



*Fearing Fame from Antiquity  
to the Middle Ages*

Gillian Adler



EXPLORATION



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[ EXPLORATION ]

*Fame is a bee.  
It has a song—  
It has a sting—  
Ah, too, it has a wing.*

**Emily Dickinson**

Admission into the 'Hall of Fame' signifies, as Shakespeare promises his beloved, the passage into an enduring temporality closely resembling eternity. The true celebrity lives on in minds and conversations after death, granting him a longer life than the mortal body would ever allow. His reputation, Shakespeare writes in sonnet 55, 'shall still find room / Even in the eyes of all posterity / That wear this world out to the ending doom'. Centuries later, Keats makes a similar connection between his poetry and fame. Studying the temporal stillness of a Grecian Urn at the British Museum, he acknowledges the inherent capacity of the object to withstand change while insinuating the immortalizing power of his verse: 'When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain'. Time passes; fame preserves.

In verses many centuries before Keats's or Shakespeare's, in fact dating back to antiquity, the appeal of a life that exceeds corporeal limits and a name that triumphs over finitude culminates in the personification of fame as a messenger trusted to carry one's reputation across time and space. The great poets, the *auctores*, were often conflated with this personification. In the fourth century BC, Alexander the Great, upon visiting the supposed tomb of Achilles in Troy, complained that only the most skillful versifier would be able to make his own fame outdo that of the Greek warrior.<sup>1</sup> The poet, he implies, is responsible for constructing the continuing identity of the politician or warrior, turning him into a hero. Fame is, in this context, both the earthly good that a poet like Homer bestows upon a subject like Achilles and the poet himself.

[1] Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, *The Loeb Classical Library*, Vol. 7 (London: Heinemann and New York: Putnam's Sons, 1919).



John Keats, *Drawing rendered of an engraving of the Sosibios Vase*, c. 1819



The Netherlandish tapestry of the *Triumph of Fame* (1502-4) thus illustrates the central personification of Fame in the intimate company of writers including Dares and Virgil, expressing the age-old connection between the author (*auctor*) and authority (*auctoritas*)—the authority, in this instance, to control the fates of heroes. The tapestry offers a Christian view of Fame, symbolized by her *globus cruciger* (the cross-bearing orb), usually held by Christ, and represents her justly in a possible allusion to the literary *Triumph* of Petrarch in the fourteenth century, which demonstrates how a triumph can prolong a lifetime otherwise concluded by death. In a similar vein, the tapestry allegorically enlivens death by the three Fates (*Clotho*, *Lachesis*, and *Atropos*), but places them beneath the victorious foot of Fame—Fame, ‘who saves man from the tomb, and gives him life’ [‘che trae l’uom del sepolcro e ’n vita il serba’], according to Petrarch.<sup>2</sup>

Like her blind and two-faced relative Fortune, however, Fame has always also *deceived* those who pursue her. She can bring infamy and disgrace as amply as renown and glory. The tradition of *pittura infamante* in fifteenth-century Italy reflects an iconographical interest in not the famous, but rather the defamed; these *pittura humiliata* thieves and fraudulent characters by illustrating them in an upside-down position or in close proximity to ignoble animals to indicate the legal status of *infamia*, and place them in contrast to the morally superior *uomini famosi* and *illustri*.<sup>3</sup> Such pictures must have reminded viewers of Achilles dragging the body of Hector when he takes revenge for the murder of Patroclus, marring the Trojan prince’s reputation with amortifying image, or of the infamous traitors in Dante’s Cocytus submerged in icy waters beneath layers of ice.



The Triumph of Fame, 1502-4

[2] Petrarca, *Triumph*, ed. Marco Ariani (Milan: Mursia, 1988). For the translation, see *The Triumphs of Petrarch*, trans. Ernest Hatch Wilkins (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 73.

[3] See Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr., *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

