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The House of Fame

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In *The House of Fame*, an enigmatic dream poem, Chaucer flies up through the heavens in the claws of a talkative eagle. Eventually they reach the place where, supposedly, each human speech ends up, reconstituted as its speaker. Fame herself turns out to be a very strange creature, difficult to visualize, but her palace does include a "hall of fame," featuring the statues of great writers. It is in *The House of Fame* that Chaucer uses the word *poetrie* for the very first time, clearly wondering whether such a term, associated with Latin writing, might be applied to his own work in English. Previously, the term *makyng*, suggestive of artisanal craft, had been thought more appropriate for compositions in English. Through extensive travelling across Europe in the 1360s and 1370s, and through familiarity with the French of England, Chaucer could not but help recognize English, in literary culture if not in arts of war, as retarded and eccentric. Retarded, in that French romance had bloomed centuries earlier (his poem references Iseult at line 1796), and the *Roman de la Rose* (translated in part by Chaucer) still ruled allegorical and encyclopedic imagining. Italian poets, in some ways heirs to the *Rose*, achieved their own preeminence by accentuating connections with, lineal descent from, ancient Rome. Two of Italy's *tre corone*, Dante and Petrarch, are cited admiringly in Chaucer's works. Boccaccio, the third, never mentioned by Chaucer, supplied him with more poetic material, and structural inspiration, than any other writer, in any language. Few might recognize this since, as said, English was *eccentric*, a tongue peculiar to a strange island at the far west of Europe. Few continental Europeans would trouble to learn English, it is worth remembering, until the later nineteenth century.

Modern editions of Chaucer tend to place *The House of Fame* between two other dream poems, *The Book of the Duchess* (from the late 1360s) and *The Parliament of Fowls* (mid-1380s). While the case for strict developmental sequencing should not be over-stated, this placement is not unreasonable. *The Book of the Duchess*, in octosyllabic couplets, strongly set in the tradition of the *Rose*, owes much to Machaut, to Froissart, and to *dits amoureux*. *The Parliament of Fowls*, a beautifully achieved poem, finds more room to maneuver by expanding the poetic line and adopting a stanzaic form, rhyme royal. It begins with reflections on dreaming adapted from Macrobius, as does *The House of Fame* (and the French *Rose*), before offering a vision of the

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cosmos, a trip through a temple of Venus (with borrowings from Boccaccio's *Teseida*) and an extraordinary parliament of birds, ruled over by Nature. This female personification, Nature, derives from Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun, and the *Parliament* ends with a song sung to a French tune ("The note, I trowe, imaked was in Fraunce," 677). It is thus incorrect to propose that Chaucer's poetry passes from French to Italian phases of influence; French can never be "phased out." It is more reasonable to propose that *The House of Fame* sees Chaucer experiencing, being shaken by, the shock of the new, and that these new cultural possibilities (for his own retarded and eccentric *makyng*) are mostly of Italian provenance.

Few people in England knew or cared that Chaucer was staging a dramatic *agon* for a possible English *poetrie* in *the House of Fame*; he was valued in royal circles chiefly for his prowess in overseeing and controlling financial accounts, for balancing the books. His place of work during these years was the wool quay downstream from Westminster, close to the Thameside neighborhood where he had grown up. In overseeing the export of England's most precious commodity, wool, Chaucer came into daily contact with merchants and shipmen, many of them Italian. This gave him access to another precious commodity, *tydynges*, news of goings on abroad. He thus took part in intelligence gathering, *espialle*. Like the Man of Law of his *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer recognizes that merchants know all about shifts of power in kingdoms: they are the "fadres of *tidynges*" (2.129). It was for his gift of languages, with a Francophone wife and fluent command of Italian, and for whatever he had learned on the London quayside, that Chaucer was chosen for important overseas missions.

In 1378 Chaucer travelled to Milan to discuss England's war with France with Bernabò Visconti, the infamous despot. It seemed that Richard II was to marry Caterina Visconti, and after returning to London Chaucer had strong scoop, great *tydynges*: he had *seen* the future queen of England. But even as Bernabò kept sending messengers to London, into the summer of 1379, an alternative marriage was being negotiated with the connivance of Urban VI, the first Roman pope of the papal schism: Richard II would marry Anne of Bohemia, daughter of Charles IV of Prague, Holy Roman Emperor. *The House of Fame* should not be read as a *roman à clef*; identifications made too narrowly rest, like Fame's castle, upon a rock of ice. But the poem's focus upon *tydynges* (the word recurs in various forms more than twenty times), and the difficulties of distinguishing between true rumors and false ones, speak directly to Chaucer's experience in these the busiest years of his public life.

