

Strange Bedfellows: The Chaucerian Dream Vision and the Neoconservative *Nightmare*

Drew Beard

A dazed-looking young woman in a flowing white gown wanders down a suburban street, encountering a little girl in a frilly white dress; like the young woman, she is blond and we see that she has used chalk to sketch on the sidewalk the abandoned house standing before them. When asked if she lives there, the little girl giggles and says that ‘no one lives here.’ The young woman asks about ‘Freddy’ and is told: ‘He’s not home.’ In an instant, the sky darkens and it begins to rain heavily, washing away the chalk drawing of the little girl, who has disappeared. Reluctantly drawn into the house, the young woman finds herself trapped inside, surrounded by the anguished cries of children, as a tricycle comes crashing down the staircase. Attempting to escape, the young woman opens the front door and finds herself not outside but once again in the front hallway of this house of horrors, a nightmarish re-imagining of a family home. As the door slams shut behind her, it becomes clear that there is no escape.(1) She is trapped inside the horrific dream vision that forms the narrative basis of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise, the postmodern counterpart of the dream visions dating from the 14th century.

Characterized by what Deanne Williams refers to as a ‘dynamic relation between text and commentary,’(2) the medieval ‘dream vision’ is defined by its allegorical orientation, an emphasis on the surreal or absurd, and a subjective and flexible reality. In addition, the Chaucerian dream vision grants a considerable degree of importance and authority to the reader through the act of individual interpretation. As a literary framing device, the dream vision served to simultaneously destabilize cultural assumptions and contain dissent in the medieval period, providing the reader with a wider range of extractable meanings while at the same time placing limits upon the discourse emerging from the text. This seemingly contradictory process, which can be viewed as a power exchange in which the reader’s authority is both acquired and limited, can be seen at work in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, *Book of the Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Legend of Good Women*. I will briefly discuss how this dynamic played out in the Chaucerian dream vision, with its discursive negotiation between the dream world and the constructed reality of the world of the dreamer, before examining the dream vision found in the postmodern horror film, most visibly in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series (1984-2003).(3) This breakdown of boundaries, between dreaming and waking, has consequences for the contemporary viewer and his or her interpretive authority. While the postmodern dream vision and its equation of the surreal with the horrific may still allow for the interrogation of cultural anxieties, particularly those surrounding sexuality and the family, its very status as horror derives from its failure to contain and structure meaning in the same manner as the Chaucerian dream vision.

Although the dream vision reached the peak of its popularity during the 13th and 14th centuries, the literary genre’s biblical origins (in the Book of Daniel) contributed to its appeal, through the dream vision’s prophetic nature and the suggestion of direct access to the divine.(4) The dream vision made its first appearance in Anglo-Saxon England in the 8th century, followed by the Old English ‘The Dream of the Rood,’ with which J. Stephen Russell claims, ‘the full complexity and ambivalence of the form

reappears'(5) ; however, it is not until the 12th century, with *The Romance of the Rose* (termed by J. Stephen Russell 'the single most important work in the history of the dream vision in the later middle ages'), that the genre fully assumes the form of the dream vision commonly associated with the medieval period.(6) Kathryn L. Lynch compares the 'high medieval dream vision' to the novel of the modern period, and of the 12th through 14th centuries, calls the dream vision the 'genre of the age.'(7)

While the dream vision has persisted in both literature (perhaps most notably in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*) and film (in everything from the 1939 version of *The Wizard of Oz* to the *Elm Street* films of the 1980s to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*), the medieval dream vision of Chaucer was written under culturally specific conditions and making use of historically specific conventions, both of which connect it to and distinguish it from more recent and well-known manifestations of the dream vision in other forms of media (indeed, by the 1980s, students of literature were much more likely to encounter Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in their studies, rather than his dream visions). Defined by Steven F. Kruger, the dream vision as a genre 'includes any text in which the main narrative (or sometimes lyric) expression is formed by an account of falling asleep or dreaming.'(8) While this definition encompasses the more recent dream visions in literature and film mentioned above, the medieval dream vision stands apart in its hybrid status as both dream and debate. Kruger writes that this particular form 'constitutes one of the most widely used forms in Middle English literature, with a number of the great canonical poems of the fourteenth century . . . being both framed as dream visions and structured around a central dialogue or series of dialogues.'(9) This dialogue took the form of a debate, providing instruction to the reader, between allegorical figures within what Kruger terms a 'circular structure . . . with the falling asleep and awakening forming an 'envelope' for the dream proper,'(10) the framing device which has continued to prove useful to writers and filmmakers in the centuries since.

J. Stephen Russell sets forth a narrative structure for the medieval dream vision, consisting of the prologue (introducing the dreamer before they enter the dream world), the dream report (containing not only the debate itself but also the fantastical elements associated with the dream world), and then finally, the epilogue, in which the dreamer most often awakes and attempts to make meaning from the dream by putting it into verse form.(11) Alongside this basic structure, the medieval dreamer is almost always a male, finding himself in a beautiful setting and awakening before the full significance of the dream is known. For the dreamer, the ultimate goal is interpretation and understanding of the dream, demonstrating a prevailing narrative concern with interiority in the form of unconscious desires and drives). Many times, this goal is complicated by an adversary in the dream, opposing any fulfillment of the drive towards this knowledge. (12)

