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How effectively do dream visions offer resolution or consolation? — The role of the authority figure within dream vision poetry.

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Introducing medieval dream narratives, Helen Phillips and Nick Havely explain that the 'mental turmoil attributed to many dream poem narrators before their dream is a device which suggests unresolved problems and provides a contrast with the ensuing order and clarity…within the dream frame'.[1] This juxtaposition underlines the vision's movement from the dreamer's confusion to the resolution reached through the dream. This journey often involves an authoritative guide who provides a solution to the dreamer's central conflict. Considering dream visions, Peter Brown argues that 'The subject of authority is hardly one that depended for its poetic treatment on the dream vision'.[2] Although not discounting it entirely, Brown's argument underestimates the importance of authority within dream poetry. Indeed, the examination of dream-guides and figures of authority within *House of Fame*, *Pearl*, *Piers Plowman*, *Wynnere and Wastoure* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* suggests that these figures are central to the poems and their ability to successfully offer resolution.

The importance of the authority or dream-guide figure to the poem's resolution is evident within the vision tradition that formed the origins of the Middle English dream narrative. Indeed, in the visions of the Bible God stands as the ultimate authority figure. Alternatively the dreamer would be guided by a saint or angel, such as the angel that appears to Joseph, who carry authority as an embodiment of God. In contrast, Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* takes a secular figure of authority, Africanus. As Scipio's grandfather, he holds a traditional position of paternal authority which authorises his role of dream-guide. Similarly, in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, it is Virgil as an acclaimed author who becomes the dream-guide. Critics often comment upon the paternal relationship developed between the two which reinforces Virgil as an authority figure. Alternatively, reaching heaven, it is Beatrice who adopts the authoritative role, justified by her Christian virtue, and her educative responsibility towards Dante. Although once mortal, she has transcended her earthly status to become an embodiment of Christian virtue. Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* also has a female guide who is able to authoritatively offer consolation to the narrator due her identity as an abstract personification of Philosophy. Referring to *Divina Commedia* and *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, although it equally applies to *Somnium Scipionis*, Jessica Barr asserts that these dreams 'depict dreamers who ascend to visionary knowledge in a more or less orderly, rational fashion and do not openly question the vision's ability to convey knowledge'.[3] In these visions the narrator is led by an *authoritative* guide whose guidance allows them transcendence and resolution. Therefore, there is arguably a direct link between

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[1] Helen Phillips and Nick Havely, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 8
[2] Peter Brown, 'On the Borders of Middle English Dream Visions', *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams for Chaucer to Shakespeare*, Peter Brown (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 45
[3] Jessica Barr, *Willing to Know God: Dreamers and Visionaries in the Later Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, c.2010), p. 9

the presence of this guide, their status of authority and their ability to provide the instruction that leads to the vision's effective resolution.

In *House of Fame*, Chaucer indicates his awareness of the visionary tradition, making intertextual references to those texts mentioned above and engaging with the genre's conventions. Although the narrative concerns a search for 'tydynges', *Fame* centres around the theme of authority, specifically 'authority in its medieval sense, which included not only power, but also, specifically, a text which could be cited to prove an argument'.[4] However, the search for this authority ultimately fails because the poem is overflowing with various authoritative figures and no single authority emerges to provide narrative resolution. In the story of Aeneas and Dido, Virgil and Ovid are considered authorities, but the combination of their two works results in conflicting judgements on the character of Aeneas. Indeed, referring to 'bokes' as a source of authority, in just four lines the narrator uses 'the book' to both condemn and justify Aeneas's betrayal of Dido, underlining the duplicitous nature of literary authority.[5] In Book III, literary authorities continue to be challenged: 'Oon seyde that Omer made lyes'.[6] Fiction is therefore proved to be 'fals and soth compouned',[7] leaving the narratives unresolved. This lack of designated authority is emphasised in *Fame*. In an evocative metaphor of the *House of Fame* as a 'verbal hydra', Lara Ruffolo argues that Fame's caprice and Chaucer's use of lists means that 'while the limbs multiply, there is no head to the literary body that would guarantee its authority'.[8] Fame, described as a 'nobel quene',[9] appears as a judicial authority figure, recalling Boethius's Lady Philosophy through her changing height.[10] However, surveying the procession of supplicants seeking Fame the narrator is quickly shown the arbitrary nature of her judgement. She is authoritative in that she has supreme power, but she is not a governing 'head' that can provide authority or resolution to the narrator's dream.

