

Petrarch and Chaucer on Fame*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to make productive connections between Petrarch and Chaucer by exploring their conceptions of fame, particularly literary fame. The first part is a broad overview of the idea of literary fame before Chaucer's time, focusing in particular on such writers as Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Statius, and Dante to sketch out their different perspectives on literary immortality. The next part examines various works by Petrarch that are reflective of his attitude toward fame. As the Church held sway in his time, Petrarch was acutely aware of the emptiness of worldly fame and carried out a profound dissection of its vanity, yet he could not entirely suppress his longing for literary fame and avowed this yearning throughout his works. Chaucer's case is trickier, mainly owing to his characteristic noncommittal attitude. Through an analysis of the *House of Fame*, the

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third part of the paper advances the argument that though Chaucer, like Petrarch, was intimately familiar with the fickleness and absurdity of worldly fame, he betrays a longing for a posthumous literary fame.

Key Words: Chaucer, fame, Petrarch

“Poetry is nothing without fame” (Cooper, 2010: 361). Most writers, at least occasionally, aspire to have their names immortalized by their works. An obvious example of this longing for literary immortality is Milton’s “On Shakespeare,” where the poet writes:

Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
 What need’st thou such weak witness of thy name?
 Thou in our wonder and astonishment
 Hast built thyself a livelong Monument. (1957: 63)

Shakespeare himself enthused about the immortality promised by poetry. In Sonnet 18, he writes:

Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (1992: 1620)

For ancient writers the situation was vastly different. Many ancient writers never felt the desire or need to mention their own names in their writings, since to them the notion of authorship mattered little and the idea of literary fame was totally alien. Over time, the concept of fame gradually germinated, matured, diversified, and took root in the consciousness of literary practitioners. Despite the predominance of Christianity and the concomitant depreciation of worldly fame, with the emergence of humanism fourteenth-century Italy witnessed greater recognition of human achievements in this life. The writings of Petrarch, which became a major driving force behind humanism, perfectly capture the tension between the Christian belittlement of earthly fame and the author’s yearning for it. Petrarch, deeply steeped in Christian orthodoxy, made an incisive and compelling critique of worldly fame; notwithstanding his full knowledge of the Christian doctrine against earthly fame, his eagerness for literary fame evolved into a lifelong obsession.

Geoffrey Chaucer, a younger contemporary of Petrarch,

dramatizes his understanding of the nature of fame in the *House of Fame*, wherein he likewise shows an acute awareness of the evanescence and emptiness of earthly fame. As in Petrarch's case, Chaucer's consciousness of the insignificance of worldly fame did not entirely dampen his longing for literary acclaim, but he eschewed making explicit his yearning. Since Chaucer was keenly aware of the Italian literary landscape through his reading of the "Three Crowns of Florence" and his several sojourns in Italy, this paper is to examine the attitudes of Petrarch and Chaucer toward fame and to analyze the extent to which Petrarch, as both an older contemporary of Chaucer and a pioneer of Italian humanism, might have informed Chaucer.

While Chaucer's writings were greatly informed by a trio of Italian literary giants—Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch—Petrarch is singled out in this study because he has conducted a profound and systematic dissection of worldly fame, especially its brevity and triviality.¹ More importantly, despite his acknowledgment of the paltriness of fame, Petrarch on various occasions openly gave voice to his longing for literary fame.

On the other hand, though Chaucer's knowledge of Petrarch's *oeuvre* is limited, Petrarch's resounding reputation as "poet laureate" had made a profound impact on Chaucer during his first visit to Italy in 1372-1373 (Howard, 1987: 188-189). Chaucer was deeply impressed by the high esteem "the vocation of poet" commanded in contemporary Italy, where the poet enjoyed a considerable degree of independence instead of remaining subservient to court or church (Pearsall, 1992: 103). Intriguingly, some ideas revealed in the *House of Fame* are analogous to those

¹ This does not mean that the other two are insensible of the transience and emptiness of artistic or literary fame. Dante's depiction of Oderisi, a foremost illuminator in the latter half of the thirteenth century, highlights the emptiness of artistic achievements. Even though Dante anticipates that as a poet his fame will eclipse that of his precursors, this statement is gloomily couched because Dante believes that his glory is destined to dim like that of his forerunners (Dante, 2003: 177, 179, 185).

in Petrarch's Coronation Oration; for example, both consider poetry the best, if not the perfect, vehicle for preserving memory and, in Glenn A. Steinberg's words, "the very basis of all renown" (2000: 182). Put simply, for both Petrarch and Chaucer, the importance of poetry and poet, to a great extent, consists in that poetry opens up the possibility of immortality. Equally importantly, by virtue of their mulling over the immortality offered by literature, Petrarch and Chaucer, to differing degrees, sanctify literature by raising its status over those of other arts. Accordingly, this paper will firstly survey how classical writers – Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Cicero, and Statius – looked at the issue of literary fame. After examining how Dante immensely raises the status of "author," this study will focus on Petrarch and Chaucer. Through a close reading of Petrarch's *Metrica*, *My Secret Book*, the *Africa*, and his Coronation Oration, as well as Chaucer's *House of Fame*, this paper concludes that while both Petrarch and Chaucer are eager for literary fame, Petrarch is much more forthright about his yearning and Chaucer's attitude toward literary fame is more subtle.

I. Authors before Petrarch and Chaucer

A. Classical Writers

This section aims to offer a broad outline of how authors in antiquity regarded literary fame.² In Greek epics, literary immortality seems not a central issue to these minstrels. The reason is quite understandable: the earliest bard's name was not mentioned as he was thought to be a passive conveyer of "what the Muses have told him concerning ancient things" (W. Kroll; as cited in Curtius, 1967: 515). This helps explain why to this day scholars

² It however should be made clear that due to the great number of classical authors, the ensuing discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, but to provide an informative overview.

still hotly debate the authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Yet an episode in the *Odyssey* can help illustrate the function of poet in the dissemination of fame. Due to the long absence of Odysseus, a horde of suitors flood to his house, hoping to win Penelope's heart and brazenly squandering Odysseus's property in endless banquets. During their carousals these suitors often force a minstrel named Phemius to entertain them with his lyre and singing (Homer, 1996: 82). In Book XXII, after virtually all the suitors are slaughtered by Odysseus and his son, this minstrel, whose name roughly means "bestower of fame" in Greek (Hexter, 1993: 340), implores Odysseus to spare him because he devotes himself to singing for gods and mortals (Homer, 1996: 450). This episode, together with the implication of the name *Phemius*, suggests that the conception of poet as disseminator of fame has already taken shape in the *Odyssey*. On the other hand, the situation is different in the case of didactic poetry (Curtius, 1967: 515). Hesiod mentions his own name in the *Theogony* (2004: 11) and sketches out his family background in the *Works and Days* (2004: 66, 81). In the opening lines of the *Works and Days*, Hesiod, though not specifically referring to literary fame, claims that Muses bring "fame and glory" (2004: 65).³

In Roman literary landscape, in *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero explicitly maintains that the quest for honor figures prominently in human artistic endeavors: "Public esteem is the nurse of the arts, and all men are fired to application by fame" (1945: 7). Virgil mentions himself at the end of the *Georgics* (2005: 78), but in the *Aeneid* he is silent on its authorship (Curtius, 1967: 515). In the case of the *Thebaid*, though Statius does not explicitly mention his own name, he refers to the hard travails in the course of writing it and, more importantly, his longing for posthumous fame through

³ Gilbert Murray, however, has pointed out that the passages in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days* where Hesiod mentions his own name and his background respectively are probably spurious (1907: 6).

this work:⁴

O my song of Thebes, that I labored at late at night, for
twice six years? Surely present already, Fame has ceased
your way and begun to show you, new-made, to the
future;
already, magnanimous Caesar deigns to acknowledge
you;⁵
Italy's eager schoolboys already recite you from memory.
Live on, I pray! Do not try to surpass the Aeneid divine,
but, at a distance, follow and always revere Her imprint.
(2008: 345)

Stadius's elation revealed in this passage bespeaks at least two divergences from the norm of anonymity in Greek epics. Firstly, the author enthuses about the present success his book enjoys and basks in the admiration his new-found fame brings. More noteworthy are Stadius's uncertainty about the future fate of his book and his passionate yearning for posthumous fame. This aspect of fame inevitably entails competition or rivalry, for securing a place in the literary pantheon implies comparison and besting both one's contemporaries and the greatest writers of the ages. This competitiveness is easily recognizable when Stadius acknowledges the superiority of Virgil's matchless *Aeneid* as a touchstone for his *Thebaid* to "follow and always revere Her [the *Aeneid*'s] imprint" (2008: 345). Hence, from Stadius's case we can conclude that no later than the Roman period the concept of fame had already established itself as a strong incentive to the poetic enterprise.

