

# The Narrative and the Structure: Two Interpretations of Chaucer's *The House of Fame*

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## I. Introduction

It is a mark of a genius that, after all the commotions and contentions that have rocked the literary circles of the English-speaking nations, Geoffrey Chaucer's literary outputs can still provide us with some dubious seams and ambiguous corners where a fresh individual light could be applied, and that the essential nature of his poetical works has not ceased to be a topic of arguments among the representative scholars of modern time. The center of attention and admiration among Chaucer's mostly narrative, poetical works is deservedly his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, which has been scrutinized, discussed, and evaluated over and over again by the major critics of English literature since its publication almost six hundred years ago up to the present time, and it seems as if the anatomy of this monumental work has been drawn with as much thoroughness and precision as humanly possible. However, imposing and glamorous as *The Canterbury Tales* is, it is not, fortunately, the only work that Chaucer produced, and we find that we can taste almost as delightful a feast and spend nearly as rewarding a time in reading his earlier works, which had formed an essential groundwork in building the literary gothic temple of the medieval England.

Among these minor works, which include *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and *The Legend of Good Women*, the works which most attract the attentions of the modern critics seem to be *The House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, the latter of which presents a sharply divergent view of love and life from that of Shakespeare incorporated in his not very popular play, *Troilus and Cressida*. It would

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be a rewarding as well as tempting task to attempt to define the nature of the contrasting attitudes to the same material of the narrative these two literary giants of English literature took, but *The House of Fame* being an earlier and much less bulkier work than *Troilus and Criseyde*, the fact of which makes the relative newcomer in Chaucer's world feel more comfortable, and a few recently published critical books, which were written exclusively on some particular interpretations of this work, falling accidentally into my hands, I have decided to examine the shorter work first and leave the longer one to the later opportunity.

Even on this relatively short and not much heralded work, there seem to be as many interpretations as are the critics who have chosen to write about it, and I find it foolhardy to attempt to harmonize all the points of view these critics have explored, because in most cases they are mutually exclusive and negating. Two interpretations, one expressed several decades ago by one of the most renowned critics of English literature and the other tendered by a relatively obscure scholar of this generation, have particularly come to my notice, and even the mere juxtaposition of their views, it is my hope, would help us to comprehend a little better how delicate, subtle and complex Chaucer's works could be. The first perspective to be introduced is an artistic point of view employed by George Lyman Kittredge in his authoritative *Chaucer and his Poetry*, in which he testifies that *The House of Fame* is first and foremost a superbly handled narrative written mainly for the purpose of amusing the readers, and the second insight comes from Sheila Delany's recently published book, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, which stresses the philosophical aspect of the poem manifested in the carefully wrought structure of skeptical fideism.

## II. The Narrative

Whatever other talents he may have found in Chaucer, including the knack of turning out endless lines of delightfully melodious verse and the ability of gracefully harmonizing all the disparate aspects of social conventions, Professor Kittredge regards Chaucer above all else as a supreme master of good story telling. In reading Chaucer's *The House of Fame*, he is so utterly fascinated with the narrative skill of the poet and so completely engrossed in analyzing the subtle and intricate devices the poet used to make the story alluring to the reader that he ends up with excluding all the seemingly tedious elements as well as evading the efforts to go beyond the surface to see if there is any other significance intended by the poet. Although Kittredge undoubtedly have missed something in wholly devoting his undeviating attention to the narrative aspect of the poem, it cannot be denied that he has reasonably succeeded in making the poem lively and more than palatable to

the modern readers.

When we view a piece of literary work mainly as an interesting story, a lively, though faithful, summarization of the work with a touch of appreciable feeling of the reader blended with it could be an integral part of the criticism, for in this case the poem means largely what it tells simply and explicitly. So it in no way surprises us to see that Kittredge fills in his critical work of *The House of Fame* mostly with the concise and colorful retelling of the story, which Chaucer made so subtly amusing that the critic seems to feel that all that he could do with it is simply to taste it with all the faculty of the palate he has. How Kittredge manages to do this with his superb sense of reality, which makes his critical piece as readable a story as the original poem, is amply demonstrated in the very first part of his article where he summarizes crisply how the narrator of the story discusses the nature and the cause of dreams, and how he steers the direction of his narrative through the discussion, and I think the force of illumination of his characteristic method justifies the following lengthy quotation:

The Discussion begins with the pious wish, "God turne us every drem to goode!" but instantly flies off at a tangent in a characteristic disclaimer. The poet can make nothing of dreams, either as to their causes or their significance. Some of them appear to be mere fancies; others are oracles, revealing what is to come. The causes he finds particularly obscure and confusing. Are dreams merely reflexes of a man's own temperament? Or do they spring from physical fatigue and mental weariness, the result, perhaps, of fasting, sickness, imprisonment, over-study, devout contemplation, or, in the case of lovers, of "the cruel life they lead"? Do spirits put dreams into our heads? Or, finally, has the soul so perfect a nature that it foresees, in slumber, what is to happen to us, but in symbols only, which our gross bodies forbid us to interpret? "I know not," cries the poet, "nor do I care to risk an ignorant guess!" And so he reverts to the prayer with which he began: "May the Holy Rood grant us a favorable issue for all our dreams!" and passes to his conclusion: "For nobody, I believe, ever had so wonderful a dream as I had on the tenth of last December. I will repeat it to you, as exactly as I can call it to mind."<sup>1</sup>

Kittredge's critical piece on *The House of Fame* goes on in this vein from the beginning up to the very end, and so it will be quite pointless to quote any more of the similar passages, which seem to have been charmed by the enchanted atmosphere of the poem, being concocted harmoniously with the proper amount of fantasy and realism. I cannot imagine a better introductory guide to *The House of Fame* than this work of criticism, because it not only tells about the main arguments and events of the story but also lets us share almost the same sensation as the critic felt as he read the poem, and because it ultimately tempts

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1) George Lyman Kittredge: *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1915) p. 74.

us to travel the wonderland on our own.

In spite of numerous derogatory remarks concerning *The House of Fame* expressed by hosts of critics throughout the centuries since Chaucer's time, whose main objections were the lack of unity and cohesion, Kittredge sees the poem as a work naturally conceived, realistically excuted and firmly based on the authoritative literary conventions of medieval romance. The apparant disjunctive movement of the poem, according to him, is in fact a properly motivated progress buttressed by the subtle probing of human psychology and the elaborate construction of perfectly balanced elements, resulting in forcing the reader to be intellectually alert and sharp in order to taste the full flavor of the artistic entertainment. Accordingly, in this evaluation of *The House of Fame*, Kittredge is most concerned with exploring Chaucer's superb narrative skill in its various aspects to eliminate all the seemingly disharmonious and disruptive jointures and all the jarring sounds to prove its masterful artistry.

Confronting the contentious issue of defining the significance of the temple and the desert, which the narrator unexpectedly visits in his dream in Book I of the poem, Kittredge hits a decisive cord by suggesting the most plausible and indisputable reason which could have occurred to the contemporary readers:

The temple and the desert are simply devices to transport the poet into the fantastic regions of dream-land, where the eagle can swoop down upon him conveniently: Jove can hardly send his bird to the custom house, or to Chaucer's city lodgings.<sup>2)</sup>

In assessing the role of the eagle who performs the double function of a carrier and a guide, Kittredge is delighted to find an unexpected effect coming from this unusual combination of animal nature and human intellect, producing tantalizing moments of ticklish sensation when the eagle unwittingly drops from the elivation of human intelligence to the ignominous state of animal habit. Even the cold and sobering scene in the Fame's House, where the machanicly conceived allegorical figures court Fame's favor, is so skillfully sketched with enthusiasm and verisimilitude that Kittredge almost seems to be ashamed to mention its allegorical aspect and hastens to emphasize the smoothness of the movement as if every events occurs exactly on the same level, that is the level of natural realism.

