

The Gothic Structure of Chaucer's *House of Fame*

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The private life of Chaucer seems to be embedded in his *House of Fame*. The golden eagle addresses Chaucer the poet or dreamer-narrator in a familiar way as 'Beau sir' (643)¹⁾ and 'Geffrey' (729) in *The House of Fame*. Chaucer was appointed Controller of Custom on June 8, 1374 and dwelt over Aldgate in London. There is a passage (652-60) which seems to describe his private life well, and we have an impression that he lays more emphasis on himself and his work as a poet in it than in any other work. *The House of Fame*, therefore, appears to be a highly personal poem,²⁾ perhaps the most personal one of all his poetry.

So far Chaucer had been under the influence of French love-vision poetry. After he twice made a journey to Italy, first from December 1372 to May 1373 and second in June 1378, particularly after the first mission to Genoa and Florence,³⁾ it is most likely, however, that his literary world was first strongly influenced by the flourishing Italian literature of the fourteenth century, and that he felt the breath of the beginnings of the

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- 1) All quotations from Chaucer's works are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).
 - 2) Dorothy Bethurum, "Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems" in *Chaucer Criticism: Troilus and Criseyde and The Minor Poems*, eds. R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1961), 217.
 - 3) Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (eds.), *Chaucer Life-Records* (Univ. of Texas Press, 1966), 32-40 and 55-61.

Italian Renaissance. As a result, he made much use of the pagan classics which probably he had been taught at school and had great respect for, and also of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In his own way he attempted a fresh experiment in *descriptio* to seek out a new 'materie' in *The House of Fame*.

John Lydgate remarks about his master in his *Prologue to the Fall of Princes*:

He wrot also / full many a day agone,
Dante in ynglyssh / hym-sylff so doth expresse,
The pitous story / of Ceix and Alcyone
And the Deth of blanche / the Duchesse;⁴⁾

Though *The House of Fame* is transitional and in a sense occasional poem, it may be called a problematic poem which anticipates his later works such as *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. It is an unfinished and experimental poem and betrays disharmony and disorder and it has indeed generally been considered to be a dubious composition, but we do not necessarily agree to those criticisms. The purpose of this article is to inquire into Chaucer's new attempts at the development of narrative in this fascinating poem.

1

On the 10th of December in a certain year, Chaucer the dreamer-narrator experiences the most wonderful dream, which he is now going to relate completely as he remembers it well. Book One begins with 'God turne us every dreme to goode!' After

4) Quoted from Caroline F. E. Spurgeon (ed.), *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-1900*, Vol. I (New York, 1960), 38.

he has made double invocations to 'Morpheus' and to 'Jesus God', he gives various theories of dream-lore and questions the causes and truthfulness of dreams. As for the framework of the poem Chaucer makes good use of the form of such traditional love-visions as Froissart's *Paradys d'Amour* and *Temple d'Onneur*,⁵⁾ but the import of the story is quite different from that of the typical ones, and very likely he is considering a departure from the patterns of French love-vision as he had translated in *Boece*⁶⁾ and subsequently met in Italian literature first hand.

As the poet sleeps he dreams that he is in the rich Temple of Venus made of glass,⁷⁾ with many statues of gold, paintings and decorative carvings. He recognizes the goddess at once for she is typically presented: 'Naked fletyng in a see' (133), she wears a red and white rose garland and a comb on her head; doves, blind Cupido and Vulcano appear in the vision. Within the familiar setting to emphasize the role of Venus,⁸⁾ as a love-poet he tells about the 'auctores' of the past⁹⁾ and particularly his memory of Virgil's epic, which was a representative work of one of the greatest poets of ancient times known by medieval audiences. Medievalized pagan classics depicting the important parts of the *Aeneid* (I and IV) appear in the

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- 5) Aage Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition* (Oxford, 1967), 158-62. F. N. Robinson, 280.
 - 6) Paul G. Ruggiers, "The Unity of Chaucer's *House of Fame*", in R. J. Schoeck and J. Taylor (eds.), 270.
 - 7) John Norton-Smith, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1974), 52 ff. For the literary motifs of the poem, see H. R. Patch, *The Other World* (1950; rpt. New York, 1970), 210 ff., 220, 223, 229.
 - 8) J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame* (Oxford, 1968), 15 ff.
 - 9) Ernest R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W.R. Trask (New York, 1953), 57-61. H. L. Levy, "As myn auctour seyth", *Medium Ævum*, XII (1944), 25-39.

form of wall paintings in the Temple of Venus. The poet uses them as an exemplum against falsehood in love. Putting to good use the formula 'saugh I (graven)', the poet gives a compressed chronological account of the Troy story, beginning with a faithful translation of the opening part of the *Aeneid* and describing the destruction of Troy up to the story of seduction and betrayal of Dido by Aeneas, Venus's son, with a list of other ladies of classical antiquity, faithful but betrayed,¹⁰⁾ which he uses here as *amplificacio* and is later to expand in *The Legend of Good Women*.

