

The Shadow of Virgil and Augustus on Chaucer's *House of Fame*

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In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, the narrator describes seeing the statues of various classical poets, including that of Virgil:

Tho saugh I stonde on a piler,
That was tynned yren cler,
The Latyn poete Virgile,
That bore hath up a longe while
The fame of Pius Eneas. (1481-85).¹⁾

According to Elizabeth Nitchie's long-established reading, quoted in *The*

1) All references to Chaucer's works are to *The Riverside Chaucer* edited by Larry Benson and are indicated by line numbers.

Riverside Chaucer, since iron was associated with the god Mars, and tin with Jupiter, the passage above would seem to “imply that Mars controlled and directed Jupiter in the *Aeneid*” (Fyler 988). The present paper, however, proposes an alternate reading, namely, that the pillar’s implicit allusion to Mars and Jupiter—divine figures of war and of kingship, respectively—reflected on Virgil as a Roman imperial mythmaker, and, hence, on the service that he rendered Caesar Augustus, the first ruler of the Roman Principate.

Focusing specifically on the implications of Virgil’s statue and the tinned-iron pillar on which it stands, *The House of Fame* appears to be shaded by Chaucer’s awareness of Virgil’s importance, not only as the producer of a classic work of epic, but also for Virgil’s contribution, through that act of writing, to the Roman imperial myth which contributed to the prestige of his patron, the *princeps*. It, thus, builds upon Larry Scanlon’s observation that “one need look no further than Virgil’s *Aeneid* to suggest that Roman notions of the poetic *auctor* were intertwined with *auctoritas* in its political sense” (Scanlon 45).

While Chaucer himself observes that it was Virgil “That bore hath up a long while/ The fame of pius Eneas” (1484-85), historians have noted the political dimension of Virgil’s work, describing the author as “a conveyor of imperial ideology,” and ascribing to him a defining role in the establishment of the Roman “cult of emperors” (Saller & Garnsey 164-66). It is precisely with regard to such intersection of literary authority and the conferring of political authority—indeed, in terms of Chaucer’s oft-noted, and certainly ironic, use of the term *auctorite*—that Chaucer comments most incisively on Virgil.

The *Aeneid* served the prestige and political interests of the man to whom it was dedicated, Augustus Caesar, founder of the Roman (Imperial) Principate, which superseded the Roman Republic following decades of civil wars with an

authoritarian, monarchical system; historians of that era, including Suetonius (*Lives of the Twelve Caesars*) and Tacitus (*The Annals of Imperial Rome*), like Dio Cassius, writing a century after them, agreed in “regard(ing) Augustus’ political arrangements as basically monarchical and his claim to have restored the Republic as insincere” (Hammond 140).

Essential to the maintenance of this political balance, the emperor needed to manipulate an ideological discourse, which, following his elimination of such rivals as Marc Antony, centered on the concept of *auctoritas*—the basis of origin of the English “authority,” and Middle English “auctorite”—which carried the particular sense of prestige and influence. Thus, in Augustus’ deathbed account of his achievements, the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (ca. AD 14), the ruler distinguished between the concepts of *auctoritas* (prestige; influence) and *potestas* (power), insisting that, although, during his long life at the apex of Roman society—holding many official positions, some repeatedly, over the years, including the (shared) consulship, alongside other members of the patrician class—he had “excelled all in influence,” he had never exceeded his colleagues in “official power” (Augustus 34.3).

In reality, Augustus had fought his way to the top as the adopted son and political heir of Julius Caesar—the assassinated would-be king, whose politically viable deification in 42 BC, two years after his death, earned Octavian—later to be known as Augustus—the prestigious title of “*divi filius*” (son of a god), an honor also noted in a prophetic episode in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (171)².

Paradoxically, at the same time, Octavian successfully exploited Roman xenophobia to eliminate his former ally Marc Antony, occupied in Egypt and Rome’s eastern provinces, who was denigrated as an Oriental despot, and

2) References to *Aeneid* are to Humphries’ translation and indicated by page numbers.

described as deprived of *virtu* both by his adoption of Dionysian iconography and an overindulgence in wine (Scott 133-37), and also by allowing himself to be seduced by the Egyptian Cleopatra, and having children by her while abandoning his Roman wife—Octavian’s own sister (Huzar 106-7). That the deified Julius Caesar himself had not disdained Cleopatra, and, in fact, had also a son with her, named Caesarion (47 BC-30 BC)—whom Octavian was politically astute enough to dispose off—was also conveniently omitted in the *Res Gestae*. So, too, the fact that, initially, following the assassination of Julius Caesar, *both* Octavian and Marc Antony publicly courted Cleopatra’s “support in their war against Brutus and Cassius by publicly acknowledging ... Caesarion as Caesar’s son and King of Egypt” (Huzar 106).