The horror film has also been advanced as being well-suited to the exploration of both individual and cultural interiority. Steven Schneider, in 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror,' writes that 'like comedy, [the horror film] provides a relatively safe (because relatively disguised/distorted) forum for the expression of socio-cultural fears.'(13) Through the genre's preoccupation with the surreal and the monstrous, whether framed as a

dream or not, it can be suggested that all horror films can be seen as evocative of the dream vision: the viewer witnesses the events, guided through the film not by the guide of the dream vision, but the apparatus of the cinema itself. Schneider quotes Andrew Tudor's assertion, in 'Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre,' that 'the [horror] genre itself invokes psychoanalytic considerations, at times borrowing its imagery from the symbolic apparatus of dream interpretation as well as allowing fictional characters to advance pseudo-Freudian accounts of their own and others' motivations.'⁽¹⁴⁾ This psychoanalytic orientation is part of what Schneider is addressing when he advances the horror film as a particularly salient avenue for examining cultural anxiety. At the same time, this orientation links it to the Chaucerian dream vision despite significant differences in address, subject matter, and potential meaning.

Deanne Williams defines the dream vision as 'a poem that relates a curious dream as a pretext for an extended poetic and philosophical discussion of a more abstract subject.'⁽¹⁵⁾ There were specific emotional and spiritual dimensions to the dream vision, as William A. Quinn states: 'Such a dream may be presented as a preternatural visitation or as an excursion into the dreamer's subconscious—or both. At worst, dreaming offers a robotic excuse for didactic exposition. At best, the dream vision provides an entertaining excuse for teaching a true fantasy.'⁽¹⁶⁾ Although its greatest popularity was achieved in the medieval period, the term 'dream vision' was not used to describe the genre until 1906.⁽¹⁷⁾ As a framing device, the dream vision allowed for the destabilization of cultural assumptions, making use of the surreal to render safe the act of dissent and providing discursive spaces outside frequently volatile hegemonic power structures.

Addressing this process of destabilization, specifically with regard to Chaucer's treatment of fame and literary canonization in the third book of *House of Fame*, Laurel Amtower writes: 'By destabilizing the force by which such cultural products retain their authority, Chaucer gives his readers a basis for reassessing the more problematic assumptions of their culture on their own.'⁽¹⁸⁾ Granting this authority to the reader through the act of individual interpretation is one of the key characteristics of the dream vision, allowing it to contain dissent while at the same time expanding the range of potential meanings emanating from the text. 'An allegory of the processes of reading and writing,'⁽¹⁹⁾ the dream vision generally personified human emotions, virtues, and vices either in the form of animals (as in *Parliament of Fowls*) or as emblematic figures with supernatural characteristics (for example, Lady Fame in *House of Fame*). Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* is set forth by Deanne Williams as 'the culmination of Chaucer's dream visions. It contains all of the conventional structures of reading, dreaming, and supernatural encounters.'⁽²⁰⁾ From the act of reading the dream as text, capable of producing coherent if varied meaning, the reader of the dream vision is provided authority through interpretation, occurring within a wide, but not infinite, range of potential meaning.

One of the most popular manifestations of the postmodern dream vision is found in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* horror film series produced by New Line Cinema, beginning in 1984 and followed by seven sequels over the next two decades. With its emphasis on graphic violence, the series belonged to the genre of the 'slasher' film, which emerged in the late 1970s and is described by Tony Williams as 'highly dependent on spectacular special effects and gory bloodbaths of promiscuous (mostly female)

teenagers.’(21) Produced in the neoconservative atmosphere of the early 1980s, the slasher genre has generally been viewed as less socially relevant than horror films produced in the previous decade. Williams delineates numerous horror films produced in the 1970’s as having ‘questioned the very nature of the nuclear family and implicitly (though never coherently) argued for a new form of society.’(22) While all horror films, and film as a medium itself, can be seen as a form of the dream vision, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is the only example of the sustained use of the postmodern dream vision, with the ‘nightmare’ of neoconservative popular culture bearing a striking resemblance to the dream vision of Chaucer while also departing from it in significant ways.

As Tony Williams writes, ‘Appearing in an era pathologically affirming conservative family values, most 1980s horror films brutally chastised those questioning or disobeying ideological norms,’(23) with particularly nasty demises being meted out to the sexually active (whether heterosexual or homosexual), substance abusers, and any other groups existing outside of established norms. In this sense, retaliation for dissent continued, with the dissident-directed violence of Chaucer’s time merely transferred to the theater screen and played out sequel after sequel. Paul Budra, in ‘Recurrent Monsters: Why Freddy, Michael, and Jason Keep Coming Back,’ notes that ‘the sequelization of horror movies is tied to the loss of closure.’(24) This lack of closure is a vital part of the postmodern horror film, as well as the dream vision appearing in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Budra points out that ‘*A Nightmare on Elm Street* is the most self-consciously open-ended and highly sequelized of these films’(25) and differentiates the postmodern horror film from the classical horror film, in the form of *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) and *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), through its embodiment of threat. If Frankenstein’s Monster and Count Dracula stood as what Budra calls ‘lurkers on the threshold,’ then their menace has been supplanted by another source of horror. Budra writes that the ‘threat in postmodern horror, then, is not the lurker on the threshold, but the very absence of thresholds that the contemporary condition entails.’(26) This breakdown of boundaries, specifically between sleeping and waking, is central to the *Elm Street* series and its use of the dream vision to provide a safe space for questioning cultural assumptions and anxieties. A similar process was at work in Chaucer’s time, undertaken by the heterodox ‘Lollard’ movement, associated with John Wyclif and the questioning and reinterpretation of the Bible, viewed as heretical in its dissent from the teachings and practices of orthodox religion.(27) Persecution and violent punishment, including death, was a present threat for anyone departing from the dominant ideologies set forth by social institutions such as the Church.(28) A politically savvy Chaucer was able to negotiate these threats by keeping his political and religious critique hidden within the protective fiction of the dream vision and the ‘envelope’ offered by the dream as framing device.