These vivid representations evoke the double-sidedness of fame in ancient and medieval literature, here inspiring dread rather than desire. The point is made persuasively by Lady Philosophy in the *Consolatio philosophiae* as she teaches Boethius that fame is one of the transient and fickle goods of Fortune, who 'crushes with unbearable grief those whom she leaves when they least expect it.'<sup>4</sup> Because fame is a temporal triumph, Fortune ends it as quickly as she distributes it. Translating the *Consolatio* into Middle English in the early 1380s, Chaucer certainly engages with Boethius's objections to the pursuit of earthly glory. However, his sense that the cruelty of fame lies in this ephemeral quality also derives from Virgil's *Aeneid*. In both the *Aeneid* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, for those who do not aspire to celebrity, the phenomenon of fame is terrifying: intrusive, unwanted, and seemingly inescapable. Virgil's *Fama*, a monstrous, winged female creature broadcasts gossip over vast expanses of space during flight through cities. Her rolling tongue and persistent flight often intimidate her victims into physical hiding. Chaucer's characters also feel safer in spaces concealed from the limelight; the phantom of Virgilian *Fama* in the story provokes Criseyde's eremitic search for shelter to protect her reputation from ruin. Timidly beginning her tragic love affair with Troilus, Criseyde is profoundly aware that words can fly, transporting a single ill tidings across Troy. She has heard of the women in love whose publicity marred their names within the historical record, and her harrowing sense that Fame will destroy her, as well, leads her to manage her spaces carefully, to burrow in small and amiable rooms averting the public gaze, and even Troilus's lovelorn stare. Criseyde's spatial anxiety ultimately foreshadows rather than counteracts the spatial transformations of Books 4 and 5, when history intrudes upon the private rooms of romance, reducing her to a pawn in wartime strategy and casting her into exile. She is, in the end, unable to control where her name flies and what version of

[4] Boethius, *Theological tractates: The Consolation of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), Book 2, Prose 1.

it roves about the ears of Troy. Criseyde's navigation of spaces in the early books of the narrative thus invites sympathy and helps to exonerate her within a set of Troy texts that blame her for breaking her promise to return to Troy after she is exiled from the city. Reading Criseyde's retreats in light of ambivalent views of fame, in Virgil and the Classical tradition, illuminates Chaucer's efforts to re-route her path toward failure and to highlight her good intention in the face of slander.

The ancient works Chaucer inherited—and some which he reasonably did not read due to their brief disappearance into 'archives' unknown to the poet—reveal the complex underpinnings of *Fama* and other less daunting bird-like modes of communication. In *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Homer repeats the enigmatic yet formulaic phrase 'winged words' (*epea pteroenta*) to qualify the birdlike manner in which a character speaks—as hasty, spontaneous, free, swift, or effusive. In Emily Wilson's 2018 translation of *The Odyssey*, when Peisistratus thinks of his dead brother, his eyes full of tears, he speaks passionately and unprompted with 'words like wings.'<sup>5</sup> (Wilson retains the phrase, while Alexander Pope's eighteenth-century translation of *The Odyssey* into heroic couplets ignores it). The goddess Athena delivers an encouraging speech to Telemachus 'with words that flew like birds', while later, when she converses with Odysseus, 'her words were light as feathers.'<sup>6</sup> Such moments of heightened and unrestrained emotion give a word physical form and the power to fly from the mouth.

[5] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: WW Norton, 2018), Book 4, l. 189.

[6] Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 2, l. 269; Book 13, l. 291.



The Orpheus Fresco from the Palace of Nestor, Pylos, 1400-1200 BCE

[7] See also John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 33-62. As Peters writes, 'the Gospels celebrate gifts given without care for reimbursement and depict *agapē* as occurring in relationships of impossible recompense,' p. 61.

[8] Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 9, ll. 95-6.

Homer's materialization of the utterance suggests that oral speech is animating, inspiring words to move and scatter about, to hover and potentially change form as they travel through space. Human speech fails to hold in the same way, to stay a fluttering concretization, in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the human spoken word is only ever temporal, becoming and then ending, always usurped by silence. Only God can eternize language, which may explain why Jesus in the synoptic Gospels, when he delivers the Parable of the Sower, advocates the dissemination of the story to a broader public by telling his audience, 'Whoever has ears, let them hear', without fear of his message being misinterpreted (Matthew 13:9). Jesus recognizes that the Gospel teachings will remain the same even if the responses to it vary, just as, in the parable, the soils upon which the farmer's seed falls are diverse, some fecund and others barren. Augustine, of course, properly distinguishes between the human word he analyzes and the incarnate Word, Jesus, *the logos*, which transcends the acoustic and visual manifestation of language during temporal experience. The flow of communication expressed by the parable, which exemplifies Christian love (*agapē*) and generosity,<sup>7</sup> is not unlike the course of communication in the ancient imagination. Homer's discourse of 'winged words' turns a whole poem into a concentrated flock of flying utterances or a bird—such as the one accompanying the seated lyre performer in this fresco from the Palace of Nestor at Pylos—which takes flight and seeks refuge in the ears of listeners, so that the message can be passed on.

