39; Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1992), 181–88; and Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 19–27.



story, and is readily evident in the *Book of the Duchess*.<sup>11</sup> In this poem, as is well known, he draws on the works of Guillaume de Machaut, Jean Froissart, and other French poets to align his English verse with the fourteenth-century *dits amoureux*. Aimed at an elite audience, the *dit* proffers the literary value of its reflection of noble interiority. In this sense, the basic matter of the *Book of the Duchess*, the mourning of the Black Knight for the loss of his Lady White, possesses a good deal of currency. At the same time, the *dit* in the hands of Machaut and Froissart was cultural work performed by an intellectual in service to the court, which matched well Chaucer's social location as an esquire of the household—a location that, as Green has so well detailed, was fully recognizable as one from which refined verse about secular love might legitimately be produced. Idiosyncratically learned, the *Book of the Duchess* features a narrator whose cluelessness serves as a humility topos that enables the poem's claim to authority, namely that the lower-born, intellectually talented esquire Chaucer has something to say to his higher-born implied audience. The poem thereby succeeds in mimicking normative definitions of literary value. It articulates its value in a manner legible with respect to its author's social position, and, in principle at least, it garners its author distinction in the ways the work conforms to extant literary models.<sup>12</sup>

### Controllership

When Chaucer came to write the *House of Fame* some years later, however much his own sense of literary value had changed, that of the literary field of the English court was largely the same. His personal challenge, therefore, was in part to infuse a *Trecento*-influenced sense of literary value into this field. Yet we need to consider this challenge in the context of the more immediate one of Chaucer's altered circumstances. For while still nominally an esquire of the household, Chaucer was no longer, in practice, a courtier, but instead, as controller of the wool customs, a lay civil servant. And, for Chaucer at least, this position was no sinecure. Documentary evidence makes plain that, except when he was on temporary leave, for

11. The story has been most influentially told by Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley, 1957); more recently, see Helen Cooper, "Chaucerian Poetics," in Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard, eds., *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry* (Cambridge, U.K., 2003), 31–50.

12. None of the documentary evidence collected in Martin M. Crow and Claire C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford, 1966)—henceforth *Life-Records*—indicates that Chaucer's poetry ever won him social or economic benefits. Yet, as Green argues, such benefits were likely not so much a matter of concrete patronage as a means of tacit acceptance among the gentle (*Poets and Princepleasers*, 111).

ten and half years (from June 1374 until the appointment of permanent deputies for his responsibilities in February 1385), Chaucer labored daily at the customs house on the Woolwharf, responsible for writing and sealing, with his own hand, over a thousand documents per year, as well as appearing in person at the exchequer for audits once or twice a year.<sup>13</sup> This work was hardly characteristic of aspiring courtiers. As Patterson observes, the controllership—at least in London—had been filled not with men like Chaucer but with clerks in the king's service, who constituted Chaucer's five immediate predecessors.<sup>14</sup> In this occupation, Chaucer was no longer, in a very practical sense, among the courtiers who had played such a key role in the early formation of his identity as poet; rather, he was back in the mercantile world in which he had been born. In short, he was no longer in a position that was at that time a socially legible one for a poet writing for the literary field of the court.

The exact social valence of Chaucer's movement from court to customs house is perhaps impossible to reconstruct and indeed may well have been ambiguous to Chaucer himself. Assessments of this valence range from Strohm's suggestion that the appointment was indicative of "[r]oyal interest in the progress of Chaucer's career" and was accompanied by perquisites (such as the apartment over Aldgate) that constituted "a handsome send-off," to less rosy accounts, such as Olive Coleman's description of the post as "a modest office for modest men" and David Carlson's more slighting depiction of the move as "a defenestration, a setback or stall in [Chaucer's] social ascent."<sup>15</sup> Given that no one of Chaucer's status had occupied the position before him, the appointment likely reflected some combination of the royal desire to evolve this fiscally key position into one reflective of the status of an esquire of the household, and of the perception that the relatively lowly but learned Chaucer, with his family connections to the mercantile community, suited this traditionally clerical role.