Of course, unlike in Chaucer’s time, *Elm Street*’s retaliatory violence is highly dependent upon special effects. Tony Williams refers to this as an ‘apocalyptic ‘crisis’ cinema’(29) and posits special effects themselves as yet another framing device, one crucial to creating the surreal landscape demanded by the postmodern dream vision.(30) *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) revolves around the character of Freddy Krueger; the fedora-wearing, hideously disfigured child murderer hunted down and killed by a group of vigilante parents after he escaped prosecution. Burned alive, Krueger seeks revenge in the dreams of his killers’ children, now teenagers, who come to realize that they are having the same

dream, one collective nightmare with only slight variations. Wearing a leather glove equipped with knife blades for fingers, Freddy chases his victims through nightmarish settings (first a hellish boiler room, and later an abandoned family home, settings that are far removed for the pastoral world of the Chaucerian dream vision) in which the dreamer is not only in danger from his or her assailant (a suggestible demonic re-envisioning of the guiding eagle in *House of Fame* or Chaucer's Black Knight in his *Book of the Duchess*), but also from the failure of logic that occurs in the dream setting (the absence of gravity, manipulation of surroundings and time, etc.). Often, the insecurities and phobias of the dreamers are turned against them, with their repressed anxieties leading to their demise: for in the *Elm Street* films, if Krueger claims his victim in his or her dream, they do not wake up at all. Film critic Richard Corliss describes the film series in relation to the postmodern tradition, and writes: 'All the *Nightmare* films are compact encyclopedias of classical and pop allusions. They quote Poe and Cocteau, *Hamlet* and Balinese dream theory; they crib ruthlessly from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Jaws*, *Poltergeist* and themselves. They are cultural carnivores.'⁽³¹⁾ This relationship to other texts serves to position the *Nightmare* films squarely within the postmodern, creating their own meaning and brand of the dream vision, relating to the Chaucerian dream vision through a shared intertextual orientation.

This intertextuality manifested in Chaucer's dream visions through prominent references to classical texts, drawing upon a body of knowledge as widely possessed in Chaucer's time as the popular culture cited in the *Elm Street* films. This allowed the poet to step outside the text, drawing parallels and suggesting relationships even as potential critique was safely contained within the dream vision. This intertextuality abounds in Chaucer's dream visions, beginning with *Book of the Duchess* (written between 1369 and 1372). Composed to commemorate the death of Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and the wife of John of Gant, it features an extended dialogue between the dreamer and the Black Knight concerning the nature of love. Here, the dreamer falls asleep while mourning a lost love and reading the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, separated when Ceyx drowned at sea. Praying to the goddess Juno for a dream vision, the grieving Alcyone then experiences a vision of her dead lover, in which he asks her to provide him a proper burial and to accept his death. Only then is Alcyone able to sleep, and the poet reading the tale wishes to be in possession of such a god to end his own bout of grief-induced sleeplessness. While reading, the poet falls asleep and enters the dream state, awakening in a chamber whose stained glass windows depict the story of Troy and whose walls retell the events related in *The Romance of the Rose*, consciously invoking an earlier dream vision (one chiefly concerned with the art of courtly love, while *The Book of the Duchess* was concerned with the loss of such love).

This "calling back" to a previous entry in the genre and the fall of Troy demonstrates Chaucer's utilization of other texts in crafting the rhetoric of his dream vision. In his second dream vision, *The House of Fame* (composed between 1379 and 1380), Chaucer draws upon the Italian influences of Boccaccio and Dante, while also alluding to and adapting Virgil, Ovid, the Bible, Boethius, and the French love poets, permitting an extended dialogue on the nature of fame and the fallibility of how fame has been recorded. Chaucer's second dream vision makes use of intertextuality to consider the role played by the poet in reporting the lives of the famous, pondering how much truth can really be told when famed exploits are set to paper. However, as the meaning of his dream visions are often left ambiguous, Chaucer's

intertextual references and his intentions behind them also remain ambiguous, yet serve a clear rhetorical purpose in allowing the poet to make subtle suggestions of connections and relationships between the dream vision and other texts, creating a larger dialogue and allowing for an effectively contained critique avoiding the retribution leveled at more overt forms of questioning such as the aforementioned Lollardy. While meaning is suggested, its interpretation by the reader remains relatively open, making the dream vision, much like the horror film, an efficacious mode for addressing otherwise taboo or even dangerous political or religious dissent, heavily dependent upon the individual act of interpretation.

