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Representing *Gothic*: Description of a Gothic Edifice
in Geoffrey Chaucer's "House of Fame"

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Representing *Gothic*: Description of a Gothic Edifice
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How have "Gothic" edifices been represented in words and images? I would like to explore this question with respect to a description by Geoffrey Chaucer of the 'House of Fame' as a Gothic edifice in his short dream vision "The House of Fame." Chaucer in his description expresses 'affect' and wonder concerning the House of Fame and its elaborate architectural elements that comprise a 'formalist' description of a Gothic structure. A close analysis of the House of Fame has been explored and well documented as a Gothic edifice by J.A.W. Bennett in Chaucer's 'Book of Fame:' An Exposition of 'The House of Fame,' who suggested the now destroyed chapel of Saint Stephen in Westminster. It was later treated by Mary Flowers Braswell in her article, "Architectural Portraiture in Chaucer's *House of Fame*" that appeared in the The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies who proposed the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris and subsequently by Laura Kendrick's "Chaucer's House of Fame and the French Palais de Justice" in Studies in the Age of Chaucer. These studies demonstrate the influence of contemporary Gothic architecture on the description of the House of Fame.

Mary Carruthers theories and work in mnemonic memory concerning the recollection and description of images lends itself readily to the description in the "House of Fame." Specifically in her article "The Poet as Master Builder: Composition and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" in New Literary History, she argues buildings of the imagination in literature employ a 'master builder trope' involving mnemonic technique. Carruthers dismisses Chaucer's architectural description as insubstantial and vague not playing a particular role in the story that follows; rather they serve a specific mnemonic purpose as "agent images." However, Chaucer's description of the House of Fame is more than merely a 'vague literary description' of an architectural edifice.

This paper proposes to approach the representation of the House of Fame with a close re-reading and a synthesis of previous historiography and literary theory in an attempt to address the problem of representation and 'story-telling' within the description of the Gothic edifice. How does Chaucer tell the story of "Gothic," how does he represent a Gothic image? Regardless of the precedent and source for Chaucer's description of the House of Fame, the important feature of the image is the representation of the Gothic edifice in words, which requires elaborate metaphors and capturing the Gothic structure as a mnemonic image. I would like to specifically engage how Chaucer works to describe and represent Gothic architecture in words. I will argue that the failure of language and a common literary trope known as the 'inexpressibility topos' figure prominently in Chaucer's description; that Chaucer posits himself into the 'role of the interlocutor' to give the architectural edifice meaning and ultimately presents an invitation for interpretation.

"The House of Fame" is a dream vision poem written in octosyllabic couplets by Geoffrey Chaucer sometime around 1379-1380.[1] Within the poem are three architectural descriptions of considerable length, of the Temple of Venus, the House of Fame, and the

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[1] Larry Dean Benson, The Riverside Chaucer: 3rd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988) 347.

House of Rumor. The description concerning the House of Fame best illustrates the verbal representation of Gothic architecture.

Several scholars have expounded upon the depiction of the House of Fame. J.A.W. Bennett in Chaucer's Book of Fame devotes a chapter concerning the Palace of Fame or House of Fame and the literary and visual antecedents of the description. Bennett asserts that the structure and design of the House of Fame was modeled not after Classical architecture, but rather more like a Gothic cathedral with extensive use of stained glass. Bennett seizes upon some of the imagery in the "House of Fame," among others, the phrase 'Ymad of glas,' which describes the exterior appearance of the Temple of Venus as way of referencing stained glass windows that were used in abundance on Gothic cathedrals.[2] The verbal representation is referring to the 'window-walls that the new perpendicular style [Gothic] made possible,' and he offers the example of the (now destroyed) chapel of Saint Stephen at Westminster.[3] Concerning the many statues that abide in the habitacles of the façade in the House of Fame Bennett states, "for their plastic representation we need seek for no closer analogue than the biblical or royal figures inhabiting many a Gothic porch or buttress or west front, from Strassburg to Wells."[4] The imagery in the poem is of striking depictions that speak the language of Gothic architecture. Bennett goes on however to expound on the poem's architectural antecedents which he asserts are largely literary that include among others Ovid's description of the House of Fame in the Metamorphoses.[5]

Mary Flowers Braswell takes up Chaucer's description of the House of Fame in her article "Architectural Portraiture in Chaucer's *House of Fame*." Her argument states:

> [The architectural depictions] are generally considered to be "born of the marvelous in dream poetry," entirely tropological, influenced by the works of Ovid and Virgil, or purely "fantastic." However, a systematic comparison of the architecture in Chaucer's poem with the contemporary art forms with which the poet would have been familiar seems to reveal Chaucer's stubborn adherence to material reality. Despite the fact that much medieval art has been destroyed and exact prototypes cannot always be found, enough remains to demonstrate that, detail for detail, the architecture in this poem could and did exist, not in a single design, but in parts of many structures.[6]

Braswell investigates records concerning Chaucer's life and notes that Chaucer held the position of Clerk of the King's Works. That "he supervised various architectural projects including the Palace of Westminster, the Tower of London, and the no longer extant

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[2] Here Bennett is speaking concerning the Temple of Venus, however the same language of Gothic architecture in the Temple of Venus appears as well as the House of Fame, notably the image of stained glass. In the description of the House of Fame it is more explicit, "ful eke of wyndowes" (l. 1191) quotation from: Benson, Larry Dean. The Riverside Chaucer: 3rd Edition. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.