As Robert L. Baker has shown, since the initiation of the wool customs in 1275, the office of controller was conceived as the key to the effective production

13. The pertinent historical records are collected and discussed in *Life-Records*, 148–270. For the calculation of the number of documents for which Chaucer was responsible, see *Life-Records*, 179.

14. Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 37; see also *Life-Records*, 152, and compare Pearsall's remark about the post: "No doubt he welcomed the addition of an annual £16. 13s. 4d. to his income, though the job itself was something of a chore, and not a usual avenue to promotion for an ambitious squire" (*The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 129).

15. Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 22; Olive Coleman, "The Collectors of Customs in London under Richard II" in A. E. J. Hollaender and William Kellaway, eds., *Studies in London History Presented to Philip Edmund Jones* (London, 1969), 181–94, at 192; and David R. Carlson, *Chaucer's Jobs* (New York, 2004), 6.

of royal revenue (from a tax that held, in the late fourteenth century, “absolute pre-eminence” among sources of this revenue).<sup>16</sup> Controllers were responsible for ensuring that the collectors of customs recorded the proper tax, an accounting task that relied on two basic methods: the creation of a duplicate set of records and the use of one-half of the double-faced “cocket seal,” which, along with the other half in the keeping of a collector, authenticated all customs receipts.<sup>17</sup> Because the collectors were most often powerful merchants, frequently wool traders themselves, and often royal creditors, they had many motivations beyond general greed to be less-than-dependable agents of the king in their recording of sums to be deposited in royal coffers. “From the outset,” Baker notes, “the ministers of Edward I had been aware that collectors might take improper advantage of their positions.”<sup>18</sup> Hence the controller was not so much an active agent of revenue collection as an observing agent of redundant tasks, who ensures thereby that the revenue collection actually works. Rather like the checksum in an electronic transmission, the controller was a redundancy that ensures the accuracy of the information transmitted—that is, of the money due the crown.

Yet from the very start the controllership at best only intermittently and quite imperfectly fulfilled its function, and the reasons for this had much to do with the social profiles of those who occupied the post.<sup>19</sup> A controller must have the technical training that the post demands, he must be willing and able to be present in the customs house and perform the required labor, and he must be loyal to the king, especially when there is (as there frequently was) a divergence of interest between the crown and the merchant oligarchs who dominated the collectorships. The difficulty in meeting these criteria lay in the fact that those most qualified in regard to the requisite training and loyalty—king’s clerks sent to the ports from Westminster—were also those most likely to be drawn away into other service, for personal and institutional reasons, thereby leaving the controllership in less reliable hands, if in any hands at

16. Robert L. Baker, “The English Customs Service, 1307–1343: A Study of Medieval Administration,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 51.6 (1961), 3–76, although the quotation is from Coleman, “The Collectors of Customs,” 185. In addition to these studies and *Life-Records*, for information on the wool customs and the controllership I have relied on Mabel H. Mills, F.S.A., “The Collectors of Customs,” in William A. Morris and Joseph R. Strayer, eds., *The English Government at Work, 1327–1336*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 2:168–200.

17. Baker, “The English Customs Service,” 10.

18. Baker, “The English Customs Service,” 10.

19. A related problem, as Baker discusses (“The English Customs Service”), was the habit of granting the controller’s half of the cocket seal to a creditor of the king—a creditor who was also sometimes the collector himself (Coleman, “The Collectors of Customs,” 186)—as a guarantee of repayment out of the customs receipts, a practice that considerably disempowered the controllership.

all. For example, Chaucer's eventual successor John de Hermesthorpe, a chamberlain of the exchequer and later confessor to the king, abandoned the post as soon as he could, leaving a deputy in his place (despite the usual official prohibition of the practice); and Chaucer himself, although long-serving and dutiful, was more than once called away to perform the king's business.<sup>20</sup> As a remedy, the strategy for staffing the office at times shifted to individuals local to the port with connections to the mercantile community, but of humbler wealth and status in comparison with the collectors. Such individuals were more likely to remain active in their positions during the course of their appointments, yet—beyond the question of whether they possessed the requisite skills—their loyalty to the king, given their connections to the mercantile community, was quite fragile. Compounding these problems, moreover, was the fact that, as a salaried office, the controllership was easily conceived as analogous to a benefice or property: from Edward I on, all English kings, to varying degrees, used controller appointments more as an object of largesse than as a tool of fiscal practice, which is evident in their tendency to make life appointments to the post. As a result, absenteeism, incompetence, and outright corruption were more common than not, leading to frequent demands—and less frequent actual attempts—to reform the process of appointments.<sup>21</sup>

