SCIENTIA SCHOLAE

A Journal for Teachers of Medieval Studies in Grades K-12

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Dear Reader,

On behalf of TEAMS, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the first issue of *Scientia Scholae*, an electronic journal dedicated to Medieval Studies at the K-12 levels. Much collaborative work has gone on in the months since the TEAMS board gave approval to launch this journal. In particular, I would like to thank the following people for their willingness to make *Scientia Scholae* a reality: Bruce C. Brasington, John W. Houghton, Vickie L. Ziegler, and Laura V. Blanchard.

The mission of *Scientia Scholae* is simple: to provide quality, thought-provoking articles related to the teaching of Medieval Studies in elementary and secondary schools. Raymond Lavoie's article on re-thinking the concept of feudalism and how we address it in the classroom is sure to bring us to that field where traditional views and modern scholarship meet in battle. How do we treat feudalism in a non-biased way, while keeping in mind that our students seem to work best with a more concrete, rather than abstract, approach to history? Or do they? Tough questions to be sure, but ones that we must ask of ourselves. Pedagogy is certainly not a concrete discipline; as teachers, we need to think "out of the box," i.e. abstractly. Pedagogy is as much a craft as anything else.

Anne Prescott, author of the second article, has offered some food for thought concerning Chaucer. We know that Chaucer is taught, in some capacity, in most high school English classrooms. But are we complacent about it? Do we teach Chaucer simply to say that we have taught Chaucer? Prescott prompts us to think about the reasons *why* Chaucer should be taught, providing corroboration for his place in English curricula. Such an argument could be valid for any number of medieval texts. Even if you do not teach Chaucer, I leave you to consider why your choice of texts strengthens your own curriculum, and just as important, the general mindset of your students.

Speaking of students, do take the time to speak to them after class about Medieval Studies. Encourage them to do some extra reading, or to look at a specific web site. If we promote Medieval Studies thoughtfully and with care, we can ensure that future generations will continue to find the Middle Ages just as fascinating and worthwhile as we do.

Good reading!

Kevin J. Ruth

Dealing with the F-word:
Feudalism and the History Classroom

A history teacher unfamiliar with medieval studies who peruses a textbook's account of feudalism would have no way of knowing that the account presented bears little resemblance to the understanding of the topic current among medieval historians. For while the narrative presented in most textbooks is clear and linear, medievalists contest hotly the definition of feudalism, and indeed the question of whether the term has any use at all to describe the multitude of social situations that existed in Europe during the Middle Ages. The purpose of this paper, then, is threefold: first, to outline briefly the narrative used by most high school textbooks when it comes to describing medieval society; second, to point out the flaws in that narrative, and to give a brief overview of current scholarship on the topic; and finally, to suggest, in light of current scholarship, alternative strategies for teaching students about the outlines of medieval society.

The narrative presented in most high school history textbooks regarding the formation of medieval society is attractively elegant and straightforward.[1] It goes something like this: After the death of Charlemagne, during the ninth century, centralized administrative and military power began to erode. Around the same time, Europe came under increased attack from a variety of hostile non-Christian outsiders: Vikings, Saracens, and Magyars. Without the centralized power of the Carolingian Empire to coordinate resistance against these attackers, local leaders were forced to organize their own forces. They turned to what the textbooks define as feudalism: the leaders granted land (fiefs) to local warriors in exchange for the warriors' professions of loyalty (homage) and military service. These warriors, now known as vassals, could be called upon for a predetermined period of military service to the local rulers, now known as lords—

according to the textbooks, usually forty days. Some textbooks even describe a "feudal pyramid," with the king at the top, lords beneath him, and warrior-vassals at the bottom. A separate section of the textbook is usually devoted to describing the agrarian economic system, generally called "manorialism," based on peasant labor, that supported the warrior elites.

Several problems exist with the narrative outlined above. One is chronological. The narrative suggests that the decision to grant land in return for military and administrative service was an innovation developed in response to the collapse of Charlemagne's empire. But, a perceptive student might ask, in the cash-poor economy of the period, how did Charlemagne himself compensate his soldiers and administrators? The answer, of course, is that he did so in the same way that feudal lords did: with grants of land. He also used oaths of loyalty to help bind these royal servants to him. Was Charlemagne, then, a feudal king? The textbook account describes feudalism as a post-Carolingian institution. The fact that Charlemagne used many of the same methods of rulership as did post-Carolingian "feudal" lords plainly contradicts that account. Some strategies for resolving this contradiction will appear below, but for now, it serves as one example of the problems of the textbook narrative.

