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How Far do Dream Poems or Visions Interrogate and/or Reinforce Ideas of Authority? Discuss in Relation to at Least Three Texts.

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The concept of authority is a broad one, so this essay will focus on specifically poetic authority – that is, the importance given to the poet as a figure of learning, one to whom other poets should aspire and emulate, as well their poetry; this involves discussion of tradition and truth. The anonymous *Wynnere and Wastoure*, Chaucer’s *House of Fame* and Skelton’s *Bowge of Courte* all explore poetic authority, but where the former believes in the authority of poets – and defines what it means to be a poet – the latter two interrogate this idea so that the audience is encouraged to choose their own authorities. A chronological approach shows the way in which poetic authority becomes intertwined with politics and satire and is increasingly challenged between the mid-fourteenth century and the fifteenth century.

The prologue to *Wynnere and Wastoure* discusses poetry in a way which implies its authority – with certain caveats. Before launching into the dream proper, the prologue complains of the contemporary practice whereby patrons no longer ‘here makers of myrthes that matirs couthe fynde’, thereby establishing a wistfulness for the past.[1] This technique is conventional in the Middle Ages, and the poem in fact places itself within the context of a wider tradition. Nor is the prologue in this matter incongruous with the rest of the poem, which is devoted to the debate between Wynnere and Wastoure. Scattergood’s view that the poem’s political concerns are expressed in poetic terms is demonstrated in the way that the poet explicitly connects the making of poetry with aristocratic figures, who are no longer supportive.[2] The complaint then criticises the youth ‘withowtten chyn-wedys’ (l. 24), unable to compose a poem but who can ‘jangle als a jaye and japes telle’ (l. 26). The mockery behind the term ‘chyn-wedys’ develops into the forcefulness produced by the alliteration, conveying the narrator’s resentment. Specifying the lack of facial hair also implies the comparative age of the narrator; wisdom and ability, and consequently experience, correlate to age, and the new generation of ‘poets’ lack these. Instead the latter are good only for entertainment and not substance. Such a view aligns with the idea that certain literature belonging to the Alliterative Revival of the fourteenth century believes in the seriousness of its subject matter; alliterative poetry especially is a form to educate and engage in serious topics.[3] Even if this is incorrect, however, the poet’s direct approach to the contemporary state of poetry undermines the view that the narrator ‘claim[s] no authority for themselves’.[4] Harrington acknowledges this later in his argument, but for him this is an exception within what is otherwise a subdued poem. That it *is* an exception, however, should make it all the more notable, since it suggests a true concern of the poet. The poet’s craft has been effectively replaced with something else – of a specifically performative nature, rather than a focus on language and content – thus undermining the authority which the poet believes should be inherent in these works, as well as undermining the tradition of this.

Authority is further explored through the figure of the king, which seems an obvious statement; once again, however, the poetic and the political are intertwined. The inconclusive end to the poem is of course a notable feature, and this is not helped by the fact that the poem is incomplete, even if only a few lines are missing.[5] That the king avoids making a definitive decision by sending ‘Aythere lede in a lond ther he es loved moste’ (l. 459) can be interpreted either satirically or as an act of good kingship (though the fact that the king ‘lovely lokes’ (l. 456) may suggest the poet’s inclination). On the one hand it may be that the king recognises the need for both, so he is making an astute decision.[6] Alternatively the king is in the role of judge, which comes with the expectation of a firm ruling. The poet appears to avoid a significant preference one way or another, settling the poem comfortably as what Macrobius terms an enigmatic dream; such a dream ‘conceals with strange shapes and veils with ambiguity the true meaning of the information being offered, and requires an interpretation for its understanding.'[7] Not only does it present an ambiguity of meaning, its very status as a dream protects it from any accusations resulting from unfavourable interpretations (a device Skelton will explicitly use in his *Bowge of Courte*).[8] The interpretation itself falls to the audience.[9] What is also striking, however, is the king's stance on disputes. He states early in the poem, 'I holde hym bot a fole that fightis whils flyttynge may helpe' (l. 154). The reading of this depends on its composition – if 1352-3, then the concern over funding wars would colour it – but his advocation of resolving conflict in court rather than in war places an emphasis on language and discourse.[10] Thus the authority of not just the poet, but of language, is affirmed.