When a literary work is looked at above all as an interesting piece of narrative, and when a critic's task is to rediscover the way the author told the story expertly, the function of the reader, especially the reader of Chaucer's time, becomes perceptively larger and takes on a dictator's role of commanding absolute obeisance to his whim and taste. Kittredge expresses this view forcefully with an effective comparison and a figure of speech, surrepti-

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2) *Ibid.*, p. 84.

tiously gibing at those critics who read and evaluate Chaucer's works as if they were written directly for them with their modern habits and consciousness, which are, needless to say, at great variance with those of medieval England. In order to enter the fascinating *The House of Fame* through the proper portal, that is, through the eyes of Chaucer's readers, Kittredge constantly refers the contentious passages to their perspectives and ponders whether the modern critical views on various incidents in *The House of Fame* could have been plausible to them. Against the popular interpretation of the modern critics concerning the significance of the temple and the desert, which makes them represent art and reality respectively, Kittredge contends that this interpretation is quite unlikely to occur in the minds of Chaucer's readers in view of the circumstances of the medieval society:

Now these sentimental equations, we must frankly admit, are quite unlike anything that Chaucer's contemporaries would have gathered from the story. The announcement at the outset, that he is to tell them a dream—accompanied as it is by a discussion of dreams which recalls the exordium of *the Romance of the Rose*, the most popular of all poems with the courtly circle of the time—meant to them, undoubtedly, that they were to hear one more variation on the favorite theme of the love-vision.<sup>3)</sup>

The discussion concerning the nature and cause of dreams, the summary of which by this critic was quoted leniently in a previous page, strikes him also as a superb example of Chaucer's skill in arousing his reader's curiosity and expectation. In order to meet the reader's curiosity to the full, it is quite proper to allude to the similar incidents to the one being introduced to the reader, and Chaucer's encyclopaedic enumeration of the aerial flights of the famous personages is, in Kittredge's estimation, is solely intended to kindle the reader's interest in the aerial flight of the narrator on the back of the mysterious bird sent by the benevolent Jove. Along with the knowledgeable description of various examples of aerial flights, the description of the various personages of mythical and allegorical origin is a potent display of the poet's vast knowledge and intellectual ability, and the reader's edification along with his entertainment is a legitimate object of the very accommodating poet.

The prevalent attitude throughout the poem of the poet toward his material including the narrator is decidedly that of ironical detachment, which affords the poet the room where he can toy with several options for the course he is going to take and also crack a few jokes at the expense of the helpless characters for the benefit of the expectant readers. Searching for the cause of the lively and delightful effect he receives in reading *The House of Fame*, Kittredge finds this ironical detachment on the poet's part to be among the most

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3) *Ibid.*, p. 81.

effective method of injecting spice and flavor to his story and making the poem tingle with humorous remarks and situations. Chaucer sets this dominant tone in the very beginning of the poem, where the narrator pokes fun at his own enterprises of recounting the dream he had, by disclaiming all the knowledge of the philosophy of dreaming and even venturing to acknowledge a possibility of untruthfulness of his dream.

In summarising the poem, Kittredge does not simply recount the main arguments and events of the story with the purpose of acquainting the reader with what is presented in the poem, but essays to make the story appear highly amusing by focussing his attention on the ironical situations and humorous aspects of the poem. He finds the situation extremely funny when the narrator is picked up by the eagle in the desert and carried through the air toward Fame's House, and all the time was completely at the mercy of the bird and compelled to listen to the display of his exceptional knowledge. Kittredge sums up this situation as follows:

He (the eagle) owes his knowledge, of course, not to books, but to exceptional facilities for observation. These, unfortunately, are enjoyed in equal measure by his associates at Jove's court. Now, at length, he has buttonholed or kidnapped an auditor. Chaucer lies helpless in the lecturer's talons, in no condition to protest or disagree; and the learned eagle holds forth, with all the gusto of long repression. He shows the exuberance of an autodidact and the condescending omniscience of a discoursing specialist. Chaucer, who has no wish to be dropped, is not contentious: he replies in monosyllables, with a meek yes or no, as the occasion requires. His reticence is not diminished by the alarming discovery that the eagle can read his thoughts! This one-sided conversation lasts throughout the aerial journey, and is intensely amusing.<sup>4)</sup>

Another example Kittredge gives to demonstrate a subtle technique Chaucer uses for the purpose of generating a humorous effect is about the peculiar function of the bird who, as already been noted, is entrusted with the responsibilities of conveying and instructing the narrator at the same time, thus producing the possibility of slipping unwittingly from one state to the other and committing a humorous blunder.