In this light, we may see—given Chaucer's specific qualities and the socially unprecedented nature of his appointment to the office—how that appointment offered a compelling solution to these problems. He was an esquire with many years in royal service and could thus be expected to be loyal; yet he was also in effect a local man with long-standing connections to the wool-trading community. And through some means (whether his poetry, other writings, or just learned conversation), he had proven himself a clerky layman, more than able to take on the responsibilities of the controllership.

20. For Hermesthorpe, see *Life-Records*, 170; and Coleman, "The Collectors of Customs," 192.

21. For example, "Early in October 1386 the commons presented a petition to the parliament in which Chaucer was sitting as representative for Kent [with a permanent deputy in his controllership], requesting that all the controllers in the ports of the realm who held their offices for life should have their appointments annulled because they were oppressing the people with extortions and henceforth no controller should be appointed for life" (*Life-Records*, 269). Perhaps most revealing was Edward III's rather desperate move in 1342 of closing all the wool ports and then reopening them with clerks from the chancery holding the collectors' halves of the seal (the controllers' halves were held by creditors), yet also retaining all the controllers. This action, in duplicating the already redundant function of the controller, was a tacit admission that the controllerships had become nonfunctional, ornamental sinecures. See Baker, "The English Customs Service," 45–46, 50n1.

It remains unclear, however, whether the appointment was considered to be a promotion, a demotion, or a lateral move; it likely fell to Chaucer to demonstrate the position's significance by the manner in which he occupied it. Although we have no way of knowing how consciously Chaucer pursued such social signification, we may assume that he would at least wish to maintain the social status he had attained prior to the appointment. Consequently, if writing poetry was part of the construction of his identity as courtier and an expression of his distinctive occupation of that position, then, naturally, Chaucer would want to continue this activity in his new position. In addition to whatever personal fulfillment writing poetry provided, the activity would link the controllership's new duties with his prior role at court.

But herein must have lain a dilemma. To continue to write poetry like the *Book of the Duchess*, which was normative for the literary field of the court, would be to write that poetry from a position that did not then possess institutionally bestowed authority in regard to literary production for this field. Chaucer's composition of further English *dits amoureux*, therefore, rather than socially elevating his position, might call attention to the mismatch between it and the normative authorial position he had lost. To put it colloquially, it would risk making him appear a poser, and thus in effect make his movement out of court look like a demotion. At the same time, to produce writing more socially legible in respect to his new, traditionally clerical position—to produce something, that is, like the *Parson's Tale*, with an affinity to Latin rather than French models, and with didactic and spiritual frameworks rather than expressive and erotic ones—would heighten the social distinction between his old and new positions. Not only would he again risk appearing as a poser, but he would also be, in effect, declaring his removal from the literary field of the court.

It is impossible to know how directly Chaucer perceived this dilemma. If the logic of cultural production requires writers to justify in some way the value of their writings in respect to both the values of their socioeconomic positions and those of the target literary field, then at the very least Chaucer's writing would register a response to this dilemma as a matter of course. And if Chaucer perceived simply that the change in his socioeconomic location increased the distance—both physical and social—from the literary field of the court, that might have been enough to urge him to remediate the problem in poetry. Regardless, the distance effected by the appointment left him with the project of producing literary work that was recognizable in respect to the normative models of the target literary field, legible in respect to the institutionally bestowed authority of his new position, and coherent in

this combination. He needed a poetry that cast him as an authentic literary producer with respect to both the literary field of the court and the traditionally clerical civil service, rather than as a poser with respect to both. Ideally, this poetry would, in fusing these two fields, articulate a literary value that was at once recognizable and unique.