[3] A. J. Minnis, Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 191.

[4] J. A. W. Bennett, Chaucer's 'Book of Fame:' An Exposition of 'the House of Fame.' (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 135.

[5] For Ovid's description of the House of Fame see the Metamorphoses Book XII (l. 40-63) in: Ovid and Frank Justus Miller, Metamorphoses: Books IX-XV Loeb Classical Library 43. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

[6] Mary Flowers Braswell, "Architectural Portraiture in Chaucer's *House of Fame*" The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 11.1 (1981): 101-102.

Chapel of St. George at Windsor."[7] Chaucer, according to Braswell was no novice at architecture, but rather something like what we perhaps today would call an architect.

Braswell examines Chaucer's description for realistic detail of which there is plenty in the House of Fame. "The "pynacles, / Ymageries and tabernacles" indicate the Gothic style. In addition, the House of Fame has 'babewynnes,' gargoyles, which decorate the building, and numerous windows, like "flakes…in grete snowes," which recall the individual glass snowflake pattern in the rose window or the oculi of medieval cathedrals."[8] Braswell notes that the buildings in the "House of Fame" have been understood as imaginary. However, her conclusions illustrate 'Chaucer's stubborn adherence to material reality.'

> It is from the stuff of life itself that Chaucer's art will be made. And it is from commonplace realities – habitacles, carpenter's tools, reliquaries, and birdcages – that his architectural description is created. His technical language is that really spoken by craftsmen, and his structures are the things which actually did exist. In effect, this poem has been his apprenticeship in realism. Chaucer will not use these technical terms again; nor, except in passing, will he refer to architecture in his later works.[9]

Laura Kendrick's study on the House of Fame focuses on Chaucer's life records and the French *Palais de Justice*. She notes that in the Spring of 1377, Chaucer was in Paris and must have seen the *Palais de Justice* on the *Île de la Cité*, during business for the king. She gives a description and reading of the House of Fame and corresponds details to the Great Hall of the *Palais de Justice*. Kendrick states:

> Fame's palace does not not, of course, correspond in every detail to the French Palais. It imitates and exaggerates only the most famous of the Palais's features, especially the pillars and statues of the Great Hall….it seems clear that Chaucer's Hall of Fame is an imitation of the Great Hall of the French Palais de Justice….Parts of *The House of Fame*, his literary monument, are modeled on his experience of viewing a contemporary monument of stone, the French Palais de Justice, with its famous royal chapel, Sainte Chapelle….[10]

Laura Kendrick concedes that the House of Fame is essentially imaginary architecture. The search for a specific source or inspiration in Chaucer's description however tempting or compelling is ultimately only a presumption. What is of tremendous importance in the House of Fame is that it speaks the language of Gothic architecture.

Chaucer's description of the House of Fame involves specific mnemonic techniques.[11] Mary Carruthers argues for a 'master builder trope' in the consideration of

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[7] Ibid. 102.

[8] Ibid. 106.

[9] Ibid. 112.

[10] Laura Kendrick, "Chaucer's House of Fame and the French Palais De Justice" Studies in the Age of Chaucer 6 (1984): 128, 129.

[11] It is important to make some distinctions concerning the operations of the human memory. Mary Carruthers lays out some important elementary definitions in her article "The Poet as Master Builder: Compositional and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" on pages 881, 882. Two important points to be made include: 1.) "Human memory operates in signs, images that call up material which is not immediately present to one. So all memories are images.

'buildings of the imagination as machines for making encyclopedic fictions,' she uses as one of her examples Geoffrey Chaucer's description of the House of Fame. The 'master builder trope' is employed in the House of Fame. Chaucer has the 'plans' for the House of Fame stored as a mnemonic device.

> [M]ajor buildings were expected to be made…first as mental locations, previsualized as schematized images in the manner of rhetorical invention, of which the actual stone and wood edifice is the "imitation," just as the poet's words 'clothe" the substantive composition of his mind. The mental picture or scheme *precedes* its actualization…. They are inventories, strictly speaking, for in them and by their aid one is enabled to invent – whether a poem, a prayer, a painting, or a building.[12]

Chaucer's 'House of Fame' is a mnemonic image, a mental image that *precedes* the written description within "The House of Fame." Chaucer's description is 'the idea of Gothic,' it is not an actual structure but embodies the elements that make up the phenomenon known as "Gothic" with its various architectural elements.

