

THE IDEA OF CULTURAL CONTINUITY
IN G. CHAUCER'S *HOUSE OF FAME*

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In Chaucer's description of the hall of Fame, we notice a series of figures representing famous ancient authors, most of them writing in Latin. They are shown as titanic, Atlas-like figures standing on columns, and bearing on their shoulders the great weight of the subject matter which they deal with in their work. For example the "Ebrayke Josephus", that is Josephus Flavius, the author of the *History of the Jewish War*, is shown standing on a pillar made of lead and iron and he bears on his shoulders "the fame of the Jewrye", i.e. the fame of the Jewish people. This burden, however, is so heavy that he needs seven other, unidentified figures to help him cope with it. The fame of the ancient city of Troy is supported by five figures besides "the great Homer", namely Dares and Dictys, Guido delle Colonne, Lollius, and Geoffrey of Monmouth, with Homer being considered, in spite of his "greatness", rather inadequate because he, allegedly, sided too much with the Greeks in the portrayal of their conflict with the Trojans, and indulged in literary fiction instead of reporting. They all are standing apparently on one pillar made of iron, whereas Ovid, "the clerk of Venus", is standing on a copper column, copper being the metal of Venus. The Latin poet Statius is shown, as the author of the poems *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, to carry on his shoulders the fame of Thebes, and also that of the "cruelle Achilles" (cf. Phillips – Havely 1997: 184-187).

The passage described above seems to be a good illustration of the medieval concept of authorship. We should first mention here the tendency to see the medieval authors as essentially anonymous. As has been put by J.A. Burrow (1982: 36):

Many of the writings are formally anonymous, in the simplest sense – the name of the author has been lost ... and even where the name of the author is

known, we may think of his work as anonymous in a deeper sense. The authors of this period, we believe, rarely talk about themselves, and their works are most often unmarked by any distinctive personality. Their subjects are traditional, their styles conventional. Like medieval sculpture and architecture, in fact, medieval literature is supposed to be public, impersonal, monumental.

We seem to have to do here with a stereotype that contrasts the collective, impersonal, and traditional nature of the Middle Ages with the individualistic, often egocentric, or even egomaniac, experimental and, at least ostensibly, innovative character of the modern, or modernist writing. The post-modernist literature would, interestingly enough, with its explicitly eclectic nature, and its programmatic distrust towards the grand project of revolutionising culture, veer more towards the supposedly medieval anonymity.

This collectivist stereotype of medieval authorship has actually been questioned by E.R. Curtius, who claims that in the Middle Ages we often have to do with the opposite phenomenon, namely the writer's "unadulterated pride of authorship" (Curtius 1990: 517). The "collectivist" vision of the Middle Ages is clearly a myth that, even though it has some real foundation, led to many misunderstandings and anachronistic interpretations, for instance, G.G. Coulton in his *Medieval panorama* claims that it was the study of medieval architecture that led William Morris to embrace the ideas of socialism (1976: 571).

We should distinguish now between the situation of the writer's talking, or choosing to be silent, on the subject of his own authorship, and the writer's dealing with somebody else's authorship. In the latter case we can encounter a great variety of attitudes, ranging from a complete neglect of the author's person to a veritable cult of the author. The whole matter seems to be neatly summarised in the following passage from St Bonaventure, who talks about the four *modi faciendi librum* ('ways of making a book'):

There are four ways of making a book. Sometimes a man writes others' words, adding nothing and changing nothing; and is simply called a scribe [*scriptor*]. Sometimes a man writes others' words, putting together passages which are not his own; and he is called a compiler [*compilator*]. Sometimes a man writes both others' word and his own, but with the others' words in prime place and his own added only for purposes of clarification; and he is called not an author but a commentator [*commentator*]. Sometimes a man writes both his own words and others', but with his own in prime place and others' added only for purpose of confirmation; and he should be called an author [*auctor*] (cf. Burrow 1982: 29-30).