Another problem with the textbook narrative is geographical. While examples supporting the textbook model of fiefs for fealty indeed can be found in what is now northern and western France, extending the model beyond those limited geographic boundaries stresses the model. Two examples will help illustrate the point. According to the textbook narrative, the breakdown of centralized power under the pressure of attacks from Vikings, Saracens, and Magyars created the decentralized military-political institution known as feudalism. Some of those same textbooks, however, will note in another chapter that the German emperor Otto I defeated the Magyars at the Battle of Lechfeld in 955. They will elsewhere describe that the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great campaigned successfully against the Vikings in

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[1] For example, the three textbooks I have used in world history classes over the past four years: Jackson J. Spielvogel, *World History: The Human Odyssey* (Wadsworth, 1998), 353-355; Walter Wallbank, et. al., *Civilization Past and Present* (Longman, 1996), 305-307; Edgar Schuster, *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1999), 322-326.

England during his reign (871-899). In both these cases, centralized royal authority is apparently alive and well, and key to repulsing the attacks of these outsiders. If the collapse of strong central authority in Europe after the death of Charlemagne led local leaders to devise feudal solutions for their problems, how then do we explain these strong monarchs taking the lead in their realms? What happened in those areas of Europe, such as the Iberian Peninsula, that were never under the strong central authority of Charlemagne's empire in the first place? Again, strategies for incorporating this more nuanced account of medieval society will appear later.

One might reply to the objections above that, given the limited time and background of most students of Western Civilization or World History, a general model of medieval society such as the one outlined in the textbook (the labor of agrarian peasants on manors supporting a warrior elite who received those manors from their lords in return for military service and homage) is still desirable. But current scholarship on medieval society challenges even the most basic assumptions of this model. Perhaps the best work on the subject has been done by Elizabeth A.R. Brown, whose 1974 article, "The Tyranny of a Construct,"[2] outlined the flaws in the feudal model described in most history textbooks. To outline her argument briefly, the exchange of fief for fealty is a construct of the early modern period, devised by seventeenth-century legal scholars who sought to systemize and explain the practices they encountered in medieval legal records. They based their model on the twelfth-century legal text *Libri Feudorum* (Books of Fiefs), itself a northern Italian legal text with little correlation to contemporary social practice throughout Europe. The ideas of these early modern legal scholars were adopted and promoted by successive generations until, by the nineteenth century, the idea of a "feudal system" had become ingrained in historical thought about the Middle Ages.

As early as 1887-88, however, scholars recognized that feudalism was a model constructed after—and not during—the Middle Ages. F.W. Maitland, the famous historian of English law, quipped in a series of lectures that feudalism reached its fullest development, not under a late-medieval king, but under a seventeenth-century Scottish lawyer.[3] Later historians followed Maitland in qualifying their discussions of feudalism. Marc Bloch, the famous historian of medieval French society, noted that every historian understood the word differently.[4] Despite these realizations, Brown observed, historians have continued to use the term "feudalism," each defining it in his or her own way. François Ganshof, for example, believes that the presence of the fief is of primary importance; without the exchange of land for service, the system is not feudal. Joseph Strayer, on the other hand, downplayed the importance of the fief in favor of the practice of delegating ruling authority to local leaders.[5] Finally, some French scholars such as Georges Duby and Pierre Bonnassie have turned their attention from relations between lords and vassals to relations between lords and peasants, arguing that "banal lordship," characterized by the decline in small private landowners and the increase in the exactions imposed on peasants—such as taxes, work obligations, and monopolies on mills and bread ovens—best characterized feudalism.[6] In the traditional textbook model, such relationships are consigned to a separate section on "manorialism," a term that has fallen out of use entirely among modern medieval historians. As in the case of feudalism, studies of medieval agrarian economic systems have revealed such diversity of practice as to make a single term such as "manorialism" unpopular.

