

Article

Imagination and the Cosmic Consciousness in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*[†]

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to situate Chaucer's *The House of Fame* in the tradition of exercising the self as practiced by ancient philosophers and theorized by Pierre Hadot. It shows that Chaucer's poem contains echoes of an ancient exercise referred to as 'the view from above', which engages the faculties of the imagination in order to enable an individual to review their life and to situate it in the context of universal nature. The poet's creative use of the ancient motif of the celestial flight, I will argue, distances him from those writers who use the theme to develop the *contemptus mundi* topos and affiliates him with those ancient thinkers who, like Marcus Aurelius, employ it to turn their attention to their own self, which may be achieved via meditations on the identity and homogeneity of all things (*homoeides*). It is Chaucer's use of the view from above topos that vindicates the role of imagination by showing how it contributes to self-knowledge, that is, to an awareness of where one stands.

Keywords: imagination; attention; view from above; Boethius; stoics; Geoffrey Chaucer



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1. Introduction

The House of Fame is a poem of paradoxes and contradictions, which raise fascinating but unresolved questions. It is lofty in its aspirations to transcend the material realm and simultaneously firmly grounded in physical reality. In Marion Turner's recent biography of Chaucer, the poem has been taken to serve as an example of Chaucer's pragmatic, empirical approach to everyday human experience. Even though the celestial journey undertaken by the narrator provokes excitement and suspense in the readers' minds, which is related to venturing beyond and above the mundane, such superhuman expectations are soon disappointed while the readers' eyes are directed back to "a ground-level view" (Turner 2019, p. 226). This paper argues that Chaucer's method of opening up a fresh and potentially revealing perspective on the infinite only to narrow it down to the finitely personal and human, as revealed in *The House of Fame*, is directly related to the role of imagination propounded in the poem. The role of imagination, in turn, is related to exercising the self.

The tradition of exercising the self, most commonly associated with Christian devotional practices, was traced back to the tradition of Greco-Roman antiquity by Pierre Hadot, a contemporary French historian of ancient philosophy, whose understanding of philosophy as a way of life provided the initial impetus for this article. Ancient philosophy, Hadot argues, is not aimed at teaching abstract doctrines, but at engaging the whole of existence in a program of exercises that have a therapeutic role (Hadot 1995, p. 83) in that they correct or transform an individual's vision of the world, thereby effecting a change in one's personality (Hadot 1995, p. 128). This is usually achieved by replacing the 'human' vision of reality, which is often distorted by passions, with a 'natural' vision of things,

which situates life events in the context of universal nature (Hadot 1995, p. 83). For the transformation to be effective, the philosophical act needs to be situated on the level of the self and of being rather than merely on the cognitive level (Hadot 1995, p. 83). “All spiritual exercises”, Hadot writes, “are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires” (Hadot 1995, p. 103). This makes Hadot reject terms, such as ‘thought exercises’, ‘intellectual exercises’, or ‘ethical exercises’, in favor of ‘spiritual exercises’ (Hadot 1995, p. 83). Even though my understanding of the role of ancient philosophy draws heavily on Hadot’s arguments, I have chosen to use the term ‘exercises of the self’ rather than ‘spiritual exercises’ to avoid confusion with other meanings of the term ‘spiritual’ than that intended by Hadot and precisely to highlight one of his main arguments, namely that an individual’s well-being is firmly anchored in the self (see Hadot 1995, pp. 90, 103).

Among the “inner activities of the thought and the will”, which ‘the exercises of the self’ will denote here (see Hadot 1995, p. 128), there is the practice of self-attention (*prosoche*). It refers to continuous vigilance, presence of mind, the state of being ‘awake’, ‘attentive’, and concentrated on the present moment. In its broadest sense, giving attention to the self involves correcting the judgments we hold about ourselves and our place in the universe, which can be achieved through what Hadot refers to as the “imaginative exercise of the view from above” (Hadot 1998, p. 175).¹ This philosophical practice opens up a cosmic perspective on human life and reveals “both the splendor of the universe and the splendor of the spirit” (Hadot 1998, p. 173). How this exercise applies to Chaucer’s *The House of Fame* will be the main concern of this paper. I will show how the Chaucerian “I” responds to the vision that the eye sees and the inward “eye” construes. This validates the role of imagination, which, I will argue, is construed in the poem as a tool for self-knowledge, with attention as its necessary mode.

