



‘As me mette, redely — Non other auctour alegge I’ (*The House of Fame*).

Explore the relationship between originality and authority in the works of any two writers on this course.

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Whilst dealing with the notion of authority, it is possible to view the term in two related yet distinguishable ways. The first meaning of authority is synonymous with that of originality; the second equates authority with success, both temporary and enduring. This essay will use this dual meaning of authority as a springboard to discuss the work of two medieval poets: Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Hoccleve. Close analysis will be carried out on Chaucer’s poem *The House of Fame*, written c.1379-1380, and Hoccleve’s ‘My compleinte’ and ‘A dialogue’ from his 1421 *Series*.

Both Chaucer and Hoccleve can be viewed as court poets, to varying extents. Chaucer wrote for the Ricardian court, during the reign of Richard II and ‘took up a position of great independence and dignity’.¹ This was despite the precariousness of the poetic craft in a society that valued knowledge above the arts.² Ackroyd has called Chaucer’s social standing ‘assured’,³ a description that cannot be applied to Hoccleve’s position as he was nowhere near as fully integrated into his king’s court. The latter poet worked for the majority of his professional life as a king’s clerk of the Privy Seal and was subjected to the irregular payment of annuities, which were his main income.⁴ Although Hoccleve wrote poems as a supplement to this job, they were not demanded in the same way that Chaucer’s works were. Whereas Chaucer received commissions for his work, Hoccleve wrote ‘in the hope of pleasing the royal heir’,⁵ the future Henry V. Strohm notes that Hoccleve was indeed considered a ‘proto-laureate’ over a period spanning the crowning of the new monarch.⁶ However, this status lasted for only several years and, excepting this time, the poet was awarded only very peripheral access to the Lancastrian court, as opposed to Chaucer’s decidedly ‘insider’ stature during the Ricardian period.⁷

Brewer has described the poet as ‘amusing but undignified’ and it is this reputation that has affected the reception of Hoccleve’s work in much subsequent critical opinion. Despite being largely enjoyed in its contemporaneous setting his poetry clearly lacks the authority of Chaucer’s in that it is not prominent in the modern canon. The reasons for

1 D. S. Brewer, ‘The Relationship of Chaucer to the English and European Traditions’ in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), p. 28

2 Ibid.

3 Peter Ackroyd, *Chaucer* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 1

4 Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Pennsylvania: the Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 20-21

5 Paul Strohm, ‘Hoccleve, Lydgate and the Lancastrian Court’ in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.640-62 (p. 640)

6 Strohm, p. 644

7 D. S. Brewer, ‘Images of Chaucer 1386-1900’ in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), p. 244

Hoccleve's failure as a court poet will later be explored in specific relation to his work and it is important to remember that the enduring fame of Chaucer's works is as much a social success as it is a literary one.

One contextual aspect of these poets' work that it is important to consider is the nature of their initial recording and production. Chaucer would routinely submit 'rough drafts' of his poetry for scribes to write up into manuscript form.⁸ A consequence of this was that certain scribes could make the decision to alter his texts based on personal opinion.⁹ Contrastingly, it is known that Hoccleve intermittently carried out this very task, even scribing one of Chaucer's own works.¹⁰ Scanlon has remarked that, most unusually for a medieval poet, Hoccleve 'left behind a manuscript of much of his work in his own hand'.¹¹ It is therefore much more certain that the texts of Hoccleve that modern readers have access to are the unadulterated work of the poet himself, rather than those of Chaucer. It is crucial to consider whether or not the influence of another's hand truly does undermine the authority of a poem. Chaucer's texts undeniably remain authoritative in their place in English literary history, but Hoccleve's work is the original product of his and only his own mind.

The notion of authority as originality is illuminated through the study of *The House of Fame* and the *Series*. Chaucer probably wrote his poem after returning from a trip to Italy in 1378 and the work is greatly influenced by both the Classical Roman tradition and the poetry of Dante Alighieri. Initially, Chaucer mirrors the description of Juno's Temple penned by Virgil in the *Aeneid*.¹² The frieze, in both Virgil's and Chaucer's works, depicts 'the destruction / of Troye' (ll. 151).¹³ However, whilst Virgil's poem takes a strictly omniscient perspective, Chaucer includes himself as a homodiegetic narrator. In such a position, the poet can marvel not just at the wonders of Classical battle but also the literary legacy of Virgil. Chaucer describes 'moo ymages / of gold...ryche tabernacles...curiouse portreytures...then I saugh ever' (ll. 121-27). Through this luxuriant ekphrasis, Chaucer acknowledges the immense respect that he has for his Classical predecessor and positions himself as a modest character, facing the monumental panorama of his poetic heritage. In the Middle Ages, possessing 'auctoritas' as a poet was tantamount to having divine power and was something towards which Chaucer felt he could merely, and unrealistically, aspire.¹⁴