### *Axiological Logic*

In terms of recognition, the *House of Fame's* formal resemblances to the French dream vision would in part have served this purpose. These have often been remarked upon, but they have typically been construed in terms of the internal trajectory of Chaucer's poetic career—as, for example, the transitional residue of his so-called French phase in a poem that inaugurates the Italian era of his career. But these resemblances are better understood as markers of conformity with the normative models of the literary field of the court. Hence, we should not be surprised when Queen Alceste, in the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, cites “the bok that highte the Hous of Fame” as the very first of Chaucer's works with which he “hath maked lewed folk to delyte / To serven [the God of Love]”—giving it the place of honor before the more obviously Eros-centered *Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of the Fowls*, and “love of Palamon and Arcite” (*LGW*, G 403–8); compare F 415–20). Self-identified here as a species of courtly romance, and marked as such by its formal conventions, the *House of Fame*, in order to be recognized as such by the target literary field, must also be perceived as proffering the literary value of an idealizing mirror of aristocratic emotion. In this respect, the story of Dido is pivotal.

As many commentators have pointed out, and especially Christopher Baswell, the *House of Fame's* rendering of the Dido story falls in line, in several ways, with the long tradition of romance adaptations of the *Aeneid*.<sup>22</sup> Shifting to the *ordo naturalis* after his rendition of the *Aeneid's* opening lines,

22. See Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge, U.K., 1995), 233, and, more generally, 223–48. Among the many studies that discuss Dido in *HF*, those that have especially influenced my reading include, in addition to Baswell's and several of the studies cited above, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, 1992), 87–107; Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380–1589* (Chicago, 2000), 33–39; Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis, 1994), 128–62; James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 2002), 121–90, esp. 164–67; Robert W. Hanning, “Chaucer's First Ovid: Metamorphosis and Poetic Tradition in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*,” in Leigh A. Arrathoon, ed., *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction* (Rochester, Mich., 1986), 121–63; and John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven, 1979), 23–64.

Chaucer lingers on the pathos of the flight from Troy, liberally sprinkling his narration with verbal signposts of emotion such as “allas” and “pitee.” From this beginning, he moves quickly on to Dido, his narration slows, and the intensity of the language of pathos increases, reaching a saturation point in Dido’s complaint, which begins, “Allas . . . what me ys woo! / Allas, is every man thus trewe” (300–301). As in other romance treatments of the story, Chaucer emphasizes not Aeneas’s eventual transcendence of past political trauma but the immediacy of erotic trauma, the noble, internal suffering that this literature turns into an art object by means of a verbal portrait of keenly felt emotion. In this respect, the poem offers the same matter as the *Book of the Duchess*.

Yet, despite Alceste’s generous characterization of the poem, the *House of Fame* is hardly a work that leads its readers to praise the God of Love. Eros is, instead, in the form of “tydynge / Of Loves folk” (644–45), what the narrator is promised but never receives—a narrator who is not coincidentally identified as a maker of “bookys, songes, dytees / . . . / . . . in reverence / Of Love” (622, 624–25), that is, as Chaucer the esquire, a participant in the literary field of the English court. Rather than love, the *House of Fame* is more extensively concerned with what its authorially bestowed title would lead one to expect: fame. And it is so not just when the narrator reaches Lady Fame’s court in the third book, but from the first book’s account of Dido, where the conflict between fame and love is precisely what produces the emotion of her complaint.

This conflict is evident in the manner in which Chaucer bookends this complaint. At its beginning, Dido bemoans how men choose women to “have fame” for the “magnyfyinge of [their] name” (305–6); at its end, she accuses fame directly for the sullyng of her own name:

“O wikke Fame!—for ther nys  
 Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!  
 . . . . .  
 That I have don rekever I never,  
 That I ne shal be seyde, allas,  
 Yshamed be thourgh Eneas.”

(349–50, 354–56)

The notion of fame here is bivalent, at once Dido’s nemesis and Aeneas’s goal, and, in those parts of Book IV of the *Aeneid* that Chaucer is drawing upon, the notion is even more complex.