With two notable exceptions, Virgil avoided open imperial sycophancy in the *Aeneid*, exalting Augustus indirectly through the figure of the semi-divine Homeric hero, Aeneas, reputed ancestor of the Julian line. By the same means, the sensitive subject of Rome’s internecine wars, particularly in Octavian’s final victory at Actium over the forces of Cleopatra *and* Marc Antony—a leading Roman collaborator in the avenging of Julius Caesar’s death—are addressed cursorily, through prophetic allusion in Book VI, their actual deaths quaintly omitted. Similarly, the description in Book VIII of the shield of Aeneas—wrought by Vulcan himself—which furnishes the telescoped account of the civil wars of the first century BC, culminates in the binary conflict between a masculinized Roman West, and the implicitly feminized East of Cleopatra—*and* of an Antony, so enthralled with the seductress that he “Marshals the foes of Rome, himself a Roman, / With—horror!—an Egyptian wife” (230).

Antony is mentioned no more—certainly not his suicide. Rather, the defeat is presented as the will of an incensed pantheon of the gods, and personalized

in the figure of Cleopatra, who, like her host, flees “in terror” (231). Her death by her own hand, so suggestive of that of Dido, is likewise left unnoted, the last image of the queen being a reference to the bountiful Nile “spread(ing) ... his mantle ... to bring a beaten woman home” before the triumphant entrance of [Augustus] Caesar—welcomed, as if he were a liberator rather than a foreign invader—in “Streets ... loud / with gladness, games, rejoicing” (231). The conflict between the triumvirs was evidently unsuitable for the type of persona which the *princeps* desired to cultivate as a patron of the Roman people.

Having said this, however, it is something of a commonplace that Virgil also evoked Antony and Cleopatra, and alluded to their conflict with Octavian in Book IV, which deals with the relationship between Aeneas and Dido, the widowed Queen of Carthage, whom Aeneas leaves, at the end, in quest of his divinely appointed mission to found a new city with his fellow survivors from Troy. There is, in fact, a verbal echo in Virgil's epic that associates Dido and Cleopatra, each said to “grow pale with future death” (Segal 7).³ Dido, as an analogue of Cleopatra—both being, in one scholar's description, “utterly incompatible with all Roman ideals of family and social life” (Fowler 190)—tempts the proto-Roman hero to forget his duty and destiny and to yield gentle feeling and desire—whereby Aeneas threatens to become the Antony of Augustan propaganda, but ultimately resists the temptation, implicitly reasserting his analogies with Octavian (Parry 66). Similarly, the “discord” raised by Aeneas's initially sympathetic, charismatic rival, the native-Italian Turnus, who breaks the peace treaty between his people and Aeneas' Trojan settlers, and is finally killed by Aeneas, has been identified as “a clear

3) Segal cites *Aeneid* IV.644 and VIII.709.

analogue” of the historical “civil war ‘stirred up’ by M. Antonius, the virtuous suppressor of this *seditio* being Augustus” (Cairns 92-95). Thus, as is usually the way with allegory, ambivalence and multiplicity operates, making Aeneas *both* Augustus’s ancestor, and, at times, the emperor himself (Parry 64). In this regard, while Kimberly Bell perhaps overstates the case in labeling Aeneas “a mirror image of Augustus Caesar” (Bell 14), she is undoubtedly justified in stating that “Virgil draws parallels between the actions of his hero in founding a nation and the *princeps* Augustus, who rebuilt Rome following generations of civil unrest” (Bell 20).

The most significant exception in the *Aeneid* in terms of direct praise of the emperor and other references to contemporaneous events is found in Book VI, which describes Aeneas’s descent to the underworld. Taking the form of a prophecy by the spirit of the hero’s father, Anchises, it concerns Rome’s destiny from the time of Aeneas—as the founder of a Roman people of Trojan-Native Italian extraction—to the age of Augustus, exalted as the bringer of a new Golden Age:

Turn your eyes now this way; behold the Romans,
Your very own. These are Iulus’ children,
The race to come. One promise you have heard
Over and over: here is its fulfillment,
The son of a god, Augustus Caesar, founder
Of a new age of gold, in lands where Saturn
Ruled long ago... . (171).