⁴ It should be noted that the influence of Stadius's (48-96 CE) *Thebaid* on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is tremendous. Lee Patterson has enumerated many places in the *Troilus and Criseyde* where the influence of the *Thebaid* is unmistakable (1991: 134). On the extent of Stadius's impact on Chaucer, Boyd Ashby Wise contends that Stadius is Chaucer's most familiar Latin writer after Ovid and, perhaps, Boethius (1967: 141).

⁵ According to Jane Wilson Joyce's annotation, the current Roman Emperor (Domitian, 51-96 CE) was aware of the existence of the *Thebaid* and might have leafed through it (Stadius, 2008: 458).

B. Dante

The medieval view of fame is rather different from what was evinced in antiquity. The overriding factor responsible for the transformation is the advent of Christianity, and the centerpiece is the Christian distinction between earthly and heavenly fame. According to the Christian orthodoxy, only heavenly fame counts because of its divine provenance, and earthly fame pales into insignificance and is therefore unworthy of serious pursuit (Koonce, 1966: 15). The contrast between heavenly and earthly glory is a recurring theme in the Gospels, and the following two verses from the Gospel of John perfectly capture the sharp distinction: “I [Jesus] do not accept glory from human beings” (5.41) and “they [some members in the Jewish authorities] loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (12.43).⁶

Despite the clear dominance of Christianity in medieval Europe, the rise of Italian humanism revolutionized the Western conception of worldly fame, and its influence can still be felt to this day. Moreover, despite the Christian emphasis on divine glory and its disparagement of earthly fame, it is still possible to ferret out numerous examples wherein worldly fame is exalted. That is, though worldly fame was in principle disdained in the Middle Ages, human longing for fame never completely disappeared. Particularly relevant to our discussion of how Petrarch and Chaucer conceived worldly fame is Italian humanism, which was characterized in part by its emphasis on fame. As Robert Kilburn Root writes, “Italy was the one part of medieval Europe where fame was recognized as an incentive and a reward surpassing even political power and material wealth” (1957: 160). Donald R. Howard likewise points out that fame was the Italian “pet obsession,” as evidenced by the fact that explorations of the nature of fame appear in both the

⁶ The author learns of these two references from Koonce (1966: 16-17).

Decameron and *Il Teseida* (1987: 237). The Italian influence is singled out here for two reasons. First, it is generally acknowledged that the *House of Fame* is informed by earlier Italian writers, particularly Dante and Petrarch. Second, by the end of the thirteenth century poets and artists had been already held in high esteem in Italy. Derek Albert Pearsall observes that Italian poets, especially those based in Florence, were well respected, and that these poets could state their opinions freely (1992: 104).⁷ The pervasive pursuit of literary fame in Italy is also attested to by the example of Albertino Musatto, a contemporary of Dante. As a poet laureate, the extent to which he was fêted is staggering: “Every Christmas Day the doctors and students of both colleges at the university came in solemn procession before his [Musatto’s] house with trumpets and, as it seems, with burning tapers, to salute him and bring him presents” (Burckhardt, 1958: 152). In the case of Dante, he achieved excellence as both poet and political commentator and desired to be accordingly recognized. Though Dante once claimed that fame is empty and transitory, his longing for it is obvious (Burckhardt, 1958: 151). Boccaccio, in his biography of Dante, also explicitly refers to Dante’s overt and perhaps excessive yearning for fame: “He was eager for honour and glory, perhaps more eager than befitted his illustrious virtue” (2002: 43).⁸

For Dante, emphasis on fame entails a reconsideration of

⁷ In *Life of Dante*, Boccaccio mentions that the bulk of Dante’s literary output is written in “our own Florentine idiom” (2002: 7), and that Dante is a native of Florence, where he receives his elementary education (13). Yet it should be noted that the relation between Dante and his birthplace is bittersweet: Dante was exiled from Florence on political grounds and died among the strangers bitterly (Boccaccio, 2002: 23-33).

⁸ Besides Dante and Petrarch, another pride of Florence, Boccaccio, was also keen on the topic of fame. Besides being treated in the *Amorosa Visione*, fame is the focal point in both *Il Teseida* and the last day’s talk in the *Decameron* (Howard, 1987: 237).

authorship as theoretically only an independent author deserves fame. In *Il Convivio*, Dante embarks on his discussion of “author” from the etymological perspective. Dante reasons that *autor* might be derived from two sources: the first is the disused Latin verb *auieo*, which roughly means “to tie words together” (1990: 162), and this aspect of meaning applies only to “poets who have tied their words with the art of poetry” (162). The other provenance is the Greek word *autentin*, which, according to Dante, means “worthy of faith and obedience” (162). In this sense, “author” refers to a person who is trustworthy. Dante proceeds to explain that the idea of “authority” is derived from *autenin*, and that only when one, such as Aristotle, is worthy of trust can his words carry weight (162). Thus, for Dante an author is more than a person who merely knows how to combine words to perfection—a true author must be trustworthy as well. A. J. Minnis therefore suggests that for Dante great poets should be “men of authority in the philosophical-moral sense” (Minnis, Scattergood, & Smith, 1995: 228). In this sense, Dante greatly augmented the status of “author.”

II. Petrarch

Petrarch’s conception of the nature of literary fame merits special attention not simply because he played a major role in promulgating the importance of literature, but also because he exerted a palpable impact on Chaucer’s literary career.⁹ Like Dante, Petrarch essentially regards literary fame “as an absolute, a way of immortalizing themselves [writers] against the passage of

⁹ According to William T. Rossiter, Chaucer translated at least two works of Petrarch: the sonnet “S’amor non è” and the Latin tale of Griseida (2010: 1). Besides, whether Chaucer had met Petrarch in Italy is still a moot point. Rossiter maintains that there exists no conclusive evidence that the two had met in person (2010: 38-40). Moreover, Howard suggests that textual perusal of the *House of Fame* evidences Chaucer’s, if limited, awareness of Petrarch’s *Triumph of Fame* (1987: 237).

time” (Cooper, 2010: 366). The orthodox medieval conception of mortal life, indicates James Harvey Robinson, is that earthly life is merely “a brief period of probation,” during which everyone in a society is expected to fulfill dutifully his or her role allotted by Providence, hopefully envisioning a life of beatitude in another world (1970: 18). Yet Petrarch was unconvinced of the passivity implied by this kind of mindset; instead, he wondered if there could be worthy secular causes for people to pursue.

Petrarch’s idea of poet as immortalizer emerges early in his literary career. In his *Metrica*, a poem on the death of his mother, Eletta,¹⁰ Petrarch not only feels relieved at Eletta’s being lifted to a new and better world, but also foresees his apodictic following in her footsteps sometime in the future. Jonathan Usher points out that, though a fledgling poet, in this poem Petrarch had already begun to consider himself a “secular immortalizer” in exploring some pivotal concepts which he kept revisiting and refining in later works: (1) through language the poet preserves memories; (2) the essential vulnerability of memory due to the ravages of time; (3) the poet is immortalized once he succeeds in immortalizing others; (4) fame is destined to fade with the decay of body; and (5) funerary monuments are of little help in retaining fame (Usher, 2007: 62-63).

