The following is a study of the late medieval English dream vision and, like any study of a poetic kind or form, certain presuppositions lie behind it. The purpose of this introduction is to make these presuppositions explicit and to argue, at least provisionally, that they are valid ones. The basic assumptions, then, are these:

- that the term "dream vision" refers to a definable and recognizable set of literary works, and that medieval dream vision writers were aware that they were making this certain kind of poem (and not simply using a set of unrelated conventions);
- that an understanding of the dynamics of the dream vision will tell us something worth knowing about the poems.¹

The first assumption—an obligatory one for genre studies—requires a sort of double vision. On the one hand, a genre is a set of tactics or details or motifs, conventions which, in the right combination, cause a poem to be of a certain kind. When enough of the required motifs or images are present, in, for example, The Divine Comedy, then the poem looks like a dream vision to the modern reader. Does the presence of enough such motifs, however, make The Divine Comedy a dream vision? Does the presence of some of the motifs, as J. V. Cunningham has discovered in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales,² make this poem somewhat of a dream vision?
On the other hand, a poet's choice of a genre is a self-conscious one, and the resulting poem is, at least in that poet's mind, a romance, a pastoral, an elegy, or a dream vision. When such a poet, as Deguileville, for example, excludes (or botches) some of the motifs which seem crucial—the dreamer in *La Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine* makes up parts of the dream report which he has forgotten—does this affect the genre of the poem? To cite another example, Long Will wakes up at the end of Passus Six of *Piers Plowman* and then falls asleep again and dreams the remaining passus; does this matter? Finally, Boethius, Martianus Capella, Alanus de Insulis, and Dante do not report falling asleep at all and make no references to dream lore in the prologues of their poems; are these poems dream visions?

There are no simple answers to these questions, but there are safe answers, answers suggested in my first assumption: to be a dream vision (or to be a poem of any predefined kind), a poem must both contain certain motifs and be the product of a poet's intention to follow a tradition or imitate a generic model.

This complex and rigorous set of requirements is necessary in this case because the dream vision in late medieval English literature is more than a conventional frame or an obsolescent authenticating device. In the hands of Chaucer and Langland and the *Pearl* poet, the dream vision genre with its accompanying rhetorical effects is essential to the themes and contents of the poems and not simply a convenient fiction. In adopting the special, problematic discourse created by Cicero and explicated by Macrobius, the discourse bounded and defined by Boethius and Dante, Guillaume de Lorris, Chaucer, and the others wrote poems *ipso facto* about reference, authority, the limitations of the human intellect, and the contingency of earthly knowledge, contents, and concerns enhanced and actually enabled by the dream vision form.

This interdependence of form and content is the reason for my second assumption—that looking at these poems as dream visions will tell us something important about them. The dream vision had its origin in the gaps, the interstices of two parallel taxonomies in medieval thought, taxonomies of real and literary dreams. An un-
derstanding of the way the poems invaded and deconstructed these
two taxonomies will help us look again at the ostensible subjects of
the poems and to see these subjects in powerful new, though thor­
oughly medieval ways.

No medieval writer ever used the term “dream vision” or dis­
cussed this kind of poem, but this fact should neither surprise nor
daunt us when we remember how generally casual medieval writers
were about kinds of poems. Chaucer, the medieval English poet who
talks more about literary kinds than any other, uses a notoriously
eclectic set of terms. He sees *Troilus and Criseyde* as a tragedy (III,
1786) and promises a few lines later to work next on “som come­
dye,” presumably a reference to the *Canterbury Tales*: On his other
works, sadly, Chaucer is less specific: in the Retraction to the Can­
terbury Tales, he refers to his dream visions—Book of the Duchess,
Hous of Fame, Parlement of Foules, and The Legend of Good
Women—simply as “books,” a term he seems to be using to differ­
entiate these works from “songs and lecherous lays” (13–19). In the
Prologue to The Legend of Good Women, he refers to his dream
visions once more, but this passage sheds only limited light on the
problem of how he saw the dream vision:

He made the book that hight the Hous of Fame,
And eke the Deeth of Blaunche the Duchesse,
And the Parlement of Foules, as I gesse,
And al the love of Palamon and Arcite
Of Thebes, thogh the storie ys knownen lyte;
And many an ympne for your halydayes,
That highten balades, roundels, virelayes;
And, for to speke of other holynesse,
He hath in prose translated Boece,
And maad the lyf also of Seynt Cecile.
He made also, goon ys a gret while,
Origenes upon the Maudeleyne.