Indeed, the Trojan Aeneas is already identified by his own father as Roman, making the paternal admonition an ambiguously timeless one; for the addressee could equally well be any future leader of the eternal city, including

Augustus, whose own stated ideals of justice, piety and the establishment of peace are suggested here:

Remember, Roman,
To rule the people under law, to establish
The way of peace, to battle down the haughty
To spare the meek. Our fine arts, these, forever. (173).

Following his seizure of undisputed power over Rome and its dominions, Augustus consolidated his position by cultivating the image not of a mere victorious general, and certainly not of a monarch, but, rather, of a benevolent bringer of peace, and *princeps*—the leading citizen, first among equals; in other words, not a tyrant, but a benevolent patriarch, or patron, as reflected in the title that the senate subsequently conferred upon him, of *pater patriae* (father of the country), in 2 BC, a title which Larry Scanlon observes reflected his absorption on a greater scale of the traditional social position of the *paterfamilias*, and, thereby, “offered to the rest of society ideological participation in the power from which they were materially excluded” (45). Some further connections between Augustus’ self-representation as patron and figurative *pater*, and its engagement with Virgil’s epic as a work produced in service to the *princeps* will be discussed below. Of particular interest is the correlation between the label of “*pater Aeneas*,” attached to the hero of the *Aeneid*—brought to an end by Virgil’s death in 19 BC—and the emperor’s title of *pater patriae*, formally conferred upon Augustus in 2 BC, but previously used informally for some time (Augustus 35).

Clearly, the title of *pater patriae* deployed a culturally time-honored notions of patronage and of the figure of the benefactor as a figurative father,

but there is also a Virgilian angle, as Augustus's analogue-ancestor, in the (original, Latin) *Aeneidos* is dubbed “*pater Aeneas*” 17 times.⁴ Appearing at least once in eight of the books in the epic, its absence in the remaining four books is arguably not fortuitous, but, rather, emphasizes particular values associated with the person of Aeneas as a “*pater*” to his people—and, hence, to the Romans. By extension, it also implies the values that the Aeneid's dedicatee, Augustus, wanted to be seen to favor or reject in the course of a lifetime of self-construction, which was to culminate decades later when he wrote the *Res Gestae* (ca. AD 14).

Firstly, Book IV is devoted to the Dido-Aeneas material, which, as discussed above, represents fears of the hero's deviation from his greater journey, and higher duty to his own people—faults attributed to Marc Antony, and publicly condemned by Octavian/Augustus.

Book VI, in turn, shows us a solitary hero, in the Homeric style of heroism, who, indeed, travels to the underworld like Odysseus, where he meets his father's ghost, a fact which links him to the past, and also hears prophecies of Rome, whose first figurative father he *must yet become*. On a different note of considerable relevance to Augustus's own transition from victorious warlord to founder of the *pax Romana*, Books VII and X are heavily devoted to the war between the Trojans and the native people of Latium, where the absence of the epithet “*pater Aeneas*” arguably reflects on war as a regrettable negation of the opportunities of peace both at the level of the community and in terms of the individual's capacity for benevolence, conceived in clearly parental, or paternalistic terms.

To begin with, Book VII marks the outbreak of the war between Trojans

4) See Vergil, *Aeneidos* I.580, 699; II.2; III.343, 716; V.348, 461, 545, 700; VIII. 115, 606; IX. 172; XI. 184, 904; XII. 166, 440, 697 for the Latin term.

and the native people of Latium; a peaceful covenant between them, envisaged by King Latinus as a prophetic marriage alliance to jointly form a great imperial nation (*Aeneidos* VIII. 249-58), is almost made when the chaos of war irrupts, ascribed to an irrational principle rendered feminine in the figure of the king's wife, Amata, who rouses the people to the pitch of her own frenzy in the remaining two thirds of Book VII, with no further mention of the proto-Roman Trojans, in what is, therefore, a one-sided perspective of the causes of war, which absolves Aeneas of responsibility—and, by extension, Augustus Caesar of blame in the historical civil wars of the late Roman Republic—even as war in its destructive essence deprives even such preordained nation-founders of the opportunity to exercise their constructive, paternalistic dimensions.

