Acerca de Chaucer's *House of fame*

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Como dijera el Guerra —el bueno, claro— siempre ocurre lo mismo y siempre, por mucho que de ello sepamos, ha de seguir ocurriendo. Por ello, una cosa parece el avento de la imaginación y del interés sano y entusiasta por participar en un volumen laudatorio en honor de un compañero y, sin embargo, amigo, y otra muy diferente harina de otro costal es cuando, a solas y en el silencio de una música clásica de fondo, se trata de enjaretar unas hojas a vuela pluma con la responsabilidad de hacer frente a este reto gozoso de acompañar una vez más en charla amena y comunicativa a un amigo, a un colega, a un maestro.

No creo sino que tengo por muy cierto que tú, Feliciano, encarnas en un acusado grado esas tres características de amistad, compañerismo y magisterio universitario. Mientras transcribo estas notas me asalta el recuerdo de la entrevista que me hiciste, con Steepy de testigo, cuando entré en el otrora Colegio Universitario que tan acertadamente supiste recalar en nuestra actual Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Desde aquel mismo momento entreví la suerte que suponía el contacto humano y científico contigo. El tiempo, ese egregio notario público inexorablemente fiel, ha testificado que aquella intuición era válida.

La elección de un tema para esta modesta aportación a un número extraordinario de **Alfinje**, revista de la Sección de Filología de nuestra Facultad y que tú tan bien conoces al haber figurado como el Director de su Comité de Redacción por algunos años, me ha resultado fácil y difícil al mismo tiempo. Fácil, por cuanto los campos de tu interés científico son variados y múltiples: la lingüística, la lengua, la enseñanza de los idiomas, la literatura, el arte, lo medieval, y un gran etc. Por consiguiente no es muy dificultosa la elección que pueda interesarte. Al seleccionar un autor inglés del siglo catorce, Geoffrey Chaucer, puntero en las artes literarias y al que han tildado de magnífico lingüista como para denominarle «padre de la lengua inglesa» entiendo reunir una serie de elementos que propicien tu entretenimiento al leer este artículo, que, a la postre, es uno de los dos objetivos que pretendo alcanzar y que se corresponden con la tradición medieval de enseñar mientras se pasa bien, en palabras del mismo Chaucer:

«Of usage, what for lust & what for lore,
On bokis rede I ofte, as I yow tolde.»[1]

Difícil, en cambio, se presenta la tarea de atinar con la seriedad, el rigor y la profundidad que el tema requiere ya que tu conocimiento blasona de vasto y erudito. Consecuentemente, mucho me tendré que esmerar para llegar a retener tu atención. Pues aquí se sitúa el segundo de los objetivos marcados, esto es, el 'lore' medieval inglés, es decir, el entendimiento, el aprendizaje, la comprensión. Espero y confío que esta modesta contribución no sólo sirva para tu deleite sino también para el incremento de tu conocimiento científico, literario y humano. Y lo digo convencido de que en el estadío en el que te hallas es más fácil para ti aprender que para muchos de los que todavía intentamos enseñar. Creo que era Séneca, nuestro insigne cordobés, aunque también sea clásico y latino, quien dijo: «el que es demasiado viejo para aprender es demasiado viejo para enseñar». Me consta que tú todavía sigues enseñando y también aprendiendo.

Así pues, me gustaría presentar este artículo, a guisa de justa medieval, como un reto. Por mi parte, te aseguro que no falta un ápice de esfuerzo denodado, de rigurosa comprobación científica, de atenta labor crítica. En cuanto a ti, conociendo tu elegancia deportiva (me refiero a tu gusto por el 'fair play') y tu insaciable curiosidad intelectual estoy seguro que no dudarás en recoger el guante. Así, de igual manera que alguna moderna teoría crítica literaria llega hasta afirmar que ningún texto es completo sin la colaboración del lector cuya misión consiste en completar, perfeccionar y 'realizar' —en el sentido inglés del término— dicho texto. Así este artículo estará inacabado e imperfecto sin tu comentario —vía pluma o vía oral que, a la postre, este segundo medio se sitúa en el origen de toda literatura—.