Petrarch’s longing for earthly reputation was hedged about with contemporary Christian disdain for attachment to this world.

¹⁰ The length of *Metrica*, thirty-eight Latin hexameters, corresponds to Eletta’s age at her death (Kirkham, 2009: 6). A prose translation of a portion of the poem is offered by Jonathan Usher: “For all time, faithful mother, my tongue will sing your glory. I shall offer my obsequies to you for a long time. And after the death of my perishable body, so far still alive, dear mother, whence you too still live, when the grave will have weighed down on my ashes too, unless forgetful age presses down upon me, we shall live equally, equally we shall both be remembered. Should harsh fate have something else in store, and unwelcome death should come to extinguish my fame along with my frail body, then I pray that you at least live on after the grave, and Lethal oblivion not drown you” (as cited in Usher, 2007: 62).

To weigh all aspects of his lingering doubts, Petrarch wrote a little book *My Secret Book* to dissect his misgivings. Written in the form of an imaginary dialogue between himself and St. Augustine, this book wrestles with, among other things, Petrarch's innermost desire for fame. When Petrarch confesses to hankering for "glory among men and an immortal reputation" (2002a: 82), Augustine, a stickler for orthodox Christian doctrines, responds that this unhealthy desire may militate against "the way to true immortality" (2002a: 83). As Petrarch agrees with Augustine on the definition of reputation as "simply being talked about by many people," Augustine immediately points out the absurdity of Petrarch's longing for reputation (Petrarch, 2002a: 83). Augustine queries why Petrarch, essentially a polymath whose taste is far removed from that of the general public, cares so much about the popular opinion: "It [worldly fame] is therefore a mere shifting breath of wind and—something which you will find hard to bear—the breath of many people" (Petrarch, 2002a: 83).

As Petrarch enthuses about his determination to pursue literary fame, Augustine dismisses this infatuation with "a mere passing breath of wind" as a glaring folly (2002a: 86). Augustine then proceeds to elucidate the factors responsible for the brevity of mortal fame: death and forgetfulness, argues Augustine, render mortal fame inherently transient. Other human deficiencies, such as envy, hatred, hostility, and fickleness, also shorten the duration of fame (Petrarch, 2002a: 89). For Augustine, the pursuit of immortality by way of monuments is no less ill-advised. Augustine here adduces Petrarch's own words in the *Africa* to demonstrate the unreliability and transience of material glory: "The sepulchre will soon fall into ruin, together with the epitaph carved on its marble: then, my son, you will suffer the second death" (Petrarch, 2002a: 89). For Petrarch, any attempt to preserve one's reputation by virtue of erecting physical monuments is doomed to failure as all feats will fade into absolute obscurity when the inevitable decay of building materials sets in.

When the two interlocutors turn their attention to Petrarch's literary pursuit, his unfinished epic the *Africa* becomes the focal point of the conversation.¹¹ In a dream vision in the second book, the wraith of Publius Cornelius Scipio acquaints his son with the idea that fame is destined to be short-lived if the preservation of it relies merely on material monuments:

. . . In hasty flight
 the ages pass; all time is swept away,
 and ye who rush toward death, ye are but shades
 and only shades, light dust or wisps of smoke
 tossed by the wind. This blood-stained glory, then,
 what boots it? And what purpose, say, is served
 by arduous effort on a transient earth? (1977: 34-35)

Thus marble inscriptions on imposing mausoleums by no means guarantee posthumous immortality; on the contrary, they exacerbate the sense of absurdity evoked by the "second death":

the years will pass, your mortal form decay;
 your limbs will lie in an unworthy tomb;
 which in its turn will crumble, while your name
 fades from the sculptured marble. Thus you'll know
 a second death. . . . (1977: 37)

Scipio continues his counsel by contending that an accomplished writer who celebrates heroic exploits, such as Ennius, can stave off the second death, albeit not indefinitely. That is, books might extend a life that would be otherwise truncated by "the second death," but the ravages of time will eventually prevail and lead to "the third death":

¹¹ According to Simone Marchesi, the *Africa* plays a major role in Petrarch's efforts to establish himself as "the leading intellectual and poet-historian of his age" (2009: 114). Since the *Africa* is intended for Petrarch's self-promotion, his various writings are strewn with references to its existence and progress. For further understanding of the *Africa*, see Marchesi (2009, 113-130).

. . . Books too soon die,
 for what with futile art a mortal makes
 is also mortal. Should posterity
 strive to preserve such works and so oppose
 voracious age, eager to check time's march,
 it were impossible. . .
 . . . the earth itself
 must die and take with it its dying scrolls;
 so yet a third death you must undergo. (1977: 38)

Scipio here prophesies that in the future a young Etrurian writer, “a second Ennius,” will chronicle the feats of his son (Petrarch, 1977: 38). Interestingly, this “second Ennius” is none other than Petrarch himself. In Book 9, Ennius, afflicted by a sense of inadequacy that his literary talent might not be up to the task of immortalizing Scipio Africanus, is visited by Homer in a dream vision.¹² In a conversation amounting to nearly one hundred lines, Homer anticipates the advent of a youthful Italian poet who will complete the unfinished task of Ennius (Petrarch, 1977: 230-231). This long-awaited poet can be easily identified as Petrarch since he

. . . will be called Franciscus;
 and all the glorious exploits you have seen
 he will assemble in one volume—alle
 the deed in Spain, the arduous Libyan trials;
 and he will call his poem *Africa*.¹³ (1977: 231)

¹² Scipio Africanus is the general who defeated Hannibal in the second Carthaginian War.

¹³ Petrarch's use of “poetic metempsychosis” here, according to Usher, is to slot himself in the literary history despite a considerable lapse of time between his predecessors and him (2007: 64). Usher points out that in Book 4 Petrarch is described by Scipio as “velut Ennius alter,” and that this “succession formula” was commonplace in classical and medieval times (64). Livy, for example, called Hamilcar “Mars alter,” and similar instances include Virgil, Jerome, and

This act of self-aggrandizement might sound somewhat brash, but it again points up Petrarch's fervent desire for literary fame.

Petrarch's "A Draft of a Letter to Posterity" also attests to his longing for posthumous fame and to his angst about what impact he will make on later generations. In this short letter Petrarch expresses his uncertainty about whether he will be remembered by posterity and, if so, whether his memory will be favorable: "Although I much doubt whether my obscure little name can have reached you at such a distance of time and space . . . Opinions will indeed differ about me" (2002b: 95).

From previous analysis, it is clear that Petrarch had soberly cogitated on the hurdles to immortality and on the remote chances of achieving it. Yet it seems that these obstacles did not dampen his craving for posthumous fame. When Petrarch was crowned poet laureate and declared a Roman citizen in 1341, the oration he delivered during the acceptance ceremony, as John M. Fyler argues, is the loftiest manifesto for literature in the fourteenth century (1979: 62). By the same token, Ernest H. Wilkins glowingly maintains that no other extant medieval treatise better catches the spirit of transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance than this oration (1953: 1241).

At the outset of this oration, Petrarch sanctifies literature above other arts by shrouding it in mystery: while in other arts excellence can be attained by assiduity, the attainment of literary achievements entails "a certain inner and divinely given energy" (1953: 1242). Here Petrarch adduces three classical authorities—Cicero, Juvenal, and Lucan—to underpin his insistence that literature enjoy a privileged position when compared with other arts, and that poetic creation is essentially difficult. Cicero argues

Giovanni del Virgilio (2007: 64). Metempsychosis applies to the belief that the soul of one writer can be transmitted to a future writer (Gillespie, 2010: 210), and the idea of metempsychosis has traditionally been attributed to the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras. For further understanding of metempsychosis, see Barnes (1982: 106-114); Burkert (1972, 120-165).

in his panegyric to Aulus Licinius Archias:

We have it upon the authority of the most learned men that whereas attainment in other activities depends upon talent, learning, and skill, the poet attains through his very nature, is moved by the energy that is within his mind, and as it were inspired by a divine inbreathing—so that Ennius fairly calls poets sacred in their own right, since they appear to be commended to us by the possession of a divine gift. (as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1243)

Likewise, the famed Roman satirist Juvenal emphasizes the inherent difficulty of the poet's task by claiming that "It takes a noble mind, not one dismayed by the cost of a coverlet, to behold the chariots, the horses, and the faces of the gods, and such a fury as could confound the Rutulian" (*The Satires* VII. 66-68; as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1243).¹⁴ Lucan similarly contends that "Sacred and great is the task of poets" (as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1243).