Comparatively, Ellis has called *The House of Fame* 'the crux of the Chaucer-Dante relationship'.¹⁵ Whilst Dante died only a matter of decades before Chaucer's birth, he became the most significant figure in European literature and, thus, a benchmark against which Chaucer must measure himself. In Chaucer's poem, the narrative persona is guided by an eagle 'that shon with fethres as of gold, / which that so hye gan to sore' (ll. 530-31). This eagle figure is extremely likely to be an acknowledgement of a similar bird in Dante's *Divine Comedy* who guides the earlier poet's narrator around the Christian afterlife. Again, this borrowing is adorned with gilt, gilded feathers, positioning the creature as the original work of a great poet, although Dante is never explicitly named as a source. It could be said that

8 Julia Boffey, 'Manuscript and Print: Books, Readers and Writers' in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. Corinne Saunders (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), pp. 538-55 (p. 549)

9 For a wider discussion of this, see Robert Stuart Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative, 1100-1500* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

10 Richard Firth Green, 'Textual production and textual communities' in *The Cambridge companion to medieval English literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 25-37

11 Ethan Knapp, 'Thomas Hoccleve' in *The Cambridge companion to medieval English literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 191-205 (p. 192).

12 Larry Scanlon, 'Geoffrey Chaucer' in *The Cambridge companion to medieval English literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 165-79

13 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 347-75

N.B. This and subsequent references to the text.

14 R. F. Yeager, 'Books and Authority' in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. Corinne Saunders (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), pp. 51-69 (p. 55)

15 Steve Ellis, 'Chaucer, Dante and Damnation', *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 282-94 (p. 282)

Chaucer is mocking Dante in his portrayal of the eagle. The bird addresses the narrator with, 'now herkene wel, for-why I wille / tellen the a propre skille' (ll. 725-26). Although this statement suggests that the eagle is an informative and reliable source, the bird is later revealed to be verbose and overly concerned with astronomy. Chaucer implicitly criticises the guide as a framing device for Dante's *Divine Comedy* and satirises the poet's extensive musings on planetary movements.

Contrastingly, in the invocation of Book III, Chaucer addresses Apollo and asks to 'kysse' (ll. 1108) his crown of laurels. This differs from Dante's dealings with the same subject matter, in his *Paradiso*; Dante wears the crown, he does not merely kiss it. Here, Chaucer places himself below the Italian poet in terms of achievement. He wishes to stand 'hy on a piler / of yren' (ll. 1465-66) like those canonical poets who have come before him: to 'sore' (ll. 351) as high as even Dante's eagle, an anthropomorphic motif. In this invocation, however, Chaucer once more displays an equivocal relationship with his literary forerunners. He asks for the aid of Apollo because, in his works 'som vers fayle in a sillable'. Rather than asking for the 'futuristic insights' of great classical authors he desires simple metrical assistance, suggesting a dismissal of the true superiority of those such as 'Ovide' (ll. 1487).

He claims 'non other auctour alegge I' though, as has been proven, sources are evident in the work. Additionally, Chaucer uses the device of the omniscient eagle to state: 'thou sittest at another book / tyl fully daswed ys thy look' (ll. 657-58). The narrative persona and, in association, even the poet himself admits that he reads a great deal of literature. The consequence of becoming 'daswed' suggests either that Chaucer is impressed by what he reads or that he is overtaken by the wish to tell the story in his own words. Koff writes that the poet 'sees himself as serving the story he is writing',¹⁶ and not necessarily the authoritative poets from which they might have come. Chaucer uses the interplay between (possibly faux) modesty and (possibly faux) claims of authority throughout the poem. This lends his work a comedic effect, making his courtly audience 'smile a little' and avoid drawing attention to himself as a poet with political incentives.¹⁷ In a time of 'temperamental' and 'vulnerable' monarchs,¹⁸ an explicit expression of anything but modesty could prove the end of a court career.¹⁹