(F, 417–28)

Elsewhere, Chaucer refers to his dream visions either as “books” or
“things.” All that can be learned from this is that Chaucer did not
have a single term which he used exclusively to denote his dream-frame poems: they are "books," a category that includes not only the dream visions but also integrated works like the *Troilus* (Retraction) but *not* the *Canterbury Tales,* to which he never refers except in the plural (both in the Retraction and also, implicitly, in his references to the Knight's and Second Nun's Tales in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*).

Chaucer refers to two other dream visions in his poetry. In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women,* he is accused of translating the *Romaunt of the Rose,* a work so despicable to the God of Love that it requires no generic label. In the Retraction, Chaucer claims to have translated "the book of the Leoun," presumed to be a (lost) redaction of Machaut's *Dit du Lyon,* a dream vision. Thus, Chaucer seems consistently to use the term "book" to refer to major works, including dream visions, which have a definable structure and an obvious integrity: the category includes the *Troilus* and his translations of other people's dream visions. He does *not* use the designation "book" to refer to his translations of Pope Innocent's *De misera humanae conditionis* or of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy,* even though this second work is clearly a forerunner of the dream vision.

Chaucer, then, seemed to know what he meant by "dream vision": it was a "book," an artistic integrity like the tragedy of Troilus; it was a poetic artifact with the standard Chaucerian persona and not a prose treatise like those of Innocent and Boethius; it was a form more complex (though less concretely defined) than those of the balade, roundel, or virelay; and the "book" was always identified by a representative or metonymic item such as the house of Fame, the "deeth" of Blanche, or the lion. The evidence is tantalizing but incomplete; even late in life and during the tense reign of Richard II, he would refer to these early *books* in the Retraction, a list which included a memorial to the wife of John of Gaunt, no royal favorite. To be sure, they were "enditynges of worldly vanitees," he says, but he "revokes" these juvenalia with a pride and satisfaction which shows he still thought highly of them.

Even if, perhaps, there was no medieval word for this kind of
“book,” an empirical look at the structure or shape of the dream vision reveals the form to be a conscious design and not merely a collection of motifs. At the simplest level, a dream vision is the first person account of a dream; the dream report is usually preceded by a prologue introducing the dreamer as a character and often followed by an epilogue describing the dreamer’s reawakening and recording the dream report in verse. The prologue, though typically short and allusive, is by far the most conventionalized and formulaic part of the dream vision. Along with establishing the frame narrative, the purpose of the prologue seems to be to introduce the character of the dreamer-poet. It is here that the reader often learns that the dreamer was distressed or concerned about some unnamed problem or worry, such that he found it hard to get to sleep on that fateful night. Though readers are encouraged and emboldened to guess the natures of these distresses—Chaucer’s love languor at the opening of the Book of the Duchess is patently obvious—it appears to be obligatory that the poet-dreamer not tell. The dreamer (or soon-to-be-dreamer) sometimes represents himself as a poet in the prologue and sometimes mentions that he tried to divert his mind by reading or meditation to get to sleep. Chaucer, for example, meditates on the daisy (the Legend of Good Women) or reads the story of Cey's and Alcione (the Book of the Duchess).