To summarize the dynamic of this familiar conflict briefly, Virgil develops a dialectical struggle between *laus* and *fama*, terms that in *Aeneid* IV tend to denote, respectively, renown and infamy: the divine imperative for Aeneas to pursue the former necessarily labels Dido with the latter. Indeed, in personified form, it is *fama* that in effect kills Dido; in passing word to King Iarbas of Dido's sexual affair with Aeneas, Fama spurs Iarbas to petition Jupiter, who in turn sends Mercury to Aeneas to compel the hero's renewal of his pursuit of *laus*. Later, Fama brings news to Dido of Aeneas's plans to depart, and finally *fama* as a personal quality becomes the good fame that Dido has lost in the form of her sexual reputation.<sup>23</sup> That Chaucer was acutely aware of this dynamic is evident in Dido's very complaint against "wikke Fame," portions of which he draws from the description of Fama as emissary to King Iarbas, a description which Chaucer turns to again in his Book III portrait of Lady Fame.

Fame is, of course, what epic proffers as literary value: it is what epic poets bestow on their heroes, and it is what they thereby garner for themselves. In literary fields that support the writing of epics, this literary value—with its associated ideas of eternity and transcendence—usually operates as a signifier of historically legitimated political authority for the poem's implicit or explicit dedicatee, the epic hero's contemporary doppelgänger: so it was for Virgil's Augustus, Lydgate's Henry V, Spenser's Queen Elizabeth, and so on. Correspondingly, this signified political authority presupposes that the poet performing the signification possesses legitimate literary authority, and hence the literary value of the epic is mutually confirming of both types of authority, as evidenced in the laurel wreath Petrarch imagined crowning both poet and emperor.<sup>24</sup> For Virgil, then, the abandonment of Dido provides the emotional springboard for his epic's production of value. Fame for Aeneas, Virgil, and Augustus depends upon leaving Dido behind. As shown in this paradigmatic instance, female infamy and emotional trauma are the flipside of epic value.<sup>25</sup>

Chaucer, by drawing on the romance tradition and especially on Ovid's *Heroides*, appears in contrast to be more sympathetic to Dido and even hostile to Aeneas: his narrator remarks, for example, "How [Aeneas] betrayed hir, allas, / And lefte hir unkyndely" (294–95). Many readers understand Chaucer as developing a generic opposition here, signified by the apparent

23. See *Aeneid*, IV.173–97 and IV.298–322.

24. I discuss the dynamics of laureate legitimation in Robert J. Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge, U.K., 2007); for Lydgate and Henry V, see esp. 65–87, and, for Petrarch, 16–21.

25. See Summit, *Lost Property*, 35, on this point.



irreconcilability of the two sources he so nonchalantly juxtaposes: “Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde” (378–79). Though opinions vary, most readers understand Chaucer to side with Ovid and romance over Virgil and epic.<sup>26</sup> In my view, however, Chaucer invokes the idea of opposition only to evade it, signaling instead an allegiance that is best understood as lying with both and neither. Notably, at the end of Book 1, the hero of Chaucer’s poem also leaves Dido behind. Despite the Ovidian sympathy he shows for her, Chaucer follows Aeneas by setting off, divinely compelled, in search of fame, and he follows Virgil in his willingness “to excusen Eneas / Fullyche of al his grete trespas” (427–28), and then in his redaction of the rest of the *Aeneid* (433–67).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the Eagle’s description of the reward offered to Geoffrey for his service to Love—new matter for poetry in the form of “tydynges” of lovers that consist of “Both sothe sawes and lesinges” (676)—unmistakably recalls the Fama who effectively kills Dido.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the fame offered Geoffrey both literally and implicitly in the structure of the poem—like the fame won by Aeneas and Virgil, and, indeed, by Chaucer—depends on the “wikke Fame” attached to Dido. Thus when Chaucer has Dido complain,

“For thorgh yow is my name lorn,  
And alle myn actes red and songe  
Over al thys lond, on every tonge”  
(346–48),

we may take the antecedent of the pronoun “yow” as not just the “wikke Fame” of the next line, but also as Aeneas, Virgil, Geoffrey, and Chaucer himself.<sup>29</sup>

We might thus be tempted to conclude that the poem’s response to the dilemma caused by Chaucer’s movement out of court was the signification, through the use of the Dido story, of a turn away from the *dit* in favor of something like a romance-ironized pocket epic. If Chaucer’s position with respect to the literary field of the court would have cast a shadow of inauthenticity over English verse modeled on contemporary French or clerical Latin

26. See, for example, Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 167.

27. On this point, compare Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England*, 237. That Chaucer, as Minnis observes, would likely have thought of Virgil’s account of Dido as fictional in contrast to the supposedly factual account of her “impeccable chastity” mentioned by, for example, Saint Jerome makes Chaucer’s willingness to follow Aeneas/Virgil that much more revealing (*The Shorter Poems*, 232–40).