The most crucial issue for Kittredge, when he tackles the problem of finding the chief significance of *The House of Fame*, is whether the poem should be read as a personal allegory for the poet himself as he, as an artist, is set against the unappreciating public. As a representative example of this interpretation, Kittredge cites a critical interpretation of this work by an eminent scholar of his time, Ten Brink, who argued that in *The House of Fame* we are concerned with an allegorical picture of Chaucer's life and of what may be called his literary situation. Counter to this allegorical equation, which Kittredge finds ex-

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4) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

tremely distasteful because of its tendency of turning everything real into a shadowy figure, and also finds highly improbable because of the obvious fact that the medieval English readers, accustomed to the romance of love vision prevalent over the medieval Europe, could not possibly have taken the description in this metaphysical sense, he contends that the contemporary readers could only be prepared to be entertained with another good story about the love-vision.

Once we accept the fact that Chaucer worked within the precinct of the literary convention still in force in his time, Kittredge forces us to perceive, we are simply overwhelmed by the poem's realistic texture, which seems to admit no room for the ambiguous allegorical figures to intrude, in spite of the modern predilection for unearthing the supposedly hidden allegorical meanings. It is thus in search of realism that the critic turns loose his imagination in speculating the possible nature of the news of the far country brought by the man of great authority, which has been the apparent object of the whole journey undertaken by the narrator, and which is quite unexpectedly left undescribed by the author.

The most convincing argument Kittredge tenders to impress the reader with his contention that the poem operates solely on the plain of realistic verisimilitude comes unexpectedly in dealing with the possible significance of the treatise on sound-waves, which most critics take to be an irrelevant matter so far as the main narrative is concerned:

One passage, the treatise on sound-waves, is often regarded as a digression after the true medieval manner. In fact, however, the passage is organically necessary to the realism which the poet achieves in this the wildest of his fictions, for it puts the whole structure upon a basis of genuine science. After hearing it, Chaucer feels quite satisfied, and so do his readers, that all the news of the world must make its way to the Palace of Fame. Then, too, the account of the laws of sound leads up directly to the explanation that every speech takes human shape when it enters Fame's courts. We are thus prepared, as Chaucer was, for the apparent reality of whatever is to be seen and heard in this region of phantasmagoria. And, indeed, the verisimilitude of the Third Book is complete.<sup>5)</sup>

However, it is in the discussion concerning the literary origin of the wicker framework found in the House of Rumors that Kittredge strikes the decisive cord in proving that Chaucer took his material for the romance of fantastic vision from his real experience of actual phenomenon. Kittredge wonders whether Chaucer simply extended the conventional frame, which was used by Ovid who constructed his House of Fame out of sounding bronze, to his own use by inventing the wicker framework to make his story more novel and appetizing, and was convinced that in untangling this problem lies the crucial task of discovering the essential method of the poet in making his works as delightful as they really

5) *Ibid.*, p. 93.

are.

Rejecting the prevalent modern posture of Chaucer's critics, who take *The House of Fame* to be a personal, cultural, or religious allegory, with the meanings behind the scenes, Kittredge recommends us to read it as if we read a modern realistic novel and taste the full flavor of its surface meanings, for he believes that the narrative meaning can be at times as profound as, if not more so than, the metaphysical meanings. He succeeded greatly in directing our attention to the neglected, though vital, aspect of this work through the application of his strong common sense and acute sense of good humor, with the result that the apparently simple, dubious or discordant arguments and incidents become radiant with delightful irony and sparkling humor. In Kittredge's hand, Chaucer seems to come alive again before our eyes; his characters, Geoffrey, the eagle, and the queen Fame, all perform their characteristic feats with verve and high seriousness; his plot is full of subtly ironic, though seemingly trivial, situations, which make the story as dramatic as a high comedy; his narrative technique varies as the occasions demand, from that of building up the reader's expectation to that of jolting the reader with a surprise move of holding the information expected all along by the reader from him.

There is no denying that Kittredge's critical piece is a superb introduction to *The House of Fame* for those who come to Chaucer's works for the first time without any prior knowledge of its nature, and that it could also function as a corrective to the tired intelligence of those who have gone all out to search for the illusive allegorical meanings buried under the still vibrant surface of the narrative. Still, one cannot help wondering whether Chaucer could have contented himself with the role of simply telling a good story for the temporary amusement of the readers who happened to acquire his works, or whether he was not prompted to reflect his views concerning the culture which nourished him and the life with which he had to grapple with as a human being. As a Christian who read his Bible conscientiously, and as a writer who was profoundly influenced by Italian Renaissance, whose peak could be said to be occupied by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer could not possibly escaped from the allegorical and religious concern when writing his works. In fact, Chaucer gives us a convincing clue to this problem in the central scene of his poem, and we realize that, delightful though the portal and the facade of Fame's House are, the interior is far more gorgeous and spectacular as we, along with the adventurous narrator, move toward the very throne of the magnificent, though, capricious, queen, Fame.