It is noteworthy that in this oration Petrarch also attempts to justify the human quest for personal glory and criticizes the duplicity of those philosophers who speechify about their contempt for glory: "the desire for glory is innate not merely in the generality of men but in greatest measure in those who are of some wisdom and some excellence. Hence it is that although many philosophers have much to say in contempt of glory, few or none can be found who really condemn it" (1953: 1245). To Petrarch, the disdain for celebrity claimed by the aforesaid philosophers is belied by the fact that they proudly inscribed their names on their works that attempt to discourage the pursuit of glory; instead, he, following Cicero, believes that the pursuit of glory is an innate and, therefore, innocuous part of human nature (1245).¹⁵ Thus, it is

¹⁴ "The noble mind" refers to Virgil, and the allusion here is to the *Aeneid* (Virgil, 1986: 205), where Allecto persuades Turnus, king of the Rutuli, into fighting against Aeneas by incendiary rhetoric (Juvenal, 1991: 186).

¹⁵ Cicero once said in the presence of Julius Caesar, "You will not deny that you crave glory most eagerly" (as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1245).

human nature to court fame, and to Petrarch it is Cicero who most vividly conveys the essence of this desire: “There is hardly anyone who after the completion of a laborious task or the meeting of perils does not desire glory as a reward for what he has accomplished” (*De Officiis* XIX; as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1245). For Petrarch, desire for praise or glory alone will suffice to motivate the poet to write: “The thought of the listener excites the toiling writer; excellence grows when it is praised; and the thought of glory is a powerful spur” (1245).

To Petrarch the poet’s reward is bipartite: “To be more precise, this immortality is itself twofold, for it includes both the immortality of the poet’s own name and the immortality of the names of those whom he celebrates” (1953: 1247). Regarding the first aspect of immortality, Petrarch, citing Ovid, implies that a poet can be immortalized by his work as long as it reaches excellence: “And now I have finished my work, which neither the Wrath of Jove nor fire nor sword nor the ravages of time can destroy” (as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1947). Petrarch then proceeds to illustrate the second dimension of fame, wherein the poet plays a decidedly pivotal role. Invoking three ancient authorities—Virgil, Statius, and Lucan—Petrarch avers that but for the poet’s work even those who have accomplished towering achievements by intrepidly overcoming seemingly intractable hurdles in their lifetime will be consigned to oblivion soon after death.¹⁶ In this sense, it is regrettable that people meriting eternal memory have no capable writers to chronicle their deservedly memorable deeds.¹⁷

¹⁶ “You too, now consecrate, shall survive the unforgetting years, even though my songs rise from a less lofty lyre” (Statius, 2008: 273). “the future will read you and me: our *Pharsalia* / will live, not condemned to shadows in any age” (Lucan, 2012: 286). It should be noted that the *Pharsalia* is Lucan’s account of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar in 8,000 lines, and that the title *Pharsalia* derives from the place where the most decisive battle occurs—“the plains of Pharsalus of Thessaly” (Fox & Adams, 2012: xix).

¹⁷ Here the authority cited to underpin Petrarch’s argument is Horace, who in his *Odes* writes, “Many mighty men lived before Agamemnon, but all are buried in a

Thus, an interesting phenomenon came to Petrarch's notice: to be remembered by posterity, some dignitaries purposely cultivated men of letters. In this respect, Petrarch invokes Horace to underpin his argument that people's memory largely hinges on whether they have an accomplished author to immortalize their names.¹⁸

Hence for Petrarch writing is sorely necessary to the pursuit of posthumous fame. That is, without the agency of writing even surpassing human achievements are subject to erosion by time and will sink into obscurity soon after the death of these luminaries. Among the many kinds of writing, Petrarch expresses a marked preference for literary works, since for him only literature can preserve, if not indefinitely, the glorious feats accomplished by humans, and this unique quality of literature also celebrates its practitioners. In this sense, poets are the spreaders of fame because they are instrumental in conferring immortality to those they chronicle.

III. Chaucer: the *House of Fame*

Chaucer's attitude toward fame in the *House of Fame* is a tricky issue, and the main reason for the frequent bewilderment is Chaucer's characteristic style, whereby he oftentimes oscillates "between the sublime and the ridiculous" (Minnis, Scattergood, & Smith, 1995: 181). This observation obviously applies to the *House of Fame*, for in this poem Chaucer seldom makes explicit

tearless night . . . since they lack an inspired bard" (1983: IV.9.25-28). Alexander the Great had felt a similar sense of urgency to find a suitable writer to document his achievements: as related by Cicero in his *Oration for Archias*, when Alexander visited the tomb of Achilles, he was unable to conceal his great envy of Achilles because Homer, "the prince of all poets, bestowed everlasting fame upon Achilles" (as cited in Petrarch 1953: 1248). In 62 BCE Cicero wrote the *Pro Archia* to champion Archias, a Greek poet who intended to apply for Roman citizenship (Cerutti, 2006: xx).

¹⁸ "There is little difference between buried indolence and buried excellence" (as cited in Petrarch, 1953: 1248).

his conception of literature and literary fame, and it is small wonder that Howard views it as Chaucer's "most puzzling poem" (Howard, 1987: 232). As a budding poet, Chaucer reveals his uncertainty about the ends of literature in the *House of Fame*, and his reflection on fame is closely intertwined with his mulling over the nature of literature. As this paper will demonstrate, despite all these uncertainties Chaucer betrays a yearning for literary recognition, as evidenced by the literary conventions he emulates and the attention he lavishes on the nature of fame.

The "Second Nun's Prologue" affords a clue to what prompted Chaucer to engage in literary writing. In this prologue, the Second Nun prefaces her story of St. Cecilie with a short but intriguing commentary on how to ward off sloth by "leveful bisynesse" (1987: 5).¹⁹ For the prim lady, lethargy is the scourge of evils in that the devil tends to smite the feckless by planting the seeds of laziness in them and to seize whatever chance to take control of them when they are enfeebled by idleness (1-21). As the nun considers her storytelling a "feithful busyness" (24) to expel idleness, we can assume that provision of refreshing entertainment, among other things, constitutes a possible justification for Chaucer's engaging in creative writing. While it is generally acknowledged that Chaucer's early works, such as his vision-poems, are only intended to entertain a small and intimate group in the court, a notable concern about the reception of his works among the general public is keenly felt throughout Chaucer's corpus (Strohm, 2003: 5).

If we begin our discussion with Chaucer's portrayal of Aeneas and Dido in the *House of Fame*, our first impression of fame is definitely unfavorable. For example, in his telling their story, the narrator, though genuinely sympathetic towards Dido, nevertheless casts aspersions on her credulity and impaired judgment.

¹⁹ Throughout this paper, citations from the *Canterbury Tales* are cited by line number and in accordance with Chaucer (1987).

Meanwhile, the narrator points out that the appearance of things is essentially treacherous: “Allas, what harme doth apparence / Whan hit is fals in existence!” (Chaucer, 1997: 265-266).²⁰ While lamenting Dido’s misjudgment, the narrator at once explodes the classical myth about Aeneas by denouncing him as a false lover (280-285), arguing that the pretext used by Aeneas to desert Dido is totally untenable. In a certain sense, by reinterpreting the relationship between Dido and Aeneas, Chaucer intends to demonstrate that their canonical images are open to revision even though these images were created by Ovid and Virgil. The natural corollary of this reflection is that even the judgments rendered by classical authorities might be problematic. Therefore, if the judgments of previous authorities do not necessarily guarantee accuracy, the value of worldly fame, which essentially builds on the popular opinion, is dubious.