Given the inapplicability of the term, and the lack of agreement about its use among professional medievalists, why do textbooks and historians continue to use the term "feudalism"? Brown notes two reasons commonly cited among medievalists. The first argument suggests that the idea of feudalism

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[2] Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe" *American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 1063-88. The article is reprinted in Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein, eds. *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 148-69, which I recommend highly for an overview of the period. Many of the articles cited later in this paper are available in this collection. Pagination in subsequent notes follows the reprint in Little and Rosenwein.

[3] Brown, 149-51.
[4] Brown, 153.
[5] Brown, 155-6
[6] Brown, 157-8, and Pierre Bonnassie, *La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XIe siècle. Croissance et mutations d'une société*, 2 vols (Toulouse, Association des Publications de l'Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 1975). Portions of chapter 7 of Bonnassie's work are translated and reprinted in Little and Rosenwein, 114-33.

serves as a useful construct; it is a general term that, if properly defined, can provide an easy shorthand for the social structures under study. This argument might, on its face, appear especially appealing to high school teachers who lack time in the curriculum to provide a more detailed description of medieval society. However, recent scholarship—and particularly the work of Susan Reynolds—has demolished the notion that the term "feudalism," and in particular the "fief for fealty" model found in most history textbooks, can be said to have had any broad application in medieval society. Susan Reynolds's book, *Fiefs and Vassals*, surveys legal documents from across Europe geographically, and across the ninth to thirteenth centuries chronologically.[7] Her conclusions are clear: terms such as "fief" and "vassal" meant widely different things at different times and places, depending on the legal context. The textbook model of "fiefs for fealty," in short, posits a uniformity over time and place that cannot be supported by the existing historical evidence.

But the defenders of feudalism as a valid concept raise a second argument, aimed in particular at students. While professional historians may not find the word useful, the defenders argue, it still can serve as a useful heuristic device for students; and as they advance in their studies, they can be taught where the general model they learned in high school does not apply. This argument has several obvious flaws. Most importantly, it denigrates the seriousness with which high school teachers prepare their curriculum and the vigor with which they strive for accuracy in their presentations. Indeed, the very premise underlying this article goes directly counter to the dismissive approach so advanced. Even aside from matters of professional integrity, the practical matter of instilling information that the instructor knows to be inaccurate and misleading in students when they are young and most impressionable, when they will be forming the notions that will inform all their future studies in medieval history, should give the instructor pause. Is not our charge to provide students with the best possible education, not merely the one that will cause us the least trouble in teaching it?

Having rejected the notion of feudalism, though, one is left with the question of what to replace it with. If one is not going to talk about fiefs

and fealty, lords and vassals, what shall one talk about? Brown offers some good suggestions in her article. First, and most importantly, the teacher should be descriptive, not prescriptive. As discussed above, many scholars fall into the trap of using the term "feudalism" and then devoting much energy to defining it in such a way that it fits the situation they're writing about. Rather than falling into this trap, teachers could simply describe the basic outlines of medieval society without reference to the term "feudalism." Richard W. Southern's book *Making the Middle Ages*, particularly the chapter on medieval society, "Social Bonds," represents a fine example of such descriptive scholarship.[8] Southern lucidly illustrates the key elements of medieval social relations without ever resorting to the use of the term "feudalism." Similarly, Georges Duby, in his seminal regional study on medieval society in the Mâconnais, a region of southwestern France, eschewed the term "feudalism" for a detailed description of the social relations reflected in the historical documents.[9] Other scholars have drawn attention to some of the many other ways, aside from the "fief for fealty" trade, by which medieval elites structured their societies. Fredric L. Cheyette's important article "Suum quique tribuere"[10] examines how medieval people settled disputes in the absence of a formal legal system of the sort that would be familiar to plaintiffs and defendants today, while German scholar Gerd Althoff has focused on how medieval rulers used rituals to demonstrate personal relationships that formed the foundations of their power.[11]

The wide range of approaches, and the works that outline them, can seem daunting to the teacher limited to a few weeks in which to teach the outlines of medieval society. But it need not be so. There

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[7] Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

[8] Richard W. Southern*, Making the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

[9] Georges Duby, *La societé aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953).

[10] Fredric L. Cheyette, "Suum quique tribuere," *French Historical Studies* 6 (1969/70), 287-299. Reprinted in Little and Rosenwein as "Giving Each His Due," 170-179.