The Troy story is presented as if the poet was looking at the details of mural paintings. The Temple of Venus is developed from the episode where Queen Dido built Juno's temple in Carthage in the *Aeneid* (I. 446 ff.). As 'my chambre' of *The Book of the Duchess* (321-38) shows, 'painted rooms' came into vogue in the thirteenth century¹¹⁾ and the new public in towns and castles stimulated the production of Gothic tapestries and wall paintings whose subject matter mainly came from Troy romances,¹²⁾ though stained-glass windows and miniatures were much more popular in the north. Doubtlessly Chaucer himself saw many fresco paintings in the main streams of Florentine and Sienese art during his stay in Italy.¹³⁾

British history goes back to Brutus and his Trojans. In pro-Trojan sympathies the medieval poets record the deeds, true or false, of great men deserving of fame, and talk as if they

10) D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (London, 1973), 54-55. Norton-Smith, 49-56.

11) D. S. Brewer, 35-36. Bennett, 12-14, 116-17, 134-35 and 138. H. Osborne (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford, 1970), 493-94. *Gothic Painting* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 138.

12) Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry* (London, 1963), 79. Wall paintings are, of course, a familiar feature in French love-visions.

13) *Gothic Painting*, 49-140.

were historians who valued their authorities, and who find such inclusion of detail essential to the poetry of love.¹⁴⁾ As a poet of Venus Chaucer places great stress on the Dido episode which is especially chosen because it was the best-known love story of the Middle Ages, with a moral of falsehood or infidelity in men generally.¹⁵⁾ He tries to examine two important factors—Venus and Fame—as motivation in human life.

Dido falls in love with Aeneas who soon rejects her. Even if she cries out against her fate, hers is a complaint of the ordinary woman rather than of a queen and only against wicked fame (349–63).¹⁶⁾ She goes out of her mind because of Venus's contrivance and through being deceived by Aeneas's 'apparence' (265); the poet explains that 'her nyce lest, That loved al to sone a gest' (287–8)—weakness in her character was the cause of her miseries.

As for Aeneas, he is redeemed for his desertion by Mercury's command that he should go to Italy to build New Troy there, though he is severely blamed for his traitorous behaviour. His position is safely guarded while the passionate Dido falls into evil fortune, slander, and loss of reputation through the interference of a divinity, and she finally pierces herself to the heart (in the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses*) and dies. Chaucer is reading Virgil through Ovidian eyes¹⁷⁾ as the passage proves:

Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos,
Rede Virgile in Eneydos

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- 14) Pamela M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, Vol. I: *Love Vision and Debate* (London, 1972), 102.
 - 15) W. Clemen, 84. Norton-Smith, 50. L. B. Hall, "Chaucer and the Dido-and-Aeneas Story", *Mediaeval Studies*, 25 (1963), 148–59.
 - 16) P. G. Ruggiers, 263. Clemen, 79–85. Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1964), 108–110.
 - 17) Bennett, 35 and 142.

Or the Epistle of Ovyde,

What that she wrot or that she dyde; (377-80)

When the poet depicts every torment in hell seen by Aeneas, for the first time in his works he mentions the name of 'Daunte' (450) with Virgil and Claudius Claudianus.

The injury and grief that have occurred from 'untrouthe' (384) being told in the Dido story will proceed with the themes of the nature of Fame and the search for 'tydynges of Loves folke'.¹⁸⁾ The poet goes out of the temple and sees a large field—a sand desert as in Libya, not in a lovely garden—where he leaves his secondhand treatment of love, finds himself in a state of vacancy and disillusionment, and now expects from the heart divine inspiration to rescue him.¹⁹⁾ Looking up to the heavens he asks for help: 'Christ! . . . Fro fantome and illusion Me save!' (492-94) and he sees a golden eagle soaring as Dante suggests in the *Purgatorio* (IX, 19 ff.).

2

In the second Book the introductory invocation is to Venus, the Muses, and 'Thought' (523) consistent with 'so sely an avisyou' (513), whose religious nature is secularized.²⁰⁾ Here we can see impacts of Dante and Boccaccio on Chaucer.²¹⁾ The eagle, Jupiter's messenger, seizes the poet in a swoop and ascends carrying him in its claws. He is full of 'a fere and wonder' (607) that he should be made into a constellation. It calls him

18) For the meaning of "tydynges", see R. C. Goffin, "Quiting by Tidings in *The Hous of Fame*", *Medium Ævum*, XII (1944), 40-44. Bennett, 67 and 178-80.