Carruthers notes that the figures that occupy the architectural niches of the House of Fame, like a late Gothic façade serve a mnemonic function as "agent images." The architectural ekphrasis "serves to organize a list of names – as it does in the case of Dante's display of the best products of human thought in the Elysium canto of the *Inferno*."[13] Carruthers makes an important point concerning the value of the lists.

> In neither of Chaucer's poems…do the figures named play any particular role in the stories that follow. They can mean nothing unless the reader wishes to make something of them – perhaps, in remembering these stories and the matter of these famous works, to keep them reverberating as a potential set of comparisons and contrasts to the rest of the work…. Readers who will not remember what they have read previously in the poem and who bring no inventory of *dicta et facta memorabilia* to it cannot use it: for [to] them it is like a blank wall without a gate. These structures, in other words, are not informative. They are *inventional*, both in the sense of putting away and in the sense of discovering things.[14]

Then there is the distinction in remembering something between its exact reproduction and its reconstruction or "translation" in memory. The former, what we now call rote memorization, was called in Latin *memoria verborum* or *verbatim* and was always thought to be *by itself* an ability of minor cognitive value. The latter, reconstructive memory, was called *memoria rerum* or *sententialiter* and is fundamental to understanding human learning. The phrase is best translated into English as "remembering the substance" – it should be left as open ended as that." 2.) "A locational memory system is any scheme that establishes a set of ordered clearly articulated, and readily recoverable background locations into which memory "images" are consciously placed. These images, often called *agent images* for they are "active," function like the icons of a computer program in that they set in motion a task, the associative procedures of recollection…. The power of this elementary technique is that it provides immediate access to whatever piece of stored material one may want, and it also provides the means to construct any number of cross referencing, associational links among the elements in such schemes. It provides one with a random access memory as well as schematics or templates upon which to construct any number of additional collations and concordances of material."

[12] Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Composition and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" New Literary History 24.4 (1993): 900.

[13] Ibid. 886.

[14] Ibid. 887.

The structures in the House of Fame do not tell a story, but rather invite a story and require 'story-telling' for meaning. It is this 'story-telling' aspect of the description of the House of Fame that is the important feature in the representation of the Gothic edifice.

Can a building speak? Does architecture have a communicative function? The obvious answer would be no, that a building could physically speak would be quite silly. However, architecture, even imaginary, is created in time and has essential meaning as defined by Mieczyslaw Wallis, in terms of 'semantic enclaves.' It is these 'semantic enclaves' that 'communicate' ideas through conventional and iconic signs. Wallis describes the 'conventional signs' versus 'iconic signs' in terms of these 'semantic enclaves.' Although primarily concerning paintings, the same ideas can perhaps be applied to architecture. These enclaves are 'autonomous entities within those paintings in which they occur and they have a different semantic structure and speak a different 'language.' If we the viewer are to properly interpret the iconic signs that occur in a painting we need a certain knowledge of visible objects and we must be familiar with artistic conventions current in a given culture and in a given epoch.'[15] We the viewer, and indeed the contemporaneous viewer need to be equipped with the system of conventional signs.[16] Whether a painting or architecture, memory and essential meaning is deposited in terms of these semantic enclaves. Architecture and memory are closely linked. Daniel Libeskind expounded on the capacity of architecture in a series of lectures concerning monument and memory.

> Everyone expects books, music and painting to have deep reflections about memory, but architecture seems not to have these same aspirations. Yet architecture, I think, is fundamentally a communicative art that should tell a story.... [An] issue that we have inherited from modernist thought is that one should dispense with emotion in architecture and approach it as if it were made by someone without a heart or soul. But buildings are flesh. They are transformations of inert materials – stone, concrete, glass – into something living. And in that sense, they speak a language, both communicative and silent. This is the realm that I'd like to share with you. I am a great believer that space is not just a universal continuum projected by an abstract mind, but it is actually something more like a person, a physiognomy, a soul, a spiritual entity given a particular locale…. I'm a believer that architecture does have a communicative function, that stone can talk.[17]

It seems that architecture can speak if we are to believe Libeskind. Architecture if not 'inscribed' with memory, is certainly a reflection in time. That humans make buildings means that they are created with emotions. They then of themselves become something

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[15] Richard Brilliant, "The Bayeux Tapestry: A Stripped Narrative for Their Eyes and Ears" Word and Image 7 (1991): 98-126.