What strikes the modern reader in this classification is, as J.A. Burrow (1982: 30) rightly emphasises, the conceptual continuum between the mere scribe and the original author:

Perhaps Bonaventure should have added the *translator*; but otherwise his scheme seems satisfyingly complete. One notices, however, that he does not place the *auctor*, as the logic of the scheme might suggest, at the opposite extreme from the *scriptor* or scribe; for even the *auctor* does not, as Bonaventure describes him, write only his own words.

Indeed, it may seem that the function of the translator does not have to be added to Bonaventure's scheme because what connects all four categories of writers, i.e. *scriptor*, *compilator*, *commentator*, and *auctor*, is that their activity is, in one form or another and in greater or lesser degree, intertextual, the job of the translator being intertextual par excellence.¹ In other words, according to Bonaventure one is a writer always with respect to somebody else's text towards which one may assume a rather humble attitude, similar to that of a *scriptor*, or a rather masterful one, like that of an *auctor*. Even, however, the humble scribe is not necessarily completely passive in relation to the text he deals with, he may have had, and usually did have, a margin of interpretative freedom in the process of copying, it is well known that that medieval manuscripts of one and the same text normally differ from each other in many, usually small, but often important details. Also the *auctor* is not so masterful as to avoid relying on other people's texts to provide a solid foundation for his own ideas.

This brings us back to the discussed fragment of Chaucer's *House of Fame*. In this poem the persons of the mentioned authors seem to be treated with a lot of respect, there is no cloud of anonymity hanging over them, and yet their importance is described as strictly relational, not, however, with respect to other writers' texts but rather to their subject matter. This is the way C.S. Lewis in his *Discarded Image* handles the matter:

The most surprising thing in the *House of Fame* is that the poets (with one historian) are present not because they are famous but to support the fame of their subjects. Josephus in that House 'bar upon his shuldres hye' the fame of Jewry (III, 1435-1436); Homer, with many such colleagues as Dares and Guido, that of Troy (1455-1480); Virgil, that of Aeneas (1485). The medievals were, indeed, fully conscious (Dante especially) that poets not only gave but also won fame. But in the last resort it is the fame they give – the fame of Aeneas, not of Virgil – that really matters. That Edward King should now be remembered at all only because he gave occasion to *Lycidas* would perhaps have seemed to them a strange inversion. If Milton had been

¹ It seems that the category of translation comes close, from a medieval point of view, to that of commentary: "Translation is interpretation, a kind of commentary, as medieval scholars knew full well." (Minnis – Scott – Wallace 1988: xiii).

by their standards a successful poet he would now be remembered for 'bearing up' the fame of Edward King (Lewis 1964: 213).

Perhaps Chaucer's concept of authorship, with its attempt to strike a balance between the author and what he writes about, marks a transition period that could be placed between the times when the subject matter appeared so important that it eclipsed the person of the author, which resulted in his anonymity, and the modern epoch when the subject matter is thought of only as a raw material that serves the author to build the house of his fame. C.S. Lewis suggests that modern poets are conscious of little else than their status (cf. Lewis 1964: 214).

This situation probably must have led to a violent reaction embodied in Roland Barthes's influential essay "The death of the author" where he makes a plea for scaling down what he perceives as the inflated position of the author, and, interestingly enough, calls such a "deflated author" a scriptor, which sounds like an allusion to and a conscious reversal of St Bonaventure's hierarchy of "book-makers", in which the *scriptor* was given the lowest place in relation to the *auctor*:

[T]he modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*. ... Having buried the Author, the modern scriptor can thus no longer believe, as according to the pathetic view of his predecessors, that this hand is too slow for his thought or passion and that consequently, making a law of necessity, he must emphasise this delay and indefinitely 'polish' his form. For him, on the contrary, the hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin – or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins (Barthes 1989: 116).