Following this introductory frame narrative, the dream report begins. The dream is usually a record of a debat or less formal conversation with one or more characters, sometimes real, sometimes allegorical. Usually there are several interlocutors and various topics of conversation: Pearl, with its singular figure of authority and tightly focused dialogue, seems the exception rather than the rule in its imitation of Boethius. There seems to be no particular narrative shape to this, the heart of the dream vision: motifs described by others such as the hortus conclusus, preternatural light, talking animals, or a personified figure of authority are common but not obligatory. Chaucer’s dream visions, for example, sometimes have earthly settings (the Book of the Duchess, the Parlement of Foules; also Piers Plowman); sometimes unearthly (the Hous of Fame, the Legend of Good Women). They sometimes feature preternatural
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animals like the talking birds of the *Hous of Fame* and the *Parlement of Foules*, while elsewhere the animals are either realistic details, emblematic or allegorical, like the whelp and the hart in the *Book of the Duchess*. The dream reports can be self-consciously allegorical (Piers Plowman, Skelton’s *Bouge of Court*, or the *Roman de la Rose*), superficially naturalistic (the *Book of the Duchess*), or set in the “real” other world of Christian eschatology like *Pearl* and other visions related to the apocalypse (such as the *Hous of Fame*). In all of this, the only constant seems to be the complex central figure of the dreamer-narrator-character: unlike most absent, omniscient, impersonal medieval narrators, the dreamer is always a character in his dream narrative.

This dream report makes up the bulk of the poem and, at its conclusion, there is often a brief framing *epilogue* describing the reawakening of the dreamer and occasionally offering interpretive comments on the dream report. This conclusion often reminds the reader of the identity of the poet and the dreamer: sometimes the identification is symbolic, as when a dream event turns into a waking one (the tolling bell of the *Book of the Duchess* or the river crossing of *Pearl*); sometimes it is explicit, as with the dreamer’s intention to produce a verse redaction of his experience (the *Book of the Duchess* again and Deguileville’s *Pelerinage de la Vie Humaine*). In any case, the concluding frame gives the poems a technical (or “formal”) closure that the dream reports themselves frequently lack. The dream report of *Pearl*, for example, seems enigmatic and violently interrupted by the jueler’s attempt to cross the river, but the epilogue makes it clear that, though the dream was cut off, the poem is finished and esthetically complete. Like the couplet of a sonnet, the concluding frame asserts the architectural finish of the artifact and challenges the reader to perceive its artistic closure.

This description is the last and best proof that the dream vision was a “kind of poem” in the minds of medieval artists. If dream poems were nothing more than collections of unrelated and optional motifs, then we should expect to find these motifs throughout the poems. In fact, the typical motifs are clustered at the beginning
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of the poem: the introduction to the dreamer, the dreamer's allusive
distress, his insomnia and diversions, and his appearance as the cen­
tral character in the dream report all suggest that the motifs work

together to help determine the structure of the poem.

The first dream vision in Western literature is the Somnium Scip­

ionis of Cicero, and unlike other first instances, this mysterious
work exerted a profound, though accidental, influence on the devel­
opment of the form through the later Middle Ages. This dream,
recounted by Scipio Africanus the Younger at the conclusion of
Cicero's Republic, seems to be a conscious imitation of "Vision of
Er," the death ecstasis at the end of Plato's Republic. Following his
Greek model, Cicero ends his examination of the ideal state with the
vision of a universe which embodies cosmological versions of the
very ethical and political principles just prescribed for the perfect
state. In doing this, Cicero replaces the magic of Er's extracorporeal
journey to the spheres with a more quotidian dream; the frame he
uses to introduce the dream, however, damages the dream's credibil­
ity as a revelation or ecstasis. On landing in Africa, Scipio recalls, he
spends an evening with King Masinissa of Numidia, an old friend of
his late grandfather, Scipio the Elder:

Post autem apparatu regio accepri, sermonem in multam noctem pro­
duximus, cum senex nihil nisi de Africano loqueretur, omniaque eius non
facta solum sed etiam dicta meminisset. deinde ut cubitum discessimus,
me et de via fessum, et qui ad multam noctem vigilassem, artior quam
solebat somnus complexus est. hie mihi—credo equidem ex hoc quod
eramus locuti; fit enim fere ut cogitationes sermonesque nostri pariant
aliquid in somno tale, quale de Homero scribit Ennius, de quo videlicet
saepissime vigilat solbat cogitare et loqui—Africanus se ostendit ea
forma quae mihi ex imagine eius quam ex ipso erat notior; quern ubi
agnovi, equidem cohorrui; sed ille: 'ades' inquit 'animo et omitte timo­
rem Scipio, et quae dicam trade memoriae.