Roman philosopher Macrobius, in his commentary on Cicero's *The Dream of Scipio*, classified dreams in five categories: the *somnium* (enigmatic, particularly suited to the act of interpretation), the *visio* (prophecy), the *oraculum* (the visionary appearance of a figure of authority), the *insomnium* (the nightmare), and the *visum* (apparitions occurring between the states of sleeping and waking).⁽³²⁾ The inclusive nature of Macrobius's classification of dreams indicated an early interest in dream interpretation and the privileging of the meaning such an act produced; it also led to 'an extraordinary diversity of medieval dream visions.'⁽³³⁾ This diversity can be suggested to have allowed for the wide interpretive range that the Chaucerian dream vision permitted the reader, for whom the form proved particularly interactive. As Quinn notes, 'Dreaming provides . . . a strong yet flexible paradigm for interpreting visionary narrative.'⁽³⁴⁾ In this, the Chaucerian dream vision can be seen as particularly suited to ambiguity and its explication.

By working through this ambiguity, the reader is able to question the constructed dream world as well as that in which they reside and from where they are interpreting the dream vision as text. Prompting these questions and calling for their resolution is what makes possible the dream vision's facilitation of critical discourse upon cultural assumptions regarding, most notably, social governance, gender relations, and literary merit, containing them not so much through their being resolved but through their framing as fantasy. Deanne Williams writes: 'Raising questions concerning inspiration and transmission, as well, as interpretation and authority, they destabilize tradition instead of affirming it.'⁽³⁵⁾ Williams goes on to identify Chaucer's *House of Fame* as being particularly indicative of this condition, as she states that the work 'has drawn attention to the different ways of processing a particular event, calling various forms of knowledge—literary, historical, experiential—into question.'⁽³⁶⁾ Placing the authority in the mind of the reader provides the author of the dream vision with a protected space from which to engage in a critique of social institutions and power structures. For Chaucer, the ambiguity of the dream vision and the transfer of interpretive authority to the reader serve as his own extratextual framing device, providing protection from possible authoritarian retaliation.

Dream interpretation, as practiced in the medieval period, was not merely an amusement; as Deanne Williams points out, 'a text is defined by interpretation . . . so, too, do people define themselves by the reading of a text.'⁽³⁷⁾ If the interpretation of dreams allowed the medieval reader an opportunity for self-definition, then it was a process undertaken at the reader's peril, in which one's well-being depended on the competency of the interpretation. Applying this concern to the Chaucerian dream vision, Williams writes: 'Dreams are subject to interpretation: they can be 'turned' for the better or for the worse. As a

literary genre, the dream vision requires the reader to work alongside the author to extract meaning from the dream, a process that can be done well, ‘to goode,’ or poorly.’(38) This notion of a “poor turn” for the dream vision suggests that, even within this broader range of meaning provided to the reader, there are limits upon interpretation. Authority may be granted to the reader through interpretation, but at the same time that meaning is being expanded, it is being limited by the fact that the dream vision is, by definition, a framing device and serves to contain the discourse surrounding meaning in the very same moment as rendering it ‘safe’ through the genre’s ambiguity and association with the surreal.

The Chaucerian dream vision also, like the horror film, exhibits a concern with revelation. *The Book the Duchess* ends abruptly with the Black Knight’s revelation that ‘good, fair White,’ the hard-won object of his love, is dead, while the entire narrative drive of Chaucer’s *Parliament of Fowls* (written between 1381 and 1382) involves how a parliament of birds will pair off romantically. Both of these dream visions end abruptly, with the dreamer still seeking the knowledge and meaning, that ‘certeyn thing’ he yearned for as the poem began. While Chaucer’s dream vision strives toward revelation (and very rarely reaches it), the dream visions of *Elm Street* also work towards the revelation of an unknowable thing, with the dreams of the terrorized teenagers of Elm Street all contributing to the major revelation of Freddy Krueger’s murderous and pedophilic origins, repressed by their parents and accessible only through their dreams and their interpretation.

While similarities do exist between these two forms of dream vision, separated by centuries, the postmodern dream vision of the horror film can be primarily distinguished from the Chaucerian dream vision in that, narratively speaking, the dream and ‘reality’ are not as easily differentiated in the *Elm Street* films, suggesting the lack of containment offered by the dream vision to postmodern audiences. The Chaucerian dream vision features clear indications to the reader that the narrator has fallen asleep: there are no attempts to leave ambiguous the narrator’s state of consciousness. In contrast, the postmodern dream vision typified by *Elm Street* often has the dream sequence begin without the dreamer, or the viewer (and it can be argued through the process of identification, that these two are often one and the same), being aware that they have entered the dream state. In later films, the figure of Freddy is no longer confined to the dream world: he can emerge from the subconscious and enter into the film’s reality in pursuit of his victims. The very fact that injuries and death suffered in the dream vision are occurring simultaneously in reality demonstrates how very little separation there is between sleep and waking life in the postmodern dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Budra writes of this ‘acknowledgment of postmodern relativism in these films, manifest in ideological and ontological incoherence,’(39) an incoherence that is embodied in the character of the ‘dream master,’ Freddy Krueger.