28. See *Aeneid*, IV.189–94.

29. On this point, compare J. Stephen Russell, “Dido, Emily, and Constance: Femininity and Subversion in the Mature Chaucer,” *Medieval Perspectives* 1 (1986): 65–74, at 66.

literary models, then it would not be so surprising if an adaptation of classical Latin emerged as a viable route through this generic Scylla and Charybdis. After all, classical Latin was at once the fountainhead of much courtly verse (especially that deriving from Ovidian models) and had, in Virgil, the ultimate secular clerkly *auctor*. Insofar as Chaucer shows sympathy for Dido, his springboard to fame, however ironized, has that much more loft; and inasmuch as Chaucer's bumbling narrator is no Aeneas, he has cloaked his hero in the same kind of self-authorizing humility topos that he put to good use in the *Book of the Duchess*.

The parallel with the *Aeneid*, of course, falls apart in many key ways, two of which are that Chaucer's hero, as an alter-ego identified as Geoffrey in the poem, plainly does not easily function as the doppelgänger of a sovereign, even a romance-ironized doppelgänger; and this hero has not in fact embarked on a journey in pursuit of fame, but rather has been granted a vision in which the nature of fame will be disclosed. Chaucer's relatively close (but tellingly altered) translation of the *Aeneid*'s opening lines thus registers a *rejection* of epic as the solution to his dilemma, a rejection conditioned at least in part by the fact that, in the early Ricardian court, the literary field did not recognize contemporary poets as producers of epics, serious or otherwise. Instead, the poem remains within the orbit of the dream vision but extends the reach of this genre by taking cues from Dante's response to the *Aeneid*, which reconfigures the epic journey as a visionary one, in which the hero is the poet and the destination is revelation.

Yet, as observed above, the *House of Fame* is no more an adaptation of the *Commedia* than it is of the *Aeneid*; such an adaptation would, in any event, be even less legible in the literary field of the English court. Despite its structural and verbal debts to Dante and its intertextual nods to apocalypse visions more generally, Geoffrey's vision is not a sacred one.<sup>30</sup> He does not, in the end, confront the face of God but rather the distribution center for tidings, understood as the matter of all writing. As is explained to Geoffrey and as he sees himself, sound floats upward to its "kyndelyche stede" (829), the House of Tidings, and becomes embodied there as discrete vessels of information, next traveling to the House of Fame, where Lady Fame

gan yeven ech hys name,  
 After hir disposicioun,  
 And yaf hem eke duracioun,

30. For these intertextual nods, see, for example, Kiser, *Truth and Textuality*.

Somme to wexe and wane sone,  
 As doth the faire white mone,  
 And let hem goon.

(2112–17)

Long ago Alfred David offhandedly likened the House of Tidings to the customs house, and by extending this insight and placing it alongside the generic gymnastics we have so far witnessed, we may glimpse the axiological logic of the poem.<sup>31</sup> For it is not just the House of Tidings that parallels Chaucer's work environment, but rather the whole tidings/fame complex. The customs house was the central point where raw materials (wool) converge from many directions to be given discrete quantity (bagged and weighed on the ground floor) and then discrete value (taxed on the upper floor) before moving outward, in many directions, eventually to become cloth.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the tidings/fame complex is the central point where raw materials (sound) converge from many directions to be given discrete quantity (embodied in the House of Tidings) and then discrete value (the "disposicioun" and "duracioun" bestowed in the House of Fame) before moving outward, in many directions, eventually to become (among other things) poetic compositions.

