CHAPTER 2

CHAUCER AND THE CULTURE OF COMMODIFIED MIRABILIA

That swiche a monstre or mervaille myghte be!
It is agayns the proces of nature

—Geoffrey Chaucer, The Franklin’s Tale

Courtly Marvels, Scientific Approaches

The ridings and processional pageants that brought magnificent manmade wonders before substantial and varied urban audiences were initially developed in the closer confines of internal court entertainments performed among more exclusive audiences. The manmade marvels of the period developed, like elaborate pleasure gardens and other exclusive entertainments of the elite, from within the environs of the romance. Marvelous entertainments blend the physical realities of court life with romance fictions. The fact that literature could be brought to life as an engineered artistic expression reinforcing aristocratic ideals suggests that such phenomenologized mirabilia may have had a reciprocal effect on subsequent literary representations of marvels. In a culture that had for centuries admired marvels for their supernatural qualities, Chaucer’s poetry demonstrated that the exercise of reason was crucial to the psychology of wonder accompanying the experience of marvels. Chaucer thus amplifies the traditional modes of evoking romance wonder by guiding the reader’s curiosity, representing mirabilia at arm’s length, and rendering the experience of wonder unrealizable except through the mental processes of inquiry. His representations of mechanistic, commodified, and manmade mirabilia helped to promote this new perspective within the romance genre and its environs.
We enjoy Chaucer’s romances for the pleasing ambiguities they bring to a formulaic genre, and for the learned and wide-cast intertexts embedded in his amusing expressions. Read as part of the emerging late medieval coalition of social, doctrinal, and technological concerns that is the object of this study, his texts show evidence of the effect of manmade marvels on genre and representation. The ambiguities so pleasing to modern readers often rest squarely on Chaucer’s representations of mirabilia. In the opening section of his Squire’s Tale, Chaucer depicts an encounter between the people of Cambyuskan’s court and the marvelous brass horse delivered into the midst of their revels. Admiring the steed’s appearance, the members of this fantastic Eastern court wonder how it moves, tempering admiration of the brazen beast with inquiry (V.199–201):

But everemoore hir moste wonder was
How that it koude gon, and was of bras;
It was a fairye, as the peple semed.2

In this passage, Chaucer merges the awe inspired by the literary mirabilia of romance with curiosity about the mechanical marvels that were a part of late medieval court life. The text confronts the reader not only with a romance marvel but depicts this supposedly supernatural motif as an object of rational inquiry. Chaucer often appears to invite readers to experience marvels as products of human artifice rather than as supernatural phenomena. The presence of these demystified marvels mitigates the admiratio—the awe of the supernatural—of romance wonder in stories such as the Squire’s and Franklin’s Tales, substituting an interest predicated upon technical curiosity for the awe of the rare and supernatural registered in his textual sources. The courtiers’ ensuing inquiries are characterized by reference to traditional authorities, but just as often reject them in favor of reasoning from natural science and skeptical philosophy.

I also suggest that they reflect the presence in Chaucer’s working life of mechanical mirabilia, the fashionable manmade marvels of courtly entertainment. Rather than simply passing on the traditional supernatural properties of marvels in sources such as the Squire’s Tale’s brazen horse from Meliacid and the magic mirror from the Virgilian marvels, or the Franklin’s Tale’s illusion from Decameron 10.5, Chaucer rendered them as adjuncts to internal courtly play and the outward projection of courtly magnificence.

Since the thirteenth century, the courtly contexts of mirabilia had reinforced aristocratic ideals through the psychology of wonder associated with the rare materials and the hidden functional properties of the marvel at hand. As Daston and Park observe, “Romances served, among other things, to foster and implant aristocratic and courtly ideals and behavior. Marvels,