Writing in ‘Seducing the Subject: Freddy Krueger, Popular Culture, and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films,’ Ian Conrich addresses this manifestation of incoherence and instability, stating that ‘Freddy ruptures the boundaries between the imaginary and the real.’(40) Budra sees this rupturing of boundaries as the source of postmodern horror, as he writes: ‘A specifically postmodern unease is generated not by encroaching threats, but by the perception that the world is increasingly one in which borders have collapsed, in which preconceptions, hierarchies, absolutes, and perhaps reason itself are being

abandoned.’(41) Nowhere is this rupturing of meaning more evident than in the cinematic dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

Besides standing as a site of tenuous boundaries in and of itself, the dream vision of *Elm Street* also can be seen as blurring distinctions between the intertextual and extratextual, bringing them together in a distinctly postmodern commoditization of dread. The financial success of the *Elm Street* films led to a proliferation of merchandise through licensing agreements, with the sinister Freddy Krueger being granted, among other things, his own 1-900-number, a board game, and a talking doll.(42) Conrich writes of this murky division between the reality of the viewer and that of film as dream vision, an uncontained system in which ‘popular culture allows for the successful release of Freddy from the fictional world of the film into a consumer society reality.’(43) It can be suggested that in this breakdown of boundaries and the level of ambiguity at work in the construction of film as product first and art only in the incidental sense, postmodernism offers unique challenges to the individual seeking to comprehend the dream vision of the postmodern horror film. Although it may be argued that the ‘reader’ of the dream vision of *Elm Street* is granted less interpretive authority than that of the Chaucerian dream vision, there is still a palpable level of dissonance, the ‘lack of closure’ that Budra set forth in regards to the sequelization process, with the dream author/boogeyman continually reclaiming his authorial role and control over both the dreamer and the viewer. The viewer quests for meaning through narrative closure, the dreamer for survival; both are stymied, time and again.

If there is a figure serving as a ‘dream author’ in the postmodern dream vision of *Elm Street*, it would be the murderous Freddy Krueger. He is the only character to recur consistently throughout the series, and although the viewer is encouraged to identify with the protagonists/narrators, identification with child killer Freddy becomes almost inevitable through his repeated appearance at the center of the narrative. Conrich writes: ‘[The *Nightmare* films] attempt to establish a surface that will seduce the subject into the space of illusion, in which Freddy Krueger is the foregrounded image and principal attraction.’(44) Here, the concept of the horror film as a postmodern dream vision is revisited, with the filmgoer, through the act of seeing, being placed in the same illusion encountered by the protagonists, with Freddy serving as ‘the dream master’ in the same manner found in the Chaucerian dream vision.(45) Addressing this ‘authority through repetition’ encountered through the production of sequels and the tendency for new protagonists to be introduced in each successive film, Conrich advances: ‘the other characters in the films possess weak identities . . . while Freddy is the ‘fixed’ element in the *Nightmare* series, his various victims are easily interchangeable. Freddy’s identity is so strong that he can absorb the images of his victims.’(46) Any attempt made by a character to confront and do battle with Freddy, not only for the right of interpretation but for their life as well, results in nearly instantaneous death. Freddy’s position of authority, afforded by his repeated presence in the ongoing narrative, serves to continually confound the dreamer/viewer.

Freddy also obtains authority through his ability to change form, to destabilize his own body in a way that the dreamer protagonists cannot. Henry Jenkins identifies these properties in the Freddy character, those that grant him authority over the dreamer protagonists, and writes:

We face the challenge of Freddy's shape-shifting as he moves between different cultural categories—male and female, adult and child, animate and inanimate, takes control over domestic technologies, assumes identities from mass culture, mutates and disintegrates before our eyes, only to be reconfigured and re-embodied again.'(47)

Freddy's fluid body, destabilizing meaning in the postmodern dream vision, identifies him as a guiding force, one whose power is used for violent rather than the instructive means of the Chaucerian dream vision. However, it can be suggested that through his creation of violent meaning and the generation of the surreal, discursive space is opened for the interrogation of controversial topics capable of being viewed as comparable to the contextual frameworks in which the Chaucerian dream visions were interpreted. Budra addresses this opportunity for discourse in the horror film, writing that 'the collective nightmare that horror films represent has been tied to phobias at large in the society for which the films have been designed.'(48) Emerging from the socially reactionary period of the 1980s, the dream visions of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series revolve primarily around gender confusion in a period marked by a cultural backlash and a questioning of the nuclear family in a decade in which 'family values' were evangelized in the mass media and popular culture. Through their portrayal in the dream vision of the horror film, these questions and anxieties could be expressed in a manner that might not have been possible in other forms.

When examining the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series in relation to the dream visions of Chaucer, there may be similarities yet important differences also exist between the two. Chaucer's dream visions such as *The Legend of Good Women* or *House of Fame* were formed within a specific historical context, and even when left open to individual interpretation, they were still intended as a form of satire. Peter Brown, in 'Middle English Dream Visions,' writes of the dream visions as 'a response to those economic, social, political and religious conditions which were likely to produce a sense of fragmentation, of lost identity, of questionable authority.'(49) Although such a description of the cultural atmosphere in which Chaucer created his dream visions suggests parallels between the medieval period and the postmodern age, it is crucial to remember that the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films were conceived as horror films first and dream visions second.

Perhaps the most fundamental difference is that although Chaucer's work can also be seen as a product, the production of the *Elm Street* films was predicated upon the financial success of each ensuing film. Whatever forms these dream visions took, and to whatever end they were used, was based less on authorial agency than on whatever proved effective in previous films and the generation of box office returns. The prevalence of special effects, as Williams noted, served to contain the 'message' as a whole, with spectacle obscuring potential meaning in a manner not found in the Chaucerian dream vision. It can even be suggested that the explicit nature of the special effects limits meaning, providing the viewer with nowhere near the amount of the individual authority granted to the reader in Chaucer's dream vision: less is left open to interpretation. The provision of a back-story and the creation of a series mythos also serve to decrease the authority of the reader. Despite these fundamental differences in form and content, however, it can still be worthwhile to examine the postmodern dream vision of the horror film in relation to the Chaucerian dream vision, less in terms of individual interpretation than in the area of providing a space for dissent, a space sorely needed in the increasingly conservative climate of the 1980s.