19) A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge, 1976), 85.

20) *Ibid.*, 78.

21) Bennett, 52-54.

'Awak!' (556, 560) in a man's voice which causes him to recover himself.

The wonder of this experience is conveyed by a striking contrast between the eagle and Chaucer the narrator: it is a dialogue between the learned talkative guide and the simple pupil, the poet putting himself into an intentionally comic, almost ridiculous situation.²²⁾ The eagle gives its message and promises him that by the command of Jupiter it should bring him to the House of Fame which he earnestly seeks, because for a long time he has served Venus and Cupid diligently without reward and still takes pains to write love poems (614-29), which reveal that he is not a successful lover but a love-poet. Besides, we must notice that the journey with which Jupiter rewards him has a kind of gay mood of exploration which is Chaucer's own method of presentation.²³⁾ The eagle states it:

To do the som disport and game,
In som recompensacion
Of labour and devocion. (664-66)

The process of Book Two is the journey in middle air and an amusingly intellectual adventure to reach the source of 'tydinges' and to hear 'Mo wonder thynges, . . . Of Loves folke moo tydynges, Both sothe sawes and lesynges;' (674-76). It is originally a theme of an allegorical journey for moral edification²⁴⁾ but through the eagle's instruction Chaucer pays more attention to experience of the actual world around him, the work of Nature, as well as the new science and philosophy, which certainly reflected the intellectual interests of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Chaucer enjoys explaining it, in using

22) Ruggiers, 268. Clemen, 92. Bennett, 75.

23) Clemen, 96-97.

24) Clemen, 97-100. Norton-Smith, 56-58.

scientific theories and empirical illustrations of the age.

The eagle gives the poet one-sided lectures on gravitation and sound theory, and makes him realize that poems are made not out of love but out of sound, the basis of words. Sound means echo in this case and it conveys fame through words. All things turn to seek their own proper place which is Chaucer's own version of the Aristotelian doctrine of 'natural place'.²⁵⁾ Speech is composed of sound that is nothing but 'eyr ybroken' (765), and this conception is based on the theory that sound was a vibration of air. It is borne up through continual spreading and moves naturally up into its proper place, the House of Fame (840 ff.). The eagle and the poet are flying upwards in the orderly universe, looking down at the earth that 'No more semed than a prikke' (907), when the poet hears great sounds near the House like the beating of the sea against hollow rocks. He at last reaches the House of Fame which he thinks is his final destination.

3

Book Three, which is almost the same length as both Books One and Two, opens with an invocation to Apollo, 'God of science and of lyght' (1091), just as Dante asks for such help to write in the beginning of the *Paradiso* (13 ff.).²⁶⁾ The poet's purpose is not 'To shewe craft, but o sentence.' (1100)

'This lytel laste bok' (1093) consists of three main episodes: (1) elaborate descriptions of the House of Fame, the Goddess Fame with her sound-makers, and a list of the statues of famous poets and historians, (2) a long lively account of Fame's judgment of her suppliant, and (3) a whirling wicker House of

25) Bennett, 76-80. J. E. Grennen, "Science and Poetry in Chaucer's *House of Fame*", *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 8 (1967), 38-45.

26) Bennett, 99-103.

Rumour and its ceaselessly chattering inhabitants.

The description of the House of Fame evidently parallels, and juxtaposes, that of the Temple of Venus in the first Book. 'The House stands high on a lofty rock of ice,²⁷⁾ which the poet laboriously climbs up; on the way to the top looking at many names of famous people carved on both sides of the mountain, mostly melted away on one side and preserved on the other. It is all 'of ston of beryle' (1184), and he sees many Gothic 'Babewynnes' (1189), pinnacles, carved niches, windows and so forth. On niches round about stand all kinds of 'mynstralles And gestiours' (1197-98) where he hears Orpheus and the others playing on a harp, reminding us of the façade of the maison des musiciens at Rheims.²⁸⁾ The poet wonders at the castle gates all carved with gold and goes into the great hall plated with gold all around which words are flying about. He sees the Goddess Fame sitting on an imperial throne of ruby; she seems a very small girl but soon grows so that she reaches from earth to heaven. Alexander and Hercules stand on her shoulders. The description of Fame's grotesque figure comes largely from that of *Fama* of Virgil's *Aeneid* (IV. 173-88) where she has curly golden hair and innumerable eyes, ears, and tongues with wings.²⁹⁾

On either side of the hall are great authors on huge pillars of metal—a catalogue of famous writers. On the first pillar made of lead and iron, stands Josephus, to support the fame of Jewish people. On iron pillar stands Statius to support the fame of Thebes and Achilles (1460-63); on each iron pillar stand

27) Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (New York, 1967), 110-12 and 134-36. Clemen, 101-105. Bennett, Chapters III and IV. Norton-Smith, 44-47.