B. G. Koonce argues that *Fame*, through its reference and inversion of Boethius and especially Dante, is an exploration between worldly and heavenly fame, comparing 'Fame's glittering throne' to 'the Apocalyptic throne on which Christ sits in majesty' in 'an ironic inversion of the Last Judgement'.[11] This interpretation seems highly probable, supporting the undermining of conventional authority fundamental to the poem. However, Koonce goes further to argue that the 'man of gret auctorite' is the coming of Christ. Although parallels are evident, it seems highly unlikely and inappropriate that Chaucer would introduce the ultimate figure of authority into the chaotic House of Rumour or into a poem about the failure of authority. More likely, if the continued poem had allowed the 'man of gret auctorite' to speak, he would be a figure of non-authority, continuing the inversion found throughout the poem. This inversion from divine to worldly effectively undermines authority within the poem, while their incompatibility results in a lack of resolution.

Like many readers, I support the theory that the poem is unfinished because, as a dream vision, the awakening is vital to the completion of the frame narrative. Nonetheless, it is unlikely this ending would have provided resolution to the narrative, and in fact the entry of the 'man of gret auctorite' could have been the intended ending. The use of anaphora on the accumulative 'and'[12] as those in the House of Rumour clamber over each other creates a sense of building chaos, indicative of the climax that signals the dream's end, much like the

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[4] Gillian Rudd, *The Complete Critical Guide to Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 72

[5] Larry Benson (ed.), 'House of Fame', *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), l.426; l.429

[6] 'Fame', l.1477

[7] Ibid., l.1029

[8] Lara Ruffolo, 'Literary Authority and the Lists of Chaucer's "House of Fame": Destruction and Definition through Proliferation', *The Chaucer Review*, 27.4 (1993), pp. 325-341, (p. 338; p. 327)

[9] 'Fame', l.1409

[10] Ibid., ll.1369-1375

[11] B.G. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in The House of Fame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 208; p. 170

[12] 'Fame', ll.2147-54

cry of Conscience as he is surrounded by enemies. The fact that he only '*semed* for to be/A man of gret auctorite' (italics mine) is also significant,[13] contrasting with the unquestionable figures of authority in Chaucer's literary precedents. *Divina Commedia*, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and *Somnium Scipionis*, belong to Macrobius's dream category of the 'oraculum... in which "a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god" appears and gives information or advice'.[14] By interacting with these sources, Chaucer arguably writes what A.C. Spearing defines as the 'anti-oracular'.[15] In other words, through the lack of the conventional authoritative figure, Chaucer creates a poem about the inability to locate authority and thus reveals, as Barr argues: 'the importance of a functionally authoritative speaker to the success of the vision'.[16] The absence of this figure is therefore located as significant reason for the poem's failure to reach resolution.

Similarly to Chaucer, the *Pearl*-poet seems aware of the visionary tradition and is likewise determined to defy conventions of resolution, causing Spearing to equally characterise Pearl as an 'anti-oracular'. However, this is not due to the absence of an authoritative figure, which appears in the form of the pearl-maiden, a divine authority who asserts her position in her statement that God 'Corounde me quene'.[17] She quotes biblical sources such as the parable of the vineyard and the Psalter to validate her heavenly position, emphasising her authoritative position. Notably, it is neither her gender nor her previous humanity that undermines her authority. Indeed, as a guide she is reminiscent of Dante's Beatrice in that in death she has become a 'blessed soul no longer capable of error, and now detached from all those human affections'.[18] She also possesses a position of religious authority as a spiritually superior being free from earthly sin: 'for mote ne spot in non the'.[19] Similarly, J.A. Burrow underlines that like Beatrice she responds to the narrator with 'uncompromising severity' because she stands for 'absolute truth'.[20] This severity is evident from her first exchange with the narrator. Although initially removing her crown and bowing to her father, in response to the narrator's question 'Art thou my perle that I haf playned' the pearl-maiden replaces her crown and replies 'Sir, ye haf your tale mysetente'.[21] In replacing her crown she reasserts her authority and in their following discussion she goes on to rebuke the narrator for his earth-bound attitude. Like Dante's Beatrice, she is an unquestionable dream guide who provides truthful instruction that should result in the successful resolution of the dreamer's conflict.