Part of this dissent centered on gender, an issue frequently raised in horror, a genre which although frequently charged with misogyny, has also been found to offer a unique brand of gender-based identification. A genre historically targeted towards men, the horror film typically features a female lead, whom the film scholar Carol Clover has referred to as the 'final girl': it is she who survives where the

others fall victim, and she who does battle with the malevolent force, either destroying it or rendering it benign until the next installment in the series (the figure of the final girl can be seen as a counterpoint to Chaucer's dreamer, always a male; indeed, Chaucer's only extended treatment of women occurred in his *The Legend of Good Women*, recounting the exploits of famed women and yet remaining unfinished). While the final girl (in the first film, Heather Langenkamp's Nancy Thompson, who defeats Freddy through a series of well-placed booby traps and her ultimate decision to turn her back on him, denying his power) stands at the center of the dream visions and assumes a position of power and control undreamed of by Chaucer's male dreamer, she also exists as a frame for potentially conflictive considerations of gender. Tony Williams writes about the system of identification in place in the horror film, where male viewers are encouraged to participate in a form of emotional transvestism, identifying with the female protagonist rather than the masculine figure of violence and menace. Williams writes of this process and states:

'[Clover] believes these films are really theatrical contests involving gender. The female protagonist is both active and passive, frightened by the monster's assault and vigorously defending herself. She thus takes on a male aggressive stance, defending herself while the predominantly male audience often passively submits to thrill and shock effects . . . these films articulate the anxieties of a 1980s generation experiencing the effects of massive gender confusion.'(50)

Gender is often a volatile subject for discussion, but it would have been particularly loaded in a socially conservative period such as the early 1980s.

If issues of male/female identification make the horror film a fertile landscape for articulating anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality, then the postmodern dream vision of horror proves even more hospitable through its emphasis on the surreal and the psychoanalytic aspect of dream interpretation within the narrative, where the 'good' or 'bad' interpretation of dreams means the difference between life and death. Again, Freddy Krueger as a flexible body, one that 'opens up, absorbs bodies, and frequently changes sex,'(51) permitted through the use of special effects and his position within a dream world, also allows for this exploration of gender and sexuality, most notably in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Jack Sholder, 1985), a film whose homoerotic subtext is reflected in Freddy's repeated attempt to possess the body of a teenage boy named Jesse (a 'final boy,' as it were), a move that would allow him to make use of a corporeal body outside of the dream world. Hardly a progressive interrogation of sexuality, Jesse's repressed homosexuality is equated with the hideous visage of Krueger and his murderous impulses, which one online review describes as:

'the definitive metaphor for queer teen sexual horror: the emergence of a terrifying, powerful and destructive force which exacts fantasy punishment on that which it is attracted to (gay leather bars, hot jocks, scantily-clad pool party boys) and alienates the teen from his family and the affection of a well-meaning but sexually predatory girl.'(52)

Throughout the film, Jesse screams: 'A man is trying to get inside of me!' His dreams take him to a leather fetish bar and suggest an attraction to his male gym teacher, who is killed by Freddy, emerging from Jesse's body after his teacher makes a pass at him in the gym shower. Jesse continually flees from the advances of his would-be female love interest, Lisa, running instead to his jock best friend whenever he seeks protection. Ultimately, while sleeping in his best friend's bedroom, Jesse makes the final transformation into Freddy, who murders the half-naked young man who failed to believe Jesse's claims about the 'man trying to get inside him.' Through the association of homosexual desire with demonic possession (and Jesse's ultimate salvation when Lisa's heterosexual love for him conquers Freddy), *A*

Nightmare on Elm Street 2 surely reflects a form of discourse surrounding gender and sexuality in the cultural milieu of the 1980s, particularly in the wake of the emergence of AIDS.

The other specific source of anxiety expressed in these postmodern dream visions is that of the nuclear family. Even as 1980s situation comedies such as *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992, NBC) and *Family Ties* (1982-1989, NBC) enshrined the nuclear family as a nurturing and safe environment, some ambivalence remained. Tony Williams writes of this questioning of the nuclear family in the decade, and states that 'Eighties horror films serve as allegories to their adolescent audience stressing vulnerability to parents, the adult world, and monstrous punitive avatars . . . [such as] Freddy.' (53) As Richard Corliss notes, in the *Elm Street* films, parents of the jeopardized dreamers are either drunk or distant. Mothers, especially, tend to be neglectful and otherwise unsympathetic, with one mother imprisoning her jeopardized daughter inside the family home and another drugging her daughter with sedatives and delivering her straight into Freddy's dream world, all in the name of 'a good night's sleep.' (54) 'Mother, you have just murdered me,' the character of Kristen informs her mother in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Renny Harlin, 1988), shortly before losing consciousness and meeting her demise. On several occasions, it is suggested that these children are all paying for their parents' sins, a generational accusation that would become even more resonant as 'Generation X,' to which the majority of Freddy's victims would most likely have belonged, came to assess the state of the world which they were inheriting from their elders. As Freddy states in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2*, 'You are all my children now.' Within the narrative, the dream vision murders are attributed to the parents of Elm Street, whose vigilante murder of Krueger sets the entire series in motion, with Freddy's repeated killing sprees signifying the 'return of the repressed,' returning not to the repressor but to their children. In addition, Freddy's tendency to assume the form of the dreamer's mother or father in order to lure them to their death suggests that the Reagan-era idealization of the parent-child relationship was being called into question.

