



## The importance of 'sound' and 'hearing' in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The House of Fame*, William Dunbar's *The Golden Targe*, the anonymous *Pearl*, and James Stewart's *The Kingis Quair*.

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### Introduction

Recent scholarship on the senses has demonstrated that the reconstruction of a period's sensorium - a 'sensory model of conscious and unconscious associations that functions in society',<sup>1</sup> is particularly useful for understanding the Middle Ages, as the 'theoretical and practical involvement with the senses played a central role in the development of ideology and cultural practice in this period.'<sup>2</sup> So, if the senses are a useful analytical framework for understanding medieval culture, so too are they useful for understanding medieval literature and particular genres of medieval literature, like dream-vision poetry, which were increasingly interested in the 'human sensorium and psyche.'<sup>3</sup>

Much attention has been paid to the visual and optical features of dream-vision poetry, partly because in the medieval hierarchy of the senses, sight was considered to be the most spiritual, because it is the only sense that involves 'no material contact with its object'<sup>4</sup> (as hearing was thought to be 'based on the changes induced by sound-waves')<sup>5</sup> and so sight gives the least satisfaction to bodily desires. As Aquinas remarks, the 'sense of sight' is 'more spiritual and subtle than any other sense.'<sup>6</sup> However, a long tradition of scholarship - 'produced by philologists, musicologists, and historians'<sup>7</sup> has demonstrated the variety of ways in which the intellectual perspectives of Classical Greek authors, on 'sound' and 'hearing', has influenced medieval literature, from the twelfth through to the fourteenth centuries.

In this essay, I will argue that 'sound' and 'hearing' are important components of dream-vision poetry, and that classical thought concerning sound and auditory perception, offered medieval writers a 'rich ground for poetic metaphor.'<sup>8</sup> The analysis will focus on four dream-vision poems: Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame*, William Dunbar's *The Golden Targe*, the anonymous *Pearl* and James Stewart's *The Kingis Quair*. Chaucer and Dunbar, are influenced by Aristotelian and Boethian theology, both of which suggest that sound is 'violent'. In the *House of Fame*, violent sound is used as a medium to explore the violent and competitive nature of literary authority and the mutability of earthly renown. In the *Golden Targe*, violent sound is used a structural connective between the dream report and the dream reflection, but is also used to explore the nature of literary authority, as the 'violent noise' transports the narrator from one plane of conflict to another: the violent battle between Reason and Love, becomes the competitive struggle between Dunbar and his contemporaries. The *Pearl* poet is also influenced by the Boethian theology, particularly Boethius's assertion that sound moves in a spherical and circular fashion. *Pearl* is structured in a circular manner, which mimics the movement of Boethian sound, perhaps because the *Pearl* poet is drawing a comparison between the Boethian movement of sound and the narrator's spiritual trajectory - which results in a transformation of character. The same could also be said of narrator in the *Kingis Quair*, who, as he moves upwards through the spheres, becomes a more socially integrated individual. In order to prove that sound and hearing are important components of dream-vision poetry, closer analysis is required.

<sup>1</sup> Richard G. Newhauser, 'Introduction', *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages*, ed. by R.G. Newhauser (London, Bloomsbury, 2014), p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Newhauser, p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Newhauser, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> A.C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love Narratives*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.5.

<sup>5</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce W. Holsinger, *Music, Body, and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001), p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Burnett, 'Perceiving Sound in the Middle Ages', in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. By. Mark M. Smith (Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2004), p.80.