Book X, in turn, underlines the impossibility of acting in full accordance with one's better nature, or of warding off the evil consequences of war for one's own side, despite the best intentions; as such, it arguably functioned both as an elegy for those lost in Rome's civil wars and as an apologia for the blood spilled by Augustus's winning side. Firstly, there is the death, at the hands of Turnus, of the youthful Pallas, son of Aeneas's friend, Evander, for whom Aeneas effectively stood, as one scholar notes, "*in loco parentis*" (*Aeneidos* X. 479-89; Benario 25), and, consequently, Aeneas's *pious* sense of his obligation both to the young man, and to Evander, who had extended hospitality to the Trojans (*Aeneidos* X. 513-16; Benario 25, 29). In addition, Aeneas, reluctantly though unavoidably, slays another worthy young man, or figurative son, Lausus, who dies, perhaps misguided in his actions but displaying proper filial piety, both by bravely confronting the Trojan hero and through the tears that come to his eyes when he sees his own undeserving father, Mezentius, succumbing to Aeneas in the battlefield (*Aeneidos* X. 786-95). This, in terms

of family relations between sons and fathers, would appear to function as an allegorical acceptance of the fact that, in wartime, those who fall in the service of a bad cause, supporting wicked leaders, regrettably include good people, and that divided loyalties in an internecine conflict are complex, sometimes irremediable.

By these means, this central book in the *Aeneid*'s depiction of war sees two young men die at the hands of older men and as a consequence of the conflicts of their actual or symbolic fathers, thereby enacting a reversal or negation of the concept of the *pater* as benevolent protector, or benefactor, while the epithet "*pater Aeneas*" is, appropriately, not used. Indeed, its very absence, in contrast with its repeated use in the other eight books, underlines the value increasingly placed, as the years went by in the Augustan age, upon the benefits of peace and stability, rather than on the celebration of military audaciousness and success. This is, in fact, consistent with Thomas Wyatt Dickson's account of Virgil's reconsideration, over several decades, of the subject and emphasis of his epic, from an initial plan to focus on the feats of Julius Caesar the subject—abandoned, in part, due to the untimely and unpleasant manner of his death—followed by plans to make Octavian himself the hero, before a lengthy period of incubation resulted in "an important shift in the poem's centre of gravity," as "Peace, the keynote of Augustus' principate now overshadowed the military deeds of Julius Caesar and his political heir" (Dickson 280).

Augustus's self-representation as someone who had progressed from military might and personal-if-righteous vengeance to the upholding of Republican prerogatives in a context of peace and prosperity—or, at least, of striking a balance between the two—presents discernible parallels with the *Aeneid*. To begin with, Augustus stressed the ideal of filial piety, which he

labored to articulate in the context of his stated respect for the rule of law. In these terms, the man who, as a youthful Octavian, had defeated the killers of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, at Philippi (42 BC), invited parallels with *pius Aeneas*, a perspective of his military actions that he emphasized throughout his life, as illustrated in 2 BC when he built a temple to Mars the Avenger (Augustus 21). But Augustus's care that such vengeance not be seen purely as an expression of private vengeance by a powerful individual is clear in the very opening passages of the *Res Gestae*, which appeal both to the ideals of filial piety and civic duty:

Those who butchered my father, I drove into exile, exacting vengeance for their crime through lawful courts; and subsequently when they made war upon the state, I defeated them twice in pitched battle. (Augustus 2).

In the *Aeneid*, in turn, the filial dimension of Aeneas' character is illustrated firstly in the emblematic image of the hero-as-exile, who leaves Troy behind with a small band of survivors, physically bearing his aged father upon his back, the impression of his piety reinforced by his words to Anchises: "Climb to my shoulders, father, / It will be no burden, so we are together, / Meeting the common danger or salvation" (56). In addition, the fact that he also leads his son Iulus by the hand, further emphasizes his sense of obligation to the destiny of those survivors.

Suffice it to add that Virgil labeled Aeneas "*pius*" seventeen times—in such forms as "*Atpius Aeneas*" (*Aeneidos* I. 305), "*sumpius Aeneas*" (I. 378), "*quampius Aeneas*" (VIII. 84), and so forth—while piety, generally also in relation to the hero, appears in the forms of "*pietatis*" and "*pietate*" another 22 times. By the same means, in his own self-praise in the *Res Gestae*,

Augustus evoked implicit parallels with Aeneas by boasting that he had been rewarded (in 27 BC) with the title of “Augustus” for his supposed “service” to the “Republic,” to which he added: “a golden shield was placed in the Curia Julia whose inscription testified that the senate and the Roman people gave me this in recognition of *my valour, my clemency, my justice, and my piety* [*virtutis clementiae iustitiae pietatis*]” (Augustus 34; emphasis mine).