If the neoconservative-influenced postmodern dream visions found in the *Elm Street* films were to be classified using the schema set forth by Macrobius, one would have to examine them in relation to both the *oraculum* and the *insomnium*. By the very invocation of the nightmare, the dream vision can be seen as *insomnium*. Additionally, the appearance of the authority figure of Freddy Krueger qualifies it as *oraculum*, with Krueger appearing in dreams and assuming control of the subconscious of the afflicted dreamer, not for instructional purposes (as in the Chaucerian dream vision) but in order to exert authority through committing violent acts that are felt outside the dream world. He does deliver a message in that the dream visions signify the repressed, not only within the narrative but outside of it as well. For example, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Chuck Russell, 1987), Freddy kills a dreaming young heroin addict by replacing the knife-blade fingers of his glove with drug-laden syringes. In this scene, he is not only violating the 'Just Say No' drug policy of the Reagan era, he is also showing that when it comes to the subconscious, 'just saying no' will prove quite ineffective, suggesting a critique of Reagan-era drug policy, without question a contentious criticism to make in 1987, and one that would have to be safely embedded within the postmodern dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

In addition to allowing for social critique, the Chaucerian and postmodern dream vision can both be seen as offering degrees of pleasure to the reader/viewer, a pleasure of interpretation that may be unique to the genre, whether in literary or cinematic form. Steven F. Kruger, commenting on the reflexive nature of the dream vision in *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, posits: 'Dream vision is especially liable to become metafiction, thematizing issues of representation and interpretation.' (55) While Kruger is applying this to the Chaucerian dream vision, it can also be considered in discussion of the postmodern dream vision found in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series. Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* may be interpreted in relation to the Lancastrian court, yet it still opens itself to individual interpretation, questioning not only

its content but also its very form, as literary product. Kruger goes on to state: ‘The view of the dream vision as self-reflexive receives support from the striking and pervasive medieval association between dreams and that premier instrument of self-examination, the mirror.’(56) Kruger’s mention of the mirror is striking if considered with regard to the interpretation of film as dream vision, with the initial pleasure of consumption being derived from the perception of oneself in the act of gazing.(57) The entire act of film-going would seem to be predicated upon this ‘pleasure in the self’: being able to see, and by virtue of this, to question through the act of interpretation.

As far as identification, the mirror metaphor is particularly suited to the necessity of creating a relationship between object and viewer, and allowing for further discourse. Kruger writes: ‘The goal of looking into a mirror is in part self-knowledge, and the dream poem does mirror itself, examining its own constructs and movement. Medieval mirrors, however, serve not only to reflect the self, but also to reveal information about the world beyond the self.’(58) Perhaps this is where the relationship between the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions can be seen to be strongest, as both allow for ‘utterance,’ for the expression of anxieties, if not providing uniform or consistent interpretation (some viewers may be more likely than others to perceive the critique offered). Similarities between the postmodern and medieval are easy enough to establish, at least in broad terms. Peter Brown writes: ‘society itself was in a state where boundaries were breaking down under the pressure of severe, recurrent, and frequent crisis. What the dream vision provided was a radical means of representing, and reflecting upon, both those experiences and the pervasive sense thereby produced of being in a state of transition.’(59) Although Brown is discussing the cultural climate in which Chaucer’s dream visions were produced, he could just as easily have been describing the blurred boundaries and unstable meaning that characterizes the postmodern atmosphere in which the *Elm Street* films were produced. It’s clear that the dream visions of both periods grew out of destabilized times, yet it seems likely that such a claim can be made between any two historical periods. Perhaps it would be most helpful to think of the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions as being linked through the contradictory containment that they offer, as Brown writes that ‘the middle ground which the dream vision thus opens up is by its nature constantly shifting, elusive, open to renegotiation.’(60) The creation of this space, something made possible by the ‘slippage’ allowed by the dream vision, is perhaps the key to its endurance and power as a literary and cinematic form.

In comparing the Chaucerian and postmodern dream visions of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, it is vital to define both and establish distinctions between the two, most notably in terms of the authority granted to the reader in the process of interpretation and critique. While both forms may offer pleasure in the construction of meaning from the fluid and frequently intertextual narrative of the dream vision genre, it can be suggested that the Chaucerian dream vision, in its absence of distancing special effects, is positioned to offer greater engagement to the reader as they examine the text within a series of effectively destabilized historical and cultural contexts. Another distinction between the two forms is found in the process of identification, with the Chaucerian dream vision encouraging identification with the dreamer/narrator and the postmodern dream vision, through its creation within a series of financially-motivated sequels, shifting the point of identification from the dreamer to the monstrous dream author Freddy. Meaning and discourse are left uncontained through the ‘blurred boundaries’ (between sleeping and waking, intertextual and extratextual) characteristic of the postmodern, with special effects mediating the relationship between technical apparatus (the screen) and the viewer (standing in for both the reader and the dreamer), effectively limiting potential meaning and requiring less interpretation on the part of the average viewer, suggesting that the postmodern dream vision occurs within a narrower range of interpretation than that afforded to the Chaucerian dream vision. Yet both the Chaucerian dream vision and the postmodern dream vision of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* can be seen as

allegorical and providing discursive space for questioning the cultural assumptions and anxieties occurring in the neoconservative nightmare of the 1980s.