David Bevington asserts that the *House of Fame*, 'has been shown to contain a considerable amount of learning on a widely varying array of topics'<sup>9</sup> including 'a facetious lecture on sound waves and the celestial regions.'<sup>10</sup> John E. Wells suggests that these heterogeneous elements, like the 'lecture on sound waves', indicate that the poet 'had no very clear design.'<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, I would argue that Chaucer's exposition of the theory of sound is an important component of a larger thematic structure in the *House of Fame*: Chaucer uses 'sound' as a medium to explore the nature of literary authority, and the mutability of earthly renown. For example, in Book II, Chaucer describes 'sound' as air 'ybroke':

'Soun ys noght but eyr ybroke;  
[...]  
Ryght soo soun ys air ybroke  
[...]  
The air ys twyst with violence'<sup>12</sup>

Here, Chaucer is demonstrating an awareness of and a comfortability with Aristotelian and Boethian philosophy. Aristotle's theory of sound, dictates that sound is produced when 'two potentially sonorous bodies strike each other...and air is expelled violently from between them.'<sup>13</sup> Boethius describes sound as being like a 'stone dropped into a pond', as the air, when struck, 'causes a sound and in turn strikes the air next to it as it sounds, and this strikes the next piece of air and so on.'<sup>14</sup> Both theories accentuate the violent relationship between air and sound, which correlates with Chaucer's description of sound, as being 'eyr ybroke'. Essentially, Chaucer is using Aristotle's *De Anima* and Boethius's *De Institutione Musica* to 'figure musical sonority as primordially violent.'<sup>15</sup> I would argue that Chaucer manipulates Boethian and Aristotelian philosophy, to render sound 'violent', because he is drawing a comparison between sound and the nature of literary authority. In the *House of Fame*, sounds are in constant competition with one another to achieve renown, as are Chaucer and his contemporaries and as Chaucer notes in Book I, different competing narratives, like Virgil and Ovid's *Heroides*:

'Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos,  
Rede Virgile in Eneydos  
Or the Epistle of Ovyde'<sup>16</sup>

So, the violent and competitive nature of 'sound', mirrors the competitive and potentially aggressive process by which authors assert their literary authority. The violent relationship between air and sound, also mirrors the uneasy relationship that Chaucer and his contemporaries have with their literary predecessors, as they struggle to define the 'relationship between the status of their own individual authorial positions and the authorizing principles of their art.'<sup>17</sup> So, the 'facetious lecture on sound waves' is not pointless, but develops Chaucer's poetic argument, that the process of achieving literary authority is violent, competitive and oppressive.

Chaucer also uses sound to demonstrate the futility of this violent and competitive process, by developing a kind of auditory momentum that reaches a crescendo in Book III, but is abruptly ended by an anticlimactic silence. This argument works in alignment with A.C. Spearing's suggestion that we should read the *House of Fame*, as a kind of 'mock oraculum', which sets forth the 'meaningless of earthly renown, and leads the reader up to the non-delivery of doctrinal truth by...a man of great auctirite.'<sup>18</sup> In Book II, the Eagle engages Geoffrey in a theological discussion on the properties of 'speche', 'noyse', and 'soun', which anticipates the overwhelmingly noisy atmosphere of Book III, which, as Spearing notes verges on hysterical.<sup>19</sup> When Geoffrey enters the House of Fame, he is met by the

<sup>9</sup> David M. Bevington, 'The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Speculum*, 36:2 (1961), (pp. 288-298), p.288.

<sup>10</sup> Bevington, p.288.

<sup>11</sup> John E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1400* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1916), p.659.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame, The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., ed by. Larry D. Benson, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987), p.357, lines 765-775.

<sup>13</sup> Burnett, p.73.

<sup>14</sup> Burnett, p.75.

<sup>15</sup> Holsinger, p.262.

<sup>16</sup> Chaucer, p.352, lines 377-379.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline T. Miller, 'The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's "House of Fame"', *The Chaucer Review*, 17:2, (1982), (pp. 95-115), p.95.

<sup>18</sup> A. C., Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), p.82.