However, this position of divine authority is undermined due to the 'shocking reversal of the natural order of things' in that 'the person giving information and advice... is not the dreamer's parent but his child'.[22] Whereas Beatrice becomes a mother-like figure to Dante, the narrator continually characterises the pearl-maiden as his daughter through his persistent use of the possessive and endearments: 'my blysfol beste', 'my dete endorde', 'my blysful anunder croun', 'my lyttel quene', 'my frely'.[23] Rather than strengthening the pearl-maiden's status of authority, these phrases reject her authority over the narrator. Furthermore, although she appears as a young woman, the narrator continues to identify her as a child: 'faunt', 'so younge', 'Thou lyfed not two yer in oure thede'.[24] The narrator thus attempts to re-establish his paternal identity. Spearing notes that 'throughout the poem he is preoccupied with his

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[13] Ibid., ll.2140-2143
[14] A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 10
[15] Ibid., p.11
[16] Jessica Barr, p. 11
[17] J.J. Anderson (ed.), 'Pearl', *Sir Gawain And The Green Knight/Pearl/Cleanness/Patience* (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), l.415
[18] J.A. Burrow, *The Gawain-Poet* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2001), p. 9
[19] 'Pearl', l.764
[20] Burrow, p. 9
[21] Pearl', l.242; l.257
[22] Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry,* p. 11
[23] 'Pearl', l.279; l.368; l.1100; l.1147; l.1155
[24] Ibid., l.161; l.474; l.483

recollection of the Pearl Maiden as she was, and this hinders him from seeing even her as she is, still more from seeing God'.[25] The poet emphasises this conflict through the opposition of semantic meanings highlighted in the concatenating refrain. When the pearl-maiden talks about the pearl of great price, describing the 'jueler' who sold everything 'To bye hym a perle was mascelles',[26] she is referring to the soul. In contrast, the narrator describes her as 'O maskles perle in perles pure',[27] referring directly to the pearl-maiden herself. The narrator consequently locates her and her speech firmly in the physical world, rejecting her divine status and thus deferring the resolution that would be provided by her divine guidance.

Finally, despite her position of divine authority, the pearl-maiden is unable to supply the narrator with an effective sense of consolation. Although the narrator's declaration 'Now al be to that Prynces paye'[28] would seem to imply resolution to the narrator's emotional turmoil, his attempt to cross the river, an action forbidden by God, reveals that he has not learnt his lesson. This action is driven by the narrator's continued obsession with her physical presence while his language used to address and describe the pearl-maiden undermines her position as an authoritative dream guide by continuing to locate her in the earthly sphere. Consequently, as Barr argues, 'the apparent limitations of the dreamer's visionary experience are not a failure of the poem, but rather the poem's point'.[29] Like the *House of Fame*, Pearl foregrounds the conflict between earthly and heavenly concerns and is consequently a poem about the failure to resolve the relationship between the two.

Like the pearl-maiden, the figure of Piers in *Piers Plowman* seems to embody divine authority. He is the figure of guidance necessary to the dream's resolution and sought out by the other characters: the pilgrimage to truth 'were a wikkede wey but whoso hadde a gyde',[30] while in the search for Charity Anima tells the narrator that 'Withouten help of Piers the Plowman... his persone sestow nevere'.[31] Clearly, in order for the narrator to resolve his quest the presence of Piers as an authoritative guide is vital. Piers's first appearance occurs before a proposed pilgrimage to Truth, announcing 'I knowe hym [Truth] as kyndely as clerc doth hise bokes', 'I have ben his folwere al this fourty winter-'.[32] His sudden command of authority and immediate alignment with Truth establishes Piers as the poem's authoritative figure. Although there are many allegorical figures of authority within the poem, Piers appears as the ultimate authority and characters such as Conscience and Clergy defer to him. Indeed, Clergy refuses to define Dowel 'For oon Piers the Plowman hath impugned us alle' and supports his arguments by drawing upon Pier's authority: 'thus seith Piers the Plowman'.[33]

However, his identity as a ploughman and member of the Third Estate is problematic, especially when even the Knight defers to his authority. A ploughman becoming overseer to all society seems to challenge pre-established conventions of authority. Evidently, Piers is much more than an everyman figure. In fact, his status of ploughman does not undermine his authority, but emphasises it. This argument has been propounded by S.A. Barney, who demonstrates how the 'metaphor' of ploughing 'linked agriculture and apostolic mission' associating the ploughman with the good Christian preacher.[34] Indeed, Piers is often associated with Christ. Anima states 'Piers the Plowman – Petrus, id est, Christus'[35] while the