Surely St Bonaventure's *scriptor* could also be described as an inscribing hand "cut off from any voice" and one that neither precedes or exceeds the writing. On the hand, it can hardly be said that he "traces a field without origin" because, even if his writing was indeed deeply "unoriginal", it had its origin in the "others' words", i.e. in the text it was supposed to serve by means of a faithful reproduction. Barthes's gesture of "cutting off" the hand from the voice seems to call into being a rather monstrous creature that, as C.S. Lewis could have said, neither gives fame, nor wins it, i.e. neither controls the text nor is controlled by it. The medieval concept of the authority of the text or the subject matter, on the one hand, and the authority of the author, on the other, is replaced in Barthes by the concept of the authority of what he calls "language itself", which seems to be a very mysterious, mystical notion, not necessarily com-

pletely "unmedieval", but certainly lying beyond the scope of Bonaventure's classification.² In Chaucer's vision in *The House of Fame*, the poet appears also as neither an arrogant Author, nor a liberated scriptor in Barthesian sense of the word, but rather as somebody who is more aware of his responsibilities than of his possibilities, as a servant, albeit of a very noble kind, rather than a master.

Also Robert Graves in his *White Goddess* asks the question "does poetry necessarily have to be original?", and proceeds to claim that the classical, Apollonian, or "golden age" poetry, such as the Latin poetry of the time of emperor Augustus, the French poetry of the age of Louis XIV, or the English literature of the time of Queen Anne, is never original because it serves as a sign of political stability based on a military power so that it expects a full support for the existing political regime, and creates a situation in which an original poet would have to be either disloyal towards the state or become a tramp (Graves 2000: 519). In Graves's interpretation clearly to be "original" means to be boldly untraditional, experimental and individualistic. From this point of view Chaucer's conception in *The House of Fame* certainly can hardly be read as a plea for originality, on the contrary Chaucer emphasises the dignity of traditional motifs and topics, but, on the other hand, neither does he promote a truly Apollonian kind of poetry, at least in Graves's sense of the word. This is an interesting question because *Book 3* of *The House of Fame* containing the vision of the House of Fame and the House of Rumour is expressly dedicated to Apollo:

O god of science and of lyght –	<i>learning</i>
Apollo, thurgh thy grete myght	<i>with your</i>
This lytel laste boke thou gye!	<i>direct</i>
Nat that I wilne for maistrye	<i>wish</i>
Here art poetical be shewed –	
But, for the rhyme ys lyght and lewed,	<i>slight and unskilful</i>
Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,	
Though some vers fayle in a syllable –	
And that I do no diligence	
To shew craft, but o sentence.	<i>skill, sense</i>

vv. 1091-1100 (Phillips – Havelly 1997: 170)

This invocation is well known to be an imitation of a similar invocation to Apollo that opens Dante's *Paradiso*, which, just like Chaucer's *Book 3* of *The House of Fame*, is the third part of the Italian poet's *Divine Comedy*. On the

² It is true that Barthes also talks about the importance of the "reader" but his concept of the "reader" is very abstract and unhistorical: "The reader is without history, biography, psychology." (cf. Barthes 1989: 118).

other hand, it has been emphasised by David Wallace, that Dante, as befits a classical poet, shows at this point a great self-assurance, while Chaucer's tone is tentative and self-deprecatory: "Heard against the sonorous background of Dante's magisterial *terzine*, Chaucer's English couplets amount to little more than a nervous squeak." (Boitani – Mann 1986: 23).