<sup>19</sup> Spearing, *Dream-Poetry*, p.82.

sounds of a 'harpe', which 'sowned bothe wel and sharpe'<sup>20</sup>, and a set of instruments that 'maken blody soun'.<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on the 'warlike' and 'savage'<sup>22</sup> quality of the instrumental sounds, reiterates Chaucer's Boethian assertion that sounds, like literary texts, are in violent competition with one another. But the cacophony of different noises also develops an auditory momentum, which reaches a crescendo, when Geoffrey arrives at the House of Rumour. Initially, Geoffrey hears a great 'noyse' that he likens to the roar of a stone being released from a catapult.<sup>23</sup> Then, he hears another 'gret noyse' 'in a corner of the halle',<sup>24</sup> and for a moment it seems as if the 'man of great aucotirite' will speak a 'doctrinal truth' (the moment of the crescendo), but instead the reader is met with silence, and a non-delivery of doctrinal truth. This 'silence' emphasises the meaninglessness and mutability of earthly renown, as all 'sound' and 'speche' travels to the House of Fame, an unfair, and arbitrary place, where renown is not allocated meritocratically. So, 'sound' is integral to Chaucer's poetic argument: fame and renown are mutable.

William Dunbar also explores the Aristotelian and Boethian notion of 'violent sound', in his dream-vision poem *The Golden Targe*:

'Thai fyrit gunnis with powder violent...  
The rochis all resownyt wyth the rak,  
For rede it semyt that the raynbow brak.  
[...]  
And as I did awake of my sweving.'<sup>25</sup>

The narrator describes how, when the gun is fired, a 'noisy blast' (rak)<sup>26</sup> echoes (resonyt)<sup>27</sup> around the cliffs (rochis)<sup>28</sup>, and how this noise causes the rainbow (raynbow)<sup>29</sup> to crack. The violent noise brings the narrator 'to his feet, and with great relief, he wakes from his nightmare.'<sup>30</sup> So, Dunbar uses 'sound' (and hearing) as a reawakening device and as a structural connective between the dream report and the dream reflection. It is interesting however, that Dunbar's description of sound is so proximate to Chaucer's. Chaucer describes how sound is 'air ys twyst with violence' and likens sound to several different weapons and Dunbar's description of sound is also violent, and associated with weaponry:

'Thai fyrit gunnis with powder violent...  
The rochis all resownyt wyth the rak,'<sup>31</sup>

I would argue that Dunbar is (perhaps in a Chaucerian style) also using 'violent' sound to explore the nature of literary authority. The violent sound, that the narrator hears, allows him to awake from his nightmarish battle with reason and love, and instead contemplate the nature of poetry and his relationship with his literary predecessors. Spearing suggests that the 'noisy blast' allows the narrator to retreat 'from the pain of love to the comforting artifice of literature.'<sup>32</sup> I would dissuade from Spearing's suggestion that, for Dunbar, the artifice of literature is 'comforting', rather the violent sound has transported the narrator from one scene of violence; the battle between reason and love, to another (albeit subtler) scene of conflict; the battle for literary authority. Whilst the language Dunbar uses is not violent ('O reverend Chaucere, rose of rehtoris/O morall Gower, and Ludgate laureate')<sup>33</sup> he is questioning how he fits into the literary tradition with Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate:

<sup>20</sup> Chaucer, p.362, lines 1201-1202.

<sup>21</sup> Chaucer, p.363, lines 1239-1240.

<sup>22</sup> MED, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=byte&byte=17938311&egdisplay=open&egs=17945544>

<sup>23</sup> Marian Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006), p.13.

<sup>24</sup> Chaucer, p.373, lines 2141-2142.

<sup>25</sup> William Dunbar, 'The Golden Targe', in *William Dunbar: Poems*, ed. by James Kinsley (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1958), p.32, lines 235-244.

<sup>26</sup> Dictionary of Old Scots, Scottish Language Dictionaries, (University of Glasgow)

[http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/rak\\_v\\_2](http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/rak_v_2) [Accessed 12/05/17].

<sup>27</sup> DSL, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/resoun>.

<sup>28</sup> DSL, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/roche>.

<sup>29</sup> DSL, <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/rainbow>.

<sup>30</sup> Spearing, *Voyeur*, p.245.

<sup>31</sup> Dunbar, p.32, lines 237-238.