El título del artículo nos dice que vamos a comentar una de las obras menores y primeras de Geoffrey Chaucer, su *House of Fame*, poema no traducido al español todavía (se está en ello) y de difícil interpretación. Consta de tres libros, el primero se compone de 508 versos octosílabos que riman de dos en dos, el segundo de 589 y el tercero y último de 1466 y, no obstante, el poema, según la crítica, está inacabado. Si su datación aparece incierta y aún por determinar, entre 1374 y 1385 según los autores, su interpretación nos ofrece un mayor grado de dificultad sin que haya unanimidad en la misma entre los especialistas.

Se cree que esta obra fue compuesta mientras el poeta trabajaba en Londres como controlador de aduanas y, quizás, su objetivo principal consistiera en tratar de remediar el tedio y la rutina que le proporcionaba dicho trabajo. De aquí que la obra destaque por su composición formal, sin una clara temática preponderante aún con profusión de tópicos clásicos. El poema muestra a todas luces un gran avance en el dominio de la métrica y del estilo, así como el inicio de su influencia italiana. El autor emplea como mecanismo principal el diseño de la 'dream-vision', recurso retórico tan habitual en la literatura de la Edad Media y que sin duda nos ofrece un Chaucer bibliófilo, lector empedernido de autores clásicos y contemporáneos a él. Robert M. Jordan considera este Poema como el inicio de la poética Chauceriana donde el autor indaga en la naturaleza de la escritura —entiéndase literatura— en cuanto actividad humana. En sus propias palabras: «**The** *House*

[1] CHAUCER, Geoffrey, *The Parliament of Fowls*, lines 15-16.

of Fame **stands out among the dream visions in its preoccupation with questions about the validity of language and the nature of poetic composition**»[2]

En todo caso para el propósito que aquí nos concierne, el homenajear a un intelectual inquieto, estimo que la obra elegida es la adecuada aunque sólo sea por lo apuntado por Robinson en la edición de las obras completas de nuestro poeta y que a continuación cito: «**And, as a whole, it** (this Poem) **gives a lively impression of the intellectual interests of Chaucer and his contemporaries**».[3]

Este artículo queda configurado en tres partes, a la usanza augusta, como casi todas las cosas que pueden fragmentarse, y que se corresponden con los tres idiomas que más usualmente utilizamos. Esta primera, a guisa de introducción, en español, nuestra lengua materna en la que tu dominio y gusto tanto excede. La segunda parte consiste en cuestionarse el papel de la lectura de un autor medieval como Chaucer a la luz de nuestra sociedad moderna super tecnificada. Esta parte la escribiré en francés por aquello de su famoso «esprit» nacional irónico y agudo del que tan sobrado andas tú[4]. En la tercera y última parte me referiré más concretamente a la obra en cuestión comentándola más detenidamente en inglés, lengua cuya utilidad actual no resta un ápice a su maravilloso poder de expresividad y del que tú tanto te deleitas en tus lecturas.

Deuxième partie

Nous pouvons commencer donc, par nous poser la suivante question: Lit-on encore Chaucer au XXème siècle?[5]

Il faut avouer que oui. Mais là n'est pas le vrai débat. Il ne s'agit de savoir si Chaucer est encore lu, mais s'il mérite toujours d'être lu, si l'aliment spirituel —c'est là où se trouve le rôle du poète— qu'il proposait aux anglais du XIV siècle a conservé sa vertu.

La réponse, pour moi, est évidente. Geoffrey Chaucer, témoin privilégié de l'Homme demeure actuel de siècle en siècle et plus que jamais peut-être dans une époque comme la nôtre qui ressemble beaucoup à celle dont il fut le spectateur et le juge.

Je crois que la science n'a de valeur que dans la mesure où nous en faisons l'instrument d'une conversion intérieure.

Chez Chaucer il y a je ne sais quel aspect secret et inattendu qui nous touche profondement: le témoignage et l'appel d'un homme qui parle à des hommes. La sagesse Chaucerienne a quelque chose de rustique, d'autentique et d'artisanal.

L'homme du XXème siècle n'est pas, spirituellement parlant, différent de l'homme des siècles passés: seulement il dispose des moyens plus nombreux et plus efficaces pour se detourner de lui-même. Mais la faute est en lui et non dans les choses qui lui font mal: l'idole n'est pas responsable de l'idolatrie. Et le remède est en lui comme le mal. Les biens

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[2] Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, University of California Press. 1987, pp. 23-4.