If this analogy seems far-fetched, consider the observation made at the outset of this essay: the *House of Fame* is the *only* poem in which Chaucer explicitly refers to his non-literary "labour," which is not coincidentally his labor as customs controller. In this regard, the immediate context of the passage quoted as this essay's epigraph, Chaucer's famous self-reference to the "rekenynges" he performed at the customs house, is revealing. As mentioned above, just a few lines earlier the Eagle describes Geoffrey as a maker of "dytees . . . in reverence / Of Love"—that is, a member of the court of Cupid, a player in the literary field of the English court. Then, immediately before the "rekenynges" passage, the Eagle explains to Geoffrey that Jupiter's reward (of the trip to the House of Fame) is recompense for the fact that Geoffrey has not had "tydynges / Of Loves folk," neither of those "fro fer contree" nor of his "verray neyghebores" (644–49). Putting this all together, we understand that it is precisely because of Geoffrey's "labour" at the customs house that he

31. Alfred David, "Literary Satire in the *House of Fame*," *PMLA* 75 (1960): 333–39, at 339. Compare Hisashi Shigeo, "Chaucer's Quest for the Truth and Value in *The House of Fame*," in Hiroe Futamura, Kenichi Akishino, and Hisato Ebi, eds., *A Pilgrimage Through Medieval Literature* (Tokyo, 1993), 59–80, at 77.

32. For the functional architecture of the customs house in Chaucer's day, see Mills, "The Collectors of Customs," 180–81, and, for more detail, her earlier study, Mabel H. Mills, "The London Customs House during the Middle Ages," *Archaeologia* 83 (1933): 307–25.

is no longer able to author “dytees . . . of Love” as a player in the literary field of the court. In recompense, he will receive a trip to the House of Fame, a trip that—when read alongside the distinctly uncourtly, jokingly monastic self-description as solitary scholar that concludes the “rekenynges” passage—promises to lead somewhere other than back to the court of Cupid. Again not at all coincidentally, only a few lines later the Eagle addresses Geoffrey by his given name (729, the only time in all Chaucer’s writing that he so names himself), thereby fusing narrator and author and, with the preface of the “rekenynges” passage, ensuring that the socioeconomic identity of the narrator/author cannot be mistaken.

Crucially, Chaucer does not depict his narrator at the tidings/fame complex as a producer or carrier of fame. He is rather an observer of the process of its creation, valuation, and dissemination. He has not “come hider to han fame” (1872), but he is nevertheless, as author of the poem, the individual who enables this process to succeed in this instance, by making public both the nature of fame and his own name. Likewise, as controller, Chaucer was effectively a paid observer, not an integral part of the process but nonetheless essential to its success. The tidings/fame complex, positioned “Ryght even in myddes of the weye / Betwixen hevne and erthe, and see” (714–15), is at once marginal and central—as was Chaucer, in economic space as controller, both marginal and central in his position among wool merchants, customs collectors, and the crown. So too was Chaucer positioned in social space somewhere “even in myddes of the weye / Betwixen” gentle, clerical, and mercantile.<sup>33</sup>

Taken together, these parallels suggest that the poem and the poet become central to English literature through their marginal positions in the literary field of the court and in the field of clerical writing. Positioned between romance, epic, and sacred vision, the *House of Fame* partakes of but does not really participate in these genres, instead observing and taking account of their axiological relations, that is, the dependencies and distinctions among the kinds of literary value they hold forth. Chaucer as poet, like his narrator Geoffrey, belongs neither fully outside the court, like the entertainers outside Lady Fame’s castle, nor fully inside the court, like the *poetae* standing on pillars around the goddess herself; but he rather moves among and around all positions, describing and accounting for their structure and value.

33. This positional detail comes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (see, for example, Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, ed. Havely, 154), unlike the architecture of the tidings/fame complex, which is original to Chaucer.

The literary value extended by the *House of Fame*, then, is the value of the accounting for literary value itself, a meta-value that presupposes, and therefore authorizes, the value of the literary accountant. As readers have readily perceived, behind the comic self-depiction of the “noyous” Geffrey (574) stands the master-poet manipulating the strings of his narrator, the implied author who possesses the valuable intellectual and compositional abilities—married to a paradoxically marginal and central positionality—that are required to perform the poem’s act of accounting. And it is these implied valuable abilities and positionality, finally, that constitute the common ground shared by the poem’s literary meta-value and a controller’s economic meta-value: both the *form* and the *intensity* of the labor required by the *House of Fame*’s accounting of the stuff of all kinds of poetry are not just parallel to, but exactly those required by, Chaucer’s effective accounting of the wool customs.