### III. The Structure

The cultural aspect of *The House of Fame*, which is conspicuously absent from Professor

Kittredge's critical work wholly devoted to elucidating the technical dexterities of the narrative content of the poem, has been amply discussed and incisively analyzed by Sheila Delany in her *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, where the narrative provides the poet merely with the handy tools with which he hammers out his ambivalent cultural criticism. Having lived in one of the turbulent periods of English history, and having absorbed the greatest impacts of the continental Renaissance through travelling widely over Europe for cultural discipline, Miss Delany argues, Chaucer could not have been indifferent toward the gigantic cultural transformation which was taking place, that is, the transformation from the absolute dependence on divine guidance into the revolt of logic and dialectical argumentation. She likens this period, in which Chaucer wrote his *The House of Fame*, to the latter half of the nineteenth century, in which Matthew Arnold struggled to discern the clear direction that the culture was then taking, and finds much similarity in their essential attitudes toward the confused aspects of the cultural phenomena caused by the gradual loss of authority of the old tradition and the incipient formation of the new tradition.

In this fluid atmosphere in which everything asserts its authenticity and yet everything assumes the form of indefiniteness, choosing a priority among the equally pertinent arguments, in the absence of indisputable authority, seems to Chaucer a foolhardy venture, although many contemporary writers, including the very prestigious Boccaccio, appeared to have thought themselves competent enough to cast their ballots on the side of the new tradition. According to Mrs. Delany's interpretation, Chaucer, feeling the simultaneous attractions toward the lingering authority of the Christian myth and the logical aptitude of the new science, could not decide to which he should give his allegiance, and in an obvious effort to break the stalemate in the cultural warfare, resorted to the artistic solution of presenting the structure of incongruity, where all the claims of various choices are simply juxtaposed. Presenting the convincing analysis of the text in the light of these considerations, Mrs. Delany, who has a feminine advantage of strong cultural perception, boldly concludes that Chaucer's *The House of Fame*, despite its narrative excellence and allegorical implications, should be examined for its profound, though, concise, representation of the cultural phenomena in the time of Geoffrey Chaucer:

Chaucer's pluralism, his inability (or refusal) to commit himself wholeheartedly to the past or to the present, his ironic treatment of intellectual systems: these attitudes are with us still. They help us to recognize in Chaucer's poetry early versions of our own dilemma, just as we recognize in the social events of Chaucer's time the roots of our own historical experience. Insofar as that pluralism causes us to recoil from the historical future, it is our "fantome and illusion," and no fideistic leap of faith will help us to transcend the choices confronting us. But if the *House of Fame* can clarify

anything for us it is the potential sterility of being unable to choose.<sup>6)</sup>

By foregoing the impossible task of clarifying his stance in the face of the conflicting demands of myth and logic, Mrs. Delany also points out, Chaucer did not succeed in presenting himself as a good Christian, but the fact that he became free from the obligation of following the historical truth formed the basis of his artistic power, which enabled him to establish the independent field, where the problem of choice became irrelevant through fideistic transcendence. Thus the structure of incongruity, instead of constituting the object of criticism, which it has been for the numerous critics of Chaucer's works, becomes the very foundation of the structural meaning of *The House of Fame*, which, in Miss Delany's opinion, is far more potent than the narrative meaning advocated by professor Kittredge or the allegorical implications upheld by the numerous critics of modern symbolism.