1. This scene is derived from *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (1988).
2. Deanne Williams, 'The Dream Visions,' in *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 147.
3. The films in the series include *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Jack Sholder, 1985), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Chuck Russell, 1987), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Renny Harlin, 1988), *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Stephen Hopkins, 1989), *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Rachel Talalay, 1991), and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994). In addition, Freddy also had his own syndicated television series (*Freddy's Nightmares*, 1988-1990) and appeared in *Freddy Vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003), in which he battled Jason Voorhees, the murderous 'star' of the *Friday the 13th* franchise. In 2010, a remake of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was released, with Samuel Bayer as director and starring former child star Jackie Earle Haley in the role of Freddy.
4. Chelsea Henson, Personal interview. 19 May 2010.
5. J. Stephen Russell. *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 12.
6. *Ibid*, 16.
7. Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 1.
8. Steven Kruger, "Dialogue, Debate, and Dream Vision," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72.
9. *Ibid*, 71.
10. *Ibid*, 72.
11. Russell, 5.
12. Anne Laskaya, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR. 10 Apr. 2007. Lecture notes.
13. Steven Schneider, 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror,' in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 168.
14. Schneider, 169.
15. Williams, 147.
16. William A. Quinn, 'Medieval Dream Visions: Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*,' in *Readings in Medieval Texts*, eds. David Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 323.
17. *Ibid*, 323.
18. Laurel Amtower, 'Authorizing the Reader in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,' *Philological Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (Summer 2000), 274.
19. Williams, 149.
20. *Ibid*, 173.
21. Tony Williams, 'Trying to Survive on the Darker Side: 1980s Family Horror,' in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 164.
22. *Ibid*, 164.
23. *Ibid*, 165.
24. Paul Budra, 'Recurrent Monsters: Why Freddy, Michael, and Jason Keep Coming Back,' in *Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel*, eds. Paul Budra and Betty A. Schallenberg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 190.

25. Ibid, 193.
26. Ibid, 191.
27. Rita Copeland, 'Lollard Writings,' *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111.
28. Laskaya.
29. Williams, 165.
30. Ibid.
31. Richard Corliss, 'Did You Ever See a Dream Stalking?', *Time*, Vol. 132, No. 10 (5 September 1988), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,968343,00.html>, accessed 26 May 2007.
32. Quinn, 325.
33. Ibid, 324.
34. Ibid.
35. Williams, 149.
36. Ibid, 162.
37. Ibid, 176.
38. Ibid, 147.
39. Budra, 193.
40. Ian Conrich, 'Seducing the Subject: Freddy Krueger, Popular Culture and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* Films,' in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 223.
41. Budra, 191.
42. Conrich, 224.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid, 229.
45. Freddy's portrayer, actor Robert Englund, recurs throughout the series, while protagonists come and go.
46. Conrich, 224.
47. Jenkins, qtd. in Conrich, 224
48. Budra, 190.
49. Peter Brown, 'On the Borders of Middle English Dream Visions,' in *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 44.
50. Williams, 167.
51. Ibid, 172.
52. 'A *Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*: The Gaypex of Horror Cinema,' *CampBlood Reviews: Senseless Rants from a Picky Sissy*, <http://www.campblood.org/Reviews/Review%20-%20Freddy%27s%20Revenge.htm>, accessed 26 May 2007.
53. Williams, 172.
54. When, in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, we first see Marge Thompson, as played by Ronee Blakley, she seems the typical movie mother, concerned and softspoken, collecting our heroine, Heather Langenkamp's Nancy, from the police station. We soon learn that she is divorced from Nancy's father, Donald (played by John Saxon) and that the former spouses have a strained relationship. Once Nancy starts uncovering her parents' part in the vigilante murder of child killer Fred Krueger, however, Marge begins to drink heavily. At one point, Marge does try to obtain help for her daughter, first by taking her to a 'dream clinic' and then by turning the house into a virtual fortress and more or less keeping Nancy a prisoner inside behind the useless bars and padlocks. Marge seeks her own escape in alcohol and similarly, tries to protect Nancy from the return of the repressed, only to fail on both accounts. By facing the repressed in the form of

Freddy, Nancy survives and by refusing to face it, Marge signs her own death warrant (indeed, director Wes Craven has said that he felt the mother's inability to face the past required that she die as punishment). The children of Elm Street, in addition to being pursued by the avenging Freddy, are frequently just as much at risk from their parents, especially their mothers, who range from benignly neglectful/clueless to genuinely abusive. Ultimately, the horror of *Elm Street* is often derived from the failure of these parents to care for their children properly, a lack of care that becomes a matter of life and death for their offspring once Freddy enters the picture. Much of the horror of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series came from abusive and neglectful parents who, through delivering them to Freddy one way or another, 'killed' their children without ever realizing their crime.

55. Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134.

56. *Ibid*, 136.

57. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

58. *Ibid*, 137.

59. Brown, 45.

60. *Ibid*, 45.