And later, after we had dined amidst regal state we prolonged our talk
until far into the night. The old man would talk about nothing except of
Africanus and remembered not only all that he had done but all as well
that he had said. Then, when we had parted to take our rest a sleep much
dereper than was usual fell upon me, for I was very weary from my jour­
ney and had stayed awake until very late. And then—(I suppose it was a
result of what we had been talking about; for it happens often that the things that we have been thinking and speaking of bring about something in our sleep. So Ennius relates in his dream about Homer, of whom in hours of wakefulness he used so often to think and speak)—Africanus stood there before me, in figure familiar to me from his bust rather than from life. I shuddered with dread as I recognized him but he said, "Be calm, Scipio, and have no fear, but fail not to remember the things that I shall tell."

Effectively, what is introduced here is the day-residue dream of a great man, Scipio Africanus the Younger. The introduction implies that the details of the dream (if not the entire experience) are the products of the exhausted mind of an impressionable young man who has spent the night hearing stories of his adoptive grandfather. Scipio himself says as much in comparing his experience to that of the poet Ennius; the comparison firmly suggests that neither dream, inspired by waking thought and surrounded by coincidences, ought to be taken seriously as a revelation. Indeed, Scipio takes care to mention that his namesake appeared to him in resemblance to a statue the younger man remembered; this is a telling little detail, for Scipio the Younger, who was two when his grandfather died, would not have remembered him in life. Even Macrobius, whose Commentary on the Somnium preserved the text for the modern world, sees the frame as self-consciously fictional and not supernaturally revelatory.

What follows this introduction is a spectacular but fairly predictable vision of the great world in the Platonic affective tradition, a vision designed to legitimize Cicero's conservative republican virtues of pietas and civic obligation. The elder Scipio, the dreamer's guide in the ecstasis, concludes by drawing a crisp moral lesson from the rapturous vision of the spheres:

* cum pateat igitur aeternum id esse quod se ipsum moveat, quis est qui hanc naturam animis esse tributam neget? inanimum est enim omne quod pulsu agitatur externo; quod autem est animal, id motu cietur interiore et suo; nam haec est propria natura animi atque vis; quae si est una ex omnibus quae se ipsa moveat, neque nata certe est et aeterna est. hanc tu exerce in optimis rebus! sunt autem optimae curae de salute patriae, quibus agitatus et exercitatus animus velocius in hanc sedem et domum suam pervolabit, idque oculi faciet, si iam num cum erit inclusus in cor-
pore, eminebit foras, et ea quae extra erunt contemplans quam maxime se a corpore abstrahet.

Since then that which is self-moving is everlasting, who would dare deny that this is the essential nature given to living spirits? For everything that is set in motion by an outside force is without a spirit within it, but that which is animated by spirit is moved by its own power within, for this is the essential property and power of spirit,—which, since it is the only thing among all things which moves itself, cannot have had a beginning nor can it ever have an end. Devote this, then, to the highest tasks! Of these surely the noblest are those on behalf of one's fatherland: a spirit dedicated and devoted to these will swiftly wing its way to this, its own abode and home. And more swiftly will it speed here if, while still imprisoned in the body, it soars above it and fixing its gaze on things beyond, it rids itself as much as is in its power from the body.¹⁰