The fact that Chaucer does not extol the glory of the 14th c. England, or of the cultural formation he belonged to is not the most important here, after all the French neo-classical writers, or the English poets of the Augustan Age were also usually far from enthusiasm concerning the state of their respective countries. More important appears here the circumstance that Chaucer ostensibly does not see himself as a follower of the greater and lesser poets and writers he sees standing on the columns in *The House of Fame*. When asked directly, Chaucer's dreamer denies having any pretensions to fame:

With that y gan aboute wende,	<i>turn round</i>
For oon that stooode ryght at my bake,	
Me thought, goodely to me spake	<i>politely</i>
And seyde: 'Frende, what is thy name ?	
Artow come hider to han fame ?'	
'Nay, forsoothe, frende,' quod y,	<i>indeed</i>
'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,	<i>thanks very much</i>
For no such cause, by my hede !	<i>I swear</i>
...	
'But what doost thou here thenne ?' quod he.	
Quod y: 'That wol y tellen the,	
The cause why y stonde here:	
Some newe tydinges for to lere –	<i>to learn</i>
Some newe thinge – y not what –	<i>I know not</i>
Tydynges, other this or that,	
Of love, or suche thynges glade.	

vv. 1868-1875, 1883-1889 (Phillips – Havely 1997: 201-202)

This longing for "some newe tydinges ... of love, or suche thynges glade" (vv. 1886-1889) may sound a little childish and irresponsible, it is based on a consistent refusal to treat oneself quite seriously, while being, at the same time, almost obsessively preoccupied with oneself and with examining the relationship between the poet's work and the poet himself. Chaucer never forgets about himself in his poetry, although he consistently gives us a vision of himself as a slightly ridiculous and fundamentally passive figure lurking on the sidelines of the represented world. Such is the situation beginning with his first great poem *The Book of the Duchess*, where he, or rather his persona, appears as a slightly obtuse and perhaps willingly insensitive witness to the Black Knight's tragedy (cf. Spearing 1976: 66), through his clumsy appearance in *The Legend of Good*

Women where he is upbraided by the God of Love for his "cool wit", and for spreading heresies that make people "withdraw from love" (cf. *The Legend of Good Women*, vv. 256-258 in: Phillips – Havely 1997: 322), to his last crowning achievement *The Canterbury Tales*, where he appears as one of the pilgrims and he tells his tale of *Sir Thopas* so incompetently that he is rudely interrupted by the Host, and accused of "lewednesse", that is ignorance (cf. Fragment VII, vv. 2109-2111 in Benson 1987: 216).

There may be a method in this simultaneous self-emphasis and self-erasure, a characteristically medieval, or rather late medieval, way of overcoming and retaining one's anonymity. Emile Male describes in the following way the medieval sense of temporal symmetry:

Symmetry was regarded as the expression of a mysterious inner harmony. Craftsmen opposed the twelve patriarchs and twelve prophets of the Ancient Law to the twelve apostles of the New, and the four major prophets to the four evangelists. A window in the south transept at Chartres shows – with audacious symbolism – the four prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Jeremiah bearing on their shoulders the four evangelists, St. Matthew, St. John, St. Mark, St. Luke. In this way the artist would tell us that although the evangelists rest upon the prophets, yet from their spiritual vantage-ground they have a wider outlook (Male 1961: 9).

Male is clearly referring here to the well known image of "dwarfs on the shoulders of giants", which is often invoked to illustrate the way the medieval people felt in relation to the ancients, and which S.T. Coleridge expressed by saying that "The dwarf sees farther than the giant, when he has the giant's shoulder to mount on." (Cohen 1960: 116). This symbolical representation is indeed audacious because it shows the four evangelists in a dwarf-like, or child-like posture, with their position in relation to the Old Testament prophets being a curious conceptual mixture of superiority and inferiority, as it is based on the idea of a progressive continuation and of a rather one-sided dependence.

The above situation may also easily remind us of the columns in Chaucer's *House of Fame*, here it is, for example, Isaiah that bears up St Matthew, there it was Virgil who bore up Aeneas. This similarity cannot be of course pressed too far, Isaiah supports St Matthew by preceding him and preparing the ground for him, while Virgil carries Aeneas on his shoulders, as somebody who came after Aeneas and prevented the memory of his name from dying out among people. In both cases, however, we have to do with the idea of mediation and without which the transmission of fame, in the latter case, and of gospel, meaning exactly "good tidings" about love, in the former case, would be impossible.