It has been noted that imagination plays a significant role in *The House of Fame*, as it does in other visions, which in their traditional form were intended to mirror the structure of the human mind, with imagination as one of its faculties (Lynch 2000, p. 62; see also Lynch 1988, pp. 64–76). Eve Salisbury has related the Chaucerian imagination to the poet’s ability to become *like a child*, that is, to reclaim a purer state of mind that enables individuals to situate themselves “at the precipice of real-world experience and imaginative escape” (Salisbury 2017, p. 52). Other studies have situated imagination in *The House of Fame* in relation to *ars poetica* (Zieman 1997, pp. 70–91; Martin 1998, pp. 40–65) or to the counterclaims of reason and faith (Holley 2011). Most relevant for my reading are those interpretations which navigate between the internal and the external, paying attention to the self (Buckmaster 1986, pp. 279–87; Kruger 1993, pp. 117–34), as well as those open to applying the Stoic perspective to Chaucer’s poems (DeMarco 2008; Burnley 1979). None of the studies known to me have situated *The House of Fame* in the context of exercising the self, as this paper attempts to do, and have shown how imagination works towards shaping the self.

2. Awakening and Exercising the Self

In *The House of Fame*, the desire for the view from above is generated by the narrator’s disillusionment with the initial vision that appears before his eyes when he falls asleep on a December night. Having found himself in “a temple ymad of glas” (l. 120),² the dreamer first sees the image of Venus, the deity presiding over the temple, before his eyes register various stories of love recorded on the walls. They are the stories of classical lovers, betrayers and betrayed, partial to foolish desire, wickedness, falsehood, and “untrouthe” (l. 384 and 395), that is, stories that tell us about opportunities missed and reputations lost. They are narratives that “hyt was pitee for to here” (l. 189) and which evoke no other response from the narrator than “Allas!” (l. 265). The multiplicity of disconcerting images produces an unwelcome effect on the dreamer, leaving “a void that may be filled by either ‘fantom’ or ‘Christ’” (Kruger 1993, p. 123). It is to Christ that the dreamer prays, hopefully casting his eyes to heaven in anticipation of a divine revelation (ll. 492–495).

David M. Bevington notes that the stories of betrayal painted on the walls of Venus's temple bring "a rude awakening" to the dreamer, himself inexperienced and an innocent believer in the power of love (Bevington 1961, p. 293). If his eyes are indeed opened to the perfidy of false lovers, they are soon closed, and all his senses dead when he finds himself in the sharp claws of an eagle that appears as if summoned by the dreamer's prayer for illumination. The topos of an eagle as a distinctive symbol of the poetic or philosophic ascent was frequently used in ancient and medieval literature.³ In *The House of Fame*, the solemnity of this ambitious endeavor is undercut by the eagle's humorous remarks about the dreamer's plump body (ll. 573–574) and intellectual shortcomings (l. 621). The eagle's twice-uttered cry "Awak!" (l. 556 and 560), which brings the man out of his stupor, has also been seen as a hilarious enactment of a domestic situation (see Havely 1997, p. 148, n. 562 and Bevington 1961, p. 295), while the bird's "mannes vois" (l. 556) seems to humorously deflate the dreamer's sense of human or manly exceptionality.⁴ Chaucer's creative approach to the topos of the celestial journey suggests that the narrator's comic Odyssey⁵ may lead to different than conventional conclusions of such journeys, which typically prompt the traveler to devalue and reject the world.⁶

The fact that the poet makes a clear connection between the dreamer's lethargy and the celestial flight creates an anticipation of an eye-opening, educative, and possibly therapeutic outcome of the journey. The Chaucer persona is promised to experience an adventure that will bring him "lore" [knowledge] and "prow" [benefit] (l. 579) and which may therefore be associated with shedding old habits and forming new. This expectation is again undermined by the dreamer himself who reveals his unsuitability as a celestial voyager (ll. 588–589). As expressed by the eagle's "Thow demest of thyself amys" (l. 596), the dreamer-narrator is lacking in self-knowledge and is in need of spiritual guidance. Sitting at his desk at night, he is envisioned as an individual whose intellectual pretensions keep him up while other earthly men are asleep. Lost in his thought, immersed in learning, he symbolizes isolation and voluntary detachment from what he sees as an unnecessary contact with the world, including relations with his neighbors (ll. 656–660).