<sup>32</sup> Spearing, *Dream-Poetry*, p.197.

<sup>33</sup> Dunbar, p.32, lines 253 and 262

'Thou lytill quair, be evir obedient,  
Humble, subject, and symple of entent  
Before the face of eviry connyng wicht.<sup>34</sup>

As R. J. Lyall suggests, Dunbar is also questioning his relationship with other contemporary poets, like Gavin Douglas. Indeed, Lyall reads the *The Golden Targe* as an 'intelligent critical response to *The Palice*',<sup>35</sup> and suggests that the two poets to some degree at least, had a 'partly competitive, partly collaborative'<sup>36</sup> relationship with one another. So, in *The Golden Targe*, violent noise changes the narrators focus from one violent scene to another: he moves away from debating the violent relationship between reason and love and instead contemplates a subtler and arguably more personal conflict, 'how he fits into the literary tradition'<sup>37</sup> with authors like Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower (and also local contemporaries, like Gavin Douglas), and also, how is he able to navigate the relationship between the status of his own individual authorial position 'before the face of eviry connyng wicht.'

In *Pearl*, stanzas relate to each other in a 'precisely controlled pattern of interdependence.'<sup>38</sup> The stanzas are arranged into groups of five, and each stanza within the group 'ends in a refrain which is echoed in the first line of the following stanza, which produces the effect of concatenation.'<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the first line of each stanza group also echoes the concatenating words of the preceding section.<sup>40</sup> For example, the word 'spote' is inherited from the last line of the preceding stanza:

Of that pryvy perle withouten spot.  
Sythen in that spote hit fro me sprange.<sup>41</sup>

Structurally then, *Pearl* is an 'interlacement of circles'.<sup>42</sup> As 'the largest circle is the whole poem' (the first line of the poem, 'Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye', concatenates with the last line, 'And precious perles unto His pay')<sup>43</sup> and the 'smallest circles are the individual stanzas.'<sup>44</sup> In many ways, this mimics the movement of Boethian sound: 'just as circular waves are caused by a stone dropped into a pound, so the air when struck causes a sound and in turn strikes the air next to it as it sounds'.<sup>45</sup> So, sound is propagated from its point of origin in 'a circular (or spherical: rotundas) wave of ever increasing diameter.'<sup>46</sup> Perhaps, the *Pearl* poet has used Boethian sound patterns as a guideline to structure the poem because, for Boethius, the 'ideal purpose of...sounds that embody cosmic harmony'<sup>47</sup> is to move the soul towards a 'radical transformation in character'.<sup>48</sup> By moving the *Pearl* poem in a circular fashion, that mimics the spherical and harmonious sound movements Boethius describes, *Pearl's* narrator comes closer to a 'radical transformation in character' and a more harmonious understanding of his grief. Indeed, by the end of the poem, the narrator is not entirely rehabilitated, but his concerns have moved from the personal to the spiritual,<sup>49</sup> as he is no longer mourning his earthly, material pearl, but what the pearl is symbolic of: his 'place in heaven'<sup>50</sup> and the community of the elect. So, it could be said

<sup>34</sup> Dunbar, p.33, lines 271-273

<sup>35</sup> R. J. Lyall, 'The Stylistic Relationship between Dunbar and Douglas', in *William Dunbar, "The Nobill Poyet": Essays in Honour of Priscilla Bawcutt*, ed. by Sally Mapstone (East Linton, Tuckwell Press, 2001), p.71

<sup>36</sup> Lyall, p.70

<sup>37</sup> Denton Fox, 'Dunbar's The Golden Targe', *English Literary History*, 26:3, (1959), (pp.311-334), p.312.

<sup>38</sup> *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978), p.34.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew and Waldron, p.34.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew and Waldron, p.34.

<sup>41</sup> 'Pearl', in *Cleanness, Patience Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, ed. by A. C. Cawley (London, J.M. Dent, 1962), p.3, lines 11-14.