In this light, we may understand Geffrey’s assertion of literary autonomy as also an expression of controller ideology:

“I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,  
 For no such cause [i.e., “to han fame”], by my hed!  
 Sufficeth me, as I were ded,  
 That no wight have my name in honde.  
 I wot myself best how y stonde;  
 For what I drye, or what I thyнке,  
 I wil myselfen al hyt drynke,  
 Certeyn, for the more part,  
 As fer forth as I kan myn art.”

(1874–82)

As a poet, he is like a good controller in that he does not desire the proffered value (fame or money, respectively) of the system in which he is present as observer (“I cam noght hyder”), but instead asserts autonomy by accounting for that value (“Sufficeth me, as I were ded”), and accepts complete responsibility for the effects of this autonomy (“For what I drye”). In this fashion, the idea of the literary as an autonomous discourse arises here as a projection onto the artistic plane of the conceptual form of the controllership, which, in the socioeconomic plane, is the poem’s inaugurating problem. Moreover, the wry qualifications in this seemingly assertive passage (for example, by naming himself in this poem, Chaucer has ensured that future readers, after his death, must necessarily have his “name in honde”) stand also as markers of where

controller ideology comes up short against controller practice. Neither the poet nor the controller is, in fact, autonomous.<sup>34</sup> From this perspective, the skepticism that most readers have found pervading the poem's meditations on poetry reflects not just Chaucer's literary, theological, and philosophical dispositions, but also his socioeconomic experience of the vitiating of ideals within a system that, as Carlson has quipped, "was corrupt by design."<sup>35</sup>

Let me be clear: in calling attention to these several interlocking parallels, I am *not* arguing that they disclose some sort of quasi-allegorical, socio-economically self-referential commentary that is the "true" meaning of the poem. The analogies are not so developed as this; they resonate more than they symbolize. Instead, I am arguing that these parallels create a socioeconomic framework for what are very much literary concerns—the poem's inscrutable, poetically self-referential content. And it is the combination of framework and content that constitutes the axiological logic of the *House of Fame*: the fusion of values at the level of form and intensity of labor means that the proffering of literary meta-value and the proffering of economic meta-value become mutually affirming, and hence the poem and Chaucer's controllership become mutually legitimating. Whether present as a reflexive or more active response to his circumstances, in this poem literary and socio-economic axiologies blend and affirm each other in a generalized assertion of the value of the exceptionally literate and marginally central accountant of value. The poem, through its peculiar but still evident generic affiliation with romance and its sensitivity to noble emotion, registers the implication that the literary field of the court has a place for a controller of customs, thereby elevating the social status of the controller. Conversely, that controllership provides an explanation for the poem's peculiarity, giving it a distinctive value that reflects the controllership and thus is both legitimated by and legitimates the value of that appointment.

In conclusion, with the *House of Fame* Chaucer staged an intervention into the literary field of the court, one that, in theory, might alter what the field recognized as literary value by evolving existing models to better suit his new social position. In the process, almost as a necessary side effect, he articulated an idea of the literary as an autonomous discourse, and virtually in the same gesture put this idea in question. This transformation, however, was not likely an actual one. The limited circulation, dense erudition, and oblique organization of the poem suggest rather that it served as a kind of

34. For the "name in honde" contradiction, see, for example, Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, 170; and Cooper, "Chaucerian Poetics," 50.

35. Carlson, *Chaucer's Jobs*, 11.

prototypical proof-of-concept—an imaginary transformation of the field that enabled the actual transformation that he achieved with, say, *Troilus and Criseyde*. For in this latter work we have again a narrator who observes the collision of erotic romance and historical epic, who sympathizes with the emotional turmoil of a noble woman, but who in this very sympathy participates in the perpetuation of her infamy. And in this work, literary value once again arises as inseparable from a latent sense of the master-poet who pulls the strings—who kisses the steps of the *poetae* and tells his little book to go.

*Indiana University South Bend*  
*South Bend, Indiana*  
(*rmeyerle@iusb.edu*)