The narrator's "hermitic pattern of existence" (Bevington 1961, p. 295) has been variously interpreted. In its broadest terms, it may exemplify Chaucer's "decidedly mixed feelings about the trend towards more private modes of living" (Turner 2019, p. 196). It may also capture the 'archival' dimension of a poet's craft, which, when it takes over the experiential, may undermine the credibility of his writings. This is especially relevant to those poetic works which are divested of relatable contexts, such as writings about love that are not based on the "tydynges" of "Loves folk" (l. 675).⁷ Chaucer's hermitic figure may also represent a philosopher who is occupied with what to him seem *real* questions of existence as his attention is being drawn towards *real-life* questions and towards "preve by experience" (l. 878). Whether interpreted as the figure of a poet or philosopher, Chaucer's dreamer-narrator epitomizes the ideal of intellectual labor sustained by undistracted attention. In either case, Chaucer construes an individual who is "domb as any stoon", whose look is "daswed" and all connection with the outside world cut off (ll. 656–658). Isolation, as experienced by the dreamer persona, represents the very opposite of an increase in self-knowledge. In fact, Chaucer shows that a temporary elimination of distraction also means the elimination of the stimuli that act as sensory and cognitive triggers. It appears, therefore, that a crucial aim of the narrator's celestial journey is to re-activate his senses by engaging his imagination. It is to offer an antidote to emotional numbness and apathy through the exercise of the view from above.

The process of re-activation, however, as presented in *The House of Fame*, does not merely apply to the senses but also involves the re-building of the inner self, and, as such, it begins with adopting an attentive attitude. The call to attention (*prosoche*) is related to the journey through the landscape of the dreamer's mind in that the faculty of memory, evoked in Book One through the images of classical stories in the Temple of Venus, in Book Two, gives way to the faculty of understanding,⁸ with Thought becoming a crucial ruling power in this section of the poem (see Kruger 1993, p. 122). Even though the contrast between

thought and memory may have been less significant than such a transition presupposes,⁹ this does not invalidate the claim that the transformation of the self begins in the mind before it applies to the whole consciousness. The eagle's appeal to the dreamer makes a very clear connection between attentive concentration and understanding: "So that thou yeve thyn advertence [attention]/To understonde my sentence" (ll. 709–710). One needs to find oneself in the present moment, the poet seems to be saying, to fully enjoy the instruction that is provided and to process it in the mind. This vindicates the human imagination¹⁰ in its role of disciplining our thinking and launching a reconstructive process. The fact that the word 'advertence' was also used in the Middle Ages to denote consciousness, mind, and spirit (see Kurath 1952, p. 109) reinforces the idea that what the eagle may be trying to activate is not only the Chaucer persona's mental attention but also his whole consciousness, effecting a transformation of the dreamer's inner self.

The first signs of this intention were signaled via the eagle's call to wake up, which had been mentioned before. The call to attention articulated in Book Two further paves the way for the imaginative exercise of the view from above. Before the dreamer's eyes are opened to a wider cosmic view, his imagination is activated and constantly sustained by frequent admonitions to "herkene wel" (l. 725, 764) and "take hede" (l. 787), as well as by visionary promises (l. 793), references to the previously obtained knowledge (l. 762, 790) and to present considerations (l. 806, 823). The eagle leaves behind the intricacies of philosophical and poetic discourses and highlights the "palpable" nature of the instruction the dreamer-narrator is going to receive (l. 869), referring to this instruction in terms of "a proper skille" (l. 726).¹¹ His attention activated, the dreamer's thought soars above, leaving behind fields and plains, hills and mountains, valleys and forests, rivers, cities, and towns before it ascends

so hye
That al the world, as to myn yë,
No more semed than a prikke;
Or elles was the air so thikke
That y ne myghte not discernen. (ll. 905–909)

Encouraged to cast his eyes upwards, the dreamer is confronted with the immensity of the cosmos and encouraged to "behold this large space" (l. 926) inhabited by "many a citezeyn" and "eyryssh bestes" (ll. 930, 932). It is in this way that Chaucer's readers, together with the dreamer-narrator, find themselves in the presence of a traditional exercise that utilizes the faculty of imagination. They are asked to contemplate the vastness of the cosmic space and the smallness of the earth. The eagle's active engagement of the dreamer-narrator in the experience that unfolds before his eyes shows that for Chaucer, like for many Stoic philosophers, including Marcus Aurelius, "the consideration of the infinity of time and space is an active maneuver" (Hadot 1998, p. 255).