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[1] *Wynnere and Wastoure*, in *Wynnere and Wastoure and The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, ed. by Warren Ginsberg (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), l. 20: all further references will be in parentheses in the text.

[2] John Scattergood, ‘*Winner and Waster* and the Mid-Fourteenth-Century Economy’, in *The Lost Tradition: Essays on Middle English Alliterative Poetry* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 73-74, 72.

[3] Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), p. 27.

[4] David V. Harrington, ‘Indeterminacy in *Winner and Waster* and *The Parliament of the Three Ages*’, *The Chaucer Review*, 20:3 (1986), 246-257 (p. 249).

[5] Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*, p. 70; Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival*, p. 3.

[6] Nicolas Jacobs, ‘The Typology of Debate and the Interpretation of *Wynnere and Wastoure*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 36:144 (1985), 481-500 (p. 486).

Conversely, Chaucer's use of his source material displays a questioning of poetic authority, in particular that which is inherited from the classical past. Since the tale of Dido and Aeneas was a familiar one to many in the Middle Ages, a degree of expectation could be assumed – which the poet could then subvert.[11] As in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Chaucer's Aeneas must go to Italy, 'As was hys destinee', emphasising the role of the gods.[12] Yet even as the narrator reads out this narrative, Aeneas's 'destinee' is referenced in the context of a tradition other than Virgil. It is Creusa, his wife whom he 'lovede as hys lyf' (l. 176), who comes to him in ghost form to urge him on. This presents a personal narrative with a humanised hero. Virgil's hero, on the other hand, requires his wife to push his son in front of him before he leaves, reminding him of his duty to his family and to 'Guard your home first!', thereby prompting him to ask the gods for his family's protection.[13] This other tradition is, of course, Ovid, and like Ovid, Chaucer's version of the tale sympathises with Dido. Having been 'betrayed' (l. 294) and left 'unkyndely' (l. 295), Dido laments his falsity, before the narrator goes on to list numerous literary figures who have suffered the same fate. The presence within the poem's historical context of two (contradictory) interpretations for a single tale already suggests that there can be no single authority, but in setting them next to each other, Chaucer draws attention to this fact.[14] This is emphasised still further when the narrator abridges the story and invites the audience to 'Rede Virgile in Eneydos/Or the Epistle of Ovyde' if they want to know more (ll. 388-389). Even as Dido is treated more sympathetically, the fact that both traditions are used suggests the lack of a definitive choice on Chaucer's part, and the narrator in turn extends this to the audience by offering them the choice to explore one or both traditions, should they wish it. Alternatively they can reject these and create their own. In doing so he places the authority of interpretation in the hands of the audience, just as he assumed authority in the interpretation he delivers; at the same time, they choose what authority means.[15] This use of traditions, combined with the act of explicitly drawing the narrative to a premature close, undermines assumptions about literary authority.

