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The Origin of Language Reconsidered:  

Chaucer’s *House of Fame*

“Wher Joves wol me stellyfye,  
Or what thing may this sygnifye?  
I neyther am Ennok, ne Elye,  
Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede,  
That was ybore up, as men rede,  
To heavene with daun Jupiter,  
And mad the goddys botiller.”  
Loo, this was thoo my fantasye!  

Chaucer, *The House of Fame*

Dante illustrates one way fiction departs from mythology in the middle ages, and it is a conservative departure. For his writing registers its limitations by reference not, for example, to a storm or whirlwind, but to another book, the *liber praesentiae Dei*, that he sees in the heavens. His own text is set “enface” with God’s as a dim or shadowy recollection of it. By continual reference to a past text that he is trying to recall but that his own language cannot transcribe, Dante’s text is balanced against God’s, is stabilized and in control of the potential for indeterminacy of meaning. Although Dante confesses the inadequacy of language, he never leaves us in doubt about his desire to continue to make sense out of the *sentence* from the past. And he expects as much from us. In order to suggest further the conservatism of Dante’s departure, it may be compared with the approaches to language in the works of Chaucer. For instance, in *The House of Fame*, to which I will turn first, Chaucer makes more extended use of Dante than in any other poem and
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also includes some of the most salient ideas about writing in medi­

eval tradition.\textsuperscript{1} All of them are central premises of what I have
called the new mythology of the middle ages, the “Book of cul­
ture.” Chaucer represents the myth in an unusual way, through the
fiction of the journey to Fame’s house and the search for the source
of new writing. However, the quest ends not with the revelation of
a book or word, but with the confrontation of the arbitrary Lady
Fame and the whirlwind of the house of sticks. This situation poses
very different consequences for the determinancy of meaning in
language than does Dante’s comparison of his writing to the radi­
ance of the celestial liber of God.\textsuperscript{2}

Chaucer’s uses of past works of literature take various forms: oc­
casionally he follows his source rather closely, as in the translation
of the Roman de la rose, or modifies it somewhat as in the Clerk’s
Tale; at other times his source becomes a rival of the story he is try­
ing to tell, and in Troilus and Criseye; yet again, he borrows from
texts with such subtlety that references may appear with the force
of surprise, as in the biblical allusions of the Miller’s Tale.\textsuperscript{3}
But in The House of Fame the reliance on the past takes a different formaltogether. The poem appears to be less interested in subordinating
and concealing the borrowings from other works of literature than
in making them as obvious as possible. On the one hand, it has
been customary to regard this fact of the poem’s structure as a
flaw and to say that in it Chaucer’s materials are somehow “out of
hand.” It has, as a result, been called “Chaucer’s most curious and

\textsuperscript{1}F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton
Mifflin, 1957), is used throughout for quotations from Chaucer, which will be cited
hereafter in the text.

\textsuperscript{2}The question of the indeterminacy of meaning arising from the critique of the
Book of culture in the works of Dante and Chaucer is not explicitly entertained per
se—to my knowledge—in medieval theoretical inquiry. However, for the implica­
tions of the question of indeterminacy one may refer to contemporary responses to
the project of “deconstructing” the “text” of tradition; for instance, see the response
to the work of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man argued by Gerald Graff, Literature
against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
1979); Meyer H. Abrams, “How to Do Things with Texts,” Partisan Review 46
(1979):566–588; Charles Altieri, “The Hemeneutics of Literary Indeterminacy: A

\textsuperscript{3}For example, see Paul A. Olson, “Poetic Justice in the Miller’s Tale,” MLQ 24

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elusive poem”;4 defying efforts to establish unity, the work is best read, according to one critic, for its “moments of new greatness.”5 On the other hand, some readers have found distinct advantages in Chaucer’s style of reference to past literature, despite its fragmentary appearance. One of these advantages is that Chaucer is attempting to formulate in The House of Fame an ars poetica of his own. This position arises from the sense that the poem, as one critic observes, acknowledges an opposition “between what is handed down and a man’s personal experience,” that the work presents materials in ways that are quite “contrary to convention,” and that it develops “a new critical attitude toward poetry.”6 This attitude is explicit in the narrator’s wish to leave old poetic forms and search for new “tydynges”; but it is implicit elsewhere as well. “In one sense,” argues another critic, “the whole work is a vindication of poetry”;7 it is a vindication, for a third critic, specifically “from the tradition which holds that poems are made out of the experience of love.”8 However “new” Chaucer’s voice may be in the development of The House of Fame, the uses of past literature in the poem seem to have struck various readers over the years as a deliberate critique of tradition, and not the least of them is Alexander Pope, who in the Temple of Fame found the poem suitable for imitation as a satire against public taste during his time.9

Yet Pope’s choice of The House of Fame does not assume that he considered it free from flaws, a well-unified whole, since he left out of his imitation nearly half of the original. His response is not unlike the reading of many who find the work to be an ars poetica in critique of tradition: one passage departs from dream-vision con-

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2Coghill, Poet Chaucer, p. 49.
vention, another from a French model, yet another from medieval literary theory; and the work remains curious and elusive. Nonetheless, the dilemma of appreciating *The House of Fame* only for its moments of greatness instead of for its achievement as a whole is not necessarily insurmountable. One way to confront this problem has been offered recently in the suggestion that the poem is a response not just to older literary forms, but to “tradition” in general, the bulk of both written and oral knowledge from the past. This position is based, at the outset, on the meaning of the word “fame.” In Middle English and Latin sources, it signifies not only rumor and reputation, but also a body of traditional knowledge. This sense of the term is current during Chaucer’s time, for example, in John Trevisa’s translation of Ralph Higden’s *Polychronicon*, in which the conventional proof for the location of Paradise is translated as “olde fame.” Instead of too swiftly dismissing the form of the poem as a flawed, incomplete mélange, this approach assumes that if Chaucer wanted to conceal the obvious borrowings from sources—to hide the joints and seams of references—then he would have made more of an effort to do so. By rendering the borrowings as he has, Chaucer directs our attention to the nature of tradition (that is, “fame”) itself, for one of its characteristics is the conflict or rivalry between versions of the same story. This consideration of the poem has the obvious merit of trying to explain Chaucer’s use of sources not exclusively for their specific content, but rather for the way they inform the structure of the poem as a whole in relation to the theme of fame. One of the most intriguing aspects of this reading is the notion of the conflict of sources, and I will summarize it here because it raises a question about Chaucer’s treatment of tradition that, I think, needs reconsideration.

To start with, the story of Dido and Aeneas recounted in book 1 represents conflicting versions of the same legend—some material from Virgil’s account in the *Aeneid*, the rest from Ovid’s version in *Heroides*. The Virgilian material in Chaucer’s poem emphasizes

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11Ibid., p. 3.
12Ibid., p. 57.
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the heroism of “pius” Aeneas, his duty to family and mission. On the walls of the palace of Venus, the dreamer sees Aeneas flee burning Troy,

and how that he Escaped was from al the pres, And took his fader, Anchises, And bar hym on hys bak away, Cryinge, “Allas! and welaway!”

(HF, 166–170)

Although *The House of Fame* quickly turns to concentrate on the episode with Dido, the heroism of Aeneas is not forgotten. Rather the interest moves to love, and the source shifts to Ovid. Regarding the rejection of Dido, *The House of Fame* leaves out Virgil’s rendering, in which Dido is outraged and incensed, and instead reproduces Ovid’s epistle, which gives us the pathetic portrait of the unrequited lover.

“Allas!” quod she, “my swete herte, Have pitee on my sorwes smerte, And slee mee not! goo noght awey! O woful Dido, wel-away!”
Quod she to hirselve thoo. “O Eneas, what wol ye doo? O that your love, ne your bond That ye have sworn with your ryght hond, Ne my crewel deth,” quod she, “May holde yow stille here with me!”

(HF, 315–324)

But Aeneas has no response in the remaining account of *The House of Fame*. His heroism and duty are not forgotten or nullified; they exist in conflict with the portrait of him rendered by Ovid’s Dido as a callous betrayer.

In this approach to the literary materials in Chaucer’s poem, the oppositions are unmistakable between Virgil’s text and Ovid’s, Aeneas the “pius” and the traitor, Dido the shrew and the woebegone. The conflict is appropriate to the larger subject of Chaucer’s poem because the ambivalence illustrates the ambiguous nature of “fame” itself. What is crucial to this reading, moreover, is that Chaucer’s text does not resolve the conflict of sources in order to

14 Delany, pp. 56–57.
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establish the privilege of one over the other. At one point, the question of excusing Aeneas is raised, but the narrator does not solve it:

But to excusen Eneas
Fullyche of al his grete trespas,
The book seyth Mercurie, sauns fayle,
Bad hym goo into Itayle,
And leve Auffrikes regioun,
And Dido and hir faire toun.