3. The View from Above

The motif of the ascent, as used by the ancient thinkers, promoted the moral superiority of a philosopher whose life of contemplation elevated him to celestial heights and made him ready to abandon the inferior life of mankind (Rutherford 1989, pp. 155–56). When envisioned in terms of an exercise, the view from above was intended to reveal the ephemerality and banality of earthly things, including the vanity of fame, in contrast to the grandeur of eternal realities. It often led to the radical conclusion that our present earthly concerns should be rejected in favor of the spiritual. This kind of conclusion rounds off Book 2, Prose 7 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In Chaucer's translation:

And yif the soule, whiche that hath in itself science of gode werkes, unbownden
fro the prysone of the erthe, weendeth frely to the hevene, *despiseth it nat thane al*
erthly ocupacioun; and [usynge] hevene rejoyseth that it is exempt fro alle erthly
thynges? (Boece 2.pr7.152–157; my emphasis).¹²

Chaucer acknowledges his debt to Boethius on several occasions in *The House of Fame*,¹³ and the poet's reference to the "fetheres of Philosophye" (l. 974) has a clear antecedent in Lady Philosophy's words about surmounting "the heighte of the hevene" (*Boece* 4.m1.1–2). And yet the poet's omissions are equally significant. "Whanne the swift thoght hath clothid itself in tho fetheris, it despiseth the hateful erthes" (*Boece* 4.m1.2–4; my emphasis), Boethius writes, and this idea finds no reflection in *The House of Fame*. Stevenson notes that while *Consolation* moves in the direction of "turning away from the natural world and its illusion", Chaucer reveals "zest for things as they are" (Stevenson 1978, p. 24). The poet does not reject the earthly dimension of life, as will also be shown in his engagement with corporeality, but he does undermine the human pretense of rising above earthly constraints in the hope of participating in divine wisdom and becoming like a god.¹⁴ Chaucer does this by "cutting Boethius off in mid-sentence" (Fyler 1979, p. 46). The poet creates expectations of visionary experience through the upward movement and then suspends both vision and movement:

In fact, Chaucer truncates Boethius just as the latter is about to make his most striking ascent; he chooses to keep his reader in the lower realm of "Cloude" (978), completing Boethius's statement with his own deflating "and al that y of spak" (978) and thus throwing us back into the "Cloudes, mystes, and tempestes,/Snowes, hayles, reynes, wyndes" (966–67) that we have already seen, back into a kind of experience that obfuscates rather than reveals. (Kruger 1993, p. 126)

Chaucer highlights the limited rather than limitless potential of the journey through the "hevenes region" (l. 988) by constantly bringing the astral voyagers down. They move "now up, now down" (l. 947); "they anon/Gonne up to mounte and doun descende" (ll. 952–953). This fluctuating movement seems to bring an individual to a vantage point that, as Kruger notes, "allows him to look, and even move, toward heaven, but without forgetting the limitations imposed by human beings' embodiment as individuals living necessarily among the unreliable things of the world" (Kruger 1993, p. 131). Rather than dismiss earthly things, human beings are encouraged to situate themselves in relation to them and to the whole universe through the imaginative exercise of the view from above. In a variation of this theme, Chaucer's poem does not lead in the direction of the Neoplatonic ideal of rejecting all claims of the body, but rather in the direction of the Stoics' materialism or 'corporealism'.¹⁵

Chaucer's interest in the question of corporeality is shown on different levels in the poem, including the dreamer-narrator's considerations of whether "oure flesh" has the ability to understand the meaning of the visionary dreams that originate in the soul (l. 49) and whether as a human flyer through the heavens he is there "in body or in gost" (l. 981). Interestingly, human speech appears in the House of Fame in a personified, embodied form:

Whan any speche ycomen ys
Up to the paleys, anon-ryght
Hyt wexeth lyk the same wight
Which that the word in erthe spak,
Be hyt clothed red or blak;
And hath so verray hys lyknesse
That spak the word, that thou wilt gesse
That it the same body be,
Man or woman, he or she. (ll. 1074–1082)