In order to show that Chaucer's dualistic attitude toward culture based on the suspension of judgment on the poet's part is not an arbitrary creation of her ingenuity, Mrs. Delany backs up her contention with the convincing arguments and scholarly researches, and demonstrates that the skeptical attitude Chaucer assumed was not an original posture among the philosophers and artists, but was a legitimate successor of the classical and medieval tradition of skepticism. Although Chaucer, who, as Mrs. Delany suggests, was not a very conscientious reader and acquired his knowledge mainly through observation and reflection, was not directly influenced by the philosophers of his own time, it cannot be denied that their arguments, leavened more or less with the dialectical skepticism, must have formed the general atmosphere in which Chaucer worked. Mrs. Delany further contends that despite the fact that she could not find a direct linkage between the classical skepticism and the medieval tradition of skepticism, both traditions are founded on the basic human assumption of the limits of human capability in perceiving the absolute truth, although the Christian traditions affirm with transcendental faith that such a truth has been conferred to men through the divine revelation of human salvation, especially through the miraculous incarnation of the divine son:

The medieval skeptical tradition is not a continuation of the teachings of Greek skeptical philosophers. In that formal sense, the tradition of skepticism was practically unknown during the Middle Ages, though traces of it have been found. Yet without knowing the specific arguments of the classical school, medieval skepticism does, like its predecessor, insist on the limits and contingency of human knowledge, whether the source of that knowledge be experience, natural reason, or traditional authority. The central difference between classical and late medieval skepticism is that the Christian concept of divine omnipotence permitted the medieval philosopher to go beyond purely

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6) Sheila Delany: *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972) p. 122.

logical concepts. He did not need to limit himself to an agnostic assertion of contingency, but could move to a fideistic statement of the mutually exclusive claims of logic and faith, conceding the latter to superior.<sup>7)</sup>

In point of fact, throughout the medieval ages and the early part of the Renaissance, the intellectuals were obliged to tread cautiously on the thin ice of logical argumentation lest he should fall into a religious heresy by refuting outright the veracity of religious phenomena, which had been believed to be inviolable facts by nearly all the people since the foundation of the Holy Roman Church. Since there could be no effective way of establishing a common ground, where myth and logic could operate harmoniously without violating the sanctuary of the other, as they are mutually exclusive in their essential nature, the followers of the skeptical tradition had to find some way of accommodating the authorities of the still powerful church in order to preserve their very existence. As a classical case, which presented the divergent conclusions reached by religious consciousness and the intellectual reasoning, Mrs. Delany takes up the mystery of the Eucharist, noting the inevitable conflict of opinions, which must result from the fact that, whereas the Bible definitely indicates the transformation of bread and wine into the body of Jesus Christ, the dialectical logicians cannot find it consistent with the result of their rational process. Pressed by this obvious dilemma to offer a facade of reconciliation between the claims of these two systems of perceiving truth, the medieval skeptics managed to devise a few ingenious ways of evading the direct denial of the authority of the holy scripture, thus placating as much as possible the jealous guardians of the divine prerogatives, although not a few dialecticians were condemned for tampering with the divine revelation and had to retract their former protestations and reaffirm their faith in the supernatural operation of the divine will.

After the bitter experience of insufficient solution, the late medieval philosophers finally hit upon a convenient way of breaking the impass by assigning faith and logic to two different fields of operation so as to make each free to pursue the activities of its faculty to their ultimate conclusion without infringing upon the activities of the other faculty. Somewhat ambiguously differentiating this line of reasoning from proposing the existence of double truths, Mrs. Delany states that many a medieval scholar was allowed to explore the laws of physical nature relatively unmolested while conceding the spiritual phenomenon such as miracles and revelations to the faculty which is given to man solely for the purpose of communicating with God.

The apparent contradiction between what we are supposed to believe and what we are

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7) *Ibid.*, p. 7.

obliged to believe, which arises inevitably from the skeptical attitude of the poet, is partially resolved in the structure of the poem, in which the poet simply enumerates all the options opened for him to follow and then, without giving any priority to any of them, gives the task back to God as insoluble by any human means. However, even in the confused atmosphere where no certitude could be attained in the existing order of things, the medieval poets were not satisfied with merely presenting to the readers a juxtaposed set of ideas invested with the mutually negating qualities. Even if it is not possible to profess an absolute truth through their literary works, they seem to have reasoned, the literary domain, in which they chiefly operate, should be able to produce its own truth, the artistic world being a sort of enchanted island once removed from the reality, without being challenged by the scrutiny of the jealous eyes of actuality. Accordingly, the medieval poets did not feel obligated to provide the readers with any convincing evidences in order to prove the veracity of the sources for their narratives, and in some cases, as Chaucer did with the matter of dreams, the poets even ventured to disclaim any vestige of authenticity of the sources they used, thus captivating the whole attentions of the readers within the magic circle of the literary field, as well as freeing their own minds from the burdensome duty of continually appearing in the court of actuality to answer for the charges of untruthfulness. Among the several instances which Mrs. Delany introduces to show how this process of poetic independence worked, I would like to quote the accounts concerning the practices performed by the Scottish poet Robert Henryson in his *Testament of Cresseid* (c. 1492).