This neutral standpoint is one that Hoccleve aspired towards and is both supported and damaged by his choice of sources and his specific ways of dealing with them. Hoccleve is alleged to have known Chaucer on a personal level and was extremely familiar with his work.²⁰ Taking into account this level of knowledge, alongside a desire to inherit Chaucer's quasi-laureate role, it is no surprise that Hoccleve used Chaucer's poetry as one of his key inspirations. Knapp sees Hoccleve's relationship with Chaucer as 'at times antagonistic' and this complexity is revealed throughout the early parts of the *Series*.²¹

Hoccleve begins 'My compleinte' with a passage remarkably reminiscent of Chaucer's 'General Prologue' from *The Canterbury Tales*. Hoccleve contrasts Chaucer's 'Aprill with his shoures soote' (ll. 1)²² with his own 'broun sesoun of Mihelmesse' (ll. 2).²³

16 Leonard Michael Koff, *Chaucer and the Art of Storytelling* (London: University of California Press, 1988), p. 7

17 Brewer, 'The Relationship of Chaucer', p. 8

18 Strohm, p. 651

19 Glending Olson, 'Geoffrey Chaucer' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 566-89

20 Derek Pearsall, 'The English Chaucerians' in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), pp. 201-40

21 Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, p. 12

22 Geoffrey Chaucer, 'General Prologue' in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 23-37

23 Thomas Hoccleve, 'My compleinte' in *Thomas Hoccleve: My Compleinte and other poems* (London: University of Exeter Press, 2001), pp. 115-30

N.B. This and subsequent references to the text.

Chaucer's tales begin in the spring, associated with youth and new beginnings.²⁴ Hoccleve paints a picture of 'leues' (ll. 3) changed from 'grene...into colour of Ȝelownesse' (ll. 4-5). Chaucer describes his landscape with 'tendre' and 'yonge' (ll. 7) and Hoccleve carries forward the notions of newness and vitality with 'freisshenesse' (ll. 4) and 'freisshly' (ll. 8). However, whilst Chaucer accords these concepts undoubtedly positive connotations, Hoccleve subverts this. 'Freisshenesse' is 'lusty' (ll. 4), fickle, transient, whilst the fresh, new idea had by Chaucer is not fresh at all but a 'remembraunce' (ll. 8). Hoccleve is pessimistic when faced with his own latter years, rather than the 'Aprill' of his youth; he remembers that he will be 'vndirfoote...priste adoun' (ll. 13), just like the dead leaves.

It is arguable that, through his unexpected use of Chaucerian source material, Hoccleve comments on the brief nature of poetic success. He depicts the winter, the death, of Chaucer's famed prologue, drawing attention away from Chaucer's legacy and towards the new literary 'croppes' (ll. 7) such as himself. An alternative explanation is also likely. Hoccleve, by all appearances, idolised Chaucer. He even undertook what Scanlon calls 'canonizing efforts' by requesting that an illustration of the elder poet illuminate Hoccleve's own *Regiment of Princes* manuscript, a text that describes Chaucer as a creative father to Hoccleve.²⁵ Pathetic fallacy was a commonly used convention in the poetry of the Middle Ages.²⁶ By using this convention to meet his own needs but using lexical patterning similar to that of Chaucer, Hoccleve may simply show an admiration of the work of his predecessor. Of course, the explanation always remains that Hoccleve wished to express his appreciation of Chaucer in the hope of ingratiating himself to courtly patrons. It is not possible to detect which is the more pervasive feeling of Hoccleve towards Chaucer: artistic veneration or social envy.

Both Chaucer and Hoccleve appear to have mixed dealings with their sources. A Bloomian might attribute this struggle to the 'anxiety of influence' and the conscious or subconscious misreading of others' work with a view to exist as an independent creator. Morse attributes the extensive use of intertextual influences to a cultural rather than existential phenomenon: the 'shared culture' of Medieval poets, in which authors were free to 'extend, ironize, misunderstand' as much as they wished, merely as a way to 'legitimate' their work.²⁷