The image of carrying somebody on one's shoulders appears also in *Book I* of *The House of Fame*, where we have the story of Dido and Aeneas told, by means of which Chaucer introduces the central theme of deception, and unfair-

ness of the dictates of Fortune or Fame. We find there namely the motif of Aeneas carrying on his shoulders his father Anchises, who took away from the burning Troy the ancestral images of gods (cf. *The House of Fame*, vv. 168-172 in Phillips – Havelly 1997: 133), of “goddesses of the londe”. Here we have to do, just as in the House of Fame itself, with a member of a younger generation carrying somebody from an older one, this time, however, Aeneas’s gesture is not meant to support the fame or reputation of Anchises, it is rather a deed that gives fame and reputation to the one who supports, that is to Aeneas.

We should ask ourselves perhaps why Chaucer tells the story of Dido and Aeneas as a kind of introduction to his poem. The fact that it introduces the theme of deception and injustice seems only a part of the answer. We should mention here that Virgil’s *Aeneid* contains a vision of Fame represented as a highly destructive, female demon, who brings to Jove the news about the love affair of Dido and Aeneas provoking thus the anger of the Father of gods, and who raves in triumph at the sight of the unhappy Dido’s suicide, a vision that might well be an inspiration for Chaucer:

Incontinent Fame sped through the great cities of Libya – Fame, swiftest created of evil things. Nurtured by motion, at every step she gathers strength, – timorous and small at birth; but soon she towers to the stars, and hides her head within the clouds. ... By night she flits shrieking through the dusk betwixt sky and earth, nor declines her eyes in gentle sleep: by day she sits sentinel on the summit of a roof or stately tower, and affrights great cities, – lover of the false and evil no less than herald of truth! (Virgil 1995: 57-58).

Piero Boitani rightly stresses the bookishness of Chaucer’s style of writing:

Literature is Chaucer’s inspiration. A book is at the beginning and end of each of his poems until he starts composing the *Canterbury Tales*. ... In the *House of Fame*, he dreams a book as a pictorial experience (the ‘Aeneid’ on the walls of the temple of Venus), flies, thinking of books, through the air, and encounters in the Palace of Fame the writers of books themselves (Boitani 1986: 40-41).

In his flight to the Palace of Fame Chaucer, or rather the dreamer, remotely resembles Aeneas himself, after all he, a native of London, that is of Troynovant, the New Troy, is carried to the Palace of Fame by an eagle, the bird of Jove.³ A similar eagle appears in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as the bird who car-

³ Chaucer’s eagle in *The House of Fame* says expressly that he was sent by Jove: And therefore Joves, thorgh hys grace,
Wol that I bere the to a place
Which that hight the House of Fame,
(Book 2, vv. 661-63).

ries the poet towards a zone of heavenly fire, that is a proper element for Jove or Jupiter (cf. *Purgatorio IX*, vv. 19-33, in Dante Alighieri 1993: 234-235). It is the same Jove who also guided Aeneas on his way to Italy, and who sent his winged son Mercury to tell Aeneas in a dream that he should abandon Dido and Carthage, and follow his destiny and go to Italy where a glorious future lies in wait for himself and his progeny (cf. Virgil 1995: 58-59). Aeneas is, at the same time, a son of Venus, the goddess of love, and is occasionally helped by his heavenly mother, while Chaucer sees himself as servant, albeit unworthy, of love, who, in the *Legend of Good Women*, is shown as having a direct contact with the God of Love, who also makes frequent use of the stories and motifs found in the works of the “clerk of Venus” that is Ovid. In this context, it becomes more understandable why Chaucer returns so often to the story of Dido and Aeneas, invariably siding with the sufferings of Dido, and condemning Aeneas’s duplicity (“untrouthe”) (cf. v. 384, in Phillips – Havelly 1997: 141).