The phrase 'winged words' charmingly visualizes the thoughts of one person reaching another through a material and enduring form, which suits the eloquence of the speaker. Nevertheless, the ancient Greeks also expressed reservations about flighty language. Odysseus's boasting and jeering after he blinds the Cyclops causes his own crew to plead with him to stop: 'Calm down! Why are you being so insistent and taunting this wild man?''<sup>8</sup>



His mockery in this episode hardly resembles bird-like speech. The essayist Plutarch, in *De garrulitate*, *On Talkativeness*, darkens the expression of 'winged words' more overtly by reproaching the individual who refuses to control his speech. A man who frees a bird from his hand, he says, does not easily catch it again, just as, when a man speaks, his tongue can never recover his words. Tempering the risk, Plutarch warns those prone to loquacity to remember that Nature 'has given us two ears, though but one tongue', and urges them to cure their 'willful deafness'.<sup>9</sup>



Bernardo Strozzi, *A Personification of Fame*, 1635-36

This paradox of oral communication calls attention to the problem in which 'fame' is connected to the Latin verb *fari*, 'to speak'; to become famous is to be talked about, and it creates the risk that loquacious tongues spread fictions they are too weak or impertinent to retrieve. The ambivalence about moving, protean speech is expressed throughout the Western tradition in a number of forms. In an allegorical painting of Fame, the Genoese painter Bernardo Strozzi represents a girl holding two conical instruments with bores through which air travels to create sounds heralding the famous, possibly evoking the two trumpets, representing gossip and truth, conventionally found in Mannerist illustrations of fame. Her wings and luminous visage give her the look of an angel, rather than a force of evil, evoking the kind of fame desired by the poet, who scrupulously articulates words for as many ears as possible. The angel is based on the Greek term *angelos*, or messenger, because of its pure and perfect ability to communicate, uninhibited by corporeality; in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the angels talk and talk, and when the archangel Raphael 'speeds and through the vast ethereal sky / Sails between worlds and worlds with steady wing', the other angels regard him as the chosen communicator, 'For on some message high they guessed him bound'.<sup>10</sup> The word of God, who has sent Raphael to Eden as a divine intermediary, remains unaffected by the temporality of earthly language, just as the parables of Jesus preserve their truth and fixity in spite of those who receive and interpret them in sundry manners.

The desirable sort of fame, and the body of truthful words that accompanies it, contrasts with the *Fama* invented by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. This horrific allegorical figuration expresses the danger of gossip, a supernatural phenomenon eluding the control of human speakers. She even eludes definition, embodying fame, but also scandal, news, reputation, memory, and rumor. Partbird, she is swift-footed and tall enough that her head is hidden in the clouds while her feet tread on the ground.

[9] Plutarch, *Plutarch's Morals*, ed. William W. Goodwin (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1874).

[10] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Gordon Teskey (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), Book 5, ll. 267-68, 290.

This feathered monster terrorizes with the help of many watchful eyes, granting her during flight a perspective no ancient eye had yet enjoyed:

Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes,

Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum:

mobilitate viget virisque adquirit eundo,

parva metu primo, mox sese attollit in auras

ingrediturque solo et caput inter nubila condit.

...pedibus celerem et pernicibus alis,

monstrum horrendum, ingens, cui quot sunt corpore plumae,

tot vigiles oculi subter (mirabile dictu),

tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris.

nocte volat caeli medio terraeque per umbram

stridens, nec dulci declinat lumina somno;

luce sedet custos aut summi culmine tecti

turribus aut altis, et magnas territat urbes,

tam ficti praeque tenax quam nuntia veri.

haec tum multiplici populos sermone replebat

gaudens, et pariter facta atque infecta canebat



Straightway Rumor flies through Libya's great cities, Rumor, swiftest of all the evils in the world. She thrives on speed, stronger for every stride, slight with fear at first, soon soaring into the air she treads the ground and hides her head in the clouds. ...Rumor, quicksilver afoot and swift on the wing, a monster, horrific, huge and under every feather on her body—what a marvel—an eye that never sleeps and as many tongues as eyes and as many raucous mouths and ears pricked up for news. By night she flies aloft, between the earth and sky, whirring across the dark, never closing her lids in soothing sleep. By day she keeps her watch, crouched on a peaked roof or palace turret, terrorizing the great cities, clinging as fast to her twisted lies as she clings to words of truth.<sup>11</sup>



Jean-Bernard Restout, *Aeneas and Dido Fleeing the Storm*, 1772-74

[11] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Eagles (New York: Viking Penguin, 2006), II, 219-36, and Virgil, *Aeneid*, ed. Alexander G. McKay (Wauconda, IL: Pharr, 2007), Book 4, II, 173-190.