<sup>42</sup> Russell A. Peck, 'Number as a Cosmic Language' in *Essays in the Numerical Criticism of Medieval Literature*, ed. by Caroline D Eckhardt, (London, Associated University Presses, 1980), p.49.

<sup>43</sup> *Pearl*, lines 1 and 1212.

<sup>44</sup> Peck, p.49.

<sup>45</sup> Burnett, p.75.

<sup>46</sup> Burnett, p.75.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Blackwood, *The Consolation of Boethius as Poetic Liturgy*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), p.12.

<sup>48</sup> Blackwood, p.12.

<sup>49</sup> J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of Form*, (Columbus, Ohio University Press, 1970), p.161.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, p.160-161.

that the *Pearl* poet is drawing a comparison between the Boethian movement of sound and the narrator's spiritual trajectory.

The notion that a narrator's personal trajectory aligns with the movement of Boethian sound is also applicable to James Stewart's *Kingis Quair*. After the narrator falls into a kind of trance like state he awakens and ascends up through the spheres:

'Ascednign upward ay fro spere to spere,  
[...]  
Till that I come unto the circle clere'<sup>51</sup>

Many writers have already noted that these spheres are representative of the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe.<sup>52</sup> But the emphasis on the circularity of the 'spere's' is also reminiscent of the Boethian movement of sound. Especially as the narrator's ascension through the circular spheres and his meetings 'with Venus, Minerva and fortune', 'increases the independence and authority of his subject position and his identity as a socially integrated individual and even a ruler of others'.<sup>53</sup> So, it could be said, that James Stewart is not only drawing on his understanding of the Ptolemaic universe, but (like the *Pearl* poet) also on his understanding of Boethian sound as being an inherently circular force, that 'moves the soul towards a 'radical transformation in character' – or in the *Kingis Quair*, a 'socially integrated individual' instructed in the importance of virtue and reason.<sup>54</sup>

So, sound and hearing are important components of dream-vision poetry, and classical thought concerning sound and auditory perception, like Aristotle's *De Anima* and Boethius's *De Institutione Musica*, offered medieval writers like Chaucer, Dunbar, Stewart, and the *Pearl* poet a 'rich ground for poetic metaphor'.<sup>55</sup> Chaucer and Dunbar seem especially influenced by Aristotle's and Boethius's assertion that sound is a violent force, that is expelled when two sonorous bodies strike each other. In the *House of Fame* Chaucer uses 'violent sound' as a medium to explore the competitive and oppressive nature of literary authority and the mutability of earthly renown. The same could be said for Dunbar, who also uses 'violent sound' to explore the nature of literary authority. The violent 'rak' connects the dream report and the dream reflection, and also moves the narrator between two scenes of conflict: the conflict between reason and love, and the conflict between the poet and the authorizing principles of his art. Whereas the *Pearl* poet seems interested in the Boethian assertion that sound moves in spherical waves. This may be because, for Boethius, spherical sound moves us towards 'transformations in character'. So, the *Pearl* poet may be making a comparison between the Boethian movement of sound and the narrator's spiritual journey, as by the end of the poem, his funereal grief at having lost his pearl has transformed into a kind of spiritual grief. This is also evident in James Stewart's the *Kingis Quair*, as the narrator moves up through the circular spheres (which move in the same way that Boethian sound moves), he comes closer to becoming a socially integrated individual. So, despite the Christian emphasis on the primacy of sight, sound and hearing, and classical thought on sound and hearing, offered medieval writers a fertile site for poetic exploration.

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<sup>51</sup> James, Stewart, *The Kingis Quair*, ed. by Matthew P. McDiarmid (London, Heinemann, 1973), p.92, lines 526-528.

<sup>52</sup> *The Kingis Quair*, notes for lines 526-528, p.126.

<sup>53</sup> Joanna Martin, *Kingship and Love in Scottish Poetry, 1424–1540*, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2008), p.24.

<sup>54</sup> Martin, p.27.

<sup>55</sup> Burnett, p.80.

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