In the *House of Fame*, fame is far from an approving term as it is transitory and, more importantly, arbitrarily bestowed. Chaucer’s vivid delineation of the architecture of the house of fame is indicative of his awareness of the limitations of worldly fame. The rock on which the house of fame is perched baffles the narrator, who cannot name the “congeled matere” (1997: 1126). Metaphorically speaking, the name of the crystal and the nature of fame are analogous in at least one aspect: both are mysterious unknown quantities waiting to be explored. When later it gradually dawns on the narrator that the foundation of the house is entirely made of “roche of yse” (1130), the reader meanwhile becomes conscious of the caprice of fame since its house is constructed on a shaky and unstable foundation.

The fickle nature of worldly fame is further highlighted by the narrator’s portrayal of the inscriptions of past luminaries’ names on the slope. All the names, according to the narrator, were

²⁰ In this paper, citations from the *House of Fame* are cited by line number and in accordance with Chaucer (1997).

once well-known, but in each name one or two letters have become unrecognizable due to the thawing of the icy rock (Chaucer, 1997: 1136-1145). This dismal sight triggers a sense of sadness in the narrator, who laments how short-lived fame is in the tide of time: “So unfamouse was wox hir fame, / But, men seyn, what may ever last?” (1146-1147). While still trying to digest the disheartening fact, the narrator spots on the northern side of the hill the names of other famous ancients and finds that all these inscriptions are well preserved and therefore perfectly legible (1551-1158). The cause of the difference between these two slopes is soon identified by the narrator: the inscriptions on the northern hill are protected from the sunshine by the shade offered by a high castle (1159-1164). This sudden epiphany deepens the impression that the preservation of fame oftentimes hinges on irrelevant factors. The vivid delineation of the different fates of previous personalities simply due to the locations where their names are inscribed attests to the prominent role pure chance plays in the continuation of fame.

Another aspect of fame, as the narrator observes, is its tendency towards self-aggrandizement. After strolling awhile in the palace and reciting a portion of household names he sees there, an intriguing phenomenon comes to the narrator’s notice. The beryl on the walls, the narrator notes, magnifies things in their reflection:²¹

Upon these walles of berile
 That shoone ful lyghter than a glas
 And made wel more than hit was
 To semen every thinge ywis, (Chaucer, 1997: 1288-1291)

For the narrator, this special feature of beryl is strongly suggestive of the self-augmentative and deceptive nature of worldly fame. By

²¹ According to Nick Havely, beryl is a kind of rock-crystal that was “used for glazing and magnifying (e.g. in spectacles)” (Chaucer, 1997: 179).

highlighting its inflated nature, Chaucer lays bare the unreliability of fame, which swells a little every time it is bandied about.

This metaphoric comparison is visualized by Chaucer near the end of the poem, where the murmur of many people drifts into the narrator's ears. When people try to relate what they have just heard to others, they begin their conversation in a similar fashion:

‘Thus hath he sayde,’ and ‘Thus de dothe,’
 And ‘Thus shal hit be,’ and ‘Thus herde y seye,’
 ‘That shal be founde, that dar I leye -’
 That alle the folke that ys alyve
 Ne han the kunnyng to discryve
 The thinges that I herde there,
 What a-loude and what in ere. (Chaucer, 1997: 2052-2058)

In this hubbub what amazes the narrator the most is that everyone relates what he or she has just received to someone else without delay, and that everyone further embellishes the stories when recounting them:

But al the wondermost was this:
 Whan oon had herde a thinge, ywis,
 He come forthright to another wight
 And gan him tellen anonryght
 The same that him was tolde,
 Or hyt a forlonge way was olde—
 But gan somewhat for to eche
 To this tydinge in hys speche
 More than hit ever was. (Chaucer, 1997: 2059-2067)

In this scene, the words uttered by these mouths are likened to sparks: transmitted from mouth to mouth, originally tiny sparks evolve into flames that can engulf a city (Chaucer, 1997: 2076-2080). For Chaucer, if all pieces of news are “woxen more on every tonge / Than ever it was” (2082-2083) in the process of

transmission before piling onto the Goddess Fame, who in turn decides on the lifespan of each piece (2111-2113), the merit of earthly fame is profoundly doubtful.

The narrator's qualms about the fickle nature of fame also issue from the way in which Fame pronounces on whether to bestow her blessings on her petitioners. Chaucer's portrait of Fame is, by and large, unappealing and even grotesque:

For as feele yen had she
 As fetheres upon foules be,
 Or weren on the bestes four
 That Goddis trone gunne honoure,
 As John writ in th'hApocalips.
 Hir heere, that oundye was and crips,
 As burned gold hyt shoon to see-
 And, soth to tellen, also she
 Had also fele upstondyng eres
 And tonges as on bestes heres-
 And on hir fete waxen saugh y
 Partriches wynges, redely. (Chaucer, 1997: 1381-1392)

The bizarre appearance and nature of Fame are crucially important to our discussion. In his depiction of the character of Fame, Chaucer is greatly indebted to Virgil's *Aeneid*.²² According to the Virgilian account, after Aeneas and Dido consummate their relationship in a cavern, rumor (*fama*), "the swiftest traveller of all the ills on earth" (Virgil, 1986: 96), thereupon roves around and snowballs along the way, transforming itself from a tiny thing into a gargantuan entity. Her singularly hideous appearance²³ manifests

²² According to Minnis, prime among the influences on Chaucer's portrayal of Fame are Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Ovid's influence is more marked in Chaucer's depiction of Fame's appearance (Minnis, Scattergood, & Smith, 1995: 185).

²³ A terrible, grotesque monster, each feather upon whose body-
 Incredible though it sounds-has a sleepless eye beneath it,

fama's arbitrary mingling of fact and fiction, with which she enjoys regaling people (Virgil, 1986: 96-97). In the Virgilian version, fame's nature as a hybrid of fact and fiction is pointedly foregrounded, and Chaucer reworks this aspect in the *House of Fame*.

The idea that fame is essentially susceptible to change was far from novel in medieval times. Isidore of Seville, for example, maintains that the term *fama* (report) applies to both good and bad things (2006: 124), and the unedifying example of *fama* cited by Isidore is, interestingly, none other than the case of Dido. Isidore proceeds to argue that the truth of *fama* is oftentimes highly suspect, "either adding many things to the truth, or distorting the truth" (2006: 125).²⁴ By the same token, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, fame in its medieval context meant both "reputation (whether good or bad)" and "any report, rumor, or widely circulated opinion" (fame, 1953).

The dubious nature of fame is vividly presented in the *House of Fame*, particularly in Chaucer's depiction of how the Goddess indiscriminately bestows fame or ill repute on different groups of petitioners. Previous critics, therefore, tend to read the *House of Fame* as a reflection of Chaucer's contempt for the earthly world. This view is not unsound, but the argument that Chaucer is entirely uninterested in earthly fame might not be tenable. There is no doubt that Chaucer, under the influence of Christian doctrines and, in particular, Boethius's disparagement of earthly fame, was

And for every eye she has also a tongue, a voice and a pricked ear.
At night she flits midway between earth and sky, through the groom.
Screeching, and never closes her eyelids in sweet slumber:
By day she is perched like a look-out either upon a roof-top

Or some high turret; . . . (Virgil, 1986: 97)

²⁴ Modern scholarship has further delved into the nuances of *fāma*, which contains at least seven shades of meaning: 1. News, tidings; 2. Rumour, hearsay; 3. Tradition, story; 4. Public opinion, talk; 5. The report which a person has, one's reputation; 6. One's good reputation or ill repute; 7. Fame, glory, renown (fama, 1982).

generally critical of earthly fame, yet the sober reflection on fame signals at once Chaucer's abiding regard for fame. In other words, if the idea of earthly fame had never haunted Chaucer, his strenuous efforts to downplay worldly glory would be inexplicable.