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[25] A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 116
[26] 'Pearl', l.732
[27] Ibid., l.745
[28] Ibid., l.1176
[29] Jessica Barr, p. 123
[30] A.V.C. Schmidt (ed.), *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (Everyman, 1995), VI: l.1
[31] *Piers*, XV: l.196
[32] Ibid., V: l.538; l.542
[33] Ibid., XIII: l.124; l.130
[34] S.A. Barney, 'The Plowshare of the Tongue: The Progress of a Symbol from the Bible to Piers Plowman', Mediæval Studies, 35 (1973), pp. 261-93 (p. 262)
[35] *Piers*, XV: l.212

narrator repeatedly confuses Christ with Piers.[36] Using these comparisons as evidence, Mary Clemente Davlin argues that 'Piers is the whole Christ'.[37] However, despite the confusion between the two, I support Nevill Coghill's caution against identifying Piers as Christ, opting instead for the idea that 'Piers is the embodiment of God's Authority on earth'[38]. He is Christ-like, but not Christ himself.

Despite his implied divine authority, Piers remains ambiguous. As John Alford argues: 'Though Piers is the highest potential of mankind... even he suffers repeated defeats and perplexities'.[39] The most referenced example is the tearing of the pardon. Critics cannot agree on its meaning, but the significant effect is that it confuses both narrator and reader, causing a re-evaluation of Piers's position of authority. However, what truly defers the resolution of the poem are the final Passus. Having reached a definite sense of resolution in his elated trip to Mass with his family, the narrator proceeds to have apocalyptic visions. Significantly, Piers does now not appear to resolve the conflict, unlike earlier points in the poem. Refusing Piers the opportunity for a heroic entrance, Langland instead sends Conscience in search for Piers, a quest that is left open-ended. It is precisely the potential for Piers to appear, and his failure to do so, that defers the resolution of the poem. Although ambiguous, Piers *does* represent an effective authority figure throughout the poem, but his absence in the final visions means that the resolution reached in the preceding Passus is effectively undermined.

Wynnere and Wastoure takes on similar social and political issues to *Piers* by hosting a debate between allegorical representations. However, whereas in *Piers*, 'waster' is a pejorative term used to describe shirkers who live of the work of others, in *Wynnere and Wastoure* the allegorical figure of 'waster' is more complex. When the narrator witnesses the two figures leading armies against each other, it falls to the King to resolve the conflict. As a king, he holds a conventional position of supreme authority and indeed in the poem he is presented as unquestionable, the two leaders submitting to this authority. The messenger announces 'And fro he wiete wittirly where the wronge ristyth, / Thare nowthir wye be wrothe to wirche als he demeth'.[40] This statement not only asserts the supreme authority of the King, but also implies a future resolution to the conflict, because, as a judicial figure, the reader expects his judgement. The King is also presented as morally superior. Described as 'comliche kynge… One of the lovelyste ledis, whoso loveth hym in hert',[41] he shows mercy to the armies illegally assembled and 'lovely lokes on the ledis twayne'.[42] He therefore seems to occupy the moral position necessary to pass judgement.

However, his final decision to split Wynnere from Wastoure by sending them to Rome and Cheapside respectively is not the judgement the reader has been promised. Nicholas Jacobs argues that 'the debate is intended to be of the balanced or resolved type' providing 'synthesis between the opposed points of view',[43] but debatably this decision does not achieve any sort of conclusion. In fact, aligning with David Harrington's argument that 'the King's acceptance of each does not constitute in itself a complete solution',[44] it is highly probable that his orders will only serve to further exacerbate the problem. The King promises

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[36] Ibid., XVIII: l.22; XIX: ll.10-11
[37] Mary Clemente Davlin, 'Petrus, Id Est, Christus: Piers the Plowman as the Whole Christ', *The Chaucer Review*, 6.4 (1972), pp. 280-92 (p. 281)
[38] Nevill K. Coghill, 'The Character of Piers the Plowman Considered from the B-text', *MÆ* 2 (1933), pp. 108-35 (p. 133)
[39] John Alford, *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (University of California Press, 1988), p. 148
[40] Warren Ginsberg (ed.), 'Wynnere and Wastoure', *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), ll.200-201
[41] 'Wynnere', l.86; l.88
[42] Ibid., l.456
[43] Nicholas Jacobs, 'The Typology of Debate and the Interpretation of Wynnere and Wastoure', *The Review of English Studies*, 36.144 (1985), pp. 481-500 (p. 485; p. 482)
[44] David Harrington, 'Indeterminacy in "Winner and Waster" and "The Parliament of the Three Ages"', *The Chaucer Review*, 20.3 (1986), pp. 246-57 (p. 254)

Wynnere that 'With hym [Wastoure] happyns the nver a fote for [to holde]', implying that the two cannot exist together.[45] Therefore, the debate dramatically lacks the 'synthesis' that Jacobs argues for. Despite being a highly authoritative figure, the action eventually taken by the King is a non-decision. He fails to decide between Wynnere and Wastoure or pass judgement on their comparative value, and therefore provides no guidance for the narrator. Like *House of Fame*, a man of great authority appears but ultimately fails to resolve the central conflict of the poem.