(HF, 427–432)

Since as the appeal to the authority of the book dictates the next event to be narrated in Chaucer’s poem, the opposition between the sources is bypassed. Such a strategy, according to this reading, circumvents “direct personal comment,” which would presumably answer the question. In the absence of a stated opinion, we are left with a view of the ambiguity of tradition rendered through the oppositions in the structure of the poem. By refusing to choose, “Chaucer grants the validity of conflicting truths and confronts the problem with no way of deciding between them.” Chaucer is, in the view summarized here, a “skeptic” who knows “no rational way”; instead, he seeks to transcend opposition through faith. He looks forward to the uncertainty and doubt of renaissance writers and specifically to the “skeptical fideism,” such as we find in Montaigne. From this position it is only one short step toward speaking of “the renaissance Chaucer,” and that step has been taken by at least one critic on the premise that Chaucer is a skeptic.

This position is suggestive, and its conclusion has been felt, perhaps, by many readers of The House of Fame. But Chaucer does not look forward to the renaissance, in my view, because he is a skeptic who opts for faith when faced with oppositions unresolved in his work. To begin with, seeing the structural ambiguity of the work as a reflection of the ambiguity of fame is a point arrived at by suspending the search for the “intention” that Chaucer may have had “in mind” and attending instead to the structural intentionality of the language of the poem. If we are to take this position fully, as we are asked to, then we really are not looking for a “direct personal comment” in the poem—be it the narrator’s or “Chaucer’s”—that

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would settle at last which strand of tradition about Aeneas and Dido is to have privilege.\(^{18}\) For when we grant the language of the text its own intentionality, Chaucer’s “report” of his dream is a construct in its own right, a text itself in which personal comment—even if it were given—is no less fictional than any other part of the poem. The absence of a stated or implied preference does not mean, therefore, that it should have been included. By reporting both versions of the story as he has, Chaucer has deliberately begged the question that was typically asked in the middle ages in response to tradition. I mean the determination that prompts different materials—like disparate historical events—to have special meaning, the kind of meaning conferred upon events in an encompassing narrative, where loose ends are tied up, opposing materials are subordinated, and things move toward a point of closure, particularly a moral one.

What Chaucer has accomplished by presenting the materials of Dido and Aeneas without an explicit resolution is to expose the expectation “between” the two stories, the binding, so to speak, that accommodates narrative structure to moralizing.\(^{19}\) This expectation is the myth of the Book of culture finding expression in yet another form—the desire to resolve contradiction and absolve conflict that we have seen manifested in the Books of nature and Scripture and the summa of Gothic architecture and painting. By refusing to give “the answer,” Chaucer has called into question the medieval preference to have events rationalized in a sequential order—“narrativized.” Furthermore, he tells us as much when he does not give us the conclusion; instead, “the book seyth” that Aeneas was excused to continue his journey to Italy. The Book of traditional material about Aeneas has prefigured a response that The House of Fame refuses to complete.\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\)The phrase is Delany’s, p. 554.


\(^{20}\)This “fracturing” of the text, the unresolved “openings” in it, are the kinds of textual properties that Kermode points to as evidence of the fundamental secrecy that cannot be suppressed by narrative; see his essay mentioned in the previous note and his book *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Such textual properties, as I argue in the previous chapter, also characterize Dante’s *liber occultorum*, which may well be—along with biblical writing, in Kermode’s view—the most important inspirations for the secrecy of Chaucerian narrative. I will return to this point in the last section of this chapter.
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The use of sources about Aeneas in Chaucer's poem is not, as a result, a confused collation of bits and pieces that ought to be appreciated only for their moments of greatness. Nor does Chaucer oppose two strands within tradition and draw a blank, leaving us with unavoidable skepticism. Rather, he has opposed his own text to the Book of the past, and this opposition has an unmistakable resolution. Chaucer has made his choice very clearly in favor of his own text, the language of poetry and its capacity to explore old books. It is through this choice, instead of through a tone of doubtfulness and skepticism, that Chaucer looks forward to the renaissance, for his choice effects an emphasis that we find quite strong in later writers—a shift away from the tradition of writing as a "copy" of the Text of the past, a "metaphor of divine perceiving," as well as a definite separation from the old view of poetry (still apparent in Boccaccio's Genealogia deorum, 14–15) as an embarrassed vulgar tongue of more privileged discourses.21

In The House of Fame a new appreciation for poetic writing emerges, and it is of course suggested precisely by the motif of the quest for "tydynges," for new poetic material. Although the poem relies heavily on traditional literary sources, it is not primarily concerned—as has been argued—with the nature of "tradition" as an example of the ambiguities of "fame." This position, while it has many values, depends on a more basic association in the poem—the link between "fame" and "writing." I do not refer to the argument that the poem is concerned with the "fame" of literary history or its subcategory, ars poetica, although those who have supported these approaches to the poem have added immensely to a more complete appreciation of it. I am suggesting, rather, that Chaucer is interested in "fame" as a way of studying the broader subject—also a "renaissance" one—of how language signifies, where it originates, how it is authorized, and how it is received. The dream of Venus's temple (with its walls made of painted stories), the discourse on the origin of sound, the journey to Fame's House (constructed "literally" of authors), the distribution of "fame" as the arbitrary utterance of a deity, the quest for "tydynges"—all these patterns of imagery are means of considering the signifying capacity of language. What better way to undertake such a subject than

21Cf. some of the standard renaissance defenses of the vernacular, such as Joachim du Bellay, Défense et illustration de la langue française (1549); Pierre Ronsard, Abrégé de l'art poétique (1565); William Webbe, A Discourse of English Poetrie (1586); George Puttenham, The Arte of English Poesie (1589); Richard Carew, The Excellency of the English Tongue (1595–1596).
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to focus on “fame,” which has its origin and being in the primary medium of communication, language? “Old books” in *The House of Fame* are explored, but less for their specific content than for their ability to reflect on the medium out of which they are made and through which they are represented in Chaucer’s poem.

This property of language not only to designate a specific subject, such as the nature of fame, but to comment on its own order of designating—this “metalinguistic” characteristic of the poem—is one of its most noteworthy differences from the myth of the Book, which lacks this quality; it is also a feature that *The House of Fame* has in common with Dante’s *Commedia*, which is perhaps one of the reasons Chaucer found that poem so convenient for repeated references in his dream vision. The vast question of how language signifies occupied both poets in many of their works, and Chaucer particularly confronts aspects of it in *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as in *The Canterbury Tales*. In *The House of Fame* he narrows the question of writing to the study of how the poem acknowledges its difference from the myth of language that composes the Book of culture. The treatment of the sources about Aeneas in book 1 illustrates the prominence of this issue, but it is carried out in the poem by many other means as well. A salient one is Chaucer’s use of the *Commedia*, to which I will turn next.

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An extensive interpretation of Chaucer’s use of Dante maintains that *The House of Fame* is largely concerned with contrasting worldly fame or reputation with eternal “fame” or God’s glory. For ex-

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23See above, chapter 4.

24For instance, see the narrator’s remarks on his writing in the prologues to each of the three books and the epilogue of *Troilus*, as well as the palinodes in the “General Prologue” (730–746), the Miller’s “Prologue” (3167–3187), and the Wife of Bath’s arguments against learned writing in her “Prologue.” A recent account of the theme of language in *Troilus* is Eugene Vance, “Mervelous Signals: Poetics, Sign Theory, and Politics in Chaucer’s *Troilus*,” NLH 10 (1979): 293–337; on *The Canterbury Tales*, see H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., “The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*,” *PMLA* 95 (1980):213–224.

ample, Chaucer’s allusions in book 1 to the underworld of Aeneas (HF, 439 ff.), the vanity of Venus’s temple, and the “desert of Lybye” (HF, 486 ff.) represent Dante’s journey through Hell with its deserts (Inferno 1 and 14) and many places of sensuality. In book 2, Chaucer’s dream of the flight in the claws of the golden eagle (adapted from Purgatorio 9) is interpreted as an ironic attempt to render the second stage of Dante’s journey, from the deserts of Hell to the Mountain of Purgatory. In book 3 Chaucer creates Dante’s Heaven by beginning with his invocation to Apollo (borrowed from Paradiso 1) and by transporting his “pilgrim-dreamer” from the Ice Hill of Fame (the Mountain of Purgatory) to the more celestial vantages of the Houses of Fame and Rumor. The argument in favor of these parallels asserts that “in both poems the prophetic content becomes an integral part of the experience of the poet, whose need for spiritual instruction initiates a pattern of education leading to a higher stage of understanding.”