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It is time to look at the poem. *The House of Fame* opens with a meditation on the interpretation of dreams, drawing on the theories of Macrobius as mediated by so many medieval French works (1-110). Having considered possible causes and classifications of dreams, Chaucer strikes a characteristic note (with a Germanic verb): "I not" (12), a contraction of "I ne woot," "I do not know." It is the task of the narrator, Chaucer implies, to serve up an account of his dream, but not to interpret its meaning: that task falls to the reader, or auditor. Chaucer can only hope that nobody will "mysdeme" or misinterpret his poem (97). The misunderstanding of texts that circulate in a court-and-city milieu can prove fatal; his fellow poet, Thomas Usk, known to Chaucer as he wrote *The House of Fame*, would be beheaded in 1388.

Having fallen asleep, Chaucer enters a temple of glass and finds the text of the *Aeneid*, at first written upon "a table of bras" but later more visually imagined (111-468). His beginning direct translation of Virgil only serves to show up the shortcomings of short-lined English verse: "I wol now synge, yif I kan,/ The armes and also the man" (143-4), with "if I can," supplying a rhyme while sounding like a nervous tic. In imitating or "following after" Virgil in this way, in his mother tongue, Chaucer also follows after Dante (who follows Virgil as a model of style, and as a guide through the afterlife). As Chaucer's synopsis goes on, however, it becomes more Ovidian and less Virgilian; by the time that Aeneas sails away from Carthage we are looking on with Dido, as in the *Heroides*, at a retreating love rat (320-60). The notion that history posits alternative points of view is strongly sustained by Chaucer's poetry. The Theseus celebrated as a conquering hero, unfurling his golden Minotaur pennon in the *Knight's Tale* (1,975-84), is unmasked as a love rat in both *The Legend of Good Women* (1886-2227) and *the House of Fame* (405-426). Those wishing to know the full story of Dido and Aeneas, says Chaucer, must "Rede Virgile in Eneydos/ Or the Epistle of Ovyde" (388-9). The "or" here is telling: which *tydynge* is true? Having gone on to describe Aeneas's imperial mission, and his witnessing of hell's torments, Chaucer refers us to Virgil *or* Claudian *or* Dante (449-50).

Having seen all the sights of "this noble tempel" (469), Chaucer offers a purely material reflection on things seen "in this chirche," commending the "richesse" of its craftsmanship (468-73). The dreaming Chaucer next wanders out into a desert landscape, throws a devout prayer up into the heavens, and then sees a golden eagle descending from a great height. Book II opens with a brusque appeal for attention: "Now herkeneth every maner man/ That Englisshe understande kan" (509-10). Such appeals are familiar from the openings of popular romance, where the romancer

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needs to quieten the crowd so that he can launch his performance. But Chaucer then gives us the first invocation of the Muses in English poetry, going on to imitate *Inferno* 2.7-9. The eagle descends upon him like a thunderbolt (534), just like the eagle of *Purgatorio* 9.29. Dante, on first being recruited for his visionary journey, exclaims that he is not Aeneas, nor Paul (*Inferno* 2.52); Chaucer, lifted into the heavens, cries that he is not Enoch nor Elijah, Romulus not Ganymede (the beautiful youth, cupbearer to the gods). The eagle then shouts at him, twice, attempting to get his attention in the manner of a person who is probably his wife (560-2); he then complains, twice, that Chaucer is chubby, over-weight, *en bon point* (573-4), difficult to haul through the heavens. Chaucer's dream journey, then, seems both Dante-like and close to farce; the imperial eagle is weighed down in his upward flight by the person of Chaucer and the burden of "Englissh."

The eagle's "wake up" call initiates a dialogue that runs from 555 to just before the end of Book II (1088). Jupiter pities Chaucer, we are told, because he has "no tydynges" (644): he works all day keeping accounts, making "rekenynges" (653) at the London customs house, before going home and sticking his nose in another book. Chaucer gathers no news, not even from his closest neighbors (641-60). As noted, nobody in England was better placed to gather *tydynges* than Chaucer; the fiction here is that the bookish and otherworldly royal servant misses everything, and needs help. And so Jupiter, who rules over the gods as Richard II aspires to rule London and England, will reward Chaucer (for his fruitless devotion "To Cupido the rechcheles"), by sending him on a celestial mission. Here he will learn *tydynges* about many things, but especially love (661-80).