Thomas Jones, *Landscape with Dido and Aeneas*, 1769

The placement of the *tot vigilae oculi* has tended to stump interpreters, as the adverb *subter* could imply that the eyes are on the underside of her body, peering down at earth as Fame flies above it, or that the eyes, along with the multitude of tongues and ears in equilibrium, belong to the rumor-mongers on earth. Fame's corporeal and spatial aspect reinforces her proclivity to air truths and lies (*facta atque infecta*), and to the rumor-mongering that gives her the title of *dea foeda*, a foul or sordid goddess.<sup>12</sup> The mixture of fact and fiction she absorbs suits her balanced (even if monstrous) form; Antonia Syson points out that 'the Latin language loves using correlatives to show equivalence.'<sup>13</sup>

[12] Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, 195.

[13] Antonia Syson, *Fama and Fiction in Virgil's Aeneid* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 48.



In Book IV of the *Aeneid*, the flight of Fame enlists characters in a precarious game of hide-and-seek, fostering narrative movement and leaving Dido as one of the most memorable casualties of rumor. Word circulates, as it were, about the love affair between Aeneas and Dido, and although Dido, drunk with a short-lived and therefore poisonous love, abandons her discretion when she walks through the streets in a frenzied state of passion, her actual affair with Aeneas takes place in the secrecy of a cave. The furtive act of two prominent figures nevertheless creates suspicion, and soon Fame appears to scandalize the romance far and wide, sentencing Dido to public shame with an account that belongs more to the realm of mythmaking than to the realm of fact. The sheer space of Fame expands the scope of scrutiny. Confirming her reach, the rays of light in British painter Thomas Jones's *Landscape with Dido and Aeneas* shine on Aeneas and Dido in the foreground and the city of Carthage in the background, suggesting how the private and public spatial zones of the Aeneid become inseparable within the purview (as well as audible range) of Fame.

The numerous references to fame in the Middle Ages call attention to the ethical question of whether the victims of fame merited their rewards and punishments, and whether the pursuit of fame was in itself a vice. Virgil's narrative abandonment of Dido after the episode of Aeneas's departure from Carthage, with the exception of describing Aeneas's brief encounter with Dido in the underworld in Book 6, is seen by many medieval readers as unjust, in contrast to Ovid's portrayal of Dido in the *Heroides*. Dido's letter to Aeneas in this series of epistles revises Virgil's account by emphasizing Dido's victimhood and minimizing the hero's piety, connecting Dido to other wronged and suffering women whose subjectivities demand further attention and revision. Thus, while Virgil seems to accept the course Fame takes, Ovid protests it. Medieval writers responded with profound feeling to this debate about Dido and fame; Augustine remembers weeping while reading her story in *Confessions*, toiling with this memory, as the plight of Dido interferes with his path to God and cultivation of holy virtues.

Such virtues dismissed the importance of worldly fame and even selfish concerns, shaping religious material in which piety, prayer, and supplication were intended to outweigh any focus on individual complaints. The foremost virtue of humility involved a philosophical distance and certainly a forgetting of oneself (though not necessarily a diminishment of oneself). In the early fifteenth century, Julian of Norwich exemplifies the exercise of humbling herself when she begins her *Showings* by calling herself as a 'symple creature unlettyrde', despite her discernible intellectual foundation, particularly regarding the theological tradition.<sup>14</sup> *Humilitas* developed its own *topos* across a broader range of medieval literature after the twelfth century, including the poems of the German courtly writers Wolfram von Eschenbach and Hartmann von Aue. Marie de France also relies upon it to construct her authority at the beginning of her collection of *lais*. She explains that she initially considered composing stories and translating some from Latin into the vernacular out of a desire to teach morality, and not to achieve fame ('mais ne me fust guaires de pris').<sup>15</sup> While she does not seek fame, she holds herself responsible for disseminating ethical knowledge and implies the fame of her works through agricultural metaphor: 'Quant uns granz biens est mult oïz, / Dunc a primes est il fluriz, / E quant loëz est du plusurs, / Dunc ad espandues ses flurs' ['When a great good is widely heard of, then, and only then, does it bloom, and when that good is praised by many, it has spread its blossoms'].<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, medieval poets often used their writings to establish their reputations and positions in the literary canon, reflecting the strong attraction to fame, even in a time marked by religious injunctions against it. Dante envisions himself superseding the great *auctores* of antiquity whom he assigns to the infernal borderland of Limbo, and Chrétien de Troyes begins *Le Chevalier de la Charette* by positioning himself in relation to Marie, Countess of Champagne, claiming to relay her chosen *matière* and *sens*—the matter, or source, and the meaning—without

[14] Denise N. Baker, ed., *The Showings of Julian of Norwich* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 4.