Chaucerian works are not the only sources made use of in Hoccleve's 'My compleinte'. Isidore of Seville's *Synonyma* is not just mentioned but plays a large role in the narrative of the poem.²⁸ The narrative persona describes a 'wilde infirmite' (ll. 40) which he has overcome some five years previously. Despite leaving this illness behind, he feels hopeless in discovering that his peers still do not treat him as they once did. It is only once reading of the plight of a similar 'wofull man' that the narrator makes the decision to live his life 'not grucching but...take it in souffrance' (ll. 384). Whilst Hoccleve nods to Chaucer's legacy in stylistic terms, in 'My compleinte' it is the *Synonyma* that actually shapes the plot of the poem. Pearsall has noted that, often, the content of Hoccleve's poems is not particularly reminiscent of Chaucer's work.²⁹

Koff writes that Chaucer 'comes to a book...because he has already assumed there is learning to be had there'.³⁰ This approach to source material is a key departure in the poetry

24 Deanne Williams, 'The Dream Visions', in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Seth Lerer (New York: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 147-79

25 Scanlon, p. 166

26 Daniel Wakelin, 'Hoccleve and Lydgate' in *A Companion to Medieval Poetry*, ed. Corinne Saunders (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), pp. 557-75

27 Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 18

28 Lee Patterson, *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010)

29 See Pearsall, 'The English Chaucerians'

30 Koff, p. 38

of Chaucer and Hoccleve. Whilst Chaucer's narrator reads classical poetry at the very beginning of the text, prompting meditations on the nature of authority, Hoccleve's narrator faces a personal societal crisis and finds a text which changes the course of his thoughts, fairly near the end of the complaint. Chaucer uses his sources as a starting point or a question whilst Hoccleve treats literature as a completion or solution. Meyer-Lee takes an intriguing stance on this matter when he characterises Chaucer as a 'laureate' figure within court and Hoccleve as a 'beggar'. The laureate views poetry as a 'service' whereas the beggar has 'utter dependence' on his work.³¹

This difference between the two poets is exacerbated by the instability of the kings' courts over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The usurpation of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke left a tension in the monarchic structure that left room for very few celebrated poets, for the purposes of mere entertainment. Resultantly, the requirements of the court poet changed drastically with the advent of the Lancastrian court; in place of Chaucer's neutral Ricardian standing, the House of Lancaster required poetry to be a form of flattering propaganda.³² Whether by individual artistic nature or in debt to his Chaucerian roots, Hoccleve was unable to fulfil this role and could not maintain authoritative power. For Chaucer, poetic expression was a job, for Hoccleve it was a desperate grasp for recognition and a luxury.

One of the key reasons for Hoccleve's perpetual mendicant status was his choice of content for his work. In his *Series*, the narrative persona is widely thought to be Hoccleve himself, due to its startlingly modern psychological realism. Certainly, the narrator's friend addresses him as 'Hoccleve' (ll. 4).³³ Chaucer's pastiche of himself as the bookish but ignorant 'Geffrey' (ll. 329) in *The House of Fame* flatters the audience into enjoyment and is probably not representative of the poet himself.³⁴ Conversely, Hoccleve's depiction of his namesake is considered 'the most strenuously autobiographical of early English literature'.³⁵ Chaucer uses the conventional genre of the dream-vision to comment on what can be considered a politically safe topic: that of authority, but in a solely artistic sense.³⁶ Hoccleve chooses to use the form of the complaint, usually 'an empty rhetorical display of conventional feeling', to opine on his personal treatment within the specific context of the Lancastrian court. This treatment is not shown to be a positive experience: 'her heed they caste awry, / whanne I hem mette, as they not me sy' (ll. 77). Knapp has described Hoccleve's work as an 'anomaly' due to its unusual form.³⁷ In a literary environment in which texts were not seen to make complete sense unless situated in a 'familiar scheme', this renders the poet's work inaccessible, to some extent.³⁸

Hoccleve's crucial downfall is his dedication to the truth, to his own personal authority of originality. In 'My compleinte', Hoccleve 'streit unto' his 'mirroure' (ll. 157) to find the faults that he could later attempt to dispel by writing the poem itself. However, he does not anticipate the ever-changing nature of the 'mirroure' that he stands in front of: courtly society and, by dint of this, the entire people of London and England. Medieval thought dictated that facial expressions could display emotions of which even the individual himself

31 Robert J. Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 4

32 Ibid.

33 Thomas Hoccleve, 'A dialoge' in *Thomas Hoccleve: My Compleinte and other poems* (London: University of Exeter Press, 2001), pp. 131-55

34 Piero Boitani, 'Old books brought to life in dreams' in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

35 Patterson, p. 84

36 John Lawlor, 'The earlier poems' in *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature in Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1966), pp. 39-65

37 Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, p. 10

38 Morse, p. 17

was unaware.³⁹ Additionally, Morse writes that literature of the time taught that ‘what is evil is recognizable and repugnant’. When faced with two such forceful and complete premises, anything written by Hoccleve could only serve to reinforce existing public opinion; Hoccleve was a ‘wilde steer’ (ll. 120), far too unpredictable to successfully represent Henry V and the behaviour of others projected this image back onto himself.