As noted by Kruger, "Here idea is necessarily incarnated, just as, for the living human being, soul must inform the body, and just as, in poetry, idea must be communicated through the likenesses of bodies, through images" (Kruger 1993, p. 131). Chaucer's engagement with those aspects of the human experience, which are made easily imaginable through their visible and corporeal form enhances the impression that his exercise of the view from above was not intended to jettison the earthly things as impediments that weigh

humans down. Even though the sense of banality and ephemerality of human existence is brought to the surface in the poem in the evocation of Judgment Day (l. 1284) and expressions such as “But men seyn, ‘What may ever laste?’” (l. 1147) or “For tyme ylost, this knowen ye,/Be no way may recovered be” (ll. 1257–1258), such expressions do not add up to a *contemptus mundi* conclusion, while the celestial flight does not take the form of a triumphant heroic adventure transporting the soul to its final destination of truth and glory which are the reward of virtue.¹⁶ Instead, Chaucer’s approach to the view from above situates him in the presence of those ancient thinkers, for whom the imagined flight remains “strictly hypothetical, rather than a foreshadowing of the soul’s future fate” and for whom the sense of the futility of human endeavor is directly related to the sense of necessity and universality of things, as is the case in Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* (Rutherford 1989, p. 159).

4. ‘Everything Is within Everything Else’ (*Homoeides*)

In his analysis of the philosophical variations on the view from above, R. B. Rutherford notes how Marcus Aurelius’s position differs from those of other philosophers:

We notice above all that he is not asserting any hope of permanent liberation in the afterlife, as Seneca or Plato might do. Nor does he even describe the vistas which are opened up to the mind as it rises to the heights. The celestial geography and the music of the spheres, which are highlighted in Cicero’s *Somnium Scipionis* and seized on by his imitators, find no echoes in these chapters of the *Meditations*. [...] In these hypothetical heavenly flights, as on the earth, his attention is still focused on the endless and futile pursuits of the masses. (Rutherford 1989, p. 158)

Marcus Aurelius’s meditations on the vastness of the cosmos often contain an enumeration of men’s actions, which, when seen from above, appear as an endless chain of activities. “If you want to talk about people, you need to look down on the earth from above”, he says, “Herds, armies, farms; weddings, divorces, births, deaths; noisy court-rooms, desert places; all the foreign peoples; holidays, days of mourning, market days . . . all mixed together, a harmony of opposites” (*Meditations* 7.48, p. 92).¹⁷ The identity and homogeneity of these activities exemplify what Marcus Aurelius refers to as *homoeides*. “This is an ambiguous notion”, Hadot says, “it can mean for example, that in the eyes of one who plunges his gaze into the cosmic immensity, everything is within everything else” (Hadot 1998, p. 176). Approached from this perspective, human history unfolds as a series of uniform scenes and dramas, with the same spectacles constantly repeating themselves while only the actors change. The rational soul, while surveying the world and the empty space around it, “knows that those who come after us will see nothing different, that those who came before us saw no more than we do, and that anyone with forty years behind him and eyes in his head has seen both past and future—both alike” (11.1, p. 146).

Aurelius interlaces meditations on the ceaseless, cyclical, and repetitive nature of human activities with meditations on universal nature.¹⁸ Both lead to “a startlingly reductive interpretation of humanity’s state” (Rutherford 1989, p. 150), but they should not be seen as a negative expression of Marcus Aurelius’s own experience. Instead, when he defines the world as “a random catalogue whose order is imposed upon it arbitrarily, but logically connected” (4.45, p. 47), he may be seen as engaging in an exercise in detachment. This exercise is an attempt at stripping reality down to its bare essentials, at rejecting subjective, biased, and emotional responses to the surrounding world. The expected goal of this exercise is to create space for the self, while the method it employs is that of reflection, which is prompted by looking at things from a distance. In Marcus Aurelius’s words,

You can discard most of the junk that clutters your mind—things that exist only there—and clear out space for yourself:
 . . . by comprehending the scale of the world
 . . . by contemplating infinite time

... by thinking of the speed with which things change—each part of every thing; the narrow space between our birth and death; the infinite time before; the equally unbounded time that follows. (9.35, p. 125)

In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer is engaging his readers in a similar exercise, but this has not been duly acknowledged by the critics. The only scholar known to me who refers to Marcus Aurelius while examining *The House of Fame* is Piero Boitani, who lists Aurelius's name in the company of those ancient thinkers whose pessimistic view of fame and glory may have inspired Chaucer's own. Boitani does not address the question of Chaucer's actual knowledge of Marcus Aurelius and of whether the latter's ideas may have reached him directly or through intermediary texts, but he does highlight their relevance, noting that Marcus Aurelius "is a particularly interesting case of the workings of the goddess Fame as conceived by Chaucer" (Boitani 1984, p. 39). To exemplify the similarity between the two writers Boitani quotes from Book III of Aurelius's *Meditations*:

Little indeed, then, is a man's life, and little the nook of earth whereon he lives, and little even the longest after-fame, and that too handed on through a succession of manikins, each one of them very soon to be dead, with no knowledge even of themselves, let alone of a man who has died long since. (3.10; cited in Boitani 1984, p. 39).¹⁹

Boitani refers to Aurelius's argument about fame, which, like all earthly things, becomes as insignificant as dust, but he does not discuss it in a wider context in which it appears in Aurelius's *Meditations*, namely that of the uniformity of things, which is what this article attempts to do. As will be shown below, Chaucer's indebtedness to Marcus Aurelius moves beyond a single idea and also concerns the method through which it is activated in the readers' imagination. Both writers place before their readers' minds the image of universal nature, which is intended to draw their attention to what lies beyond their immediate concerns and to look at the world from a different vantage point. This, in turn, is intended, as has already been mentioned, to clear space for the self.

Similarly to Marcus Aurelius, who describes Nature as the one 'through whom *all things* happen as they should', Chaucer devotes a lot of attention in *The House of Fame* to conveying the idea that the law of nature applies to 'every thing' (l. 753 and 828), 'every speche' (l. 783 and 832), 'every soun' (l. 832) and 'everych ayr' (l. 817). Accordingly, all 'thynges' are infused with universal energy and united by a common and perpetual bond. In fact, one of the most frequently repeated terms in Book Two is 'every', and the fact that it rhymes with 'kyndely' further reinforces the sense of universality. In other words, the poet construes a universe in which every entity is allotted its *kynde* place, its "propre mansyon" (l. 754), to which it "seketh to repaire" (l. 755).

It is also a universe in which 'everything is within everything else', that is, one which is not only governed by the law of universal nature but also the law of homogeneity. This idea emerges from the poet's discussion of how speech is produced. In a similar manner that a stone thrown into the water initiates circular ripples on its surface, every word spoken generates the movement of the air and "Everych ayr another stereth, / More and more, and speche up bereth" (ll. 817–818). The poet's interest lies in the way a part is related to the whole, with speech originating in a single gust of "air ybroke" (l. 770) before it spreads over the whole earth via the endless process of multiplication. It also lies in the way the boundaries between various entities, which are initially differentiated, become elusive, making them blur into one. This is what happens to "every speche that ys spoken", both fair and foul, private and public (ll. 766–767). All kinds of utterances, whether "voys, or noyse, or word, or soun" (l. 819), are turned into a single mass of 'talk' by the constantly circulating air, producing a certain aural/oral uniformity. In order for the information to be successfully channeled to the House of Fame, "the building is located between the sky, earth, and sea, precisely so that it can intercept *everything* said, *anywhere* in the world" (Guastella 2017, p. 356; my emphasis).

A similar process of uniformization can be observed with reference to those who embody the various forms of speech, that is, Fame's petitioners. The nine groups of

postulants who appeal for Fame's favor are distinguished by the different regions they come from and by various "condiciouns" (l. 1530). They represent different sides of the moral scale, with some of them engaged in "goode werkes" (l. 1666), others delighting in "wikkednesse" (l. 1831), while still others doing "neither that ne this" (l. 1732) but being idle all their lives. They also differ in their motivation, with some performing their good deeds "for contemplacioun,/ And Goddes love" (ll. 1710–1711) while others act on the expectation of reward. At first sight, these differences, as well as the fact that the petitioners "were dyversly served" (l. 1546), may be seen as pointing in the direction of diversification, but the fact that similarly deserving or undeserving actions receive very different responses makes the case for uniformization rather than diversification. If Fame's decisions are based on a whim rather than on the petitioners' merits, their merits cease to be relevant, personal worth is de-valued and the original distinctions between the many petitioners are erased. Accordingly, all human actions and energies become subsumed in the monotony of worldly affairs while individuals coalesce into a single homogenous mass, made up of those deserving of fame and those undeserving, all joined under the jurisdiction of a capricious goddess.