28) G. G. Williams, "The House of Fame and the House of the Musicians", *MLN*, 72 (1957), 6-9.

29) Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna*, 110-12. Bennett, 42-44, 71-74 and 128-32. Norton-Smith, 43. Clemen, 101-106.

Homer, Dares and Dictys, Lollius, Guido delle Colonne, and also Geoffrey of Monmouth to bear up the fame of Troy (1464-80); Virgil stands on a pillar of tin-plated iron, to do that of Aeneas (1481-85), which recalls the story of Troy in the first Book; 'Venus clerk' Ovid stands on a pillar of copper, to do that of the God of Love (1486-92); Lucan stands on an iron pillar, to do that of Caesar and Pompey (1497-1502); and Claudius Claudianus on a pillar of sulphur, to do that of Pluto and Proserpina (1507-12). It is the fame those poets give their subjects that really matters with medieval audiences.³⁰ In this description the relationship between poetry and fame is clearly explained and the poet shows that he is much concerned with the nature of fame and of poetry.

Now the poet sees a vast company—nine groups of petitioners, all worshipping Fame, coming into the hall one after another. In the long scene we see that the behaviour of Fame towards them, like that of her sister Fortune whose medieval character serves the poet's need, is capricious, unreliable and incalculable, and that her arbitrary responses show an indifference to both their wishes and their relative deserts. Aeolus, the god of winds, with two trumpets of 'Clere Laude' (1575) and 'Sklaundre' (1580), is called to help Fame as her efficient assistant.

A friendly stranger who appears at his back, perceives the poet and asks him about his intention. He replies that he has not come there to gain fame, now recognizing the true nature of Fame, but

Somme newe tydynges for to lere,
Somme newe thinges, y not what,

30) C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1967), 212-13. Curtius, 260-64. Bennett, 138-45.

Tydynges, other this or that,
Of love, or suche thynges glade. (1886-89)

They go out of the castle and into a valley below it, where they find a whirling house like the Labyrinth of Daedalus.³¹⁾ It is made of basket work full of holes, and all the doors are wide open.³²⁾

To look at 'what wonders in this place been' (1996) the eagle brings him into the House of Rumour which is much crowded with people. The poet is aware that there are whisperings and rumours mingled with truth and lies in the House, which are distorted and amplified on the way, and that they thus go straight to Fame. All 'tydings' originate in the House of Rumour, but they fly to Fame's court to be judged and dispersed. He then learns the true nature of rumour and the circumstances of human reputation which leads another meaning to ME 'fame'.³³⁾ Suddenly and perhaps intentionally the accumulative narrative is ended with the appearance of an enigmatic person, 'A man of gret auctorite' (2158) among those who talk loudly about love tidings.

The whole story of *The House of Fame* is related in its undercurrent of delicate satire rather than of irony or parody; the background in which the narrative develops is for example

31) Bennett, 166-68.

32) Bennett, 165-76.

33) Clemen, 102-103. Bennett, 39, 70-71, 96-97, 170-75 and 179-80. Kean, 86 and 108-109. Norton-Smith, 42-43. According to *The Middle English Dictionary* (Part F. 1), "fame" means: 1. (a) Reputation (whether good or bad) as to character or behavior; (b) good reputation, good name; (c) bad reputation; ill repute. 2. (a) (Wide-spread) reputation, celebrity, renown, fame; (b) a reputation (for some specified or implied excellence or accomplishment). 3. (a) Any report, rumor, or widely circulated opinion; also, a tidings or rumor.

a kind of 'shrewd satire of ambition and idle curiosity'.³⁴⁾ The Goddess Fame's world is only a place of appearance and of instability. Chaucer shifts his emphasis from mere love stories to life itself or what he actually sees and hears in everyday affairs, though of course he affirms his belief in the worth of poetry and of the act of *ars poetica* in the same way that Dante does.³⁵⁾ He realizes that the theme of 'tydynges' is not merely of love but of something else. His work is based on experiment and improvisation,³⁶⁾ which probably conveys his preoccupation with a new way of writing and the presentation of new material to his limited audiences or readers in court circle.

34) Alfred David, "Literary Satire in *The House of Fame*", *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 339.

35) Bennett, 101, 140 and 163-64.

36) Clemen, 101.