[11] Gerd Althoff, *Verwandte, Freunde, und Getreue: Zum politisichen Stellenwert der Gruppenbindungen im früheren Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990). One portion of his book is translated in Little and Rosenwein, 192-210, as "Amicitiae [Friendships] as Relationships Between States and People."

certainly are some general principles that can be taught about medieval society. For example, compared with today, communication technology in the Middle Ages was very limited and travel was slow; thus, much governmental authority had devolved to the local level. Personal relationships, whether they were ties of kinship, oaths of fealty, or formal declarations of amity, carried much greater official weight in political, legal, and social relations than they do today. The citizens of a modern-day town would be very suspicious if their mayor were to give all the city's contracts to his brothers-in-law, cousins, and nephews. In the Middle Ages, however, it was considered normal and sensible for the German emperor, for example, to confer the most important dukedoms and bishoprics on his brothers and cousins. After all, whom could/should he trust with such crucial offices? As a consequence of these facts, legal and administrative authority was very often delegated along lines of personal relationship, and authority in general tended to be far more decentralized and local than today. Further, the distinctions between property and authority, which are very strong today, were far less rigid in the Middle Ages. The right to collect taxes or to levy fines, which today is considered a legitimate function only of public civil authority, was in many places regarded as a personal property, just as a vineyard or an estate would be. It could be given away, traded, sold, or inherited like a piece of land. Finally, it is important to understand the radically different worldview of medieval people. The aristocratic elites embraced warrior values of courage and honor, which in turn shaped their activities in society, while all classes of society were strongly influenced by the Church (although to explain the role of religion in medieval society would require another entire article—watch this space!). Obviously there are exceptions to all these generalizations, but no college professor who received into his medieval historical survey class a student who understands these generalities would find him or her lacking.

Another factor to consider carefully when selecting ideas to present in a class on the Middle Ages is the background that students bring into the classroom. Popular culture, through movies such as "A Knight's Tale," fantasy novels such as J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* and its myriad pale imitations, and computer games such as "Age of Empires," shapes a student's perceptions of the medieval period. Blunt statements that such depictions are inaccurate will not, as most teachers know, gain much traction against the savvy multimedia marketing campaigns that promote them. However, encouraging students to locate medieval socio-political relations in the larger context of medieval studies, especially the literature of chivalric romance, opens the door to a parallel exercise in locating such contemporary depictions of a fantastic medieval past as "A Knight's Tale" or "Age of Empires" within the larger context of modern knowledge and presentations of the Middle Ages. In this way, students can be encouraged to analyze critically those elements of medieval society that are included in modern depictions, to discern where the reality is distorted, and to understand the ends to which those distortions are made. Such an approach not only pushes students to think on a variety of levels, but it also serves to demonstrate to them how they can apply the skills of critical thinking and source analysis to their lives outside the classroom.

Furthermore, rather than relying on stale and outdated textbook models to convey the principles outlined above, teachers will find it both more rewarding and more effective to challenge students to think for themselves about medieval society in ways similar to professional historians. Use primary sources, such as donation charters, contemporary chronicles, saints' lives, or contemporary works of literature to illustrate important points (a fine range of these sources is available online at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html). Encourage students to analyze what is going on in selected texts, rather than to rely on the models spoon-fed to them by the textbook. Challenge them to explain why medieval people might have done things in the ways described in those documents, bearing in mind the basic principles of medieval society outlined above. Following such basic principles will not only provide students with a firmer grasp of the nuances of medieval society than their textbook would give them, but it also will encourage them to develop more fully the academic skills that will allow them to be successful in college. Perhaps enabling them to act as historians may kindle in them an interest in medieval history itself, such as the interest that has brought you here to read, and me here to write, this brief article.

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Teaching Chaucer's *House of Fame* in High School

I came to the *House of Fame* by arranging some of its lines in translation for composers and musical performance. As I worked, it occurred to me that this book is a fantasy for adolescents, and that, with its great energy and musicality, it deserves a wider audience. This book, I believe, can be taught to both mainstream and advanced-placement (AP) students. Scholars have given increased attention to this book in the past two decades. It stands to reason that both students and teachers at the high school level could do the same.