[15] Marie de France, "Prologue" to the *Lais*, I. 31. Translation from *The Lais of Marie de France*, trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978).

[16] Marie de France, "Prologue" to the *Lais*, II. 5-8.

flattery.<sup>17</sup> In England, Chaucer both acknowledges his own negotiations with fame and integrates the issue into his poems. In *The House of Fame*, he hybridizes Virgilian and Ovidian figurations of *Fama* to construct a formidable female figure who elects celebrities arbitrarily, cruelly dismissing good deeds as a factor in her decision-making process and relishing in her own caprice. Lady *Fame's* wavy golden hair and imperial ruby throne display her refinement and likeness to a goddess, but like the classical *Fama*, she disturbs bystanders with her unearthly height, many eyes, ears, and tongues, as well as Partridge-winged feet.

Chaucer's allegorical lady plainly reveals his engagement with Classical precursors, but in *Troilus and Criseyde* he explores the devastating consequences of *Fame* with both greater subtlety and more concrete proof. If, in the *Aeneid*, *Fama* destroys Dido, ruining her credibility as queen of Carthage, Chaucer's response to this event emerges discreetly through his representation of *Criseyde*, who, despite taking cover in protective spaces, is discovered by *Fame* and loses credibility as *Troilus's* beloved partner. The poem begins with the treason against *Troy*, which haunts *Criseyde* indefinitely. *Criseyde's* father, a prophet who foresees the collapse of the city, has departed for Greece in a public and perfidious flight that incites idle talk throughout *Troy*. Since the aura of fame resides not in the famed subject, but rather in the public quest to know what is not there to know, the scandal redirects attention to *Criseyde*.<sup>18</sup> Hearing about her father's treason all day and wherever she goes, *Criseyde* wears a widow's habit and turns platonically to the renowned and honorable *Hector* for his mercy. She is panicked by shame, a word used no fewer than 25 times in *Troilus and Criseyde*. In Middle English, 'shame' describes the emotion resulting from an awareness of disgrace, or even the anticipation of disgrace, and Chaucer often uses the word in passages highlighting such awareness and anticipation of *Criseyde*, in particular.

[17] Chrétien writes, 'Certes, je ne suis pas homme / À vouloir flatter sa dame', but then proceeds to praise her in such a way that could only improve his standing as a poet: 'Dirai-je: Telle une gemme / Qui prévaut sur les reines? Bien sûr, je ne dirai rien de pareil, / Et pourtant c'est un fait que je ne saurais nier.' These lines come from the modern French version in the *Classiques Garnier* (Paris: Bordas, 1989).

[18] The idea pertains to Walter Benjamin's sense that the unapproachability of the artwork defines its aura and unique value. 'What, then, is the aura?' Benjamin asks. 'A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.' Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 23. *Criseyde's* 'aura' and celebrity have little to do with who she really is or her physical presence; they have more to do with what is not known, what is always at a remove to do with what is not known, what is always at a remove.

She fears gossip and the further destruction of her reputation after her father's flight. In the manuscript tradition, scribal variation magnifies the connection between shame and gossip. In the Campsall Manuscript, now Pierpont Morgan Library MS.M.817 (1399-1413), the verses appear as follows:

But ther-on was to heven and to done.

Considered al thing it may not be;

And why? For shame; and it were ek to sone

To graunten hym so greet a libertee.<sup>19</sup>

This passage appears in Book II, when Criseyde's meddling uncle Pandarus ignores her desire to avoid social engagement and persuades her to love the besotted Troilus. The narrator here intercedes on Criseyde's behalf, moving into her consciousness. In other words, in love there is pain, so, all things considered, it could not be. *And why should Criseyde choose not to love?* The answer differs in the manuscripts, however.

[19] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), Book 2, ll. 1289-92.

While the Campsall manuscript faults *shame*, which justifies Criseyde's thought that it is 'to sone / to graunten hym so greet a libertee'—it's too soon to grant him the liberty to be with her—Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 61 (early 1400s) records *speche*, or gossip, as the reason Criseyde must avoid a union with Troilus:

But theron was to heven and to doone.

Considered al thing it may nat be;

And whi? For speche; and it were ek to soone

To graunten hym so greet a libertee.