However, when we consider that Dante’s poem is deeply concerned with the problem of interpreting signs and that his allegorical quest is in one sense understood as the ability of language to explain God’s writing, then the whole subject of Chaucer’s use of Dante appears in a new light. We do not look far, after all, before realizing that Chaucer’s references to Dante in The House of Fame are by and large devoted to the meaning of “ymages,” interpreting the Book of memory, and questing for “tydynges” suitable for poetry. Chaucer, it is fair to say, was one of the first to recognize the journey of the Commedia as an “allegory of reading,” for he plays out that theme in the action of his poem. Dante’s journey ends with the vision of the Book in the sky, with an affirmation of the language of that liber as “present” in Scripture and nature. His own language, in contrast, cannot recreate God’s without error; his writing is flawed by comparison with divine utterance; at most he writes a “gloss” and imagines himself a “scribe” instead of a creator

26Koonce, Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame, pp. 73–88.
27Ibid., p. 85.
29See above, chapter 4, sections 3 and 4.
like the Divine Author. His book is not a copy of the heavenly Logos, but only an effort to discover it. To that "logocentric" determination Dante aspires mightily, but he confesses throughout that his poem can never be the full equivalent of the text of memory; his work cannot help hiding and concealing—like a liber occultorum—the divine presence. Chaucer too depicts himself in The House of Fame as a "student" in quest of the language emanating from a cosmic source; he too seeks the origin of that language in a heavenly "midpoint" or center; language is given various images of totality, such as a "temple," a "church," and a "house"; and finally the mysterious "auctoritee" in this world of language is introduced. That these topics enter Chaucer's poem frequently by way of Dante and especially with obvious changes in passages from the Commedia definitely influences the tone of The House of Fame. Whereas Dante emphasizes the inability of poetic language to be logocentric, Chaucer goes even further by highlighting its artificiality and rhetoric. Dante's tone is serious and stern; Chaucer's is full of play.

If The House of Fame borrows Dante's tripartite division, we might expect to find it confirmed, for instance, in the invocations to each of Chaucer's three books, since they echo invocations in the Commedia. But the borrowings are not exactly symmetrical: although book 3 relies on the invocation to Apollo from Paradiso I, book 2 opens with an invocation from Inferno 2 not from Purgatorio, and the invocation of book 1 does not allude explicitly to Dante at all. Or if in book 1 Chaucer is implying a link to Inferno 1, it must surely be to suggest a reference from which he is departing. For example, both poets begin their poems with mention of sleep:

But at my gynnynge, trusteth we,  
I wol make invocation,  
With special devotion,  
Unto the god of sleep anon,  
That duelleth in a cave of stoon  
Upon a strem that cometh fro Lete.  

(HF, 66–71)

The dreamer continues to pray that Morpheus will "spede / My sweven for to telle aryght" (HF, 78–79). But when Dante mentions

30 "Logocentric" signifies here, as elsewhere in this book, the sense of the term that has become current since Jacques Derrida's use of it in De la grammatologie (Paris: Minuit, 1967).

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“sleep” (“sonno”) in *Inferno* 1.11, he has no hope whatever of gaining “speed,” or anything else for that matter, from it; on the contrary, he repudiates “sleep” as a condition of the drowsy illusions in the wood of error and turns toward Virgil, who will speed him “aright,” as Morpheus never could, out of debilitating slumber. Such changes in the use of a source inform even the passages that contain direct quotations from Dante, such as the invocations to books 2 and 3.

The invocation of book 2, from *Inferno* 2, not *Purgatorio*, is another vivid example:

O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,
And in the tresorye hyt shette
Of my brayn, now shal men se
Yf any vertu in the be,
To tellen al my drem aryght.

*(HF, 523–527)*

Chaucer’s source is:

O Muse, o alto ingengno, or m’auit ate;
o mente che scrivesti cib ch’io vidi,
qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.

*(Inf. 2.7–9)*

The Middle English carefully preserves the literal sense of the Italian, but with one significant alteration. Dante extends the metaphor of “genius” as the scribe who “wrote down” past experience in the “book of memory”; Chaucer interrupts the metaphor of writing from his source by transforming it into “money” that is shut in the “treasury” of the “brain.” *The House of Fame* contains many passages linking writing to money, jewels, and gold—for example, in the temple of Venus and the House of Fame—but these connections have nothing to do with Dante, who emphasizes the separation of the two media because of the potential of taint by association, as in his sharp contrast of writing and usury in *Inferno* 11.97–110. The *Commedia* is conservative in the way it identifies language as a means for talking about the experience of the supernatural; Chaucer, on the other hand, sees no risk in playing with

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associations between writing and other media of unmistakable artificiality, such as money.

A similar shift in the use of a source is carried out in the invocation to the final book of *The House of Fame*.

Beginning the invocation to “Appollo” for guidance in “this lytel laste bok” (*HF*, 1092–1093), Chaucer quite obviously had in mind, or on his desk, Dante’s opening invocation of the *Paradiso* to “O buono Appollo” for aid in “this last labor” (“l’ultimo lavoro”; *Para*. 1.13).35 Chaucer asks for skill in his “art poetical” (*HF*, 1095), for Apollo to “enter in my brest anoon” (*HF*, 1109) in order “to shew now / That in myn hed ymarked ys” (*HF*, 1102–1103); Dante too asks this god of poetry to “enter into my breast” (“entra nel petto mio”; *Para*. 1.19), so that he may “show forth the image of the blessed realm which is imprinted in my mind” (“l’ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo io manifesti”; *Para*. 1.23–24).36 Dante expresses his debt for whatever poetic grace he may be granted by promising to be the worthy recipient of the leaves of Apollo’s tree, the laurel (*Para*. 1.24–26); Chaucer feels a similar debt, but with this image the Dantean parallel shifts drastically. Reaching high for the poetic grace that might possibly begin his homage to Apollo, the dreamer promises that if he is given the power to describe Fame’s House, he will go forth, “as blyve” (*HF*, 1106) as he can, approach the first laurel tree he sees, and “kysse yt” (*HF*, 1108). The key images from Dante’s invocation are here: Apollo, his descent into the poet’s breast, the image in the mind, the laurel tree; but the single significant addition to the Italian source—the incredible scene of the poet communing with the divine in one breath and in the next rushing out to kiss a tree—will never allow the tone of reverence commencing Dante’s paradisal journey to open Chaucer’s quest for “fame.”37

In the invocations to each of the three books of *The House of Fame*, Chaucer’s deviations from his sources in the *Commedia* are not made with any striking effort to hide the joints and seams of

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36Singleton, *Paradiso*, p. 5.
37Bennett, too, argues that Chaucer “seems deliberately to be distancing himself and his ‘little book’ from his great exemplar, as if to emphasize that he would never presume to essay Dante’s task” (p. 102); yet he reads Chaucer’s episode of kissing the tree seriously. My own sense of the ironic tone of the passage compares with Miskimin’s, p. 73.
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reference but rather attempt to highlight them. The effect of the
invocations is far-reaching for the poem as a whole: through the
treatment of tripartite division, Chaucer calls just as much atten-
tion to the mode of signifying as to the signified supernatural
order. Dante’s creation of this same effect in presenting his quest as
an allegory of reading had an obvious influence on Chaucer. For
both poets, writing affirms a structure of reference at the same
time as it calls into question its own affirmation. This effect of the
metalinguistic function of writing in The House of Fame is a mark of
its principal difference from the kind of writing that composes the
myth of the Book—the metaphor of divine perceiving whose
structure of reference is absolute. As filled as it is with mythological
materials, Chaucer’s House of Fame does not mythologize Dante’s
Commedia. Moreover, the qualified structure of the poem is not
the consequence only of the use of sources from Virgil, Ovid, and
Dante; it is rendered through other aspects of The House of Fame,
those in which Chaucer’s style appears “artificial” and “ornamen-
tal.” One example is Chaucer’s adaptation of the genre of the
dream vision.