The work thus continues to draw moral lessons from the vision, seemingly unimpeded by the problematic nature of the dream; despite the introductory section which casts the dream into doubt, the moral lessons drawn from the visions of history and of the Platonic cosmos are responsible and salutary. In part, this is because it is a responsible man who dreams the vision; by this point in the Republic, Scipio the Younger has been established by Cicero as a stoic Republic saint, moral touchstone of a fast-fading golden age. The dream of such a person, even if it is nothing more than the product of his mind freed in sleep from the constraints of rationality and day-to-day existence, is a precious possession: dreamer valorizes dream. At the same time, though, the evident piety and moral probity of the vision is a credit to the mind that produced (received?) it: dream valorizes dreamer. So the reader is left with a vision of the other world that need not be taken literally to be appreciated or treasured (as this work certainly was). Even if the Somnium Scipionis is nothing more than a day-residue dream, it is nonetheless valuable both for the truth it obviously tells and because it is a great man’s dream.¹¹

It is unlikely that Cicero analyzed the rhetoric of the Somnium Scipionis in this way, or even that he was fully conscious of the formal issues which his choice of a dream frame raised: Macrobius’ suspicion that he chose the dream frame to avoid the intrusive in-
credibility of Er's out-of-body experience seems entirely reasonable. More important than his motives for his choice, though, was its effect: in changing the frame from apotheosis to dream, Cicero complicated and psychologized the visionary experience. Surely dreams are more commonplace than visions, even in the ancient world; more surely, though, dream intelligence is less credible, less dramatic, more dangerous than messages in waking visions. In fact, after Cicero (and after the Macrobian Commentary to which the Somnium Scipionis was always appended), a remarkably strict distinction in visionary literature is established between the somatic experience and the waking vision. As I will illustrate in detail later, the poet's choice of a waking vision suggests that the didactic message of the vision is the poet's priority; the choice of the dream as frame is based on psychological, affective, and rhetorical motives antithetical to the visionary's purpose in writing.

Surely it is such considerations that lay behind Boethius' choice of a frame narrative for The Consolation of Philosophy. A century after Macrobius, Boethius begins his treatise by approximating the drama of the Somnium Scipionis but, conscious of the ambiguity of the dream, he soon departs from his Ciceronian model:

Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi,
Flebilis heu maestos cogor inire modos.
Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda camenae
Et veris elegi fletibus ora rigant.
Has saltem nullus potius pervincere terror,
Ne nostrum comites prosequerentur iter.
Gloria felicis olim viridisque iuventae
Solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis.
Venit enim properata malis inopina senectus
Et dolor aetatem iussit inesse suam.
Intempestivi funduntur vertice cani
Et tremit effeto corpore laxa cutis.
Mors hominum felix quae se nec dulcis annis
Inserit et maestis saepe vocata venit.
Eheu quam surda miseros avertitur aure
Et flentes oculos claudere saeva negat.
I who once wrote songs of keen delight am now by sorrow driven to take up melancholy measures. Wounded Muses tell me what I must write, and elegiac verses bathe my face with real tears. Not even terror could drive from me these faithful companions of my long journey. Poetry, which was once the glory of my happy and flourishing youth, is still my comfort in this misery of my old age.

Old age has come too soon with its evils, and sorrow has commanded me to enter the age which is hers. My hair is prematurely gray, and slack skin shakes on my exhausted body. Death, happy to men when she does not intrude in the sweet years, but comes when often called in sorrow, turns a deaf ear to the wretched and cruelly refuses to close weeping eyes.

The sad hour that has nearly drowned me came just at the time that faithless Fortune favored me with her worthless gifts. Now that she has clouded her deceitful face, my accursed life seems to go on endlessly. My friends, why did you so often think me happy? Any man who has fallen never stood securely.\(^{13}\)

This prologue shows that Boethius had a clear understanding of the visionary tradition. Like Cicero, he shows quite clearly that his dreamer was distressed and preoccupied prior to his visionary experience. The poignant lyricism of this first metrum, in fact, far better captures the distressed state of the visionary than Scipio's pale prose. For precisely these reasons, Boethius departs radically from the dream conventions in the first prosa:

While I silently pondered these things, and decided to write down my wretched complaint, there appeared standing above me a woman of majestic countenance whose flashing eyes seemed wise beyond the ordinary wisdom of men.\(^{14}\)
Unlike Cicero, Boethius specifically chooses to keep his visionary awake, and his reasons for doing are serious and telling. Unlike the Somnium Scipionis, the Consolation of Philosophy is to be a treatise with a first-person narrator, and this structural change so weakens the didactic impact of the dream vision that Macrobius must suppress the dream frame to give his text any semblance of seriousness. To explain, in the Somnium Scipionis, we noted the mutual valorization of dream and dreamer; this happens only because Cicero and his audience already reverenced both Scipio and the doctrines he espouses. In Boethius, however, the change to the first person, the highly emotional state of the visionary, and the searching investigative program of the poem, taken together, preclude immediate valorization of either the vision or the visionary. Thus, were Boethius to begin his poem and say in his own voice that he is in complete despair and then to report his inspired consolatory experience, the delicate balance would shift too far in the direction of the subjective. The dream vision, quite the opposite of Boethius' form here, explodes the delicate balance of credibility: however precious a dream vision might be, it must perforce always be indeterminate, always remain suspended between the two poles, neither assuredly somatic nor assuredly divine.

In general, the implicit distinction visible in the opening of the Consolation of Philosophy is carefully maintained by visionary poets ever since. From Martianus Capella through the Chartrean naturalists and Dante to the allegorical visionary poets of the sixteenth century, the balance between objective (didactic) and subjective (somatic) is a careful one. In the next chapter, we will see that the two poles of this opposition—the dream as an event in third person narratives and the waking vision—developed and conserved well-defined ontological statuses throughout the Middle Ages.

In this very restricted sense of the dream vision, the form does not reappear until the eighth century in Anglo-Saxon England. Dreams, apocalypses, visions, and other somatic and marvelous reports were very common in French and Neolatin literature, but it is not until the Old English "Dream of the Rood" that the full complexity and ambivalence of the form reappears. The "Dream of the Rood" is a
striking dream dialogue between the dreamer-narrator and the Rood and an imaginative exploration of its crucial but inglorious part in God’s plan of redemption. But it is finally even more: in the last analysis, it is a profoundly psychological poem, an exploration of faith and despair which purposely calls the status of the dream into question. Phrases early in the dream-report (there is no introductory frame) suggest that the dreamer-narrator feels despair and shame over his sinfulness, a state that makes him a poignant analogue to the unwilling, shame-ridden instrument of the Savior’s death:

I beheld there a host of the angels of the Lord fair from their creation; this was no felon’s gallows but beholding it there were holy spirits, men of the earth and all this splendid creation.

Wondrous was the victory-tree and I stained with sin wounded with defilement.

The poem goes on to suggest a typological relationship between the narrator and the Rood; both are shameful but the same redemption that transformed the Rood can glorify the sinful dreamer:

On me beam Godes
prowode hwile; for pan ic þrymfaest nu
hlifige under heofenum, and ic hælen mæg
ægðwylcne anra þara þe him bið egesa to me.
In ic waes geworden wita heardost,
leodum laSost, æer þan ic him lifes weg
rihte gerymde, reordberendum.

On me the Son of God
suffered for a time; therefore, now in glory
I tower under Heaven, and I can save
any one who is in awe of me.
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Long ago I was made to be the cruelest of torments, hateful to men, but that was when I opened up the true way of life for men. Like the Somnium Scipionis, this poem evades the question of the authenticity of the dream; there are hints that the dream may be a projection of the dreamer's guilty conscience, but these hints do not obtrude on the traditional theological sentence of the vision. Dreamer and dream are mutually valorized here: the humble dreamer comes to terms with his sin in the dream, while the inherent worth of the dream credits the consciousness that conceived it.