[3] F.N. Robinson (ed.), *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, OUP (1933), 1957, p. 281.

[4] Es de justicia citar y agradecer aquí el trabajo de corrección del profesor Benito Álvarez González de nuestro propio Departamento quien amablemente ha supervisado mi oxidado francés.

[5] C'est trés interessant de lire le premier chapitre "On Not Reading Chaucer" du livre *The Living Chaucer* écrit par Percy Van Dyke Shelly. Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press. 1940, pp. 1-17.

de la fortune n'ont de pouvoir sur lui que par l'idée trompeuse qu'il s'en fait et par l'affection désordonnée qu'il leur porte. Qu'il purifie son regard et son désir, et les objets extérieurs se mettront à leur place. La lutte n'est pas entre l'homme et les choses, mais à l'interieur de nous mêmes. Ça a l'air d'être Ignacien, mais c'est vrai, tout de même.

L'idolatrie consiste dans la confusion entre l'ordre des moyens et l'ordre des fins. Notre temps nous fournit au moins deux examples surprenants de ce désordre:

* l'abus de l'avoir sur l'être.

* l'obéissance servile à l'opinion se substituant à la libre recherche de la verité.

Voyons de plus près ces deux exemples. Notre civilisation, dans ce qu'elle a d'inédit, est une civilisation des moyens. Le progrès des techniques ouvre pour tout le monde des possibilités inconnues jadis des gens les plus riches de la terre. Il paraît que toute une philosophie est venue s'introduire dans les conquêtes de la science pour nous montrer que cette évolution était en tout positive. Cette croyance signifie que l'accumulation des richesse implique d'une manière nécessaire le perfectionnement de l'être. Mais à quel prix faut-il payer tout cela? Nous devons considérer que l'homme est fait de telle façon que seulement il obtient le bonheur par l'interieur, non dans la possession de choses exterieures. Les possessions exterieures nous menent à une extreme convoitise. A ce propos, Chaucer l'avait déja dit au prologue de son Pardoner's:

«My theme is alwey oon, and evere was -
Radix malorum est cupiditas.»[6]

Pour remarquer l'importance de ce que nous disons par rapport à Chaucer, il me paraît intéressant de citer les suivants mots du Professeur Moseley:

«The background to ***The Pardoner's Prologue*** *and the expectations it might raise in the minds of the audience are quite important in assessing Chaucer's intention.»*

Et un peu plus loin il dira:

«The figure of the Pardoner and the Tale he tells, then, have far-reaching implications. He is a grotesque mirror-image of many things.... His intelligence and artistry are unquestioned, but the service they are in is utterly vicious. Nevertheless, the way in which Chaucer makes the Pardoner self-consciously concerned with the business of art, rhetoric, story-telling and role-playing makes him, more than any other of the pilgrims, the grotesque upside-down reflection of the poet —even to the extent that his role-playing mirrors the role-playing of the persona....And so the final question we are left with concerns not just the validity of fiction and its moral placement; it concerns the nature and status of the poet himself.»[8]

De cette maniére, dans ce compte, Chaucer va beaucoup plus loin de la figure avare et avide du Pardonner essayant de reflechir sur la verité et la nature de son rôle, en tant que poète.

La grande misère de l'homme preocupé par la possession c'est celle de perdre tout souci de son être, c'est pour ça que Chaucer quand il écrit, il vise la nature humaine, son être comme poète, comme homme tout simplement.

Il est vrai qu'à notre époque les conquêtes de la science sont considerées comme la suprême manifestation du génie humain. Mais il en faut se mefier car on peut se trouver

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[6]Vers 45-6.

[7]MOSELEY, C. W. R. D. *Chaucer. The Pardoner's Tale* Penguin Critical Studies (1987), 1989, p. 43.

[8]*Ibidem.*, p. 68.

que l'homme, rendu à sa solitude, a peur de ce temps vide qui coule dans son interieur parce qu'il n'a plus de ressources pour le remplir. Il frappe à sa propre porte et personne ne repond. L'homme tâche de chercher au dehors ce qu'il ne trouve plus en lui-même.