The internal settings and interactions of *The House of Fame*, ‘My compleinte’ and ‘A dialoge’ go further towards revealing the crucial differences between Chaucer and Hoccleve, in both senses of their individual authorities. ‘Geffrey’ flies, seeing ‘ryveres, now citees, / now tounes, and now grete trees’ (ll.901-902), whilst ‘Hoccleve’ cogitates from within his personal quarters, considering only as far afield as his workplace or neighbourhood. The dream-vision form accords Chaucer freedom to travel as far afield as he desires in the text; it is a ‘point of departure’ from the everyday.⁴⁰ Chaucer can exploit the genre’s ‘ambiguous potential’ and the way in which it straddles both truth and fiction.⁴¹ By displacing the setting of his work, Chaucer goes even further in clarifying the fictional aspect of his work; this is entertainment and is not intended to express a political intent.

An earth-bound, even London-bound scenario, in Hoccleve’s *Series*, renders the distance between art and truth too small to have such positive courtly reception. Chaucer allows himself to travel with his art but Hoccleve is too preoccupied with the idea that ‘outward display’ must match ‘inner meaning’.⁴² His commitment to veracity proves to be too personal in a society with a preference towards universal values and teachings. Chaucer’s key metatextual problem is the many shifting and temperamental ‘eyen’ (ll. 1379) and ‘tonges’ (ll. 1390) of fame. Hoccleve’s problem is the many downturned eyes of the London ‘prees’ (ll. 73). Whilst Chaucer shows concern over his success as a poet, Hoccleve must fight just to be respected as a man; from the outset, Chaucer has a greater chance at enduring authority.

In ending his poem, Chaucer left *The House of Fame* without the expected conclusion of the dream-vision: the waking of the poet.⁴³ It is unclear as to whether this was an intentional action or a result of abandonment or forgetfulness. ‘A man of gret auctorite’ (ll. 2158) appears and, instantly, the text ends. Who this figure is remains unknown; the state of the poem, void of explanatory sources in this point, leaves the audience to decide the identity of the man and even whether he is of much significance. Lawlor has posited that ‘here is the centre of the narrator’s own labyrinth’.⁴⁴ With such a multitude of literary sources and social obligations, ‘Geffrey’ cannot belong to a single mind. This is what troubles Chaucer.

The form of Hoccleve’s *Series* is an exploration of Hoccleve’s great concerns. In ‘My compleinte’, the poet finally decides to make an attempt towards altering his reputation through his writing. Immediately, ‘A dialoge’ shows his friend advising him against such actions. The *Series* continues with two works that Hoccleve considers will be more pleasing to his potential patron, Humphrey of Gloucester. Through this overarching structure, Hoccleve finally expresses his true frustrations with the fickleness and impenetrability of the poetic career in an original, but not necessarily a popular, manner; he makes a metatextual comment by creating a parallel between ‘the rejection of his company’ within the text and ‘the rejection of his poetry’ outside it.

Both of these poets were original, but they expressed their originality in different ways. Chaucer and Hoccleve extensively appropriated source materials but used them in

39 J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

40 Lawlor, p. 39

41 Steven F. Kruger, ‘Dialogue, debate, and dream vision’ in *The Cambridge companion to medieval English literature, 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 71-83 (p. 78)

42 Strohm, p. 647

43 William Anthony Davenport, *Chaucer: Complaint and Narrative* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer Ltd., 1988)

44 Lawlor, p. 50

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ways that had never been seen before. Hoccleve's poems are undamaged in their transmission from thought to paper, have a significant respect for truth and express an innovative form of individual authority; the concept of the autobiography has perpetuated ever since. Chaucer's work exhibits an extremely early exploration of the postmodern notion of authorship and was written in a style that centuries of poets attempted to replicate. Despite their mutually authoritative originality, Chaucer's innovations were more suited to his court environment, allowing these variations to enter into the mainstream and, resultantly, his work remains canonical.

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