Octavian’s desire to transform his public image once he had consolidated sole rule over the empire is discussed by Gregory S. Dundas, who interprets Octavian’s “conciliatory manner toward the people of Egypt,” after his victory at Actium in 31 BC, as a case of “posturing . . . heavy with symbolism”—a public display of “*clementia*,” whereby the victorious general “attempted to convert his image from *triumvir et dux* [leader] to *vindex iustitiae* [avenger of justice] and σωτήρ [saviour]” (Dundas 440).

Thus, to lead back to the terms used in the description of Virgil’s statue in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, it is in the process the transformation of the emperor’s public image from an essentially martial, man of *iron*—particularly so after his not-readily justifiable defeat of his former ally, Marc Anthony, at Actium (31 BC)—that Virgil was implicated through his epic about *pius* Aeneas. For, the *Aeneid* ultimately added to the dignity of the emperor, whom it implicitly praised through the figure of Aeneas. In effect, Virgil helped to confer upon that man of *iron* the imperial majesty—the outer shine, of the kingly-god Jupiter’s *tin*. Chaucer’s description of the Roman poet’s pillar of *tinned iron* is, therefore, apt, yet, arguably, an ironic transference—from patron to client, and it aptly describes the transformation of Augustus from martial conqueror to benevolent, kingly figure, establishing “the way of peace” (173) for which he was indebted to Virgil.

To continue with Chaucer, it is, notably, the “piler,” rather than the poet’s

statue, that is of “tynned iren cler” (1481-82). The pillar—the phallic column of which the classical world was so fond—could well function as a symbol of Virgil’s epic contribution to the empire. Furthermore, in a telling contrast, it is Ovid’s statue, standing beside that of Virgil, and *not* its own pillar—that is made of copper: “And next hym on a piler was, / Of coper, Venus clerk Ovide” (1486-87).

As is well-known, Chaucer had a distinct affinity for Ovid⁵)—tarnished by time and the elements, but displaying the green of natural fertility, while, also, pointing to Ovid’s relationship to the theme of love.⁶) Moreover, in a different context, Chaucer’s familiarity with accounts sympathetic to Ovid as an exiled poet, and with Ovid’s own writings as an exile—which included the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, as well as the completion of the *Fasti*—has been documented (Brown 133). Chaucer’s awareness of what happened to a poet—and one stylistically close to Chaucer’s heart—who did not toe the line in the emperor’s new court is, therefore, clear. That Chaucer understood the general tendency, even if not the precise extent, of Virgil’s contribution to the Augustan imperial myth should not be doubted either, particularly since the *Aeneid*, though openly about Aeneas, not only alludes allegorically to Augustus *through Aeneas*, but

5) Representative of this well-established scholarly position, David Bevington’s observation that “although much of the narrative content and epic machinery” in the *House of Fame* “comes from Virgil, it is especially Ovid who provides the tone of poignant sympathy with man’s misfortune,” and that Chaucer followed Ovid both “in observing life from a detached, humorous, and occasionally sardonic point of view” and in his interest “in the emotions and personal experiences of his characters,” such as the tragic heroines, rather than in such things as “the gods . . . Rome’s destiny” or “military wars” (Bevington 294).

6) Also appropriately, copper (Latin *cuprum*, after Cyprus, classically rich in the metal, and mythological birthplace of the love goddess) was “Venus’s metal” (Riverside Chaucer, 366n1487; with reference to Chaucer’s “Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale,” l. 829), which, hence, emphasizes Ovid’s role as a poet of love.

also *does* include the brief prophetic sections which openly celebrate the (then-) ultimate descendant of Aeneas's Julian line, Caesar Augustus, "son of a god" and savior of Rome, in the most sycophantic terms. Readers far duller than the delightfully witty, ironic Chaucer could not have failed to miss it.