Much as the *Commedia*'s guides dedicate the time of journeying between spectacles and interviews to instructing Dante, so the eagle tries to teach Chaucer some basics of physics and cosmology as they rocket up through the heavens. This instructional phase begins with the bird-pedagogue addressing Chaucer as "Geffrey" (729), the only time that the English poet has himself so addressed in his entire *oeuvre*. He may be glancing here at *Purgatorio* 30.55, where Beatrice uniquely addresses Dante as "Dante"; or perhaps intimate naming denotes a scene of instruction, much as Chaucer begins his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* by addressing his own son Lewis ("lyte Lowys my sone," 1). Whatever the case, the eagle argues that speech is sound, and that sound is but broken air (which accounts for the fascination with farting in Chaucer, something that readers of a squeamish or "squaymous" sensibility (CT 1.3337) might think best left with little Lewis, and his infant classroom). Sounds of every human speech fan outward from their point of origin before

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coming to "Fames Hous" (786); "every speche of every man" (849) is gathered there. Having taught Chaucer the basics, as he dangles in his talons, the eagle presses his luck by trying to teach him yet more: would he like to learn the names of the stars? "Certainly not," says Chaucer. "Why not?" asks the eagle. "Because I am too old to learn," says Chaucer, "and besides, I've read all about stars in books, and staring at actual stars would ruin my eyesight" (993-1017). And so the disappointed eagle simply repeats the nub of his lesson-- that every sound comes "to the Hous of Fame yonder" (1070), sarcastically commends the quick wit of his pupil ("Hyt nedeth noght eft the to teche," 1072), and deposits him before Fame's palace (1090).

Chaucer opens the third and final Book of his *House of Fame* by imitating the invocation to Apollo that opens Dante's third and final *cantica*, the *Paradiso* (1.13-27). Dante promises Apollo that, should appropriate inspiration be forthcoming and the poem finished, then Apollo will see Dante come forth and *crown himself* with laurel (much as Napoleon crowned himself, before Pope Pius VII, in Notre Dame de Paris on 2 December 1804). Chaucer, *au contraire*, confesses to the technical weaknesses of his verse, promising only to approach the next laurel tree he happens to see, if things go well, and then plant a big kiss on its trunk (1091-1109). The English poet thus carries his modesty to comical extremes. But when comparing the short, over-stuffed lines of his English octosyllabics to the magnificent amplitude of Dantean *terza rima* he knows that he has much to be modest about.

The dreaming Chaucer now sees that the house or palace of Fame is set upon a high rock (1116), and he clammers upwards to explore. On discovering that this rock is made of ice, he swears by the most English of saints ("By Seynt Thomas of Kent"): he who chose to build upon such a feeble foundation deserves little credit (1131-5). Throughout his exploration of Fame's palace and campus Chaucer observes the details of building, ornament, and architectural decoration with a shrewdly practical eye, rather than as an accomplished interpreter of allegorical buildings (see especially 1299-1306). In the year 1389 he would be appointed Clerk of the King's Works, responsible for the maintenance and repair of royal buildings (including Westminster palace and the Tower of London); the royal court valued Chaucer chiefly for his practical skills, as a civil servant. The work of allegoresis is, as so often in Chaucer, turned over to the reader, and it is not difficult to perform. Names scratched into the icy rock upon which Fame is founded are melting away, although those inscribed on the north face, less exposed to the sun, survive better (1136-1164). Fame's palace walls are made of beryl, a stone that shines lighter than glass and make

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everything (as in a modern funfair mirror) seem bigger than it really is (1184, 1288-92). The exterior of Fame's palace is a mob scene, with all kinds of minstrels playing, *gestiours* telling tales, harpers harping (including Orpheus and Glascurion, the Welsh bard), Dutch pipers, warlike brass trump players, plus jugglers, clairvoyants, magicians, sorcerers, and illusionists: the dreamer says he sees "Colle tregetour", an English magician mentioned in French sources, fitting a windmill under a walnut shell on a sycamore table (1277-81). Serious poets do *not* want to be associated with this miscellaneous rabble of popular entertainers inhabiting the fringes of court society (we are not yet inside Fame's palace). Chaucer owes some debt to English minstrelsy, and he will parody himself as a popular tail-rhyme romancer in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*-- but as the author of *Troilus and Criseyde*, his great Trojan love epic, his hopes rise higher. Even Petrarch took pains to set himself apart from any possible association with minstrelsy; if a poem in his *Canzoniere* were found to have any phrasing suggestive of popular provenance it would be revised.

On first entering Fame's gate, Chaucer sees huge numbers of heralds and pursuivants, those charged to protect the individual coats of arms sported by the knightly class. If a book recording these singular coats of arms were made, Chaucer says, it would be like a Bible, twenty-foot thick (6.096 meters, 1334-5). In 1386, Chaucer would be summoned to the court of chivalry in Westminster to give evidence, recorded in French, about one coat of arms claimed by two knights, Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor. Chaucer recalls seeing the Scrope arms while campaigning in France in 1359-60; but he also recalls seeing the very same arms hanging outside an inn in Friday Street, London, and claimed by Grosvenor. Later on in his poem, Chaucer will describe two *tydynges* attempting to exit from the same window in the so-called House of Rumour; deadlock ensues, with bitter recriminations, and the two angry parties vow to haunt one another perpetually, like sworn brothers (2088-2107).