[16] Concerning signs, St. Augustine of Hippo defines signs as something that shows itself to the senses and something other than itself to the mind. When speaking concerning 'conventional signs' he notes, "Data vero signa sunt quae sibi quaeque viventia invicem dant ad demonstrandos quantum possunt motus animi sui, vel sensa aut intellecta quaelibet" (Conventional signs, on the other hand, are those which living beings mutually exchange in order to show, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts.) See: William McAllen Green, De Doctrina Christiana Libri Quattuor. (Vienna: Vindobonae, Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1963) 34.

[17] Daniel Libeskind, et al., Monument and Memory: September 27, 2002: The Columbia Seminar on Art in Society (New York: Department of Art History and Archaeology Columbia University, 2003) 11, 42-43.

'living' and certainly speak a language, as Libeskind notes, both communicative and silent. It is these 'semantic enclaves' that are bound up within architecture, creating monument *and* memory. This is especially true of the commemorative monument. The commemorative monument as such is a dedicated marker for memory. One of the functions of Chaucer's House of Fame is as a commemorative monument. Chaucer notes in his poem:

> Ful the castel, al aboute –
> Of alle maner of mynstralles
> And gestiours that tellen tales
> Both of wepinge and of game,
> Of al that longeth unto Fame. (l. 1196-1200)[18]

All on the outside fully about the castle, all manner of minstrals and gestours, who tell tales both of sorrow and of joy, of all the matters that belong to Fame.[19] Chaucer's "House of Fame" is in part a poem that celebrates textual literary authority and the *auctores*. Chaucer has a tremendous amount of source material from the *auctores* from which he draws inspiration for elements within his poem. As noted by Larry Dean Benson, "Chaucer exhibits a remarkable range of reading, as he alludes to and adapts Virgil and Ovid, other classical and medieval Latin authors, the Bible, Boethius and the French love poets. His trip to the heavens in Book II places his vision in comic contrast with the classics of visionary literature, for he implicitly compares himself with earlier celestial travelers whose journeys are described by among others, St. Paul, the author of the book of Revelation, Martianus Capella, Boethius, and Alanus de Insulis."[20] That Chaucer's Gothic edifice in one respect functions as a cenotaph means that it runs the risk of the life of a memorial monument. The monument has the ability to lose its meaning or become irrelevant as the spectator no longer ascribes the same meaning to the edifice.[21] This is not unlike the names inscribed on the House of Fame, those in the sun melt from the heat, while those in the shade are preserved. Chaucer has to 'cast' these semantic enclaves into his memory.

      How then does the story-telling function of the building work? How does the narrative work? Narrative is defined by two important elements: the presence of a story and a storyteller.[22] Images like statues have the propensity to expand the imagination of the audience. What is needed is an *interlocutor* to bridge the gap between image and narrative, between the story or stories and the viewer. The images invite story-telling and there is an 'invitation for interpretation' from the point of the expanded imagination of the audience to an interlocutor who then proceeds with showing and telling of a narrative, creating narrative and moving beyond description. The visual imagery: statues, stained

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[18] All quotes and line numbers from Geoffrey Chaucer's "The House of Fame" and "The Book of Duchess" appear subsequently in parentheses and are taken from the following source: Benson, Larry Dean. The Riverside Chaucer: 3rd Edition. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1988.

[19] The translation is from: Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Compositional and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" New Literary History 24.4 (1993): 886.

[20] Larry Dean Benson, The Riverside Chaucer:3rd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988) 347, 348.

[21] Daniel Libeskind, et al., Monument and Memory: September 27, 2002: The Columbia Seminar on Art in Society (New York: Department of Art History and Archaeology Columbia University, 2003) 9.

[22] Richard Brilliant, Visual Narratives: Story-Telling in Etruscan and Roman Art (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) 16. See also: Scholes, R., and R. Kellogg. The Nature of Narrative. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1966.

glass, etc., invite a story, they *do not* tell a story unless the observer fills the role of the storyteller. As Richard Brilliant notes:

> In considering visual narratives, wherein causally and temporally interconnected images are expressed through the medium of the figured arts, the storyteller does not appear unless the observer fills that role. The real world is always present either as objects, existing physically in space and light, or as representations, often in elaborate detail of those images and settings that convey the story. Thus, visual narratives have to generate a point of view from the outside and somehow make it comprehensible to the viewer.[23]

The problem arises as to whether or not descriptions of visual narratives are in fact narratives that can tell a story or are they merely descriptions. Richard Brilliant addresses this problem:

> This emphasis on descriptive detail characterizes visual narratives in ancient art and trouble those literary critics who distinguish between narratives, which are stories about events, and description. For them, "description…is a static representation of persons, things, situations, backgrounds of events" that stops the progress of a plot. But paintings and relief sculptures, as works of art, have their own syntax, not only because they may appear whole and at [one] but because their abundant descriptive content has been deliberately selected by the artist *from* reality, even if that reality is an imagined creature or a mythological episode and requires some act of interpretation by the viewer. Visual imagery in the context of an artwork has its own coding/decoding requirements.[24]

Chaucer's description of the House of Fame describes not the events themselves, or the stories told but the wonderful representation thereof, implementing ekphrasitic technique. In addition to ekphrastic technique, Chaucer seizes upon the opportunity to reference a material object. This is evident in his description of the mythological poets in the habitacles of the House of Fame or even the stained glass of the *Romance of the Rose* in his description of a Gothic wall in his short poem "The Book of Duchess."[25] His

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[23] Richard Brilliant, <u>Visual Narratives: Story-Telling in Etruscan and Roman Art</u> (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) 16.