An examination of the literary devices in the *House of Fame* reveals that a longing for literary fame, whether inborn or acquired through exposure to Italian humanism, lingers in Chaucer despite his apparent disapproval of earthly glory. For starters, Chaucer's invocation of the Muses at the beginnings of Book 2 and 3 (1997: 520-22, 1091-1109) speaks of a significant urge to compare himself with classical precursors. Piero Boitani observes that Chaucer is the first English poet to plead for divine help from the Muses (1984: 203).²⁵ As his Italian forerunners such as Dante and Boccaccio had adopted the same technique, the fact that Chaucer followed suit implicitly betrays his desire for a sense of connectedness with classical writers through his Italian precursors.

Similarly, Chaucer's division of the *House of Fame* into three books betokens his literary aspirations. Though the modern reader might be unimpressed by this seemingly unremarkable move, it was revolutionary in Chaucer's time. John Anthony Burrow maintains that the act of dividing one work into multiple parts was an innovation in English poetry (1982: 18). As is his invocation of the Muses, Chaucer's division of the *House of Fame* into three books bespeaks his ambition to emulate classical giants in a poem chiefly concerned with the nature of literature and fame.

What prevents Chaucer from speaking his mind about his ambition for fame is the Christian doctrine that is intended to

²⁵ Minnis, nevertheless, points out an inaccuracy in Boitani's argument. Since some English poets before Chaucer had already adopted the device of invocation in their Latin poems, it is more precise to describe Chaucer as the first one to "invoke the Muses in Middle English" (Minnis, Scattergood, & Smith, 1995: 174). As for those earlier English poets who had invoked the Muses in their Latin works, see Minnis et al., 1995: 174. Besides, Chaucer invokes the Muses in two other poems: *Anelida and Arcite* and the *Troilus and Criseyde* (Hardman, 1986: 478).

inculcate people against inconsequential and transient earthly reputation and to turn their attention to the pursuit of divine glory. One of the most potent medieval treatises on the distinction between earthly fame and divine glory is Bonaventure's *Soliloquies*.²⁶ In it, Bonaventure, citing St. Gregory,²⁷ claims that the distance between one and heavenly bliss is in proportion to the extent to which he is attached to worldly things (1655: 116). Bonaventure then proceeds to undermine the lure of worldly glory by laying bare its empty and deceptive nature: "For every thing [sic] that is here [this world] eminent, is more enthralled with sorrow, then it can be delighted with honour" (117).²⁸ Not unlike Chaucer, who observes in the *House of Fame* that worldly fame oftentimes stems from the injudicious judgment of the common people, Bonaventure forthrightly argues that glory is nothing but "a vain tickling of the ears" (118).

For Bonaventure, the pursuit of worldly glory is nullified by the inevitable death, which effaces the legacies of even the greatest. For Bonaventure, the thought of death readily exposes the emptiness of human feats and of the world, and St. Gregory's maxim pinpoints the pathetic nature of human life: "Behold what a nothing man is" (1655: 120).²⁹ Bonaventure therefore admonishes that all worldly things are nothing but illusory dreams, and that all pride and riches will eventually evaporate without a trace (120).³⁰

For Bonaventure, unlike the salvation promised by God,

²⁶ Bonaventure (ca. 1217-1274) is a towering medieval theologian and generally considered by modern scholars one of the foremost figures in his age (Bonaventure, 1993).

²⁷ Gregory I, Saint (540-604), "architect of the medieval papacy" and "a notable theologian who was also an administrative, social, liturgical, and moral reformer" (Gregory I, Saint, 1993).

²⁸ Though I consult the 1655 edition, I adopt modern spelling (e.g. "sorrow" rather than "forrow").

²⁹ The Latin original reads, "Ecce, quam nihil est homo" (Bonaventura, 2003: 82).

³⁰ Bonaventure enumerates an array of ancient luminaries, including King Solomon, Alexander the Great, Samson, Roman Caesars, and many others, to underpin his argument (1655: 120-121).

“vain glory, short mirth, the power of the world, a great family, the pleasure of the flesh, the falsity of riches, the sweetness of concupiscence” will all dissolve once death takes up the reins (1655: 121). The origin of this otherworldly inclination is conceivably biblical, and Bonaventure believes that the incisive teachings of the Gospel according to John and the first letter of John account for the futility of worldly pursuits (122).³¹ Thus, it is divine grace, rather than earthly glory, that should be striven for, since the pursuit of the latter leads only to an agonizing abyss: “Leave thou therefore all these things for him, who [God] is above all” (Bonaventure, 1655: 122-23).

Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer translated from Latin into English, is another noteworthy treatise on earthly glory in the Middle Ages.³² Boethius’s aversion to secular glory is aptly illustrated by his citation of the eponymous heroine’s lines in Euripides’s *Andromache*: “O glory, glory, all those thousands of mortals / that you have inflated to make their lives seem great!” (as cited in Boethius, 2008: 73-74).³³ Indeed, several aspects of fame presented in the *House of Fame* have obvious parallels in Boethius: fame, being based on the indiscreet judgment of the masses (or Fame, in Chaucer’s case), is therefore

³¹ “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you”(John 15.19), and “And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever”(1 John 2.17).

³² Though Boethius was canonized as St Severinus after his death and had written extensively on theological issues in his lifetime, the idea of Christian salvation is seldom mentioned in the *De Consolatione philosophiae* (Andrew, 2006: 32, 34). In addition, Boethius’s *De Consolatione philosophiae* was one of the earliest works rendered into English. An extant tenth-century codex, now reduced to “a collection of charred leaves,” includes a translation of it in entirety in Old English prose and verse, “the former certainly by [king] Alfred, the latter probably” (Frank, 1993: 3). The huge popularity of the *De Consolatione philosophiae* can be further attested to by the fact that Elizabeth I had translated it (Hu, 2006: 328).

³³ Another recent translation reads, “Reputation! Reputation! You do indeed puff off countless nobodies to greatness” (Euripides, 1994: 43).

essentially tasteless; moreover, fame typically comes “randomly, for little or no reason” (74).³⁴ Arbitrariness aside, another aspect that defines fame is its paltry finiteness: when contrasted with “the infinite stretch of the eons,” the duration of any fame is nothing (2008: 55).³⁵ Boethius’s pessimistic tone undoubtedly informs the *House of Fame*, wherein Chaucer hints that whether a work will be remembered by posterity might hinge only on chance. For both Boethius and Chaucer, earthly affairs pale into insignificance once we are allowed to anticipate bliss in the heavenly kingdom.

In this religious climate, Chaucer was undoubtedly aware of the Christian depreciation of secular fame, which is vividly illustrated by his depiction of the two groups pleading for obscurity before Fame. Among the nine batches of people who come forward to Fame, the fourth and fifth groups are equally unassuming. Both lots opt out of the pursuit of secular glory, but are treated in diametrically opposite ways by the fickle Fame. What is intriguing here is that when they express their indifference to worldly fame, both groups refer to God’s love as their only cause:

³⁴ In some ways, Boethian sentiment over the illusory and arbitrary nature of worldly fame is prefigured by Euripides, who claims, “Those who have fame by truth I congratulate; but those by falsehoods, I will not consider that they have, except by chance to seem wise” (1994: 43).

³⁵ “Let him who hopes for fame consider / the extent of the starry skies / arching over our small planet. / Can he think of shouting his name / and proclaiming his pride into the icy / distances looming above him? / Does he rather wish to free / his neck from mortality’s yoke? / Will his name find a home in the mouths of strangers, / and will death be at all impressed / that welcomes alike the proud and the humble? / Where are Fabricius’ bones / or those of Brutus or stern Cato? / They are reduced now, / those glorious names, to anecdotes. / What can we know of the dead? / And do you suppose you won’t be forgotten / or that fame will keep you alive / on the lips of men for even a moment? / Your last day will take / even this hope from your unclenching / hand in a second death” (Boethius, 2008: 55-56) Boethius’s foregrounding of the emptiness of temporal life obviously makes an imprint on the ending of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, where when the slain Troilus is lifted to the heaven and overlooks the turmoil below, it dawns on him that all human pursuits, whether of love, fame, wealth, or anything else, are impolitic and vain.