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Models of the convention immediately at hand for Chaucer were
the French visions of Froissart, the Paradys d’amours and the Temple
donnour, as well as Nichole de Margival’s Panthere d’amours. But it
is certain that Chaucer adapted the convention quite freely, for he
also incorporates a good deal of the generic form of Macrobius’s
Somnium Scipionis. As Chaucer mentions in the proem to book 2,
his frame of reference for dreams draws on the “avisyon,” the
particular kind of dream that is divine in origin, like Scipio’s, but
also like the dreams mentioned in the Bible, such as Isaiah’s pro-
phetic dream or those of Nebuchadnezzar (in Daniel 1–4) and Pha-
raoh (in Genesis 41). These conventions, incidentally, also inform
Dante’s dream of the eagle’s flight that carries him aloft to the
Mountain of Purgatory in Purgatorio 9, which Chaucer adapts as a
major motif in The House of Fame. Although the revelatory and
prophetic nature of dreams becomes the basis for their function in lit-
erary conventions as authenticating devices—to affirm belief in

38 A fine account of this influence is available in Francis X. Newman’s Ph.D. dis-
sertation, “Somnium: Medieval Theories of Dreaming and the Form of Vision Po-
etry” (Princeton University, 1963), chap. 5.
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the validity of the poet’s experience as in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls*—in *The House of Fame* Chaucer undermines this convention.39

The poem opens with the old *topos* of the *dubitatio* in which the narrator expresses his confusion about the origin and purpose of dreams;40 the proem is a brilliant tour de force cataloging the highlights of medieval lore about dreams, and the speaker tears through it with such haste and preoccupation that his focus, we cannot help but recognize, is not going to be primarily on the documentary facts of his dream, the old convention that the poet really had the experience. This recognition is unavoidable when the speaker, after fifty or more lines of expressed ignorance and bewilderment about dreams, nonetheless assumes our unqualified belief in his claim that never has any man before him had a dream as wonderful as the one he is about to tell:

For never, sith that I was born,  
Ne no man elles me beforne,  
Mette, I trowe steadfastly,  
So wonderful a drem as I  
The tenth day now of December.  
*(HF, 59–63)*

The sweep of the *dubitatio* in the proem suddenly runs up against the claim to fact in this passage; the inflated rhetoric hardly comes to an end in this equally inflated appeal to specificity. “The tenth day now of Decembre,” although the kind of reference that might pique the scholarly itch for symbolic meanings, remains, because of the style of this context, an expression that either has a very obvious reference (such as “Ma yes daye the thridde”) or else signifies random choice and thus contributes to the rhetoric of exaggerated precision.41 The tone of the proem places December tenth in the latter category as an ornamental or artificial date.42

Instead of encouraging the reader’s conventional belief in the

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39For general remarks on the dream as an authenticating device, though without attention to ironic functions of the convention, see Morton W. Bloomfield, “Authenticating Realism and the Realism of Chaucer,” *Thought* 39 (1964): 345.

40See Bennett, p. x; Delany, p. 41.

41Koonce does not see it this way; contrast his lengthy search for the symbolic date, pp. 57–72; nor does Leyerle in his remarks on the date in “Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” pp. 249–251. See also John P. McCall, “Chaucer’s May 3,” *MLN* 76 (1961): 201–205.

42It is yet another instance of narrative secrecy that characterizes the medieval *liber occultorum*.
dream vision, the proem is a preface to our disbelief because it is so obviously concerned with invention. The poetic composition, like the dream it records, is disjoined from the authority it otherwise affirms; the tradition of the link between dreamer and listener, author and audience is deliberately interrupted. A consequence of this interruption is a new understanding of the dreamer and what he “mette.” Whereas the dream has been conventionally a “revelation” (as in Scripture) or a “miracle” (as in Pearl), Chaucer’s dream has the opposite effect of emphasizing itself as pure fabrication. The dream becomes a metaphor of the poem itself. Rather than authorizing the surrounding poetic composition as a historical report of an actual experience— the convention going back beyond Macrobius—the dream in this poem has the opposite effect of “de-authorizing” itself by emphasizing its own fictivity. This point is nowhere more apparent than in the content of the dream proper. It is not events past or future, but readings about events that the poet has undertaken in old books. The dreamer’s vision is called “fantasye” (HF, 11) and “fantome” (HF, 593), and fantasies of events, as one commentator has observed, are displaced by the fictional medium that represents them. This quality has been interpreted in various ways. For instance, it has been argued that Chaucer’s qualified form is a result of the unresolved conflicts in his poetry, conflicts that manifest skepticism and occasion the need to transcend opposition through a “leap of faith.” Another suggestion is that Chaucer’s emphasis on the inflation and artificiality of language draws it into comparison with the inflation of “money”; writing and money are cast as media of exchange out of control; valued for their glitter, for their “own sake” instead of for their “uses” (according to Augustine’s distinction), both media are forms of idolatry.

Each of these positions is a tempting way of reading the poem. But the artifice of form, I think, serves a much simpler function in the poem, one that is more fundamental to its actual matière. By associating writing with artificiality Chaucer is taking a step that is self-evident in theories of writing familiar to modern scholarship but not at all common in medieval tradition, especially in conven-

43See Delany, p. 46.
44Delany, too, has stressed this point (pp. 43–45), but as evidence that “neither dream theory nor literary tradition offers certain truth” (p. 44). Yet I do not see why the emphasis on fictivity and artificiality necessarily ends in skepticism for Chaucer.
45Vance, “Poetics of Inflation,” p. 29.
46Delany, pp. 24, 85, 109, 113, 122.
47Vance, “Poetics of Inflation,” p. 22.
tions of the dream as divine revelation or miracle. For the old assumption of writing as a metaphor of an order of reality transcen
dental or natural is set aside in preference for a direct recognition
of the inability of writing to represent such an order adequately.
Chaucer might have confronted this problem by offering an apolo
gia for it, as many medieval theoreticians have attempted;[48] but on
the contrary, he acknowledges outright the plain fact that writing is
an artifice of what it represents and that it cannot change this fact
without distortion. Rather than strive for a result that it can deliver
only as imperfect and limited, writing—as it is studied in The House
of Fame—begins by elevating and celebrating the artifice of form
that would otherwise remain a deficiency in medieval language
theory. Disclosing artifice for what it is, The House of Fame forestalls
any threat of deficiency by presenting its imagery not in the blood-
less representation of stiff forms cut out of old sources, but in a
style of surprising comparisons and new energy. In a most basic
sense, this poem is about the unsung fame of writing.

The dream, for instance, begins “withyn a temple ymad of glas”
where the dreamer sees “ymages / Of gold,” “portreytures,” and
other “old werk” (HF, 120–127). Although Venus herself is not
seen in the temple, the dreamer confronts “hir figure” in a portrait
provocative enough to deserve comparison with Botticelli’s famous
painting; she is “naked fletynge in a see” (HF, 132–133).[49] The
story of Aeneas and Dido, which occupies the bulk of book 1, is not
“in portreyture” (HF, 131) but is read by the dreamer from a brass
wall tablet on which the text is inscribed.

“I wol now singen, yif I kan.
The armes, and also the man.”
(HF, 143–144)

After reading these opening lines of the Aeneid, the dreamer goes
on to record what he “sawgh”—“the destruction / Of Troye,” how
“Ilyon assayled was,” and old “kynge Priam yslayn” (HF, 151–159).
Shortly he “hears” what Aeneas “said” and how Dido lamented.
Their “fame” is already synonymous with their written story, and if
the narrator’s record is not sufficient evidence of it, we are told to

[48] Documentation of such efforts is available above in chapter 2, section 5, and
chapter 3, section 2.
[49] Bennett has also noted the comparison; see Chaucer’s Book of Fame, pp. xi, 32.
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Rede Virgile in Eneydos
Or the Epistle of Ovyde.
(HF, 378–379)

In these passages, what the dreamer “sawgh” (HF, 439) is not exactly of the same order as Aeneas’s experience when he “to helle wente, for to see / His fader” and “saugh” there “every turment eke” (HF, 441–446). The contrast is simple, but it continues Chaucer’s interest throughout the poem in rendering direct perception (such as Aeneas’s experience) of the supernatural order—the “vision” of it—as an elaborate metaphor of reading and writing.

When the dreamer is finally out of “this chirche” of “ymages” (HF, 472–473), he sees the eagle, but it too is an artifice of an eternal world, a golden form (“hyt was of gold”) from a heaven that is “al newe of gold” (HF, 503, 506)—very likely the pages of Dante’s *Purgatorio* 9 and *Paradiso* 1 that are joined as the background for the scene. With the dreamer’s flight in the talons of the bird, Chaucer moves close to fracturing artifice by the experience of the dreamer’s fear that he will fall from the sky.

For so astonyed and asweved
Was every vertu in my heved,
What with his sours and with my drede,
That al my felynge gan to dede.
(HF, 549–552)

But even here the event of flight competes with the artifice of allusion to *Purgatorio* 9 in which Dante is asleep in the talons of the golden bird conveying him to the Mountain of Purgatory, or for that matter, to the *Inferno* in which Dante swoons at various times in sadness and fear. Chaucer’s passage gains its energy not because we see in it the embryo of realism developed in his later career, but because whatever strikes us as a natural reaction from the dreamer cannot free itself from the artifice of form that holds it. Nor is the fame of artifice rigidifying and stale. Quite the reverse: it is surprising, for instance, in the scene of Chaucer puzzling over his situation of being carried off by a bird. He declares that he is not a reincarnation of others reported to have had such experiences—“Ennok,” “Elye,” “Romulus,” or “Ganymede” (HF, 588–589). “What thing,” he asks, “may this sygnifie?” (HF, 587). But before

50Ibid., pp. 50–51.