This scribal substitution unwittingly shows how words change in the process of textual transmission *beyond* the world of story, which reinforces the fears about slander found *within* Chaucer's Troy. The substitution also emphasizes the dramatic irony of this passage: the narrator and the scribes clearly understand that both shame and talk are involved in the vilification of Criseyde, but Criseyde lacks foresight of the brutal change of Fortune to come. That said, she keenly fears a change for the worse. Thus, she frets about offending against propriety and physically retreats inward from the loose-lipped social world, as this image of Boccaccio's *Criseida* illustrates. For instance, at the temple of Pallas Athena, where all the Trojan maidens are dressed up for the springtime ritual of courtship, Criseyde stands alone in a little nook near the door because she fears disgrace. Later, she occupies a stone-paved parlor and begs her uncle for privacy, telling him she would be better suited living 'in a cave'.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Dido and Aeneas's love-cave, Criseyde's cave is viewed as primitive, bare, and resembling a holy person's anchorhold, in which to read pious saints' lives. In Criseyde's view, tiny spaces become the portals into a safer existence, protected from the mutability of the public world and the mutability of *Fama*, who flies above it.

Initially, Criseyde is fortunate to find Troy a city of kinship and kindness, in which Pandarus intercedes *in loco parentis*, communal feasting and reading distract from the ongoing war, and domestic rooms are refined, bordered by cultivated gardens.

At least in Hector's view, these spaces offer Criseyde provisional refuge, as he commands her to disregard her father's treason; he says, 'ye youreself in joie / Dwelleth with us... in Troie'.<sup>21</sup> Hector's rhyming of joyand Troy emphasizes the warmth of the city, as well as his own charming enthusiasm about Criseyde's future.



Criseida in Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, New York, Morgan Library MS M.0371, fol. 13v, 1414

[20] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2, l. 117.

[21] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1, ll. 117-19.

Criseyde seems comfortably ensconced within the cozy spaces of the Trojan neighborhood, but nevertheless continues to worry about her name. In addition to physically hiding, she appeals to her uncle to protect her from what she calls gooselike speech. Unlike Boccaccio's Criseida, whose concern for reputation seems a superficial way to affirm her modesty and courtliness, Chaucer's Criseyde wields as much agency as she can in the face of unpredictable gossip, and anxiously waits for the war to implicate her, and for historical time to finally supplant romance time. Certain that misfortune inevitably falls thick in love affairs, she ruminates on the recurrence of history when it comes to women in love. She ponders her own potential to become swept up into the same love-induced storm into which 'wreched women' have ended up helpless and tearful:

Therto we wrecched women nothing konne,

Whan is wo, but wepe and sitte and thinke;

Oure wrecche is this, oure owen wo to drynke<sup>22</sup>

Mistrust and infidelity might cause these women to suffer, but what exacerbates their woe are the 'wikked tonges [that] ben so prest'—so ready—to defame them.<sup>23</sup> These wicked tongues, a metonym for gossip, foreshadow the flight of Fame, whose wings are similarly modified by the adjective 'preste.' In Book 4, Chaucer's narrator reports:

The swifte Fame, which that false thynges

Egal reporteth lik the thynges trewe,

Was thoroughout Troie yfled with preste wynges

Fro man to man, and made this tale al newe

How Calkas doughter, with hire brighte hewe,

At parlement, withouten wordes more,

Ygraunted was in chaunge of Antenore<sup>24</sup>

[22] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2, ll. 782-4.

[23] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2, l. 785.

[24] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 4, ll. 659-665.

*Preste* here means rapid, quick-tongued, and slippery. Chaucer's double use of the adjective collides Fame and Talk, further justifying Criseyde's desire to stay independent and in hiding. Despite her physical efforts to shield herself from gossip, once she concedes to the prospect of love, alleviating her uncle's disappointment and assuaging Troilus's love-pains, her experience of space dramatically changes. As soon as Criseyde lets down the walls that cloister her and protect her from rumor, Pandarus takes advantage of her spatial flexibility, and, as Chaucer meticulously details, he channels her through a series of intricate passageways and doors, from the pagan temple to the dining room to the enclosed bedchamber, where Troilus waits. Quite opposite to Boccaccio's Criseida, who directly seduces Troilus into her palace, Chaucer's heroine surrenders to her uncle's reconstruction of her space with great reluctance. The sequence of private spaces through which Criseyde moves marks the progress of the love affair and initially appears to escape Fame's glance. But the interruption of the Trojan War in her love story parallels Fame's return. Displacing Criseyde from her nestled cluster of secret rooms and social spaces, Troy exchanges Criseyde for Antenor, a Trojan imprisoned by the Greeks, and in turn casts her into a landscape of fear—into clamoring, chaotic streets, where rumormongering is evermore charged by wartime conflict:

O nyce world, lo, thy discreiou!