But we ne kepen have no fame.
 Hide our werkes and our name
 For Goddys love—for, certes, we
 Han certeyn doon hyt for bounte
 And for no maner other thinge,

 And seide they yeven nought a leke
 For no fame, no for suche renoun—
 For they for contemplacioun
 And Goddes love hadde ywrought,
 Ne of fame wolde they nought. (Chaucer, 1997: 1695-1699,
 1708-1712)

Though Chaucer makes no explicit reference to the Christian deity, it is reasonable to assume that here Chaucer highlights the Christian belittlement of earthly distinctions. While the Christian disapproval of worldly things is meant to characterize the fourth group, whose members single-mindedly strive for divine grace, the number of people in this group is amazingly small: “But, certeyn, they were wonder fewe-” (Chaucer, 1997: 1691). By particularly pointing out the small number of people in this group, Chaucer seems to imply that those who can completely disregard earthly reputation are a rarity.

Despite the salient influence of the Christian disparagement of worldly reputation in Chaucer’s time, it would be impolitic to conclude that Chaucer repudiates outright all possibilities of becoming famous. As mentioned earlier, Chaucer’s prolonged musing over the nature of fame throughout his writing career betrays the extent to which the idea of fame occupied his mind. If we draw on Petrarch’s distinction of the two different aspects of literary immortality—the immortality of the poet’s own name and the immortality of those the poet celebrates, Chaucer, at least in the *House of Fame*, also considers a writer a potential chronicler of human greatness.

In this regard, Chaucer concurs with John of Salisbury in believing in the superiority of writers over performers in other arts in preserving, albeit not permanently, the stupendous achievements of human beings. The idea that letters can immortalize not only poets but also those celebrated by poets is also found in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus*.³⁶ Though *Policraticus* is generally hailed as the first treatise on political theory in the Middle Ages (Nederman, 1990: xv), in the prologue John of Salisbury lists the advantages of "the pursuit of letters": "it excludes all annoyance stemming from differences of time and place, it draws friends into each other's presence, and it abolishes the situation in which things worth knowing are not experienced" (1990: 3). Most crucially, the heroic exploits of our ancestors would be unknown to us unless writers "triumphed over idleness" and transmitted the heritage to posterity (3). For John of Salisbury letters are the real salvation, since arts, laws, faith, and other things are all vulnerable to the ravages of time (3). Writers thus become preservers of civilization responsible for chronicling human triumphs meriting the reverence of posterity, since without them even the names of Alexander or Caesar would fall into oblivion (3). Similarly, but for the authors of the Bible, the impeccable paragons of the apostles and prophets could not have been passed down for posterity to follow; in short, "no one would ever be illuminated by perpetual glory unless he himself or someone else had written" (3). Like Horace, John of Salisbury believes that without the service of writers or scribes, there would be little difference between the final fate of a fool and that of an emperor after their death: both would fall into obscurity. John concludes that for those who aspire to posthumous glory, their

³⁶ John of Salisbury (ca. 1115-1180) is generally acknowledged by modern scholars as one of the foremost Latinists of his time, and in his *Policraticus* he intended to demonstrate that his coevals were "defecting from the true task of humanity" in both their thought and actions (John of Salisbury, 1993). *Policraticus*, it should be further noted, is a work with which Chaucer has generally been considered to have some familiarity (Windeatt, 1992: 39).

deeds must be compelling enough to trigger the interest of men of letters and of scribes; if their exploits were not “illuminated in the light of letters,” even the most memorable feats would be “enveloped in perpetual darkness” (3).

This preference for literary art is evidenced by the different locations of the statues of performers and those of writers in the palace. Around the castle the narrator spots statues of musicians and storytellers who are charged with spreading fame (Chaucer, 1997: 1196-1200),³⁷ while the statues of prominent writers stand imposingly on the metal pillars inside Fame’s palace, signifying the superiority of writing over other forms of art in preserving memory. Despite different ethnic and religious backgrounds, the writers enumerated by Chaucer have at least one thing in common: they are all propagators of the fame of a people, or of specific heroic figures. In this sense, the writers listed by Chaucer are not unlike Phemius, the poet-singer in the *Odyssey* whose name literally means “one who spreads fame” in that all of them devote their writings to trumpeting the reputation of the heroes in their minds. The first writer mentioned by the narrator is Josephus, the Hebrew historian who chronicles the history of the Jewish people and assumes the responsibility of preserving the fame of the Jews (1433-1436).³⁸ Similarly, Statius is mentioned since it is he who immortalizes Thebes and, to a lesser degree, Achilles.³⁹ Other

³⁷ Including Orpheus, Arion, Chiron, Glascurion, Atiteris, Pseustis, Marsyas, Misenus, Joab, Theodomas, and many other unidentified ones.

³⁸ The Jewish provenance of Christianity might explain why Josephus tops the list.

³⁹ (Publius Papinius) Statius, author of the *Thebaid*, also wrote an unfinished epic on Achilles (the *Achilleid*). However, here Chaucer, like Dante, mixes the above Statius (born in Naples) up with a namesake born in Toulouse regarding their birthplaces (Chaucer, 1997: 185). In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante, when mentioning Statius, writes:

So sweet was the music of my words
 That, from Toulouse, Rome took me to herself,
 And there I [Publius Papinius Statius] merited a crown of myrtles.
 Statius is what people still call me there:
 I sang of Thebes, then of the great Achilles; (Dante, 2003: 351)

authors referred to by Chaucer are respectively responsible for the fame of different entities, human or otherwise: Troy, Aeneas, Venus, Caesar, Pompey, Pluto, and Proserpina. In this sense, Chaucer does not regard literature as merely *belles-lettres*, but as a vehicle for establishing reputation. Even when Chaucer comments on the unbridgeable discrepancies among Homer, Dares, Dictys, Lollius, Guido de Columnis, and Geoffrey of Monmouth in their accounts of the Trojan War, he does not fail to add that the task of preserving Troy's reputation is an uphill one (1997: 1466-1474). Judging from this dimension, for Chaucer literary works are charged with the preservation of human glory.

There exists no conclusive evidence that Chaucer had read Petrarch's coronation oration, yet some arguments in the *House of Fame* are surprisingly consonant with the central theses in Petrarch's acceptance speech. Like Petrarch, Chaucer senses the difference between the poet's own immortality and the immortality of those celebrated by the poet; even if Chaucer does not explore the difference between these two aspects as systematically as Petrarch does, he is fairly confident in the immortalizing function of literature. Chaucer depicts Virgil standing on a tin-plated iron pillar as the leading exponent of Aeneas's reputation. A passage in the *Aeneid* reveals a similar view that it is writers who help preserve the memory of people who, but for these writings, would otherwise sink into oblivion:

Ah, fortunate pair!⁴⁰ if my poetry has any influence,
 Time in its passing shall never obliterate your memory,
 As long as the house of Aeneas dwell by the Capitol's moveless
 Rock, and the head of the Roman family keeps his power.⁴¹
 (Virgil, 1986: 266)

⁴⁰ "Fortunate pair" refers to the Trojan heroes Nisus and Euryalus, who are surrounded by enemies and finally killed in action.

⁴¹ The four lines were cited by Petrarch in his coronation oration, and the adopted translation here is a recent one.

In this sense, Chaucer regards the function of writers as somewhat akin to that of historians, as witnessed by the narrator's observation that in addition to the statues of the most famous authors, the palace of Fame is also strewn with the statues of lesser-known writers, whose function is to preserve "the olde gestes" (1997: 1515). Though not a systematic treatise on the function of literature, the *House of Fame* implicitly demonstrates that literature can help preserve the memory of the great, and that literature outclasses other forms of art in the fulfillment of this task. In this respect, Howard similarly maintains that for Chaucer even though all worldly things will eventually fade away, what is preserved in poetry stands the best chance of finding a place in eternity (1987: 251).