Fame's absolutist tendencies in pronouncing judgment may be associated with either the particular or the general. They may be related to the political situation of 1380s London, with Fame symbolizing Richard II as "a tyrant ruler writ large" (Turner 2006, p. 21), but they may also bring to mind other contemporary cities "ruled arbitrarily, and controlled by unceasing surveillance" (Turner 2006, p. 24). The interpretative possibilities extend not only geographically to cover other regions and nations but also temporally to include the past and the future, together with the present. As noted by Marion Turner, "The poem suggests that in every historical period there will be arbitrary decisions, lost utterances, unfair judgements, conflicting accounts, and warring tidings" (Turner 2006, p. 25). When interpreted as such, Chaucer's *The House of Fame* presents a vision of history that is enacted through repetition and culminates in an endless spectacle of human activity, a vision that is not far from Marcus Aurelius's meditations on things in the universe and their relationship to one another. If there is little hope for change, which both Marcus Aurelius and Chaucer seem to assert, and human relations will not be any more meaningful in the future, the only thing an individual may do is to question and reconceive his relation to the universe. In the context of such a world in which human actions lose value, "the onus must fall upon the individual to question and re-conceive his relation to it" (St. John 2000, p. 120).

5. Mapping the Self

The idea that Chaucer encourages his dreamer-narrator to clear out space for his own self becomes evident when we observe that in those moments in the poem when the dreamer seems close to obtaining higher knowledge, "the trajectory of the poem turns suddenly inward" (Kruger 1993, p. 127). When asked whether he desires fame for himself, the narrator responds:

I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, 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 thynke*,
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as *I kan myn art*. (ll. 1874–1882; my emphasis)

"Here is a quite extraordinary statement of self-sufficiency and independence", Alastair Minnis notes (Minnis 2014, p. 188). It is with these words, Kruger argues, that Chaucer breaks the spell of cosmic revelation, making the dreamer fall back on his own resources and leave behind the unaccountable world of fame: "We never see the goddess Fame again" (Kruger 1993, p. 128). We may say that it is through this statement that the dreamer-narrator

rejects fame as a concept and as a goddess. He distances himself from the triviality of the pagan gods, “their childish squabbling, their vindictive natures, and their wilful and unaccommodating behavior” (Burnley 1979, p. 41), and instead highlights his self-sufficiency. He is not one of those who will ‘pray’ to Fame, even though prayer is not an alien concept for him.²⁰ The poet’s reference to his art (l. 1882), which follows his statement of being (l. 1878), is an attempt to situate himself on the *mappa mundi* of poetic creation, but the lesson that the Chaucer persona learns from his visionary experience does not relate to his poetry. It relates to ‘sculpting his own statue’ but in a different sense. Hadot notes that this expression is often seen through the lens of moral aestheticism, while, in fact, for the ancients, “sculpture was an art which ‘took away’, as opposed to painting, an art which ‘added on’. The statue pre-existed in the marble block, and it was enough to take away what was superfluous in order to cause it to appear” (Hadot 1995, p. 102). The superfluous refers here to human passions and desires, as opposed to the essential, that is “that which is truly ‘ourselves,’ and which depends on us” (Hadot 1995, p. 102). The dreamer-narrator’s response to the question of whether he has come to the House of Fame to actually seek fame—“I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,/For no such cause, by my hed!” (ll. 1874–1875)—distances him from a desire for recognition in the eyes of others. In fact, it shows how the statue of one’s own self can be sculpted by ‘taking away’ the non-essential, represented in the poem by a concern with having one’s name recorded in print.

This attitude, however, is not intended to create an egoistic, alienated self. The poet’s reference to the fact that he does not wish his name to be held “in honde” (l. 1877) by others is not to be seen as a sign of what Knight refers to as “a rootless individualism” (Knight 2010, p. 150), which comes at the cost of sacrificing human relations. In other words, it does not imply distancing the self from others but rather from their opinions, that is, from what does not depend on one’s own self. This is the realization that the quest for self-knowledge brings to the Chaucer persona, and it is through an exercise in visualization that this realization is achieved, vindicating human imagination. It is the view from above, which, through the power of imagination, enables an individual to obtain a position removed from the ordinary human perspective and to look adequately at the world and at their own place in it.