Chaucer, à cause de son genie qui s'avance de son propre temps, fait attention à ce renversement des valeurs —ce déséquilibre entre l'avoir et l'être— dans ce compte que nous venons de commenter, et dans sa *House of Fame* à laquelle nous prêterons une attention spéciale dans notre troisième partie.

Notre societé, peut-être, à cause des moyens de communication —surtout par le ravage de la télévision—, et bien sûr parce que le mimetisme social peut s'inscrire aujourdhui comme une bonne rançon des bienfaits que nous apporte la vie en commun, est fort sensible aux passions sociales. Nous voilà donc dans notre deuxième exemple. Notre époque est l'époque des foules; le nombre fait loi. Ce mal —il est vrai— appartient à tous les temps, mais maintenant il y a une grande docilité des auteurs en ce qui concerne l'opinion publique.

Chaucer —on le verra aprés— vient nous rappeler que la verité et le bien ne dépendent ni du nombre ni du temps: ils s'installent dans la profondeur inaltérable de l'âme où n'atteignent pas les cries de l'opinion.

Présent à notre époque, et témoin de l'éternel, Chaucer reste pour nous un guide privilégié sur la voie étroite qui va de la terre au ciel —alors, il faudrait citer içi le commentaire ironique de Troilus dès la huitième esphère celestiale, fait à la fin de ce grand poème médiévale d'amour qui s'appelle *Troilus and Criseyde*:

«And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
this litel spot of erthe, that with the se
Embraced is, and fully gan despise
This wrecched world, and held al vanite
To respect of the pleyn felicite
That is in hevene above; and at the laste,
Ther he was slayn, his lokyng down he caste.
And in hymself he lough right at the wo
Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste;
And dampned al oure werk that foloweth so
The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste,
And sholden al oure herte on heven caste.»[9]

En tout cas, Chaucer apparaît devant nous comme un guide d'autant plus fraternel qu'il est aussi notre compagnon de chemin —il a bien donné l'exemple dans ses *Canterbury*

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[9]La citation est prie de l'edition de F.N. ROBINSON *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde*, verses 1814 à 1825 dont la traduction à l'espagnol est, selon moi-même, comme suive:

"Y hacia abajo, desde aquel sitio, rápidamente, avistó esta pequeña porción de tierra, abrazada por el mar, y empezó a despreciar completamente este mundo miserable, y a sostener que todo es vanidad con respecto a la auténtica felicidad que está arriba en el cielo; y al final, echó su mirada allí donde había sido asesinado. Y para sí se carcajeó justamente de la pena de aquellos que lloran tan copiosamente por su muerte; y condenó todo nuestro afán en pro de tan ciega lujuria, la cual no puede durar, cuando todo nuestro corazón debe procurar el alcance del cielo".

Troilo y Criseida, Servicio de Publicaciones de Córdoba, Colección *Biblioteca de Estudios de Anglística*, n.º 2, 1985, p. 308.

Tales en se mettant comme un pelegrin de plus— et que, trébuchant à nos cotés, ne cesse jamais de nous montrer la voie.

Third part

This third and final part of this article has to do with a vivid example of what we have been stating along these lines and will be concerned with one of his minor works, *The House of Fame*.

This work has always been regarded as one of Chaucer's most puzzling poems of difficult understanding as it deals, most critics now seem to agree[10], with questions about the validity of language and the nature of literature. It is a kind of writing about writing, i.e. a treatise on poetics.

As it is one of his earlier works, our author is trying to establish the groundwork of his future poetics. Expressed in other terms , I mean that he is an innovator. As Jordan states: «**In the dream visions** (He is also referring to the other works based upon dream visions like *The Book of the Duchess, The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Legend of Good Women*) **Chaucer explored a range of generic forms and tonal registers that his vernacular had never before attempted**»[11].

Nowadays, there is an increasing and widespread interest directed towards the study of writing as a human activity, especially on the part of those devoted to Stylistics and, on these lines, the work we are dealing with here suggests a great thought provoking attention. But, our concern now is to analyze and discover how Chaucer, in this work, witnesses and reacts against these two characteristics of our modern society: the lust for 'having' over 'being', and a blind obedience to common opinion against one's own criteria.