This line of interpretation receives some additional support from D.R. Howard’s speculations according to which *The House of Fame* echoes, in many ways, Chaucer’s personal experience connected with his journeys to Paris and Milan in the capacity of somebody like the young king Richard II’s matchmaker, trying to arrange a politically advantageous marriage with the royal house of France, or with the Visconti family ruling over Milan. Both missions failed because the English court decided to accept, in 1379, the Pope Urban VI’s plan for Richard II to marry Anne of Bohemia from the German and Bohemian House of Luxembourg. The mysterious “man of greet auctoritee” who appears at the very end of the poem apparently about to deliver an important piece of news would be thus a Papal envoy bringing the news about the end of the prospects for the Visconti marriage:

[Professor Benson] thinks that in 1379 Chaucer had the poem on hand, with a space at the end for the “love-tidings,” when suddenly, just before the tenth of December, the disappointing news arrived – especially disappointing to Chaucer because he had traveled far and worked hard to promote the Visconti alliance (Howard 1987: 258).

If this theory is correct, it would make Chaucer appear as a kind of anti-Aeneas, or rather an advocate of an Italian Dido, Caterina Visconti, abandoned by the English Aeneas, i.e. Richard II, in favour of Anne of Bohemia, an appropriate figure in a Virgilian context because she was a daughter of Charles IV, the King of Bohemia, and the Holy Roman Emperor. To marry her at the behest of the Pope was indeed somewhat similar to the gesture of Aeneas choosing, at the behest of Jove, his “holy father”, to accomplish his mission to become the forefather of the Romans and the husband of Lavinia, the daughter of Latinus, the king of the area where Rome was to be founded. Chaucer’s appar-

ent reluctance to accept this marriage, analogical to Virgil's making his readers sympathise with the jilted Dido, would be thus a risky act of defiance against the will of the sovereign, but, at the same time, an elaborate compliment placing the adolescent English king on a par with Aeneas, a great hero of the Mediterranean civilisation.

Remarkable is here also the fact that the story of Aeneas is basically that of a *translatio imperii* 'the moving of the empire' from Troy to Rome. Aeneas is the one who, while upholding the fame of Troy, transfers his allegiance to a different land, and while appearing to love Dido, eventually marries another woman. Clearly his transferring, or translating is connected with an element of betrayal. Chaucer, whom the contemporary French poet Eustache Deschamps called a *grant translateur* 'a great translator' (cf. Wallace 1986: 19), demonstrated an even more complicated attitude towards the tradition from which his poetry is derived. He is a mock Aeneas and a mock Dante who ineptly tries to imitate his betters:

So from yet another serious Dantean starting-point, Chaucer's narrative takes another turn for the comic: the would-be poet is presented as one who dangles, fat and hapless, from the claws of a big, boring bird (Boitani – Mann 1986: 24).

And yet, in a sense, Chaucer, because of his constant "self-parodying" (Wallace 1986: 24) and through his consistent refusal to follow the way of what Matthew Arnold famously called "high-seriousness" (cf. Arnold 1975: 260-285), manages, at least in some respects, to soar higher than either Virgil or Dante. Chaucer, for example, has a prophetic vision of a media chaos, a great confusion of truth and falsehood, in his description of the House of Rumour:

And whan that was ful yspronge And woxen more on every tonge Than ever hit was, and went anon Up to a wyndowe out to goon – Or, but hit myght oute there pace, Hyt gan out crepe at some crevace And flygh forth faste, for the nones ...	<i>spread everywhere amplified by</i>
Thus saugh I fals and sothe compouned Togeder fle for oo tydyng. vv. 2081-2087, 2108-2109	<i>combined as one story</i> (Phillips – Havelly 1997: 210-211)