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the question calls for a signified, historical referent, it has more fundamental reference to its own signifying intention. For “Chaucer” remains the “thing” of the question. “He” is no longer an author recording a dream of being carried off by a bird. “He” is a fiction, an integer of writing puzzling over how utterly provocative it is to think like a writer.

A similar instance in which the signs of writing call attention to their own signifying import is the discourse of the eagle. The personification of the talking bird is much more than a decorative device by which learned information relevant to the cosmic journey may be included in the poem. The ornamentality of the figure here is engaging exactly as ornament, since this bird is first Dante’s golden eagle, next the scholarly guide of the voyage (Virgil), and finally an image of Beatrice. But in The House of Fame the high style of the eagle’s learned discourses, such as those concerning sound and the Milky Way, is riddled with the very different style of the everyday, the colloquialism of a figure like Pandarus or Chaunticleer. After the long disquisition on sound, the eagle asks the dreamer if he has been persuaded:

“Tell me this now feythfully,  
Have y not preved thus symply,  
Withoute any subtilite  
Of speche, or gret prolixite  
Of termes of philosophie,  
Of figures of poetrie,  
Or colours of rethorike?  
Pardee, hit oughte the to lyke!  
For hard langage and hard matere  
Ys encombrous for to here  
Attones: wost thou not wel this?”

*(HF, 853–863)*

No “colours of rethorike,” he insists, but the passage is effective precisely as rhetoric: for the argument does not quite leave us, “pardee,” preferring colloquialism to “hard language”; nor is the

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51 Contrast Koonce’s identification of the referents in exegetical history; see *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame*, pp. 142–146.

52 When Chaucer compares the bird to “another sonne” (*HF*, 506), he is following exactly the image Dante uses to describe the effect of following Beatrice’s gesture heavenward at the beginning of *Paradiso* (1.61–63). On the conflation of these images of the bird in *Purgatorio* 9 and Beatrice in *Paradiso* 1, see Bennett, pp. 50–51.

53 The eagle’s style in this passage is studied, for instance, by Bennett (p. 70) and by Leyerle, “Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” pp. 254–256.
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union of styles “encombrous” unless we choose either familiarity or learning, in which case we reject the text before us since it offers the two of them “attones” as its artifice.

The poem delights in counterfeiting both learning and colloquialism, just as the music described on the way to Fame’s House is a “countrefete” of the music tuning the universe heard in the famous musicians from antiquity—“Orpheus” and “Orion” (HF, 1201–1205). Beneath these great harpers of old sit “smale harpers with her glee” who gape upward at them and “counterfete hem as an ape” (HF, 1209, 1212). The copy is no genuine likeness of the original; “craft” cannot imitate “kynde” without distortion. But the answer to this opposition is not to choose one or abandon both. It is rather to acknowledge the necessary artificiality of artifice: “craft” only “countrefeteth kynde” (HF, 1213), as do the small harpers and their counterpart, the talking bird. When the dreamer notices a language a little closer to “kynde,” he hears the “language” of the sea, the “betynge of the see . . . ayen the roches holowe” (HF, 1034–1035). It is the chaos and confusion of “the grete soun,”

“that rumbleth up and doun
In Fames Hous, full of tydyinges,
Bothe of feir speche and chidynges,
And of fals and soth compounded.”

(HF, 1025–1029)

This noisy “speche” compares with the language of nature, the sea against the cliffs, the “tempest” and the “clappe of thundring” (HF, 1036, 1040). It cannot be intelligibly transcribed. By contrast, artificial language, albeit “unnatural,” makes no pretense of being a genuine likeness, yet at least it communicates: the language of the poem is the “craft” that “countrefeteth kynde.”

Approaching closer to the House of Fame, the dreamer is struck by its lush artifice. Writing here is not the signifier of concrete or abstract things; rather, things have turned into script. The dreamer sees a glistening “roche of yse” (HF, 1130) covered with writing: one side is melting, the side listing names of persons with little fame; the other is “conserved with the shade” (HF, 1160), its names “of folkes that hadden grete fames” (HF, 1154). The castle of Fame proper is “ful of ymageries . . . al with gold behewe” (HF, 1304–1306). The building is constructed of “pilers,” each of which

54For the exegetical traditions of these musicians, see Koonce, pp. 196–204.
55Miskimin has argued a similar point; see Renaissance Chaucer, p. 75.
is identified with a famous author.\textsuperscript{56} “Josephus, the olde” (HF, 1433),

\begin{quote}
Upon a pilere stonde on high,
That was of led and yren fyn.
(HF, 1430–1431)
\end{quote}

He represents the enormous body of Hebrew writing—the “fame” of “Jewerye” (HF, 1436). On the next “yren pilere strong” is Statius, who “bar of Thebes up the fame / Upon his shuldres” (HF, 1461–1462). Adjacent to him on a column of iron in this “house of fication” is Homer, “and with him Dares and Tytus” (HF, 1466), along with others whose writings are devoted “for to bere up Troye” (HF, 1472). Virgil follows on a column that supports “the fame of Pius Eneas,” and next to him is “Venus clerk, Ovide,” whose poetry on the God of Love “bar up wel hys fame” (HF, 1485, 1487, 1490). Then the dreamer sees the column of Lucan, who holds up the “fame of Julius and Pompe” (HF, 1502) and other poets who celebrate Rome. The last piller is Claudian’s, since he “bar up the fame of helle” (HF, 1510), notably the literature of Pluto and Proserpine.

This architecture of Fame’s House recalls an image from book 1 in which Venus’s temple is called, for all its writing and imagery, a “chirche” (HF, 473). Like this image, Fame’s House relies on the commonplace conception that the columns of the cathedral are the great men of ecclesiastical history.\textsuperscript{57} Fame’s House, made of the pillars of the community of “olde auctores,” is a domus auctoritatis, a “palace of writing.”

In the center of this House, Lady Fame, the image of artifice itself, sits on a throne carved from a single huge “rubee” (HF, 1362).\textsuperscript{58} Although other central figures in Chaucer’s works are informed by references to past literature, as “Lady Nature” in The Parliament of Fowls is modeled on “Natura” from Alanus de Insulis’s De planctu naturae, the goddess Fame is an unusual conflation of

\textsuperscript{56}This scene of the “hall of great authors” is typically regarded as evidence of the theme of vindicating poetry—the “fame” of literary history (e.g., Bennett, pp. xi, 138–145). But the hall is hardly a place where fame has positive value, and the dreamer must go elsewhere to find it. Despite the imagery of “pilers” and “yren,” this scene contributes all the more vividly to the imagery of artifice in the poem.

\textsuperscript{57}Various medieval sources for this commonplace are cited above, chapter 2, section 1. Koonce also recalls this idea of the house as a church, though he insists on its moral value (p. 215).

images from several old books. She is at once Philosophia and Fortuna from Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, insofar as she is “wonderliche streighte,” like Philosophia,

That with her fet she erthe reighte  
And with her hed she touched hevene.  

*(HF, 1374–1375)*

Yet she occasionally behaves “ryght as her suster, dame Fortune” *(HF, 1547)*, in the unpredictable and arbitrary disposition of fame that she awards to those who supplicate her, and the emphasis of Chaucer's portrait of her may be found in other famous passages about Fama and Fortuna, such as in the *Aeneid*, Petrarch’s *Trionfi*, Nichole de Margival’s *La Panthère d’amours*, and Alanus’s *Anticlaudianus*. The list of her sources is long and complex, but Chaucer has clearly not sided with one source or one emphasis that many have in common, such as Fame’s betrayal of allegiances. For along with the tradition of Fama as Fortuna, Chaucer has also rendered his goddess in the iconography of the four Gospels when he says that she has as many eyes

As fetheres upon foules be,  
Or weren on the bestes foure  
That Goddis trone gunne honour e,  
As John writ in th’Apocalips.  

*(HF, 1382–1385)*

Chaucer’s Fame, as has been commonly observed, signifies the arbitrariness that is so much a part of the poem. But that significance does not include exclusively a moral category such as the irrationality of “wordly vanity” (in contrast to God’s “fame”) or a historical one such as the changing renown of books in literary tradition. Chaucer’s “fame” has more to do with the potential for arbitrariness that is a condition of communicating in speech and writing. The idea is suggested by the goddess’s function in dispensing “fame” as “speche,” first her own utterance and then the clarion blast from Aeolus to announce her message to the world. A typical illustration is her response to the first company of suppliants who come before her asking for fame for their good works.