On entering "Fames halle" itself (1357), Chaucer sees a feminine creature seated upon an imperial throne with golden hair, a multitude of eyes, many ears, and many tongues; she is at first tiny, but then huge, and she sustains ("gan sustene," 1410) the arms and the name of Alexander the Great and Hercules upon her shoulders. The modalities of Fame (many ears, eyes, and tongues) are literalized in ways that defy visualization, and the reader arrives with some relief at a more conventional "hall of Fame," a long corridor of pillars, each supporting a renowned writer (1419-1512). Various models have been suggested for this, including the statues of twelve apostles in the Sainte Chapelle, Paris, and the figures of French kings in the great hall of the Palais de Justice,

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also in Paris. More broadly, the poem's cult of Fame owes much to Petrarch, the most famous European poet of Chaucer's lifetime, honored in the *Clerk's Tale* as "the lauriat poete" (4.31). Petrarch in turn owes much to Boccaccio as champion of Dante, and as inspirer of the Petrarchan *Trionfi* via the Boccaccian *Amorosa Visione*. Issues raised throughout Petrarch's *oeuvre* about secular fame-- should a living writer aspire to be famous?-- recur through this part of the *House of Fame*, forever shadowed by religious anxieties. Petrarch, too, of course, had doubts, confessed to Augustine in his *Secretum* and figured by the succession of his "triumphs": Fame comes fourth, preceded by Love, Chastity, and Death, and (or but) succeeded by Time and Eternity.

The first of the writers found in Fame's Hall is Flavius Josephus (*c.* 37-100 CE), "Ebrayk Josephus," who with seven associates tells of "Jewes gestes" and holds up the fame of Jewery (1429-50). Next, but given in no definite order (1453), we have Statius of the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, and then authors of Troy: Homer, Dares Phrygicus and Dictys Cretensis, Lollius, Guido delle Colonne, "and Englyssh Gaufride eke, ywis" (1470). This last is generally assumed to be Geoffrey of Monmouth, but perhaps (as Helen Cooper suggests) Chaucer is shyly or slyly imagining himself here as the author of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Such uncertainty seems fitting, since Troy authors, the poem says, never agree on the facts (1475-80); the problematic coupling of Virgil and, next pillar along, Ovid (1481-9), supports this theme.

The dreaming Chaucer next hears a "noyse" alerting him to the arrival of a "gret compayne" of people, each with a special request for the lady Fame. Some requests she grants, some she denies, and to some she grants the exact opposite of what was asked (1538-41). Fame is ably assisted by Eolus, god of the wind, who blows his trumpet "Clere Laude" (pure praise, 1575), or "Sylaundre" (slander, evil reputation, 1625), according to the arbitrary dictates of Fame. This long section on petitioners to Fame (1520-1867) includes a fifth group, dedicated to "contemplacioun/ And Goddes love" (1710-11) who seek *not* to be famous; their request is denied, and they become world-renowned. The final petitioner is an arsonist, who sought fame, or infamy, by burning down a temple; his request is granted, and "Sylaundre" is blown. And then finally, Chaucer the dreamer finds a man at his back who asks the most obvious question: what are *you* doing here? What's your name? Have you come here to become famous? (1871-2). Chaucer gives an evasive and unsatisfactory answer (1873-82), and his interlocutor repeats the question, with some exasperation: "But what doost thou here than?" (1883). Chaucer claims that he is looking for *tydynge*s, news of something or other (but preferably of love, 1899).

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The dreaming Chaucer, hungry for *love-tydynge*s, is led out of the castle, to a valley where he sees a gigantic house made of twigs, sixty miles across, revolving on its axis and letting out a great "noyse." Were this strange structure to be located at "Oyse," the river Oise (which joins the Seine north of Paris), the "noyse" (a handy rhyme), likened to a stone flung from a trébuchet, might easily be heard in Rome (1927-34). Chaucer thus locates himself in the rumor-mill of the Hundred Years War, made yet noisier by the papal schism of 1378 that now separates England and Rome, on the one side, from Paris and Avignon on the other. Tidings on every topic are whispered and gossiped within this strange space, each seeking to escape and spread their news; shipmen, pilgrims, pardoners, couriers, and messengers are on hand to help this happen (2121-8). But finally there is a great commotion in a corner of the hall (which stops revolving once Chaucer and his eagle enter, 2031-2), with promise of "love-tydynge" (2143). Finally, with men clambering over one another like a scrum of modern paperazzi, there emerges "a man of gret auctorite" (2158) who might explain all, dish the scoop, reveal the true tidings: and here the poem ends. Copyists, printers, and editors have attempted to force a final reveal, and "complete" the poem: but *The House of Fame*, unfinished, with Chaucer still dreaming, maintains the secret of its own occasion.

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