Poetic authority is further interrogated by the nature of Fame, who displays no apparent rationale in her decisions; as Geffrey says, 'What her cause was, y nyste' (l. 1543). Such an arbitrary attitude implies that those whose names are remembered achieve this only by chance, and therefore do not hold any inherent authority. In turn this denies the expectation to uphold or conform to any particular tradition, when another could just as easily have survived. Fame's 'fele upstondyng eres/And tonges' (ll. 1389-1390) are reminiscent of the same features in Virgil, where Rumour is 'huge and horrendous'.[16] The ambiguity behind the term 'fame' enables Chaucer to explore its different meanings, so that a distorted perception of the goddess-like figure in her monstrosity can be represented here, while what Virgil and Ovid (the latter of whom appears to be a main source for the House of Rumour) call Rumour is aligned with the concept of tidings.[17] The focus on sound which the eagle introduces is also associated with Fame, undermining her rulings further through the insubstantial material on which they rest. Slander, the trumpet Aeolus blows when Fame refuses her favour, emits a smoke 'blak, bloo, grenyssh, swartish red' (l. 1647); its hideous colours almost literalise the obscurity that will attend the unsuccessful applicants. Conversely, the sound which comes out of Aeolus' second trumpet for the successful is 'As men a pot of bawme helde/Amonge a basket ful of roses' (ll. 1686-1687). Air, insubstantial and intangible, becomes the vehicle for a verdict which lasts forever and which is yet based on the arbitrary nature of its executor. It is also subject to disruption: an otherwise static material is easily broken by Fame and Aeolus, and the former's judgements can be reduced to no more than 'broken air'. Terrell's observation that Fame's capriciousness again puts authority in the hands of the audience – to determine which works are authoritative *to them* – can be seen in the narrator's lack of regard for personal fame, and moves away from this abode to the House of Rumour.[18] As such, Chaucer defies the necessity of adherence to tradition and poetic authority, when it is largely a subjective matter. Simultaneously it frees the poet to write on any given topic, since even treatises on grand themes such as politics (as found in Virgil, for example) will only be remembered if Fame wills it.

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[7] Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. by William Harris Stahl (London: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 90.

[8] Delany, *Skeptical Fideism*, p. 38.

[9] Harrington, 'Indeterminacy', p. 247.

[10] Scattergood, *The Lost Tradition*, p. 83.

[11] Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's* House of Fame*: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 48.

[12] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), l. 188. All further references will be in parentheses in the text.

[13] Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. by Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I. 678.

[14] Jacqueline T. Miller, 'The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *The Chaucer Review*, 17:2 (1982), 95-115 (p. 105).

[15] Katherine H. Terrell, 'Reallocation of Hermeneutic Authority in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *The Chaucer Review*, 31:3 (1997), 279-290 (pp. 279, 284).

[16] Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV.181.

[17] Dorothy Bethurum, 'Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems', *PMLA*, 74:5 (1959), 511-520 (p. 514). See also Ovid, 'The Expedition Against Troy', in *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 275-274 for a description of Rumour's home.

Skelton, the latest of these poets, combines some of the elements found in *Wynnere and Wastoure* and Chaucer, and introduces the question of poetic authority in *The Bowge of Courte* from the beginning. After a first stanza Chaucerian in its astrological references and unseasonal setting (the dream in *The House of Fame* takes place in December), the narrator, complying with convention, invokes the 'great auctoryte/Of poets olde'.[19] Such an opening suggests that Chaucer himself is one of these great poets, an ironic occurrence if so considering Chaucer's own attitudes towards figures of tradition. However, the narrator comments on the ability of such poets to 'cloke [truth] subtylly' (l. 11), admiring the way they are able to veil meaning through language. This is contrasted with the prologue to *Wynnere and Wastoure*, which cites these qualities as a problem of the age; here, however, the narrator reveres these in his predecessors. Yet in the dream itself this begins to be problematised through the figures which the narrator, revealed to be named Drede, encounters. All of these are deceptive, ranging from Favell, the flatterer, to the cloaked Disceyte, 'His hode all pounsed and garded lyke a cage' (l. 508). Thus the technique of concealment transforms into something overtly problematic, becoming literalised in the shape of Disceyte's cloak. That each personification is a vice and also a courtier connects the issues of these with those of the 'poets olde', suggesting little difference between them. Jane Griffiths further notes the repetition of terms previously used positively by Drede to describe the poets – their ability to write 'craftely' and 'subtylly' (ll. 9, 11) – but which are now pejorative. Indeed, when Disceyte speaks, he talks of 'the subtylte and the crafte,/As I shall tell you' (ll.519-520), thereby bringing the poem full circle. Such veiling of truths begs the question of whether there is any truth to be had.[20] It also suggests a problem with the nature of fame if it foregrounds such a troubling tradition. In such blurring of courtly and poetic concerns, the notion of poetic authority is therefore undermined.