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“I werne yow hit,” quod she anon;
“Ye gete of me good fame non,
Be God! and therfore goo your wey.”
“Allas!” quod they, “and welaway!
Telle us what may your cause be.”

(HF, 1559–1563)

But she gives them none, and her disposition to other seekers is similarly unpredictable. Her utterance sometimes reflects an appeal to consistency between merit and reward, but sometimes the communication between them is lost, and the result is the reputation of her “speche” as artificial, like the mélange of images and sources composing her.

The comparison of the imagery of artifice to writing and speaking developed extensively in *The House of Fame* moves toward an inevitable and crucial question in the central image of the erratic speech of Lady Fame. Some principle of consistency ought to manifest control in speaking and in the distribution of rewards, but it is shown to be frequently arbitrary or superficial. A conventional response to this problem in the history of medieval language theory is that determinacy of meaning is controlled by appeal to authority, the authority of a source or a famous writer. As we have seen, the encyclopedias of nature and Scripture are composed of elaborate extensions of such principles of authorization. In a series of examples, the last I will consider, Chaucer takes up the problem of determining meaning by appeal to authority. These examples are related to each other insofar as they all involve, in one way or another, the search for an authoritative “source,” the determination to identify a primary “cause” or find a fixed “center” of reference. One of the most striking illustrations opens the poem.

In the *dubitatio* of book 1, the speaker’s bewilderment is specifically about the *cause* of dreams: “what causeth swevenes” *(HF, 3)* confuses him, and he repeats the word “cause” seven times in the proem. “Avisioun,” “revelacioun,” “drem,” “sweven,” “fantome,” “oracle,” “miracle”—all seem the same because he does not know

60See above, chapter 1, section 3. 

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their “causes” (HF, 7–13). For a moment the dreamer pauses over their “significance” (HF, 17), their relation to points in time past and future, but the subject that dominates the proem is the search for the true origin of dreams: “why this more then that cause is” (HF, 20). Various origins are mentioned—“complexion,” “febleness,” “abstinence,” “seknesse,” “stewe,” “prison,” “distresse,” “dysordynaunce,” “curiosity,” “melancholy,” “drede,” “devocien,” “contemplacion,” and others (HF, 21–51), but none is accepted as a primary explanation of what “causeth” dreams (HF, 35). Although a long history of thought on the subject echoes in the background of this dubitatio—for instance the distinctions drawn by Macrobius between the five species, “somnium,” “visio,” “oraculum,” “insomnium,” “visum,” and their subdivisions—the tradition is surely not being discounted when the dreamer concludes, “why the cause is, noght wot I” (HF, 52). On the contrary, the dubitatio serves structural purposes in the poem more than it delivers a judgment on the scholarship of dreams. It suggests that the appeal to the authority of a source, a “cause,” in order to make meaning determinate in a body of knowledge, in this case about dreams, must confront the variability of that cause. An originary source may be imagined to be fixed, as a center determines a circular structure, but in the area of knowledge about dreams that center is shifting.

The point is worth attention because it bears on the concerns of the poem with the fixity and variability of structure. With regard to book 1, it is an indirect but appropriate prelude to the treatment of the sources about Dido and Aeneas that I began with: Which is to have privilege, Virgil’s account or Ovid’s? The questions assume a prevenient auctoritas that would structure the legend with an “answer,” but the poem presents the relativity of differences, the absence of a “cause” that would subordinate the sources. The result in Chaucer’s poem is that the traditions of Aeneas that had become subtle and complex by Chaucer’s time are not oversimplified into a final word on the legend. Each tradition is represented as a version, and neither has privilege. As we have seen, the effect of this kind of treatment of sources is that they reflect on their own order of “telling” the story of Aeneas, just as their context in the encompassing “sweven” is narrating them. This metalinguistic function of writing assumes a very different sense of structure from the princi-

61The scholarship on this background has supplied much needed information (see above, notes 38–40), but it has not adequately addressed the structural function of the dubitatio or considered at all its relation to the quest for the origin in the poem.
ple of determinate center that organizes the myth of the past and
the Book of culture. In contrast, the structure of The House of Fame
is qualified, not fixed by an absolute center.

In book 2, the flight of the eagle and the motif of the search for
“tydynges” carry out the “decentering” strategy of book 1. The
quest is planned to terminate at a definite end, an image of con­
crete and total structure, Fame’s House, where the dreamer is sup­
posed to receive new material for his writing. But the journey is
anything but arrow straight. It is, rather, composed of learned di­
gressions on various topics, each centered in its own right; but to­
gether they are—like the mixed sources in book 1—not subordi­
nated to a single principle. To some readers the eagle’s discourse
may appear “curious and elusive,” yet it has a purpose entirely rele­
vant to the subtle structure of The House of Fame.62 For instance, en
route to the source of “fame,” the eagle’s discourse on the origin of
“soun” (HF, 753–852) sharply juxtaposes his own style of speech
and the course of his flight.63 He claims that a single source is the
cause of all language; variations in speech are “broken” pieces of a
primary substance, air; changes in pitch, as produced by a musical
pipe, “twyst with violence” (HF, 775) a substance trying to remain
whole. When a word is uttered, its “multiplicacioun” (HF, 784) into
language is like a stone thrown into water:

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yf that thow
Throwe on water now a stoon,
Wel wost thou, hyt wol make anoon
A litel roundell as a sercle,
Parunter brod as a covercle;
And ryght anoon thow shalt see wel,
That whel wol cause another whel.
(HF, 788–794)
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As rings of water in a pond radiate from one center, “every sercle
causynge other” (HF, 796), so language is a structure. The rest of
the lecture is replete with the imagery of centering and closing: the
“sercle” becomes a “whel” that will “cause another whel / And that
the thridde, and so forth” (HF, 794–795); the wheel suggests next
a “roundel” and a “compass,” each “aboute other goynge / Causereth

62Leyerle has argued this point well (“Chaucer’s Windy Eagle,” pp. 260–261),
though without attention to the question of authority raised by the eagle’s style.
63See Vance’s remarks on the eagle’s “inflating” and “deflating” rhetoric; “Poetics
of Inflation,” pp. 25–27.

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of others sterynge,” and “mytiplyinge ever moo” (HF 798–801). Like the First Cause itself, “every word, ywys ... moveth first an ayr aboute” (HF, 809–811).

The “word” as “prime mover,” as Logos, controls a conception of language as a determinate, “logocentric” structure that has deep roots in the medieval mythology of music. The lecture is informed by a long and various list of auctoritates, extending from Augustine’s and Boethius’s treatises on music and continuing through Chalcidius’s commentary on Plato’s Timaeus, Macrobius’s treatise on dreams, Vincent of Beauvais’s encyclopedia of nature, and Jacobus of Liège’s summary of musical theory in the fourteenth century. The tradition reflected by these sources treats “number” (numerus) as the primary cause of audible sound (instrumentalis musica) and the fixed center of “music” in man (humana musica), in the physical world and the celestial spheres (mundana musica), and finally in the supernatural order (divina musica).64 Informed by this rich and well-known tradition, the eagle’s lecture is an elaborate application of mythological structure to language.

But the eagle is not a very effective auditor of his own lecture. In a manipulation of perspective that Chaucer employs in many later works, the eagle is unaware that the mythology of language he would “teche” (HF, 782) is not the language he actually speaks.65 He reaches high for the grandeur of encyclopedic learning and frequently its style of cataloging and listing.66 For example, regarding the tidings at Fame’s House, the eagle says that the dreamer will hear:

Mo discordes, moo jelousies,
Mo murmures, and moo novelries,
And moo dissymulacions,
And feyned reparacions.

(HF, 685–688)

But this totalizing style completes its comparison with an incongruous reference to the familiar and colloquial: “And moo berdys,” he goes on,

64See the discussion of medieval musical ideas above, chapter 2, section 5.
65For instance, cf. the limited omniscience of the Reeve, the Wife of Bath, or the Prioress concerning their understanding of the significance of the tales they tell.
66Cf. the preoccupation with manifestatio in the summae of theological learning and Gothic architecture described above, chapter 2, sections 2 and 3.
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in two hours
Withoute rasour or sisors
Ymad, then greynes be of sondes."
(HF, 689–691)

Unaware of the jarring stylistic shift, the eagle again rises to the elevation of the catalog and again interrupts it, this time comparing the exchanges between lovers to the number of ears of corn stored in a barn (“loves moo eschaunges / Then ever cornes were in graunges”; HF, 697–698). It is this kind of shifting rhetorical style, like the arbitrary changing of subjects throughout his discourse on the way to Fame’s House, that returns us to the discussion of the changing “cause” of dreams at the opening of the poem: fixity of center characterizes mythological structures, but the actual experience of dreams is far more flexible, and so is the production and reception of “speche.” The discourse of The House of Fame acknowledges this difference, just as Dante confesses the inability of the language of his poem to imitate the myth of the liber praesentiae Dei at the end of the Paradiso. But the eagle is no imitation of Dante. Proceeding headlong to copy the “ensercled” theory of sound, the eagle continues to weave and soar, utterly unaware of the evidence in his style for the shifting center and inevitable play in the structure of language.