[24] Ibid. 17.

[25] This opportunity to reference a material object, imaginary or otherwise is seized upon in other ekphrastic poems; notably in Baudri de Bourgueil's poem *Adelae Comitissae* lines 207-578 that comprise an important poetic description of a tapestry recounting William Duke of Normandy's triumph over Harold in the Battle of Hastings. As Richard Brilliant states: "In Baudri's poem, the narrative imagery of the tapestry in Countess Adele's bedroom represents a reduction of the historical account as well as a translation of medium from text to image. His poetic conceit also represents the reversal of that process, that is, the poet's extensive retranslation of the tapestry's images into the slow-developing language of court poetry. Thus, the poem consciously offers to the reader or the listener the spoken narrative of a visual narrative, as if Baudri's voice accompanied a leisurely passage along the richly embroidered tapestry, interpreting its images, reading aloud the inscriptions, and narrating expansively the great history manifested therein.

> *In short, the brilliance and beauty of the tapestry was so great*
> *You might say they excelled the splendour of Phoebus.*
> *Moreover, you could reckon by reading the script of the titles*
> *That the new and true stories are contained in the hanging.*

description of a Gothic wall is closely tied to storytelling and the communicative function of architecture.

Chaucer in an interior chamber in his "Book of Duchess" describes a stained glass embellishment that typifies many Gothic walls, and in doing so highlights the function of memory and story-telling that are closely linked as well as the buildings ability to speak.

> And sooth to seyn, my chamber was
> Ful wel depeynted, and with glas
> Were al the wyndowes wel yglased,
> Ful clere and nat an hole ycrased,
> That to behold hyt was great joye,
> For hooly al the story of Troye
> Was in the glasynge ywroght thus,
> Of Ector and of kyng Priamus,
> Of Achilles and Lamedon,
> And eke of Medea and of Jason,
> Of Paris, Eleyne, and of Lavyne.
> And alle the walles with colours fine
> Were peynted, bothe text and glose,
> Of al the Romanuce of the Rose. (l. 321-334)

Importantly this description of a Gothic wall describes 'affect' and wonder. The visual narrative was impressive in addition to the wall and building. His whole '*chambre'* was *'ful wel depeynted'* and impressive. Chaucer remarks that '*to beholde hyt was gret joye.'* The viewing of the stained glass window was a pleasurable experience. There are two pictures comprising a visual narrative. One of an Iliac frieze the other a strip narrative of the *Romance of the Rose, 'bothe text and glose.'* Here we see a subordination of visual narrative to a written text, in this case the *Romance of the Rose*.[26] This is a type of reverse ekphrasis, however, to us the reader they constitute ekphrasis and constitute a description rather than being informative. The images are *inventional* as noted by Mary Carruthers.[27] However, importantly to Chaucer they *are* informative. The storyteller does not appear unless the observer fills that role. Chaucer is filling that role of the observer and of the interlocutor. He is pointing out the Gothic wall and saying how marvelous it is to behold. 'Look here is the whole of the *Romance of the Rose*, both text and gloss.' Chaucer is positing himself in the role of the interlocutor and is exhorting an invitation for interpretation, remarking that the images and the Gothic edifice can speak

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To tell his story as effectively as possible, the poet enhanced his work by reference to a material object, another work, however imaginary it might have been, because the visual record provided a material and familiar form of evidence that confirmed the truth of this poetic statement." See: Richard Brilliant, "The Bayeux Tapestry: A Stripped Narrative for Their Eyes and Ears" Word and Image 7 (1991): 104.

[26] Mary Carruthers notes, "It is worth remarking here that stained-glass windows, when technology made them possible in abundance, were thought to be a form of mural painting." See: Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Compostitional and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" New Literary History 24.4 (1993): 886, 901. Carruthers cites Rudolph quoting Theophilus, *De Diversis Artibus*, II (Preface), where the two forms of picturing on walls, in paint and in glass, "are equated conceptually." See also: Conrad Rudolph, Artistic Change at St-Denis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 67 and 106 n. 10.

[27] Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Compostitional and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" New Literary History 24.4 (1993): 887.

and tell stories if one is equipped to hear them or the reader wishes to make something of them.