As previously mentioned, Skelton takes advantage of the dream vision form in that it allows for self-protection, enabling a reminder – and disclaimer – that the events of the poem are just a dream. It is curious to note that Skelton almost cloaks his poem with the dream in the way the great poets cloaked their own meanings, even if it is a defensive manoeuvre. Then, however, the narrator makes the ambiguous statement that dreams are often found to be true, before challenging the audience, 'Now constrewe ye what is the resydewe' (l. 539). Stanley Fish finds this problematic because 'it offers neither reader nor Dread anything authoritative…the final impression is not of vice condemned or ridiculed, but of vice triumphant', yet there are problems with this.[21] Even if there is no definitive message, the end of the poem is still a powerful one – that the narrator had to jump overboard in order to escape the people charging toward him 'to slee me' (l. 529) is surely a statement in itself. Moreover (and this is the case especially regarding the question of poetic authority), it can be argued that the poem's refusal to offer something authoritative is precisely the point. Instead it offers the chance for the audience to come to their own conclusion, thus putting the authority in their hands. Griffiths posits something similar, where the reader is forced to be active; the relationship between poet and audience changes so that the poet does not have to represent truth, but instead fulfils their role by 'stimulating readers to pursue the truth for themselves.'[22] Indeed, part of the narrator's praise at the beginning of the poem included those who 'of moralyte nobly dyde endyte' (l. 14), suggesting in part the didactic role of the poet, but this unravels in the course of the poem.

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[18] Terrell, 'Hermeneutic Authority', p. 287.

[19] John Skelton, *The Bowge of Courte*, in *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), ll. 8-9; Greg Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). All further references to Skelton's poetry will be in parentheses in the text.

[20] Jane Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 60-61.

[21] Stanley Eugene Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry* (London: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 74.

[22] Griffiths, *Skelton and Poetic Authority*, pp. 64-65.

Rather than relying on the poet, then, Skelton's poem follows Chaucer in advocating the engagement of the reader.

The notion of poetic authority is thus a complex one, but it meets increasing interrogation. *Wynnere and Wastoure*'s belief in the authority of the poet is hampered by what the poem sees as contemporary degeneration. This is a political as well as poetic issue, since the aristocracy no longer offers the support it once did. There is thus a sense in which poetic authority is twofold: it is inherently worthy of recognition; and that same recognition enforces its power. The king's ruling reflects Macrobius' enigmatic dream; the ambiguity of both leads to the necessity of interpretation. Conversely, Chaucer's approach to authority is irreverent. His use of classical writers such as Virgil and Ovid suggest respect for them, but his placing side by side such alternative traditions opens up tradition as a whole. His hasty conclusion to the narrative of Aeneas and Dido reflects impatience; instead he directs his audience towards the sources and gives them the choice to choose: one, both or even neither. His portrayal of Fame as arbitrary further undermines the weight given to the classical tradition, since the implication is that they are only considered great by chance. Again this gives the audience agency in choice, while Fame's judgements are as insubstantial as disrupted air. Finally there is Skelton, whose poem demonstrates an initial respect for poets of subtlety, but which is gradually problematised. Courtly insincerity is linked to deceptive concealment on the poet's part so that any notion of an objective truth is questioned. The poem's ambiguous conclusion leaves the audience with an instruction to devise the meaning, overtly refusing to offer something definitive itself. Where *Wynnere and Wastoure* laments the days of respect for the poet, therefore, the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries see a distrust of poetic authority; instead they open it so that authority becomes more subjective.

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