Book 2 closes with a passage in which this play is apparent in another way. The eagle describes what happens to words when they reach Fame’s House, but he acknowledges no sense whatever of the humor of the scene he visualizes. A word uttered, he says,

wexeth lyk the same wight
Which that the word in erthe spak,
Be hyt clothed red or blak.
(HF, 1076–1078)

A word reaching the palace of the goddess is not merely the referent of its author’s intent, claims the eagle, but has “verray hys lyknesse,” indeed, even the “same body”—“man or woman, he or she” (HF, 1079–1082). Again the eagle’s scholarship is impressive. It may even be greater than that of the learned “clerks” of the fourteenth century, since this notion of the identity of author and word goes back to a classical document unknown to them, Plato’s Cratylus. But what is undermined by the hyperbole of the scene is
the consubstantiality of utterance and reference, a position also rejected, for the most part, by medieval theoreticians. For the Cratylistic notion of the “presence” of the author in his “word” obviously risked treading too heavily on sacred doctrine, although its more subtle manifestations, in such concepts as the organic bond of sign and signified, posed no apparent threat. The scene ending book 2 undermines both the Cratylistic and the organic concept of the sign: by exaggerating the bond of sound and referent to such proportions, the poem repeats the strategy of decentering structure—not only the eagle’s, but also its own.

In book 3 the quest for the origin continues as the dreamer arrives at his destination expecting to hear the promised “tydynges.” The palace is described in the vivid imagery of a fixed and centered place. Earlier in the journey, the dreamer was told that the House is situated:

Ryght even in myddes of the weye  
Betwixen hevene, erthe, and see.  

(HF, 714–715)

Now arrived at that cosmic center, he sees its solidity and closure—the “walles of berile,” the “castel-yate” (HF, 1288, 1294), the inside “flor, and roof, and al” that are “plated half a foote thikke / Of gold” (HF, 1344–1346). Among the “folk” present he imagines the coats of arms dispersed among so many in the crowd bound together in a single volume—“a bible / Twenty foot thykke, as y trowe” (HF, 1334–1335). In the middle of the hall, high above the press on a “dees” (HF, 1360), Fame sits “in a see imperiall,” installed “perpetually” on a throne (HF, 1374–1375); the songs of the muses and spheres (musica mundana and divina) circle around her, as if “tuned” by the centrality of her position:

And, Lord! the hevenyssh melodye  
Of songes, ful of armonye,  
I herde aboute her trone ysonge,  
That al the paleys-walles ronge!  

(HF, 1395–1398)

67 The medieval tradition of the via negativa, going back to Dionysius the Areopagite, is one of the more popular oppositions to the Cratylistic assumption about signs. Cf. Vance’s observation about the Cratylistic poem; “Poetics of Inflation,” p. 27.

68 This image appears to be an obvious distortion of the learned tradition of the Book as totality and authority; it turns the convention from Dante’s vision of the liber praesentiae Dei to the artifice of exaggeration that could occur only in dreams.

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In the context of this *concordia*, this architecture of sound, the speech of Lady Fame, like the eagle’s speech earlier, echoes as a poor imitation. Her arbitrary announcement of “fame” in response to the suppliants who seek her favor is only remotely bound by the stability and value of her position in the hall. For her speech is continually sliding off the center that ties merit to reward and gives utterance determinate meaning. The blast of noise from the god of wind declaring the “fame” of each company serves all the more to emphasize the anticentric “speche” of the goddess. It is no surprise, therefore, that the dreamer does not find at this terminus of his quest the “tydynges” he has come for. The origin he seeks has been continually deferred: it is not in the poetry he has written (*HF*, 641–671); it is not in the books he has read (the sources of the poem); he has not heard it in the learned discourse of the eagle; nor is it to be found in Fame’s palace. When he finally says to the anonymous escort near the end of book 3 that he has come not for the kind of tidings he has heard in Fame’s hall but for “newe tydynge[s],” “newe thinges” (*HF*, 1886–1887), he is taken elsewhere (*HF*, 1914).

It might appear that this displacement is a realization that the quest for the origin of a centered “cause” for dreams and an identifiable structure for language comes to very little. As the dreamer observes, pondering Fame’s motivations:

> But thus I seye yow, trewely,  
> What her cause was, y nyste.  
> (*HF*, 1542–1543)

If support for Chaucer’s “skepticism” is to be sought, one might look for it in these lines, or in the passage describing the house that the dreamer is taken to after leaving the goddess Fame. For this house is a labyrinth within the pale of Fame’s palace:

> Under the castel, faste by,  
> An hous, that Domus Dedaly,  
> That Laboryntus cleped ys.  
> (*HF*, 1919–1921)

Instead of solidity and closure, this house is “mad of twigges” (*HF*, 1936); it is “lyk a cage” (*HF*, 1985); sound moves in and out of its “thousand holes” (*HF*, 1949) and “dores opened wide” (*HF*, 1952); inside all things are in continual motion, “so faste hit whirleth”
However, these contrasts to Fame’s House do not necessarily signify logical oppositions, the antitheses of a meaningful order in the search for new poetic material: the poem does not stop with emptiness and nihilism. For the dreamer is escorted not into outer darkness, but into “another place” (HF, 1914) that is off center from the cosmic midpoint (“mydes”—HF, 714) of Fame’s hall; he stands no longer on high, but “in a valeye” (HF, 1918). The house he confronts is not an image of desolation and destruction; it seems to the dreamer “founded to endure” (HF, 1981). And it is not “centerless,” but labyrinthian, a place whose center exists as a secret; it is eccentric; the wind whirling in it is contained loosely by its wicker walls, rotating around some shifting vortex.

These patterns indicate that the search of the poem does not end in the absence of structure, the abandonment of a centerless void. The quest leads the speaker to the discovery of an “off-center” vantage, a perspective for understanding that has heretofore been confusing to him. “Soun,” the most baffling image in the poem, now issues from the house of sticks: like everything else in this context, it contrasts with the splendor of Fame’s palace and thus is hardly an imitation of *musica mundana* and *divina*. But the contrast is not a principle of opposition. Instead of senseless discord, language without structure, the “soun” is this time made by the dreamer himself, the writer, as the “poetry” summarizing what he heard issuing from the wicker house:

And over alle the houses angles  
Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles  
Of werres, of pes, of marriages,  
Of reste, of labour, of viages,  
Of abood, of deeth, of lyf,  
Of love, of hate, acord, of stryf,  
Of loos, of lore, and of wynnynges,  
Of hele, of seknesse, of bildynges,  
Of faire wyndes, and of tempestes,  
Of qwalm of folk, and eke of bestes;  
Of dyvers transmutacions  
Of estats, and eke of regions;  
Of trust, of drede, of jelousy,  
Of wit, of wynnynge, of folye;  
Of plente, and of gret famyne,

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‘The image of the whirling wicker house typically serves as a reference in arguments for Chaucer’s skepticism; for example, Delany, *Chaucer’s “House of Fame,”* pp. 104–111.
This “music” is very odd. The anaphora is too long to be taken seriously as a structural principle; the *amplificatio* too inclusive; the rhyme too predictable; the syntax too repetitious; and the subject matter far too multifarious. Yet all the same it is music “off center,” playing with conventions of style that announce their own overstylized preoccupations. And this play with structure, like the artifice of form throughout, is a fitting vehicle for turning a most unfitting jumble of matter into amusing verse. The passage displays the kind of ingenuity that is apparent much later in Chaucer’s works, such as in the lists of clutter in the *Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.* Even in a house of sticks, Chaucer finds a *matière* suitable for poetry, the “tydynges” that he has sought all along here being realized before us in what must remain one of the most understated discoveries in fourteenth-century poetry.