Does Chaucer's Gothic edifice 'speak?' Does the House of Fame tell stories? Chaucer gives the answer to this question. 'All on the outside fully about the castle, all manner of minstrals and gestours, who *tell tales* both of sorrow and joy….' Chaucer himself acknowledges and informs the reader that the statuary inhabiting the niches '*tell tales*.' He launches into a long catalog of secular, biblical, and mythological poets who inhabit habitacles in the House of Fame.

A close re-reading of Chaucer's depiction of the House of Fame will address the problem of representation and 'story-telling' within the description. The representation is of substantial length and is found in the third part of "The House of Fame" in lines 1148-1304. Geoffrey Chaucer addresses the problem of representation of Gothic in the House of Fame by positing himself into the 'role of the interlocutor.' He places himself as the intermediary between the building and the reader to allow the building to 'speak' through a dialogue and narrative. Chaucer's description has several important elements that work to 'tell the story of Gothic.' He initially has 'affect' and wonder in relation to the Gothic edifice. Chaucer struggles for words to describe, but ultimately resigns with a literary trope, 'the inexpressibility topos.' There is a failure of language in relation to what needs to be experienced or one's experience that needs to be articulated. Chaucer does however succeed in creating a parallel with his reaction with respect to the astonishment felt with love. Chaucer then moves to compulsive looking, there is an irresistible impulse to categorize and describe the House of Fame. Chaucer shifts to a formal description, he uses the nomenclature of Gothic architecture, describing elements within the House of Fame that are also found in Gothic cathedrals. Chaucer urges the reader to see that the building 'has a story to tell' through the 'interlocutor' who if equipped to decipher can interpret the architectural and sculptural programs. Chaucer points to the edifice, '*Ful the castel, al aboute – / Of alle maner of mynstralles / And gestiours that tellen tales*' (l. 1196-98). In effect he is saying "look here," and works to create connective tissues in 'story-telling' and sharing knowledge. Ultimately, Chaucer urges and 'invitation for interpretation.' This is more than architectural ekphrasis, Chaucer's description of the House of Fame works to illustrate how the phenomenon of Gothic is represented.[28]

Chaucer begins with a look at the names on the side of the House of Fame some of which are in the sun that are "molte awey with hete." (l. 1149) and those in the shade being preserved. Interestingly he opens with "Thoo gan I in myn herte caste," (l.1148) implying that Chaucer is inscribing the House of Fame into his memory. Chaucer's persona in the "House of Fame" (also named 'Geffrey') has physical movement in that he walks up the hill to the House of Fame.

> Thoo gan I up the hil to goon,
> And fond upon the cop a woon,
> That al the men that ben on lyve
> Ne han the kunnynge to descrive

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[28] In sharp contrast to other ekphrastic depictions in narrative, notably the description of the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (l. 763-779, 785-806), wherein there is an absence of the problem of representation and 'story-telling.' Instead there is just a formalist description minus any 'affect' or inability to cope with the subject, and an 'invitation for interpretation.' See: Casey Finch, The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 242-245.

> The beaute of that ylke place,
> Ne coude casten no compace
> Swich another for to make,
> That might of beaute ben hys make,
> Ne so wonderlych ywrought;
> That hit astonyeth yit my thought,
> And maketh al my wyt to swynke,
> On this castel to bethynke,
> So that the grete craft, beaute,
> The cast, the curiosite
> Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
> My wit ne may not suffise. (l. 1165-1180)

The narrator is unpacking several ideas and motifs in his initial experience of engaging the House of Fame. In lines 1165-1166, he relates a somatic experience. It expresses and details his movement. Upon seeing the House of Fame he has a 'pre-scholarly' response, namely 'affect' and wonder. '*The beaute of that ylke place*' is not able to be reproduced, it has no equal '*That might of beaute ben hys make, / Ne so wonderlych ywrought.*' The wonder causes all of his '*wyt to swynke*,' it requires all his mental faculty '*So that the grete craft, beaute, / The cast, the curiosite / Ne kan I not to yow devyse / My wit may not suffice.*' He is unable to express the tremendous beauty and wonder. 'Geffrey's' 'affect' is best expressed in lines 1174 and 1175 which J. A. W. Bennett pointed out parallels in language to Chaucer's poem devoted to the celebration of love, "The Parliament of Foules."

> It is 'so wonderlich ywrought That hit astonieth *yit* my thought' (1173-4) – precisely the expression used in the *Parliament* to convey his awe of that god of Love who 'my feling Astonieth with his wonderful worching' (*PF*, 4-5). The astonishment is of a piece with the wonder voiced at the very outset of the poem (2 ff.); and the similarity of his amazement in the *Parliament* before the *craft* of love to that here expressed at the building's *craft* (1177)…[29]

Interestingly Chaucer uses the same language of love to describe the craft, beauty, and '*curiosite*' or Middle English for intricate skillful workmanship of the House of Fame.