Despite this native facility with the dream vision form in the Old English period, the dream vision masterpieces of the fourteenth century owe virtually nothing to rich, primitive works such as "The Dream of the Rood," Cynewulf's "Elene," or to the story of Caedmon's dream in Bede. The later works, the poems of Chaucer and of the alliterative revival in the second half of the fourteenth century, are the direct descendants of the remarkably original invention of Guillaume de Lorris, Le Roman de la Rose. While Roman source studies ably demonstrate Guillaume's wide reading (to say nothing of Jean de Meun's encyclopedic vision), the originality of the idea of the Roman remains completely intact: even comparisons with the poems of Machaut, Froissart, Houdenc, and other early French writers of vision-poems cannot account for the grand blasphemy, the extraordinary deadpan, and finally the profound beauty of this poem. More to our present purpose, no poet before Guillaume de Lorris understands and exploits the rich ambiguity of the dream frame, the mutual valorization of dream and dreamer, and the strange energy of the self-conscious dream report:

Aucunes genz dient qu'en songes
n'a se fables non et mençonges;
mes l'en puet tex songes songier
qui ne sont mie mençongier,
ainz sont après bien aparant,
si en puis bien traire a garant
un auctor qui ot non Macrobes,
qui ne tint pas songes a lobes,
Many men sayn that in sweveninges
Ther nys but fables and lesynges;
But men may some swevenes sen
Whiche hardely that false ne ben,
But afterward ben apparaunt.
This may I drawe to warraunt
An authour that hight Macrobes,
That holt nat dremes false ne lees,
But undoth us the avysioun
That whilom mette kyng Cipioun.
And whoso saith or weneth it be
A jape, or elles nycete,
To wene that dremes after falle,
Let whoso lyste a fol me calle.
For this trowe I, and say for me,
That dremes signiffiaunce be
Of good and harm to many wightes,
That dremen in her slep a-nyghtes
Ful many thynges covertly,
That fallen after al openly.17

The key to the passage is Guillaume’s mention of Macrobius and the
Commentary on the Somnium Scipionis. As we shall see in chapter
3, Macrobius does assert the existence of divine, revelatory, or pre-
monitory dreams, but Macrobius would hardly have considered this
dream a revelatory one, given its context and circumstances. If any-
thing, the mention of Macrobius puts this present dream into even more question, for Macrobius' prime example of the anxiety- or day residue-dream—the lover's dream of possessing his beloved—is the very dream to which Guillaume here calls Macrobius to witness. The use of the Commentary as intertext or context thus puts Guillaume's opening strategies into sharp relief; invoking the authority of Macrobius makes the choice Guillaume offers his readers—"Let whoso lyst a fol me calle"—a legitimate one.18

So, as in the other cases, there is good reason here to doubt the revelatory nature of the dream, but at the same time the content of the dream valorizes the dreamer as a worshipper of the God of Love, just as the dream of the rood valorized the dreamer in that poem. The same situation, in which neither the dream nor the dreamer is trustworthy in isolation but each justifies the other when taken together, inheres in the artificial courtly ambience of the Roman de la Rose. For the follower of courtly love, a true lover's dream is *ipso facto* an object of value, while the stately, masque-like decorum of the dream is a credit to its dreamer.

The Roman de la Rose is the single most important work in the history of the dream vision in the later Middle Ages. By grafting a moribund doctrinal form onto the mischief and vigor of courtly love, the Roman brought new life to the poetic form and turned it, once more, inward, focusing its energies not on messages from beyond but on tensions within. Guillaume de Lorris could give his readers lush religious ecstasy one moment, light and disreputable burlesque the next, and could enclose all within a frame that blithely defers all questions of source, credibility, and authority.

Thanks to Guillaume, the dream vision form with all its subtleties became the undisputed poetic fashion in France and later in England during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Scores of greater and lesser poets adopted the form, and related literary kinds such as the Neoplatonic ecstasis experienced a rebirth throughout Europe. De Planctu Naturae, the Anticlaudianus, and the Divina Commedia each share, to some degree, the ancestry of the love visions of Froissart and Machaut, but these works move away from the inten-
sity of the dream vision toward other identities and for other poetic effects. The famous opening lines of the *Divina Commedia*, for example, suggest the initial situation of the dream vision but do so only obliquely:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.

Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte
che nel pensier rinova la paura!

Tant' è amara che poco è più morte;
ma per trattar del ben ch'i' vi trovai,
dirò de l'altre cose ch'i' v'ho scorte.

Io non so ben ridir com'i' v'intrai,
tant' era pien di sonno . . .

Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost. Ah, how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of the good that I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there.

I cannot rightly say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way; but when I had reached the foot of a hill, . . . 19

Clearly, from these first lines, Dante does not have the dream vision in mind. The verb "ritrovai" is nicely ambiguous and seems to suggest a sleep, but the reader soon learns that the sleep, like all else in this dream landscape, is figurative. Only a figurative or allegorical life's journey could have a "mezzo" and only after a metaphorical sleep could the Wayfarer find himself in this backdrop. Dante is not interested in his frame, as Scipio, Guillaume de Lorris, and other dream vision writers are; in a real sense, the *Divina Commedia* does not have a frame, preferring instead the less comforting and forgiving wrench of the reader's perspective from the earthbound to the polysemous. 20 This dislocation, the tracklessness of the dark forest, stands in contrast to the (actually overdetermined) conventional
prologue of the dream vision, just as the mysterious Wayfarer contrasts with the conventionalized and languishing dreamer. Dante certainly wants us to mistrust his simulacrum, but he wants this mistrust to be on a moral, not a narrative level (and he wants the mistrust to develop slowly through the early cantos of *Inferno*). The dreamer's debility, so critical an element in the dream vision, here calls the Wayfarer's moral probity into question, not his credibility.\(^{21}\)

While poems like the *Commedia* and the allegories of the Chartrean Naturalists spring in part from the same creative ferment that inspired Guillaume de Lorris, his true heirs were the great English dream vision poets of the fourteenth century. Chaucer, the most prolific English writer of dream visions, wrote complex poems which drew deeply on the wide French love vision tradition of which Guillaume was the flower. The *Book of the Duchess*, usually thought to be Chaucer's first major poem, is the most French of Chaucer's dream poems and alludes to Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*, Machaut's two *Jugement* poems and the *Dit du Lyon*, and of course to the *Roman*. The *Parlement of Foules* also traces its ancestry to the *Roman* but also owes much in theme and technique to Jean de Meun and to the Chartrean Naturalists. While the *Hous of Fame* clearly echoes Dante and Classical models, it too is finally a work after the *Roman de la Rose*, in which the unreliability of the narrator becomes the crucial counter in a web of disreputed and disreputable authorities. Only the anthology of lives of the Saints of Cupid, called the *Legend of Good Women*, a work often thought to have been commissioned by the court and one in which Chaucer's interest seems to have failed, employs the frame but fails to develop it as a psychological motif.

Outside London, the dream frame narrative experienced an equally remarkable renaissance in the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century. Poems such as *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* use the imagery of courtly love, personification allegory, estates satire, and eschatology within the flexible poetic form. Later writers in the Chaucerian tradition such as Lydgate, Dunbar, James I, and Skelton continued to use the frame into the fifteenth century for amorous and satiric purposes but, with the new vogue of Italianate lyric mod-
els in the late fifteenth century, the form essentially disappears in
the antiquarian voice of Edmund Spenser, to subsist marginally in
the Renaissance and beyond as the bankrupt vehicle of ecstatics,
mystics, and political satirists. We can only speculate about the rea­
sons for the dream vision’s demise, but poetry’s new devotion to
human emotion and Protestantism’s new suspicions about dreams
must surely have made the form seem plodding and mechanical. In a
literary environment where life is a dream, where Prosperos and
Redcrosses live in poems, the line between this world and the
mind’s own habitat need not be drawn before art can begin.