IV. Conclusion

From previous analysis, it is not difficult to find similarities between Petrarch's and Chaucer's conceptions of worldly fame. Both are acutely aware that fame is no more than an indiscriminate verdict of an unwise horde. Petrarch, as mentioned earlier, in *My Secret Book* reveals his intimate understanding that fame is merely "the breath of many people" (2002: 83), a thing not even remotely worthy to be pursued. Even so, Petrarch's obsession with literary fame is keenly felt throughout his corpus, in particular his Coronation Oration. Admittedly, both the *Africa* and "A Draft of a Letter to Posterity" bear eloquent testimony to Petrarch's ideas pertaining to literary fame and "the power of letters to project one's presence in the future"; the oration, however, holds the key to understanding these topoi (Looney, 2009: 133).⁴² It is the most systematic exposition of the profession of poet prior to the Renaissance, not only elevating the poetic enterprise over other forms of art, but pragmatically enumerating the hurdles that a poet

⁴² For the link between the *Africa* and the Oration, see Murphy (1997: 74-127).

might encounter.

When commenting on the significance of Petrarch to humanism, Robinson writes, “To the centuries before Petrarch the world was a place in which to prepare for a life beyond; the noblest subject of thought was theology; the saving of the soul was the one important task” (1970: 227). Yet with Petrarch the world became different: life becomes more meaningful in itself, for no longer is it just a prelude to the next life. This shift in worldview, of course, cannot be attributed to a single individual or even a small group of people, but Petrarch can be more credited with the change than any other person (Robinson, 1970: 227). For Petrarch, literary pursuit takes pride of place in the ennoblement of this life because, he believes, now and future can be connected by a body of canonical works. Perhaps it is this longing that urged Petrarch to open his Oration with the citation from the *Georgics*: “Sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis raptat amor” (1953: 1242).⁴³

In the case of Chaucer, the image of fame is even more unflattering, since it is a powerful manifestation of human thoughtlessness and folly. The popular wisdom is belittled by Chaucer as everybody only uncritically receives information and immediately sends out a further distorted version of it. However, the issue of posthumous fame occupied Chaucer’s mind throughout his lifetime. *The House of Fame* aside, the *Troilus and Criseyde* also bears eloquent testimony to Chaucer’s lingering concern with his status in the following ages, since in its concluding Book Chaucer compares his rewrite of the Trojan legend with previous masterworks. In a short poem titled “Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn,”⁴⁴ Chaucer reveals his worry about possible

⁴³ “But sweet love propels me over Mount Parnassus’ heights” (Virgil, 2005: 50).

⁴⁴ Adam scriveyn, if ever thee bifalle
 Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
 Under the long lokkes thou most have the scale,
 But after my makynge thou wryte more trewe;
 So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
 It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,

corruption of his texts in the hands of inadequate copyists, which implicitly betrays his telltale angst about what will become of his literary production. In his advanced years, Chaucer in the “Retraction” bitterly regrets having written the *House of Fame* and other morally lax works, yet many critics read this gesture as a way to map out the canon of his works.⁴⁵ In summary, though we can never exactly reconstruct Chaucer’s innermost feelings in different phases of his life, these musings on the nature of fame bespeak that Chaucer was haunted by this kind of consideration.

These reflections on fame would not have come about if Chaucer, as some critics have claimed, had been totally immune to the lure of fame. Like Petrarch, Chaucer successfully depicts the unpalatable aspects of worldly fame—arbitrary, fickle, and short-lived, to name just a few, but the driving force of this debunking might originate from a fervent desire for it. To put it another way, it is the longing for worldly glory that prompts Chaucer to dissect its nature in the first place, even though it turns out that the essence of worldly fame is repulsive. More importantly, as mentioned earlier, in his portrayal of the nine groups of petitioners suing for the grace of Fame, Chaucer seems to hint that few, if any, people can be perfectly impervious to the appeal of fame even though all its undesirable traits have been exposed.

What distinguishes the *House of Fame* from Chaucer’s other poems and other contemporary English works is its pioneering reflection on the production and evaluation of literary works. Regarding this aspect, Howard’s praise of this work is felicitous, since it may be “the greatest poetical statement” in English about “the nature of poetic influence and poetic tradition” (1987: 252). This work meanwhile offers a rare glimpse of the sense of

And al is thourgh thy negligence and rape.

Efforts have been made to identify “Adam” among three likely candidates—Adam Stedeman, Adam Acton, or Adam Pinckhurst, but the question remains moot (Minnis, Scattergood, & Smith, 1995: 501).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Sayce (1970: 230-248).

bafflement experienced by a budding poet and presents a case that had no parallel in English literature before Milton (Howard, 1987: 252). In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer's attitude toward literary fame is ambivalent: on one hand, both his invocation to divine inspiration and division of the work into three books bespeak Chaucer's intent to rival the ancients; on the other hand, Chaucer was intimately aware of the emptiness of worldly fame. Perhaps it is this insoluble dilemma that makes the *House of Fame* "the most personal" of Chaucer's writings (Brusendorff, 1968: 160).

In Chaucer's lifetime, England was still "deeply feudalized and ecclesiasticized," and the most highly educated, despite the worldliness of their behavior, still stuck to "a world-denying ideal" (Spearing, 1985: 15). Therefore, the sophistication and progressiveness reflected in Chaucer's works surprise not only today's critics but also some British commentators in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. As early as in the fifteenth century, John Lydgate already hailed Chaucer as the English Petrarch whose English works had sufficed to secure himself a place in the house of fame (2003: 517).⁴⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, in his 1581 *Apologie for Poetrie*, similarly considered Chaucer's achievement comparable to those of his Italian forerunners—Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch (1970: 7).

⁴⁶ Til þat he cam, &, þoru3his poetrie,
 Gan oure tonge firste to magnifie,
 And adourne it *with* his elloquence—
 To whom honour, laude, & reuerence,
 þoru3-oute þis londe 3oue be & songe,
 So þat þe laurer of oure englishe tonge
 Be to hym 3oue for his excellence,
 —Ri3t a[s] whilom by ful hi3e sentence,
 Perpetuelly for a memorial,
 Of Columpna by þe cardynal
 To Petrak Fraunceis was 3ouen in Ytaille—
 pat þe report neuere after faille,
 Nor þe honour dirked of his name,
 To be registered in þe house of fame

If we confine our discussion to the issue of fame, both Petrarch and Chaucer, as analyzed before, are intimately aware of the emptiness of worldly fame when contrasted with the effulgence of divine glory. Yet they express their longing for fame in different ways. Petrarch is much more candid about his yearning for literary fame: despite his understanding of the vanity of worldly glory, Petrarch still strives for immortality through his literary works. Chaucer's case is more complicated because of his characteristic noncommittal style throughout his works. Though patently disappointed with the rulings delivered by Fame and therefore determined to disregard any judgment concerning his reputation after his death (Chaucer, 1997: 1876-1877), the narrator does not completely forsake the quest of fame. However, the narrator falls back on himself as the only inerrant arbiter of how he fares: "I wote my self best how y stonde—" (1878).

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摘 要

本文大致分成三部分：第一部分主要檢視喬叟之前一些代表性作家如何看待因為文學創作而獲致的名聲。第二部分則爬梳佩特拉克不同的作品探討他對追求不朽名聲的看法。身為人文主義早期的鼓吹者之一，佩特拉克在不同作品中明確表達想要以文學成就獲致不朽名聲的渴望。第三部分主要探究喬叟《聲譽之宮》中對名聲的看法。類似於佩特拉克，喬叟對世俗名聲的短暫、不確定甚至荒謬有深刻的體認及生動的描繪。但即使如此，本文將指出雖然喬叟並未像佩特拉克一樣明確表達以文學創作達到不朽的渴望，然而他對於追求文學史上一席之地的期待仍在字裡行間流露出來。

關鍵詞：喬叟、名聲、佩特拉克