Drawing on the work of other passionate Chaucerians, this essay will take examples from my newly-published book, Imagining Fame, in order to demonstrate the beauty and joy of Middle English, and the timelessness of Chaucer's thoughts. [1]

I know little about electronic media, so it is reassuring to me that there are still scholars doing fine work with pencil and lined yellow pad. G.K Chesterton said in his book, *Chaucer*, that he was writing for those who knew even less about Chaucer than he; I am writing for those who know less about the computer than I.[2]

There are certainly more than a handful of reasons for using the computer to teach Chaucer. To cite but a few examples: students are familiar with the medium, they can go further with discussions on their own, and they can explore and practice research without burdening the school library.

As a graduate student in English Education at Boston University, I became excited about the teaching machine, which was expected to provide feedback on all subjects and reduce the role of the teacher. During that time I met Dean Erwin Griswold of the Harvard Law School at a dinner; he was horrified both by my enthusiasm and the teaching machine. "Nothing can take the place of the teacher/student relationship," he said. He was right. I would add the following: nor would anyone want computer skills to replace human exchange. But now we have a new machine that is not going away, one which can enhance the teacher's relationship to students; it sharpens the focus while increasing the scope of the readings. The computer both gives and allows more time for interaction between students and between student and teacher.

In July 2002, I attended the annual meeting of the New Chaucer Society (this time in Boulder, Colorado), where there was an enlightened emphasis in both the plenary talks and scheduled sessions on teaching Chaucer at various levels.[3] An exciting development is the growing interest in closing the gap between secondary schools and universities, which is due in part to computer access to texts and ideas. The overall theme of the conference was "Chaucer and After," asking where have we come and where are we going with Chaucerian studies.

One panel entitled "Teaching Chaucer" was organized and chaired by Dee Dyas of Christianity and Culture, the new area of the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of York, and also by Tom Hanks of Baylor University. This panel opened with secondary teacher Donna Dermond asking, "Why teach Chaucer today?" The answer to this common and necessary question bears repeating: because he is immediate and relevant, and can tell us everything about human nature as well as our own language. Chaucer places ideas on imagery and point of view, on character and voice, in the largest context. Adolescents love his jokes. Dermond said that teaching Chaucer is the essence of "educare" in the sense of leading students into a wider world.

On this same panel, teacher Michael Cervas of Westminster School (CT) stated that he teaches not only the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, but all of the tales, a statement that drew startled admiration from the audience. Cervas said that there is never a better time than today; it is not just that our times resemble Chaucer's, but that he is so vital and alive-- he is intensely personal. Chaucer speaks directly to students.

Cervas uses a variety of approaches and angles in his teaching. Chaucer responds to all of these angles: for example, "What you see is never what you get;" or "When Chaucer is most serious, he is the funniest

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[1] Anne Worthington Prescott. *Imagining Fame*. Illustrated by Kathryn Finter. Santa Barbara: Fithian Press, 2002

[2] Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. *Chaucer*. London: Faber & Faber, 1932.

[3] For more information on the New Chaucer Society, see Susan Arvay, "A Brief History of the NCS" *The Chaucer Newsletter* 24.1 (2002). The original Chaucer Society, founded in 1851, was disbanded in l912 after the death of its most famous member, Dr.F.J.Furnivall. The New Chaucer Society was founded in 1977 with Paul Ruggiers of the University of Oklahoma as director. There are now over 700 members from l9 different countries.

and vice versa;" or "Try the three C's of character, complexity and comedy."

Thematic study of English language and literature, as well as world literature, are also areas where Chaucer fits very well. The questions at the end of this essay are designed to help students perceive the variety in Chaucer. Michael reminds us that Chaucer had one foot in the Middle Ages and one foot in "the now." I recall a remark made by Professor B.J.Whiting in his Chaucer class at Harvard, "If you would understand Chaucer, read the daily newspaper." Chaucer is easy to teach because he is so alive to connections and can capture enormous change. High school students like the big ideas of poetry, virtuosity, games, and story telling. Chaucer's generous spirit and humanity are needed badly today; that is why it is important that we teach Chaucer.

Michael Calabrese from the California State University at Los Angeles followed up by saying that students from other cultures identify with Chaucer. They see how many languages converged to make English. Hispanic students come from a publicly religious culture not unlike that of the fourteenth century and have a linguistic affinity to Middle English. Chaucer, then, belongs to the very students who are supposed to find him adversarial and alien.