Criseyde, which that nevere dide hem scathe,

Shal now no lenger in hire blisse bathe;

But Antenor, he shal com *hom* to towne,

And *she shal out*; thus seyden here and howne.<sup>25</sup>

[25] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 4, ll. 206-10.

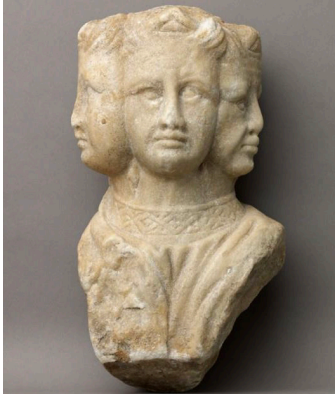


In the frontispiece to the copy of *Troilus and Criseyde* in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 61, Chaucer delivers an open-air recital of his poem to a courtly audience, populated by figures in hues of red and blue, as well as one—probably King Richard II—in gold. But behind his lectern, ascending the castle or city walls, is an entourage of Trojans, the same figures in Chaucer’s poem. Aside from evoking again the idea that poets are responsible for shaping the destinies of their characters, as Homer did for Achilles, this frontispiece represents Criseyde, crowned and wearing blue and white, being traded for Antenor, which visualizes a key moment of spatial transition: Antenor’s happy return to the domestic and intimate place of Troy— indicated by ‘home’ and ‘town’— contrasts sharply with Criseyde’s new exilic status as simply ‘out.’

Chaucer omits description of Criseyde’s new environment on the Greek side, never offering the palpable sense of place and form that we find in his picture of Troy. This omission legitimizes Criseyde’s sense of loss. She yearns for the sites of her former city, ruefully looking upon Troy’s noble towers in the distance. Yet, her sense of alarm drives her to adapt to her new landscape as she prior adapted to Troy; her flight to the Greek soldier Diomedes repeats her crisis-driven flight to the Trojan Hector. In the narrative tradition, this turn represents a traitorous change of heart, but Chaucer’s version tells us to sympathize with Criseyde; because her priority has always been sanctuary, not romantic infatuation, the onus shifts to the accidents of life, which she can’t control, and to the flight of Fame, from which it is impossible to take refuge.



Frontispiece to *Troilus and Criseyde* in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 61, c. 1399-1413



Pacio Bertini da Firenze, *Vultus trifrons*,  
or *The Allegory of Prudence*, ca. 1340-55

Criseyde indeed regrets that this is all she can do given her lack of vision into the 'Future'—and 'Future' here is particularly significant given that it is Chaucer's neologism:

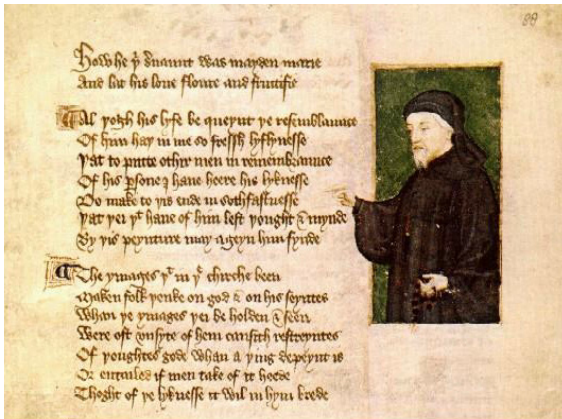
Prudence, allas, oon of thyne eyen thre  
Me lakked alwey, er that I come here!  
On tyme ypassed wel remembred me,  
And present tyme ek koud ich wel ise,  
But future tyme, er I was in the snare,  
Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care.<sup>26</sup>

[26] Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 5, ll. 744-9.



Criseyde's apostrophe to Prudence evokes the iconography of the virtue bearing three faces—as seen here in the bust of the *Vultus Trifrons* or *The Allegory of Prudence* by Pacio Bertini da Firenze—which represent her ability to see in three directions: toward past time, present time, and future time. In the Middle Ages, prudence improved an individual's ability to rely on the past and present to judge the future; the quality was especially desirable in princes and heads of households, politicians, and soldiers, and was believed to govern other essential virtues, as Christine de Pizan discussed in *Othéa*. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Criseyde recognizes the importance of prudence as if she were temporarily lifted out of ancient Troy and inhabiting late medieval England; she claims she can see the past through memory, and present time before her, but by lamenting the want of a third eye, she identifies the very flaw in her temporal consciousness that limits her instrumentality in determining future matters.