6. Conclusions

The practice of the self offers a very interesting frame for examining medieval literature, dream-vision poetry in particular, which is by definition related to the workings of the individual psyche (see Wynne-Davies 1995, p. 538). The relation of an individual to their own self is visualized in Chaucer’s poetry in terms of a complex movement on horizontal and vertical axes. Through his creative use of the view from above, which represents the vertical direction of movement, Chaucer underlines the imaginative abilities, which enable individuals to extricate themselves from their physical surroundings while simultaneously keeping them firmly anchored in these surroundings. If the dreamer-narrator is made to look up at the splendor of the universe, his gaze is soon brought down to look at the insignificance of earth, but this lasts for an equally brief moment. Instead, the individual is encouraged to look inwards to discover where they themselves stand “in [their] ymagynacion” (l. 728) and to look around and notice where their neighbors stand. It is the horizontal plane of reference that enables theory to be connected with practice (Kruger 1993, p. 129), thereby ensuring that the exercitant’s self will not become a symbol of “mere intellectualism” averse to action (Knight 2010, p. 150). In both cases, however, the movement is a two-way traffic, and Chaucer’s reader is compelled to travel up and down, inwards and outwards in their imagination, engaged in uneasy acts of self-recognition.

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Notes

- ¹ In Pierre Hadot's words: "If we think we are rich and noble, we are to recall that we are made of earth, and ask ourselves where are the famous men who have preceded us now. If, on the contrary, we are poor and in disgrace, we are to take cognizance of the riches and splendors which the cosmos offers us: our body, the earth, the sky, and the stars, and we shall then be reminded of our divine vocation" (Hadot 1995, p. 131).
- ² All the references to Chaucer come from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson (1988).
- ³ On the literary descent of Chaucer's eagle, see A. J. Minnis and John Scattergood (Minnis and Scattergood 1995, pp. 201–3).
- ⁴ For a reference to human and nonhuman exchanges in *The House of Fame*, see Warren (2021, p. 166).
- ⁵ I borrow this expression from Bevington (1961, p. 288).
- ⁶ A classic example of a *contemptus mundi* conclusion appears, for instance, in Macrobius's Ciceronian *Somnium Scipionis* and Chaucer rehearses this idea in *The Parliament of Fowls* (see l. 66).
- ⁷ Bevington suggests that the dreamer-narrator's persona might serve as a caricature of Chaucer the poet: "Geffrey is a wallflower, retiring and sensitive, unfit to serve as love's poet. Add to this his glassy-eyed drudgery not only over his books but in the customs house, and we have the burlesque sketch of a poet-bureaucrat in need of enlightenment" (Bevington 1961, p. 295).
- ⁸ On the structure of the poem as corresponding to the three powers of the soul, see Buckmaster (1986, pp. 279–87).
- ⁹ Miller notes that Chaucer's "Thought" (l. 523 and 526) is a translation of Dante's "mente", that is, memory or mind (Miller 2014, p. 483).
- ¹⁰ On how Chaucer replaces Dante's claim to a revelatory, transcendent truth with a vindication of human imagination, see Murton (2020, p. 136).
- ¹¹ Steven F. Kruger notes that the eagle's discourse is motivated by a double impulse: "a desire to teach abstract doctrine but also to connect that doctrine to everyday experience" (Kruger 1993, p. 129).
- ¹² Boethius is following Cicero, who in his *Dream of Scipio* writes that the flight of the soul will be swifter "if the soul, while it is still shut up in the body, will rise above it, and in contemplation of what is beyond, detach itself as much as possible from the body." See Macrobius (1952, p. 77). On Boethius's knowledge of Macrobius, see Magee (2009, p. 203, n. 96).
- ¹³ On Boethian echoes in *The House of Fame*, see Havelly's introduction to *The House of Fame* (Havelly 1997, p. 124, n. 31).
- ¹⁴ On Boethius's articulation of this idea in CP 3.10, see Wetherbee (2009, p. 284).
- ¹⁵ On the use of the term 'corporealism' instead of 'materialism' with reference to the Stoics' theory of material reality, see Jedan (2009, p. 10). Jedan notes that for the Stoics only bodies can act or be acted upon, which leads to the idea that "everything that 'is' (including the soul and the virtues) is body, or a property of it" (p. 11).
- ¹⁶ On the depiction of the celestial flight in terms of a successful heroic adventure and military campaign, see Rutherford (1989, p. 159.)
- ¹⁷ Unless indicated otherwise, quotations and references from Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* come from Gregory Hays's translation (Aurelius 2002).
- ¹⁸ "Nature—through whom *all things* happen as they should, and have happened forever in just the same way, and will continue to, one way or another endlessly" (9.35, p. 125; my emphasis).
- ¹⁹ Boitani uses C. R. Haines's translation of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (Loeb Library).
- ²⁰ On the idea of people 'praying' to Fame's 'grace', see Knight (2010, p. 150).

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