Chaucer also employs figures of speech and slippage of meaning in relation to the Palace of Fame, ultimately declaring a failure of language.

> That al the men that ben on lyve
> Ne han the kunnynge to descrive
> -----------------------------
> Ne kan I not to yow devyse;
> My wit ne may not suffise. (l. 1167-68, 1179-80)

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[29] J. A. W. Bennett, Chaucer's 'Book of Fame:' An Exposition of 'the House of Fame' (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 133.

Chaucer employs a common literary trope known as the 'inexpressibility topos.' Ernst
Curtius describes the 'inexpressibility topos' as the "emphasis upon inability to cope with
the subject," and notes that it is often used when one can "find no words" with which to
fitly praise."[30] Chaucer has an inability to cope with the subject of the Gothic edifice.
The rendering of an architectural work into words is impossible, because it loses
something along the way. Architecture is a somatic encounter and it needs to be
experienced. Nevertheless, Chaucer manages to equate his 'affect' and wonder by using
the same language he uses for his poem of love.

  Following Chaucer's 'pre-scholarly' response he begins 'naming names,'
describing and cataloging the building into a formalist description following compulsive
looking and capturing the House of Fame as a mnemonic image.

> But natheless al the substance
> I have yit in my remembrance;
> For whi me thoughte, be Seynt Gyle,
> Al was of ston of beryle,
> Bothe the castel and the tour,
> And eke the halle and every bour,
> Wythouten peces or joynynges.
> But many subtil compassinges,
> Babewynnes and pynacles,
> Ymageries and tabernacles
> I say; and ful eke of wyndowes
> As flakes falle in grete snowes.
> And eke in ech of the pynacles
> Weren sundry habitacles,
> In which stoden, al withoute –
> Ful the castel, al aboute –
> Of alle maner of mynstralles
> And gestiours that tellen tales
> Both of wepinge and of game,
> Of al that longeth unto Fame. (l. 1181-1200)

Chaucer uses the nomenclature of Gothic architecture in his 'telling the story' of Gothic.
His language is technical as has been pointed out by Mary Flowers Braswell. Chaucer
describes gargoyles, and pinnacles, various imagery and niches for statues and figures.
The structure is full of stained glass windows, the Gothic style having allowed for
"window walls" that Chaucer describes as having images and narratives. Although this is
essentially an imaginary work, Chaucer engages it as though it is real from the 'role of
the interlocutor.' There is a 'conversation' between the reader and the 'narrator.' His
description is a narrative, cataloging and naming various elements.

  The imagery of statues is similar to a late Gothic façade, and like the façade there
is an image overload. Chaucer devotes eighty lines of verse to the catalog list of statues,
in effect giving a 'poetical image overload.'

> Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe,
> That sowned bothe wel and sharpe,

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[30] Ernst Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 159.

> Orpheus ful craftely,
> And on his side, faste by,
> Sat the harper Orion,
> And Eacides Chiron,
> And other harpers many oon,
> And the Bret Glascurion;
> And smale harpers with her gleës…
> -----------------------------
> What shuld I make lenger tale
> Of alle the pepil y ther say,
> Fro hennes into domes day?
> Whan I had al this folk beholde,
> And fond me lous and nought yholde,
> And eft imused longe while
> Upon these walles of berile,
> That shone ful lighter than a glas (l. 1201-09; 1282-89)

The list goes on, but importantly the narrator 'hears' the statues 'speak' to him and play their music. '*Ther herde I pleyen on an harpe.*' 'Geffrey' is equipped with the ability to interpret the sculptural program. Mary Carruthers is correct in that these structures act as mnemonic devices and are *inventional* "in the sense of putting away and in the sense of discovering things; however, she is incorrect in that the structures are not informative. They are indeed meaningless *unless* one is equipped to interpret them. Chaucer's narrator 'Geffrey' does in fact approach the sculptural program with the necessary prerequisites to interpret them as he mentions. 'Whan I had al this folk beholde, / And eft *imused* longe while….' Chaucer gazes on the sculptural program and takes it in and considers and interprets it for a while.[31] Importantly it encompasses a wide spectrum, with Chaucer positing himself into the 'role of the interlocutor,' to Chaucer's reaction and response of 'affect' and wonder with figures speech and a failure of language to accurately capture the experience architecture; to a description of architectural elements and compulsive looking to categorization; and ultimately creating connective tissues with explaining and 'telling-stories.'

Sir John Summerson in his essay "Heavenly Mansions: An Interpretation of Gothic" describes an interpretation of Gothic in terms of *aedicules*. *Aedicule* is a term that derives from the Latin word for a building, an *aedes*, and the word for a little building that had a symbolic or ceremonial function.[32] Summerson describes how the aedicule was incorporated in temple architecture.