Admittedly, Ovid never made the Antony-Cleopatra affair an explicit subject of his work. However, in the *Heroides* Ovid included Dido—a figure noted for her analogies with Cleopatra—her poetic suicide note functioning as a counter-version of Virgil's epic version of Aeneas, while Ovid even mockingly alluded to the hero's piety, as the reproachful Dido, planning her own immolation, compares herself to "pious incense" (*Heroides* VII. 24, emphasis mine), and attributes to both her murderously ambitious brother and to Aeneas himself "impious hand(s)" (VII. 43, 46). Ovid, then, cemented the probable offense to Augustus in the *Fasti*—on which he was working when he was exiled in AD 8. In the first place, the Book III-section concerning the Ides of March (March 15) refers to the death of Dido, the epitaph on her tomb, which is said to follow the "Brief verses left by the dying woman," suggesting Cleopatra, not only in blaming the heroine's death upon the foreigner who had, suggestively, "*furnished ... the sword*" (as Octavian's invading armies had done in conquering Egypt), but also by referring to the heroine's "*death*," like Cleopatra's, had been "*by her own hand*" (*Fasti* III. 547-50).

Furthermore, in this narrative about the feast of the Ides of March, Ovid identified Anna Perenna—a folk deity associated with the returning year, the day taking on a new political significance following the assassination of Julius Caesar and his subsequent apotheosis, so central to Augustus's propaganda—with Dido's sister Anna, in a "parodic" *sequel* to Virgil's epic, in which, as Carole Newlands notes, Ovid ridicules the "Julian appropriation" of the feast through his carnivalesque narrative of the

“apotheosis” of a “Carthaginian . . . woman” (Newlands 328-29). When Anna seeks shelter in the new home of a well-meaning but rather unheroic Aeneas, his open-handedness, in what is ironically dubbed a “*pia causa*” (*Fasti* III. 629-32) in mocking allusion to Aeneas’s “trademark quality,” results in his wife’s murderous jealousy—Anna must flee for her life into a river-god’s embrace, underlining the reduction of Ovid’s Aeneas to the realm of farce and melodrama (Newlands 328-29).

In similar terms, Chaucer’s comment that Virgil “bore . . . up a longe while / The fame of Pius Aeneas” (1484-85) is surely sardonic, and more Ovidian than Virgilian, implying that Aeneas’s fame is entirely owing to Virgil, without a foundation in the putative original’s actual deeds or merits. Indeed, to consider how facetious Chaucer is about Virgil by the time Chaucer’s narrator describes the statues in Book III of *The House of Fame*, we need but consider that the Virgilian material has already been addressed in Book I, and that, as scholars generally agree, the approach was strongly influenced by Ovid, particularly so in his treatment of Dido. Although Chaucer’s narrator includes—as a kind of afterthought “to excusen Eneas . . . for his grete trespass” (427-28)—that the hero was instructed by “Mercurie” to set off for “Itayle” (429-30), this only comes after a detailed narrative portrait of Dido preparing for her death, punctuated with the narrator’s extensive criticism of Aeneas as “a traytour” (267), who left Dido “unkyndely” (295), causing the all-loving Dido to take her own life.

Indeed, Chaucer painted a much harsher portrait of Aeneas in Book III of *The Legend of Good Women*, in which the fickle Trojan forswears himself simply because he “Is wery of his craft withinne a throwe” (1296), and even his excuse of a greater duty, which he claims has been delivered to him by his “fadres gost” besides “Mercurye” (1295-97)—and accompanied, the

narrator underlines, by Aeneas's "false teres" (1301)—is the mere pretext of "a traytour," who leaves "Dido in wo and pyne" (1328-30).

Also arguably Ovidian is Chaucer's unconventional treatment of Cleopatra—as well as Marc Antony—given the privileged place of first book in *The Legend of Good Women*. There, Marc Antony is initially described as a "Rebel unto the toun of Rome," and worse—given Chaucer's focus on matters of love—for "falsly" deceiving his wife, "the suster of Cesar" (591-93). However, Chaucer shows himself remarkably sympathetic towards the lovers—described as a "noble queene," who loved "this knyght" deeply, "Thourgh his desert, and for his chyvalrye" (607-8)—and proceeds to address their tragic destiny. Thus, when Marc Antony, defeated at Actium, takes his own life, Chaucer's Cleopatra decides to follow suit—not because of the imminent loss of her kingdom, or another point of pride, but because she does not want to outlive him, as Chaucer celebrates her as an inexpressible exemplar of true love, who:

mad swich routhe
That ther nis tonge that may hit telle.
But on the morwe she wol no lenger dwelle. (669-71).