Like Chaucer, Henryson defers to his audience's expectation that there is a respectable traditional source for his work, and, like Chaucer, he invents one. But Henryson, confronting an uncertain tradition, claims nothing for either his real source or his invented one. Instead, admitting that no certainty can be derived from any of his literary antecedents, he withdraws the assurance he had momentarily held out to his reader. Indeed the double irony of the "feigned" source is not only that its story was invented by a poet, but the existence of the book itself was invented. Thus Henryson offers, as sources for his work, a well-known poem whose historical truth he deliberately casts into doubt, and another anonymous account that is plainly said to be of dubious historical worth. In doing so Henryson allows poetic invention an independent claim on our attention, even though this claim may not be identical with that of "authoreist" narrative.<sup>8)</sup>

The writer, who most thoroughly believed in the poetic independence and most effectively utilized the blessed condition of freedom, according to the record of Mrs. Delany's scholarly works, is the famous Italian author of the Renaissance, Boccaccio, and his masterpiece, *Decameron*, a collection of amusing stories placed in the sombre setting of plague-stricken Florence, is conspicuously singled out to demonstrate how consciously the

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8) *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

author endeavoured to secure an independent, though unauthenticated, region for his literary activities.

It is not, however, the intention of the medieval writers to cut themselves entirely from reality and to live permanently within the secure enclosure of artistic invention, for art without any bearing on reality could be nothing but a fantasy or a phantom, from which Chaucer implores Jesus Christ to protect him. They realized that Christian truth, even if it were termed as a myth, contained a vital function to perform in the capacity of symbolical or allegorical representation of reality, which, though not a projection of natural phenomenon, is able to suggest the essential nature of the things hidden beneath the facade of the realistic appearances. It is this symbolical or allegorical representation of reality that the medieval poets essayed to pursue by means of constructing the materials gathered from ancient myths, legends, folk lores, and other human inventions, in such a way that they exude significances not easily available to the realistic account of natural phenomena.

Being influenced greatly by the same skeptical tradition as prompted Boccaccio to follow the above-mentioned course, it is an educated guess, according to Mrs. Delany, that Chaucer must have felt a strong temptation to support the idea of the separation of truths and devote himself to artistic truth, denying flatly any relevancy of the problem of realistic foundation. Although in *The House of Fame*, Chaucer was confronted with the situation in which such a posture could be a very convenient course to take in order to make the story more consistent and amusing, it is Mrs. Delany's contention that Chaucer opted to enumerate all the possible alternatives with equal stress and, finally transcending the obligation to choose among them, turned to God for guidance. Thus according to Mrs. Delany, the real structure of *The House of Fame*, which gives the work the unity, coherence and meaning, is this appeal for the divine intervention in the critical moments of desperation when the poet exhausts all the means available to him for the solution of the problem presented to him. Calling this tantalizing posture, which in the strict sense cannot be called faith, and which is rather closer to the gesture of finally acknowledging the impossibility of preserving non-faith, a fideistic transcendence, Mrs. Delany explains that this posture is the basic structure upon which every element of the narrative, large or small, important or trivial, physical or spiritual, evolves, giving the work the fundamental sense of harmony and movement.

In the ensuing chapters, which are consecutively titled, "Dido and Aeneas," "Phantom," "The Limits of Science," and "History and Story," Mrs. Delany sets about to analyze the text in detail in order to show how this organic structure is woven into every corner of the story. I think it would not be necessary to introduce all the pertinent points Mrs. Delany made in her critical works to impress the reader with the logical fitness of her arguments,

especially because the structural principle she upholds is that every portion of the narrative is composed of the same texture as the every other portion of the narrative, enabling it to represent the whole without losing much of the meaning of the narrative. The story of Dido and Aeneas, being most familiar to us among the descriptions of several incidents which come across the narrator on his visionary journey, seems to be the most convenient part of the narrative for us to deal with to examine what exactly this fideistic transcendence means in terms of artistic construction.