The play with literary tradition throughout the poem reflects on the theme that writing (“tydynges”) proceeds, as does the quest, by virtue of its play factor. It is therefore appropriate that the poem should end with a dramatization of language at play. Book 2 closes with the personification of the “word” as the being of its speaker; book 3 ends by returning us to that figure in the animation of “lesyng” and “soth sawe” (*HF*, 2089). Uttered by different occupants of the wicker house, these two “sentences” rise up to pass “out at a wyndowe” (*HF*, 2091), but they are “achekked” when they cannot fit through the opening simultaneously. The rivalry is settled when “fals and soth” are “compounded” (*HF*, 2108) and pass through the opening as “00 tydynge” (*HF*, 2109). The scene circles back elliptically to the question that has been entertained at various points in the poem, the question of authority. As the rivalry of sources, such as between Ovid and Virgil in book 1, raises the issue of privilege and calls attention to the signifying capacity of writing,
the skirmish of the sentences in the final scenes of the poem makes the problem explicit, and it is a problem that the metalinguistic function always poses: Who has authority here? “Soth sawe” or “lesyng”? The source or the report? What writing signifies or its own signifying mode? Truth or fiction? “‘Lat me go first!’ ‘Nay, but let me!’” (HF, 2097). The agreement is reached that they “wil medle us ech with other” (HF, 2102) and together play a game with readers who will not be able to tell them apart: “no man” shall have them separate, truth or fiction, “but bothe / At ones” (HF, 2104–2105).72 The argument is ended, but what about the question of authority?

It has surely not been bypassed; nor has it been assigned by fiat to either “soth” or “fals.” The ending of the poem, the recognition of the “man of gret auctorite” (HF, 2158), emphasizes what the foregoing argument, if not the entire journey of the dreamer, has suggested about the question of appealing to authority. When it is sought in auctoritates, sources, The House of Fame reveals the multiplicity of them and their genuine artifice; and when it is sought in auctores, the eagle is depicted as pedantic and Fame as utterly unpredictable. Such an appeal is the essence of the structure of mythology that was created in the middle ages out of nature and Scripture. But Chaucer’s fiction repeatedly defers the attempt to identify a “source” for authority.73 The “origin” for knowledge in the poem can only be the text itself. Its voice has replaced the auctoritates and auctores of tradition as a way of determining meaning, and its authority is the “meddling,” the play, of “soth” and “fals.” The play of the poem demythologizes the tradition that assumes the presence of authority by showing in the end that “he” is literally a personification, an animated word without a natural identity. The “man of gret auctorite” must be anonymous. To search for his name is to go in the wrong direction. Chaucer has led us in the last line of the poem to the “origin” that myths always lead to: they are anonymous. Fiction, on the other hand, never hides the fact of its authorship. But neither does it actually assume the authority of documentary history. Instead, it acknowledges outright, as The House of Fame does so elegantly, the simple point that

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72The argument in the poem at this point seems to go against the intriguing study of opposition in Chaucer’s poetry presented by Peter Elbow, Oppositions in Chaucer (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

73In this sense the structure of reference in the poem compares with Dante’s treatment of structure in the Commedia as the continuing desire to recover, yet simultaneously defer, a point of origin or end; see above, chapter 4.
the text itself is its own authority, its fiction our only frame of refer­
ence, and its author (notwithstanding his testimony to the “soth” of
what he “sawgh”) a creation of the text, a pure fiction, and even
given a name—in order to sever finally the anonymous myth of
the Book from the only authority the poem can have—“Geffrey”
(HF, 729).

If not a poem of final conclusions, The House of Fame is sur ely a
work of provocative experiments in structure, authority, and the
determinacy of meaning. The dislocation of authority from the
voice of the past to the play of signifying in the text, perhaps the
poem’s most daring move, registers a separation from the Text
of tradition that is more far-reaching than anything we find in
Dante’s Commedia. Since this separation is not one that medieval
theory has engaged, it is all the more conceivable that medieval
readers would have been unused to it. Their expectations were
conditioned—as expectations are usually shaped—by what they
had read and heard, by the assumptions that disparate events and
sources add up and make sense in the way that elements behave in
narrative. The “myth” of the Book—its “narrativity”—was the
condition of historical consciousness that authorized the truth of
what happened in the physical world, and consequently it was only
natural that the rules of narrative order would provide the “au­
thenticating” realism of fictive worlds as well. Following the narra­
tive for the purpose of understanding what the work “says” is not,
of course, a medieval phenomenon, but a condition of reading in
any age: narrative is the invitation of interpretation, which finds
its most comfortable validation when it can appeal to sequence
and subordination. We automatically make such a response in The
House of Fame as we follow the invitation of the narrative about the
quest for Fame and tidings. In this poem Chaucer uses narrative as
interpretation in as plain a strategy as we will ever find in his
works: we expect to follow the narrative sequence in order to dis­
cover the meaning of the poem, and it is a course exactly in the di­
rection of locating the source and understanding the meaning of
utterance. Our quest establishes its validity by continuing reference
to what happens next; the authority for what the poem “says” is de­
termined by the sequence of events: the mythology of this appeal is
at work not only in the old motif of the quest for the origin, but in
the structure of authority in sequentiality.

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However, the narrative thread we follow does not take us very far as we wander through the labyrinth of the story trying to hold on to the argumentative line of the eagle and Lady Fame. The expectation for the rules of narrative—the formalities of connection, subordination, pattern—are quickly violated. The authority of reading can no longer make an easy appeal to story. Its authority is in conflict with other matters in the poem that will not be subordinate to it. Dante pointed to this opposition when he spoke at the end of the *Commedia* of the obscurity of his own writing (his *liber occulorum*) by comparison with the clarity of God’s; similarly, one may be persuaded, as is Frank Kermode, to think of scriptural writing generally as riddled with “secret” matter that is distinctly in conflict with an interpretive inclination all too ready to read God’s language as determined by familiar expectations for narrative sequence. What is true of the *Commedia* and Scripture is also true of *The House of Fame*: the resistance of the “secret matter”—the *materia occulta*—to narrative clarity is precisely what is so intriguing about it. In contrast, to maintain that the poem is out of control and elusive reveals the automatic expectation that literary works should respond to our narrative demands on them. But *The House of Fame* has much more material at odds with narrative than we are used to in Chaucer’s works. When we suspend our easy access to narrative and consider the nonsequential matter of the text, as I have suggested, an argument about writing emerges that can establish itself only by its conflict with storial continuity. We expect clarenability, formality, and authority, but along with them we receive discord and insubordination. This conflict between sequence and secrecy—the quest for the source interrupted by the errant difficulties of writing—is another way of measuring how unusual the work is in medieval literary history. But the poem is important for more compelling reasons than its moments of greatness or its difference from other literary forms. The opposition in the piece, contrasting the *muthos* of narrative to the insubordinate matter of the text, carries out the much larger preoccupation of the separation of myth from fiction, and that difference has immediate bearing on what history means after Chaucer.

The poem may be examined for the history it contains, but just as important is how it influences historical consciousness. One salient attitude is the confrontation I have been describing between the sequential order so crucial to the tradition of the Book and the *materia occulta* of the labor of composition. The poem does not move beyond this conflict to give us a form in which sequence and
secrecy have come to terms with each other. To ask for such a reconciliation is perhaps the wrong question, and it may very well be that by the end of the poem Chaucer realized it. When we look to the work for narrative connectedness and closure we do not find it, no doubt because Chaucer had come to recognize through the work that too many competing factors interrupt the demand for simple clarity of sequence. Instead, the poem appeals to the poet’s understanding of what is at stake in the difficulties of writing, and he does not—more remarkable still—surrender its textual properties to the audience’s proprieties of unruffled, subordinate form. He runs the risk of their unfavorable response, their judgment that he may not deserve the “fame” represented by the narrative quest of the poem.

But the question of whom Chaucer wrote for, himself or his audience, is not one he treated casually. The “Prologue” to The Legend of Good Women takes up the question, and I will turn next to it. Through the dramatization of the poet’s defense before the court of Love, Chaucer reveals that he is much less interested in himself, or the poetic imagination, than he is in his audience. Chaucer’s concern in his writing, like his interest in so many other areas, is pragmatic; he owes a debt to Horace and the pragmatic theory of literature much more than he is a harbinger of Coleridge or Keats and Romantic preoccupations with poetic genesis. Chaucer, as the “Prologue” suggests, is concerned with being clear, with making sure that his audience recognizes certain problems and receives responses to them that make sense—good sense, not oversimplified or platitudinous opinions. Yet at the same time Chaucer assumes in the “Prologue”—as in The House of Fame before it and The Canterbury Tales after it—the play of language with meaning. He again counts on the primacy of narrative and our demand for storial sense; but he does not compromise the poet’s struggle with the uncontrollable matter of writing to the reader’s expectation for sequential clarity. The “Prologue” is interested in showing that this conflict is all too readily compromised and that the determinacy of meaning cannot be settled by appeal to a court of last resort. The poem takes an amusing look at those readers who demand that sort of accommodation.