Mum and the Sothsegger is also a debate poem that sets two opposing values against each other. Focusing on events contemporary to the early reign of Henry IV, primarily the problem of council, the poet posits the question whether to choose 'mum' (self-profiting silence) or 'sothsegger' (truth-telling). Resembling *Piers Plowman*, the narrator is actively engaged in a quest for a reliable authority figure in order to solve this conflict. He seeks advice at the University and the Church, but in the waking world this authoritative figure is unavailable and, frustrated, he 'romed forth *reedelees*' (italics mine).[46] Without council, the narrator is unable to reach any sort of resolution and, feeling faint, he falls asleep. He finds himself in an Eden-like setting, the traditional paradisiacal garden where the conventional dream-guide is found, and comes across a Beekeeper who represents this figure of authority: 'An olde anuncyen man', but 'pithy in his tyme, / And by his staute right stronge, and stalworth on his dayes'.[47] Like the King in *Wynnere and Wastoure*, the Beekeeper is presented as attractive, his moral quality reflected in his appearance. Meanwhile, his old age grants him authority and wisdom. This position of authority is enforced by the beekeeper's use of 'Swete soon' and 'my dere soon' to address the narrator, assuming a paternal relationship that can also be found between Dante and Virgil.[48] In his role of gardener and protector, the Beekeeper also recalls the figure of Piers in the garden tending and protecting the tree of Charity, a comparison that bestows Piers's Christ-like authority on the Beekeeper. Consequently, the Beekeeper exemplifies the convention of the 'parent, or a pious or revered man' in the oracular dream, holding a privileged position of authority.[49]

The hive-metaphor is another aspect that allows the Beekeeper to claim a position of authority. Describing the harm done by the drones, the Beekeeper states that it is the gardener's responsibility to protect the hive.[50] Although the bees are described as having their own king, the Beekeeper arguably takes on a king-like role in protecting the society represented by the hive. The use of the metaphor from nature acts to justify the natural entitlement he has to this role. This justification is also provided by his use of legal language. Instructing the narrator to make a written record of his instruction, the Beekeeper commands him to 'make vp thy matiere' and 'lete the sentence be soothe, and sue to th'ende'.[51] Barr asserts that the use of this legal vocabulary throughout ll.1268-87 gives the Beekeeper's advice 'the form of a legal injunction'.[52] This language not only serves to legitimise the narrator's truth-telling quest but through its use it confers a status of legal authority on the speaker — the Beekeeper. Therefore he is able to *definitively* resolve the question of whether to follow mum or sothsegger. This resolution, reached through the instruction of the Beekeeper, is clearly expressed in the narrator's announcement: 'For thou has demed deuely the doute I was ynne'.[53]

[45] 'Wynnere', l.471
[46] Helen Barr, 'Mum and the Sothsegger', *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J.M. Dent, 1993), l.843
[47] 'Mum', l.956; ll.964-5
[48] Ibid., l.1111; l.1275
[49] Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, p. 165
[50] 'Mum', ll.1059-1061
[51] Ibid., l. 1278; l.1283
[52] Helen Barr, *Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), p. 163
[53] 'Mum', l.1219

In conclusion, with the exception of the Beekeeper, the authority figures of these poems transgress conventions of authority, fail to act decisively, or are ambiguous or absent entirely. Unlike Dante's Virgil and Boethius's Philosophy, they are unable to provide the resolution the narrator requires. Conversely, when this figure effectively adopts authority, like the Beekeeper, they are able to provide closure. Consequently, it is the presence or failure of an effective authority figure that determines how effectively the dream vision provides resolution and consolation. In contrast to earlier medieval visions where the narrator's conflict would reach resolution through the guidance of a superior or divine authority, the dream visions in the age of Langland and Chaucer are arguably exploited to achieve the opposite effect.

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