While Criseyde does not see prophetically, she does predict that her future name will be destroyed by fame. Women especially will speak bitterly about her, feeding new material into the archives of antifeminist lore. Again, recalling Virgil's many-tongued *Fama*, Criseyde exclaims, 'O, rolled shal I ben on so many a tonge!' The graver problem by the end of the narrative is that tongues rolling Criseyde's name and the winged words carrying ill tidings will be stabilized by the scribe's pen, trapped within physical books. 'For these bokes wol me shende', Criseyde laments, admitting to the challenges of not only ephemeral hearsay but also the fame fixed by books.



The 'Hoccleve Portrait' of Chaucer, London, British Library, Harley MS 4866, fol. 88r, 1411-1412

Fame makes it difficult for Chaucer, moreover, to revise the historical narrative. The word on his heroine time-travels from the earliest recorders of the love story—the French poet Benoît de Sainte-Maure and the Sicilian author Guido de Colonne—to the Florentine Boccaccio before it reaches him. What makes Chaucer's version especially poignant, then, is his inclination to commiserate with Criseyde over the patterns and prescriptions of time. Through the portrait of

Criseyde emerges Chaucer's own conflicted feelings about the authorial quest to achieve posthumous relevance, since this relevance depends on the flying, biased, and sharp-tongued *Fama*.

Taking flight from the 14th century to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, we are reminded that shame and fame have always been inseparable—at least by those Boethian minds suspicious of the virtue and stability of celebrity. The fear of the phenomenon re-emerges among authors who might have wanted to ensure lasting literary remembrance but nevertheless perceived the fickleness of fame. Materialized language has the power to create indelible testimony to an author's imagination, wisdom, and poetic expression, but speech itself is a fleeting and changeable form of communication. Hence, both George Eliot and Emily Dickinson link 'fame' and 'winged words' to uncertainty—what Chaucer would have called *aventure*. In 'The Spanish Gypsy' (1868), Eliot's longest poem, the female lover Fedalma laments the uncontrollable trajectory of speech: 'Our words have wings, but fly not where we would.' Eliot's issue with 'winged words' is fundamentally Plutarchan, lying in the aimless and accidental movement of their flight. Like Eliot, Dickinson with brief parallelism takes issue with winged Fame because, as it traverses space, it exposes words to negative bias and variations that modify the original source. Dickinson expresses her point succinctly in the following quatrain:

Fame is a bee.

It has a song—

It has a sting—

Ah, too, it has a wing.





Of course, the bee stings but does not literally sing; the 'song' instead alludes to the buzz that makes the bee's presence known to its potential victim, a sound that might initially recall the sensory pleasures of a flower garden but in fact warns of the pain it causes. By imagining Fame as capable of both song and sting, Dickinson recalls Chaucer's iconography of fame as an enthroned dictator cruelly deciding who is worthy of a good name and who must be subjected to ill repute. Both Chaucer's Fame and Dickinson's Fame make anonymity preferable to renown, a bold statement when we consider the paradox highlighted by Goethe: 'It is quite impossible for a thinking being to imagine nonbeing [as] ... everyone carries the proof of his own immortality within himself.'<sup>27</sup> To reject fame when death or nonbeing always seems impossible to us is subversive of our quest to live eternally, a true acknowledgement of the threats posed to our life and being.

These writers recognize that they need the word to preserve history, but also that language is polysemous and protean, even when we possess various writing technologies to stabilize and standardize it. As Homer illustrates, breath miraculously concretizes and gathers into sounds, and into meanings, escaping from us as 'winged words.' Yet, these other authors point out more skeptically that fickle-flighted Fame never guarantees truth nor indemnifies fameseekers against prevarication. They leave us with the paradox of storytelling and the fragility of oral and literary transmission. They call attention to how difficult it is to 'undo' what is spoken or written, and convey the anxiety wrapped up in textual transmitters, whether the medieval scribe or the modern editor, both versions of Virgil's archetypal Fama, responsible for carrying words forward and out into the world.

[27] Echoed by Freud, these words were attributed to Goethe by Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, 1852, cited in Nichols, 'Imagination and Immortality: Thinking of Me,' *Synthese* 159/2 (2007), 215.



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