> …the aedicule became interwoven with temple architecture, so that the full-scale order is laced or counter-pointed with diminutive architecture of purely ceremonial significance. So long as the aedicule is used as a setting for statues its use approximates to its original function as a shrine – a function which it preserved…right through the Middle Ages.[33]

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[31] The Middle English word 'imused' has a dual meaning of 'gaze' as well as 'consider' implying deliberately careful thought and reflection. See: Davis, Norman, et al. A Chaucer Glossary. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1979. As well as: Benson, Larry Dean. A Glossarial Concordance to the Riverside Chaucer. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1993.

[32] John Summerson, Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998) 3.

[33] Ibid. 5.

Summerson uses the aedicule and traces through the shift of architecture from Romanesque to Gothic. He notes that the development of thin walled structures and a satisfactory vaulting system "is something resulting from a profound desire to dissolve the heavy prose of building into religious poetry; a desire to transform the heavy man-made temple into a multiple, imponderable pile of heavenly mansions."[34] For Summerson, the aedicule goes a long way towards the understanding of the Gothic phenomenon. The aedicule is in essence a shrine, and Gothic cathedral architecture is a multiplication of shrines.[35] Chaucer's aedicules and habitacles function in a similar way as in a Gothic cathedral, albeit with a dramatically different effect. Chaucer's aedicules do not house the saints or the Virgin Mary or other Christian cult sculpture. The House of Fame is not a cathedral; it is not a multiplication of Christian shrines. The aedicules in the House of Fame house the *auctores*, they are filled with secular or mythological storytellers. His Gothic edifice has a multiplication of shrines to storytellers; they are containers within containers, mansions within mansions, they are stories *within* the story.

Carruthers notes on the 'master builder trope' or 'architecture trope' that "[f]rom the beginning of Christianity, the architecture trope is associated with invention in the sense of "discovery," as well as in the sense of "inventory."[36] Chaucer's use of the trope is inventional, unless one can interpret the signs or one can hear the statuaries' song, hear them 'speak,' then it functions as 'discovery.' The sense of discovery can be said to work in a way Carruthers had not intended, as an 'invitation for interpretation.' Chaucer's imaginary architecture, his dream-vision of the House of Fame, is like the plotting of Cluny in Gunzo's dream that dealt with the rebuilding of the Church at Cluny.[37] Chaucer's building is made only as a mental location, previsualized as an image in the manner of rhetorical invention. The mental image precedes its actualization. In the case of the House of Fame there is no actual stone or wood edifice that is the imitation. Chaucer's mental picture is used to create imaginary architecture, and invents not a building but the idea and story behind the building in the form of a poem. Chaucer's rhetorical invention posits him as a "master-builder" of imaginary architecture. The Gothic edifice he creates lets the phenomenon of Gothic 'speak' through a master poet and a master storyteller.

In conclusion, the House of Fame is clearly an architectural work in the Gothic style; the literary historiography of J. A. W. Bennett, Mary Flowers Braswell, and Laura Kendrick take great pains to make this point. However, ultimately this Gothic edifice is a work of the imagination. This is made clearer even in the form of the poem, a dream vision; it is an illusion of the dreamer. This certainly echoes with Gothic architecture that

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[34] Ibid. 9.

[35] Ibid. 18.

[36] Mary Carruthers, The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 17.

[37] Carruthers recounts the Gunzo story: "Gunzo like Ezekiel, was struck down by a grave stroke-like paralysis, (Ezekiel was struck dumb, remember), when Saints Peter, Paul, and Stephen all appeared to him in a vision and told him to carry a message to Hugh to rebuild and enlarge the church at Cluny – his miraculous recovery would be proof of the truth of his vision. When Gunzo protested, Saint Peter "was seen by Gunzo to draw out measuring ropes [*funiculos*] and measure of the length and breadth (of the church). He also showed him in what manner the church was to be built, instructing him to commit both its dimensions and design securely to memory." Having recovered, Gunzo went to Hugh, who ordered the new church be built exactly according to the vision which Gunzo recounted to him "in order in which these things were told or shown to the monk."" See: Mary Carruthers, "The Poet as Master Builder: Compositional and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages" New Literary History 24.4 (1993): 899-900.

is in itself illusionary architecture with light supporting walls and extensive stained glass. Mary Carruthers studies of memory lend themselves to the House of Fame. Chaucer captures the building as a mnemonic image, '*But natheless al the substance / I have yit in my remembrance.*' (l. 1181-2) Chaucer's description employs the 'master builder trope,' yet is more than architectural ekphrasis. Chaucer goes beyond description in attempting to relate the idea of Gothic. There is a synthesis of formalist description and mnemonic imagery with 'story-telling' and representation through the 'role of the interlocutor.' Chaucer's ekphrasis creates an 'invitation for interpretation' letting the phenomenon of Gothic 'speak' through the narrator for those who have ears to listen.

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