Indeed, Cleopatra receives "hir deeth ... with good chere, / For love of Antony, that was hir so dere" (701-2).

The term *auctoritas*—so central to Augustus's pronouncements in the *Res Gestae*—is, evidently, the basis of the modern word *authority*, but was closer, yet, to the Middle English *auctorite*, used in *The House of Fame* (2158); the Middle English Dictionary defines *auctorite* as "a capacity for inspiring belief

or trust." This is, of course, what Chaucer's *House of Fame* demands that we question about texts, and about the authors—or *actors*—behind them: do they actually merit our belief and trust?

As far as that question pertains to Chaucer's attitude towards Virgil, there is scholarly consensus to the contrary, a position exemplified by A. S. G. Edwards' observation that "Chaucer's attitude towards the *Aeneid* is both ironic and deflationary, diminishing and undercutting the Virgilian emphasis on *pius Aeneas*" (Edwards 5; similarly, Ellis 283; McGerr 61). Indeed, Larry D. Benson stresses that Chaucer's entire poem "comically deflate(s) the whole idea of 'auctorite'" (Benson 224). Discussion of the *Aeneid*, and of scholarly findings about its allegorical treatment of figures opposed to Octavian's rise and subsequent rule—such as Antony and Cleopatra (and her alter-ego, Dido)—and, in turn, Chaucer's sympathetic treatment of such counter-Virgilian figures—would suggest that Chaucer was conscious of the far-reaching, and possibly insidious, political, national, or imperial, implications of such literary works as the *Aeneid*, arguably making the description of Virgil's statue in Book II of *The House of Fame* a keystone to this dream poem.

By way of a coda, I would like to comment on the relevance of the present reading to established interpretations about the topical implications of Chaucer's *House of Fame* at the time of its composition. Whatever the exact nature of the occasion in December 1379 when Chaucer possibly read this poem at court, the poem is hardly complimentary about any form of authority. Yet, while Benson rejects arguments that the mysterious "man of great auctorite" (2158) could have been an English royal—this being supposedly too dangerous for someone in Chaucer's "professional" position—he suggests that Chaucer's poem served as a sophisticated insult directed at Niccolò, the Milanese Cardinal's envoy, who had conveyed the refusal of Richard II's suit

for the hand of the “daughter of Bernabò, lord of Milan” (Benson 225, 231).

Arguably, however, Chaucer’s poem found in the intersection between political and literary *auctoritas/auctorite* represented by the Virgilio- Augustan manipulation of that concept, an exemplum for a far-reaching commentary on power and authority. By these means, Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, as a rejection of Virgil’s artistic subordination, represents an act of defiance. Moreover, this literary stance, taken by a poet who favored Virgil’s ill-fated avatar, Ovid, is something with which Chaucer’s royal patrons could hardly have been pleased, regardless of the potential flattery of any particular topical allusion to foreign misadventures.

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The Shadow of Virgil and Augustus on Chaucer's *House of Fame*

Abstract

Ivan Cañadas

In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, the narrator describes statues of Virgil and of Ovid (1481-87), the lines long-interpreted as implying the predominance of Mars over Jupiter in the *Aeneid*. It is apparent, however, that Chaucer—ironic in his use of “*auctorite*,” and familiar with a range of contrasts between Virgil and Ovid—particularly with the latter's irreverent, subversive and carnivalesque approach to imperial myths in the *Heroides* and *Fasti*—in fact, described those statues to comment incisively on Virgil's role in bolstering the political prestige of Augustus, first Roman emperor.

Furthermore, Virgil's exaltation of Augustus's authority by implicit analogy with “*pius Aeneas*” was consistent and complementary with Augustus's own self-construction in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, which appealed to the Latin concept of *auctoritas* and to the ideals of filial piety and symbolic fatherhood to mystify the *princeps*' authoritarian usurpation of political power. Thus, also, Chaucer's equivalent use of Middle-English term, *auctorite*, and his symbolic descriptions of the statues of Virgil and Ovid, highlight new evidence of Chaucer's ironic perspective of political and literary authority.

Key Words

Chaucer, *House of Fame*, *Legend of Good Women*, *auctorite*, authority, Virgil, *Aeneid*, Augustus, *Res Gestae*, Ovid, *Heroides*, *Fasti*, propaganda, *pater patriae*, *pater Aeneas*

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