In Book I of *The House of Fame*, the narrator, wandering through the visionary world of the medieval romance, comes upon the magnificent temple of Venus standing in an unknown land, and entering the edifice, he finds no living person around and instead is attracted to the drawings on the wall of the interior showing the famous love story of the Carthaginian queen, Dido, and the founder of the Roman Empire, Aeneas. Curiously enough, in spite of the lengthy account of the amorous dealings between the well-known personalities, the images of the hero and the heroine are blurred so as not to allow us to see them clearly as a unified and sharply defined characters. Mrs. Delany regards this effect of the characterization as being carefully contrived by the author in order to express his fideistic attitude toward tradition and reality, stating that Dido and Aeneas are respectively composed of two radically divergent interpretations concerning their moral characters: one viewpoint based on Virgil's classic epic, *Aeneid*, and the other interpretation drawn from Ovid's "Epistle of Dido." In Virgil's account, Aeneas appears as a noble hero who suppresses his personal passion for the sake of fulfilling the god-ordained task of founding a great nation, whereas in Ovid's description, he comes across as a heartless boor who breaks without compunction the holy oath of matrimony in order to achieve his personal ambition. Mrs. Delany contends:

Both the Virgilian and the Ovidian versions of Dido and Aeneas are used in the Narrator's account of what he sees in the Temple of Venus, though the differences between them are not easily reconciled. In the former, for instance, it is plainly the hero's obligation to leave his mistress; in the latter he is blamed as a traitor. For the critic to try to reconcile such differences in the interest of "organic unity" or "unified point of view" would represent a misreading of the poem, as well as a misunderstanding of medieval esthetics. The structural principle of the *House of Fame* is not the unity we tend to value so highly, in which subject matter and plot development provide the major statement of meaning.<sup>9)</sup>

Confronted with the enigmatic figures of the legendary hero and heroine who present two sets of mutually negating visages, the narrator comes out of the temple and searches in the adjacent desert for a person who could enlighten him on this matter, but finding no

9) *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

living person around to help him, he cries out to God for the necessary guidance, which indeed is granted in the form of the eagle sent to the narrator by Jove to let him hear the new tidings from the far country. As is apparent in this brief recount of the closing story of Book I of *The House of Fame*, Chaucer does not choose to take as truth either the Virgilian version of the legend or the Ovidian modification of Virgil's work, but instead lets both versions of the romance stand independently, juxtaposed with equal authority, and abruptly turns to supernatural power to intervene and solve the problem for him.

#### IV. Conclusion

It goes without saying that Mrs. Delany's interpretation has not exhausted all the meanings *The House of Fame* could possibly have, nor Kittredge's outlook can be said to have covered all the intricate features of the colorful scenery this work presents to us. However, there is no doubt that these two interpretations of *The House of Fame* are given with not a little insight and persuasiveness, with a consequence that the combined impression we receive from them tends to produce in us the similar feelings we get when we are confronted with a masterpiece, such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in which the narratives and the structures seem to operate independently but are in reality intricately and vitally connected. Kittredge and Mrs. Delany appear to clash on several points: whereas Kittredge regards Chaucer as a faithful follower of medieval convention of love vision, Mrs. Delany is determined to place him in the camp of the skeptical tradition: a personal allegory which, although in a different context from what was suggested by Kittredge, is the main ingredient in Mrs. Delany's critical approach, is an anathema in Kittredge's criticism. However, as in the case of a man, to whom a literary work is often likened, and in whom body and spirit are constantly at war with each other, these conflicting views and interpretations are curiously combined in our total appreciation of *The House of Fame* so that, instead of giving us double visions, they lead us to a single, unified sense of the work such as we perceive when we chat with a friendly living personality.

#### V. Reference Books

1. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* ed. by F. N. Robinson (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1957)
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3. John Speirs: *Chaucer the Maker* (Faber and Faber, 3 Queen Square, London, 1964)
4. *Geoffrey Chaucer*, Penguin Critical Anthologies ed. by J. A. Burrow (Penguin Books Ltd. Middle-

- sex, England, 1969)
5. George Lyman Kittredge: *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1915)
  6. Sheila Delany: *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972)