Chaucer is writing about judgment and doubt, and never more so than in the *House of Fame*: he saw that Dante was so sure of himself and had so much judgment in the *Divine Comedy*. Calabrese pointed out that students today do not want to judge -unless it is that people should not smoke! Julian Wasserman, another member of the panel, commented that Chaucer shows the dangers of being too absolute, or of being absolutely unsure.

Chaucer invites us to ask the question of how we deal with people by showing how his pilgrims deal with each other. Chaucer is writing about human failure and sin, not to mention human flaws. It is time to teach more Chaucer because he explains our times to us, makes us better able to survive in the world, and enables us to make sound judgments. Adolescents, particularly, need to learn balance, and not be too absolute or too absolutely unsure.

These comments on Chaucer testify that we need to be familiar with the history of our language; not only because many languages converged to make it, but I believe it matters that we know our ancestral tongue. Not only is English the dominant language of the world today, but if we explore its development in Chaucer, we can see how beautiful and funny it can

be. Thematic study of English language and literature, as well as world literature, are all areas where Chaucer's ideas fit in well.

Chaucer, too, was -- and is -- a great communicator. In San Rafael, California, composer John Geist and actress Becky Parker Geist have formed a small theatre company of young actors who sing and present Chaucer's tales in theatres and on campuses across the county. They show better than I can tell why Chaucer does not go away. We need to pay closer attention to this performative aspect of medieval literature, especially as it relates to Chaucer's *House of Fame*.

The *House of Fame* is an unusual *tour de force.* The poet's *tour,* as in medieval culture, is vertical as well as round. He wanders back in history looking for love and for the truth of poetry, and with no time restraints, appears to get lost for 2,158 lines. From seeing Dido's sad tale, which he observes from a feminist viewpoint, he ends up in a desert where a golden eagle rescues him, seizing the hapless poet and carrying him halfway to heaven to the house of Lady Fame. Unconscious with fear, the eagle assures him that Jove does not intend to 'stellify' him. The dazzling palace with the capricious Lady in charge confuses the poet-Geffrey-even more, and he stumbles out to meet a stranger who asks him if he has come for fame. In a moment of clarity he declares, "I wot myself best how y stond." (I know best where I stand.) He is then guided to the House of Rumor where the ever-eager travel agent, the eagle, assures him that he will finally find what he is looking for. Instead, there is chaos in the labyrinth, and at its end, a pile of people resembling a soccer riot. The poet glimpses a 'man of great authority,' and the poem ends abruptly.

For centuries readers have viewed the *House of Fame* as ending unfinished, right in the middle of a sentence: a charming dissertation on dreams, perhaps, but a book that wanders aimlessly. Disappointing, in other words. In recent decades, however, scholars have discovered in the *House of Fame* a richer mine for future students of Chaucer, especially as far as language is concerned. If we explore its development in Chaucer, we can see how beautiful and funny language can be.

The following lines are from the *Riverside Chaucer* (Third Edition, 1987) with translations from *Imagining Fame*.

--The poet leaves the temple of Love:

Ne where I am, nor in what countree.
But now wol I goo out and see,
Yf I can see owhere any stiryng man
That may tell me wher I am. (ll.475-78)

I know neither where I am, nor in what country.
I shall go out and see
If anyone is stirring
Who can tell me where I am.

Whan I out at the dores cam,
I faste aboute me beheld,
Then sawgh I but a large feld,
Withouten toun, or hous, or tree. (ll.480-83)

When I came out the temple door,
I quickly looked about
and saw but a large field,
without town or house or tree.

He will cry out in fright in line 494:

O Crist, fro fantome and illustion me save!

O Christ, from phantom and illusion save me!

Later, the eagle discourses on sound as the basis
for fame, parodying both science and the superiority
of professors. And yet, the science is accurate:

Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken,
and every speche that ys spoken
lowd or privee, foul or fair,
in his substaunce ys but air. (ll.765-68)

Speech is sound and sound is but broken air,
and every speech that is spoken,
loud or private, foul or fair,
is but air.

Every speche or noyse or soun,
Thorgh hys multiplicacioun,
Mot ned com to Fame's Hous. (ll.783-85)

Every speech or noise or sound,
through its multiplication,
must come to Fame's House.