This vision is often treated as a premonition of the motley crowd of the characters that can be found in *The Canterbury Tales* with each of them representing his or her conception of the truth. These conceptions often contradict each other but the poet simply lets them express themselves. It is his complex attitude to-

wards the tradition that enables him to assume this objective stance, the position of an observer who refuses to undertake any futile attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff. Such an attitude, however, inevitably awakes a hunger for an authoritarian voice that would indeed, as in the Gospel according to St Matthew (25:32) tell the goats from the sheep. Chaucer's project is flexible enough to include such a voice, but it is a voice that appears only to put an end to the poet's voice. From this point of view, Chaucer's famous ending of *The House of Fame*:

Attelast, y saugh a man
Whiche that y nat ne kan,
But he semed for to be
A man of grete auctorite ...
vv. 2155-2158 (Phillips – Havelly 1997: 213)

is quite well motivated, and the poem's being unfinished in this way appears to be perhaps the only way in which it could be logically finished.

To summarise the various threads of interpretation presented above, I would like to emphasise my impression that *The House of Fame* bears witness to Chaucer's struggle to find some place, to use T.S. Eliot's language, for his individual talent in the mainstream of the Western and Mediterranean tradition. Being an Englishman, that is a representative of the new Europe, lacking the undoubted classical pedigree of the Romance nations, he was perhaps bound to assume a slightly, or, at times quite heavily, ironical posture towards the classical and Italian tradition, and to emphasise what he called "sentence", i.e. sense, at the expense of "craft", i.e. the poetical form (see *The House of Fame*, vv. 1099-1100, as quoted above), or, in other words, to favour a rather pedestrian and sceptical point of view. In doing this he anticipated Eliot's postulate of an active attitude towards the heritage of the past: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (Eliot 1975: 294-295). At the same time, Chaucer makes Eliot's theorising less ponderous in opting for a rather playful attitude towards the tradition, which seems a far cry from Eliot's judgement: "Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (Eliot 1975: 294). In fact, however, this playfulness is attained at the price of hard, intellectual labour the objective of which was to strike a balance between the obligations towards the past and the requirements of the present time, and, above all, to justify his dabbling with literature. D.R. Howard claims that in *The House of Fame*:

[Chaucer] was asking himself what literature was made of because he was looking for something out of which to make a literary work, and these concerns came into the fabric of the poem until they became in some manner a theory of literature (Howard 1987: 251).

The question of tradition is only one aspect, though a very important one, of this "theory of literature". Of course it may be objected that Chaucer did not know the notion of literature, at least not in our sense of the word, and yet his notion of "tydynges" comes very close to that of modern "fiction", although it can also be interpreted as "news". He defines it as "truth and falsehood combined":

Bothe of feire speche and chidynges,
And of fals and soth compunded.
vv. 1028-1029 (Phillips – Haveley 1997: 167)

Literature is thus a mixture of truth and falsehood produced under a high pressure of time, the old word for time, i.e. "tide", being the basis of the word "tiding", and represents generally a distorted, exaggerated, and usually sensationalist vision of the reality, symbolised in the poem by the walls of the House of Fame being made of the beryl, which has the properties of a magnifying glass:

Upon these walles of berile
That shoone ful lyghter than a glas
And made wel more than hit was
To semen every thinge ywis,
vv. 1288-1291 (Phillips – Haveley 1997: 179)

This vision, in itself rather unreliable though no doubt sometimes attractive, is subject to the utterly capricious and unpredictable decrees of the goddess Fame, who bears, of course, a strong resemblance to figure representing Fortune. To achieve a lasting value in this mad world of "tidings" it becomes a dire necessity to establish a meaningful relationship with tradition, just like the authors shown by Chaucer in the hall of Fame, and of course the author of *The House of Fame* himself. The only alternative is to pose oneself as a "man of great authority", but this is exactly the option presented as an element that makes the continuation of the poem impossible. The symbol of the author's attitude becomes the mythical figure of Aeneas, a traveller and a fugitive, faithful, however, to his calling and destiny.

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