... throwe on water now a stoon
hyt wol make a litel roundel
as a sercle,

paraunter brod as a covercle;
whel wol cause another whel
ech aboute other goynge
and muyltiplying ever moo,
til hyt be ate Hous of Fame.(ll.789-96)

...throw a stone upon the water,
it will make a little ring
as in a circle,
soon it broadens as a cover,
one wheel will cause another,
each about the other going,
multiplying evermore,
until it be at the House of Fame.

The plays on words in Chaucer are many; in one
passage there can be music, image, poem, and
philosophy. Fame means sound--and the function of
music in Chaucer's time was to spread fame. There
will be many musicians in the palace of Fame, but
not much music aside from the blasts from the
trumpets of Aeolus, giving praise and blame.

When the poet finally reaches the throne of the
Lady Fame, the ninth group of petitioners are
terrorists. The Lady asks the leader what he had done.
He replies:

I am that ylke shrewe,
that brende the temple of Ysidis
in Athenes...
I wolde fayn han hadde fame. (ll.1843-46)

I am that ilk shrew
Who burned the temple of Isis
in Athens...
I would feign have had fame.

In the labyrinth, the House of Rumor, the poet
sees increasing wildness; within this place truth and
lies are mixed together:
Saugh I...a lesyng and a sad soth saw,
and when they metten in that place
they were achekked both two,
and neyther o hem moste out goo;
so they gone crowde
til ech of hem gan crien lowed,
"Lat me go first!" "Nay, let me."(ll.2088-94)

I saw a lie and a sad truth,
And when they met in the window
Both were checked,

Crowding each other
So neither could go out;
Til each of them began to cry,
"Let me go first!" "No, let me!"

Tho behynde begunne up lepe
And clamben up on other faste,
And up the nose and yen kaste,
And trodden fast on others heles,
And stempen, as men doon aftir eles.
Atte last y saugh a man,
...he semed for to be
a man of gret auctorite...(ll.2151-58)

Those behind began to leap
And climb upon each other,
And casting eyes and noses upward,
They trod upon each others heels,
And stamped as men do after eels.
At last I saw a man,
...he seemed to be
a man of great authority...

　　The questions below ask students to join Chaucer's search for truth. As readers come to see that this poet describes himself as somewhat confused, they will also recognize that he is the author of this poem. With this understanding, it may be necessary to question who the less perceptive people are -- those in the Middle Ages or those in the modern age. Chaucer is always in control of himself, his work, and his audience. Some of questions can be tied to personal experience, and lines taken from the text may suggest answers. Encourage students to read aloud, memorize and recite. Read him aloud, and Chaucer sells himself; declaim his poetry, and the understanding of poetry manifests itself.

Questions

1. Compare the eagle's definition with a scientific definition of sound. Sound was a meaning for fame in Chaucer's time. Why? Why might sound be so important? In what ways has sound influenced your own life?
2. The poet comes out upon a desert. Can his loneliness be compared to that of T.S.Eliot's Prufrock or J.D.Salinger's Holden Caulfield, or perhaps to the characters in Samuel Beckett's plays?
3. Lady Fame is unpredictable, just as life can be unpredictable. Do you know any unpredictable people?
4. Symbolic language can help with communication. Cite an example from this book and from your own life.
5. Sometimes change and confusion can lead to something better. Can you provide such an example? How can a journey into chaos be a journey into truth?
6. Have you ever walked a labyrinth or maze? Describe it.
7. What is your definition of famous or infamous, fame or infamy? What is the attraction of fame?
8. The House of Fame has been described as stationary, standing still, and filled with nouns, while the House of Rumor is a labyrinth of verbs. In the latter, people are rushing about hoping to fly to Fame. Why?
9. How might Chaucer's House of Fame have been performed? Indeed, why might it have been performed?

--Anne W. Prescott

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSION

Scientia Scholae is dedicated exclusively to the promulgation of Medieval Studies at the K-12 levels. It is published in electronic format twice a year, on August 1 and February 1. The former date is meant to aid teachers who are in the midst of preparing their upcoming academic courses; the latter serves as a supplement to those who have had time to implement ideas, or to create new ones, although articles pertaining to the next academic year and its preparations are certainly welcome.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Dolores L. Cullen. *Who's Afraid of Middle English? A Booke of Lystes*. Santa Barbara: Fithian Press, 2002.

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