The *House of Fame* is a rhetorical composition, whose aim is not to describe direct truth and reality but is persuasive discourse. At first sight, the poem appears to be expansive and encyclopaedic. As a matter of fact, there is a real problem in finding a unifying theme for the whole work. According to Jordan: «**Poetry assumes a place —jostles for a place, one might say— among the many subjects of this poem: dreams, love, fame, auditory physics, cosmology, mythology, epistemology**»[12]. and some pages further on

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[10] I give here a whole bibliographical bunch on this work in alphabetical order:

— BOITANI, P. & MANN, J. (eds.), *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, CUP. (1986), 1988. pp. 39-58.

— BURLIN, R.B., *Chaucerian Fiction*, Princeton U.P., 1989, pp. 93-122-58.

— HOWARD, D.R., "Chaucer's Idea of an Idea" in *Essays and Studies*, edited by E.T. Donaldson, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1976, pp. 39-55.

— JORDAN, R.M., *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader*, University Press of California Press, 1987, pp. 22-50.

— KISER, L.J., *Truth and Textuality in Chaucer's Poetry*, University Press of New England, 1991, pp. 25-41.

— MUSCATINE, CH., *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Univ. of California P. (1957), 1973, pp. 107-115.

— PAYNE, R.O., *The Key to Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics*, Yale U.P. 1963, pp. 129-37.

— SHOOK, L.K., "The House of Fame", in *Compaion to Chaucer Studies* edited by B. ROWLAND, Oxford, 1979, pp. 414-27.

[11] Jordan, R.M., *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[12] *Ibidem.*, p. 34.

he will define this poem as: «**a brilliant mosaic, a literary entertainment, sanctioned by its classical —and in book 2 its 'scientific'— erudition and rendered ceaselessly engaging by the narrative skills of its presentation**».[13]

If it is true that in general in its early forms vision poetry was closely associated with religious experience, here in this work, Chaucer patterned his dream vision on literary texts he had read, displaying thereforth a remarkable range of readings. Thus, we witness a magnificent display of literary erudition: «Virgil, *Aeneid* (378); Ovid, *Heroides* (379); Virgil, Claudian, Dante (449-50); Cicero, Macrobius *Somnium Scipionis* (916-18); Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* (972-8); St. Paul, *2 Corinthians* (980-2); Martianus Capella, *De Nuptiis Mercurii et Philologiae* (985); Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus* (986); Virgil (1244); St. John, *Apocalypse* (1385); Josephus Flavius (1433); Statius, *Thebaid* and *Achilleid* (1460-3); Homer, Dares Phrygius, Dictys Cretensis, Lollius (Boccaccio?), Guido delle Colonne, Geoffrey Monmouth (1466-70); Virgil, *Aeneid* (1483); Ovid (1487); Lucan, *Pharsalia* (1499); Claudian, *De Raptu Proserpinae* (1509)».[14]

Let us now come back to the nitty-gritty of our task, the analysis of the poem.

Book I begins with a proem which is 65 lines in length. One could say at first reading that it is a kind of a philosophical reflection on the nature of dreams, in which —and I want to foreground this— he clearly states an exaggerated ignorance of his narrator:

«*I not; but whoso of these miracles*
The causes knoweth bet then I,
Devyne he, for I certeinly
Ne kan hem noght, ne never thinke
To besily my wyt to swynke
To knowe of hir signifiaunce
The gendres, neyther the distaunce
Of times of hem, ne the causes,
.....
But why the cause is, noght wot I.
Wel worthe of this thyng grete clerkys
That trete of this and other werkes,
For I of noon opinion
Nyl as now make mensyon,»[15]

This humble way of starting has, in my view, nothing to do with the showing off appearance of the greedy 'having' and a lot with the naked, modest, common and natural human being.

In fact, Chaucer uses the philosophical reflection referred to in order to approach his audience in a direct and humble way, stating his purpose clearly at the end of this proem:

«*So wonderful a drem as I*
The tenthe day now of Decembre,
The which, as I kan now remembre,

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[13] *Ibidem.*, p. 46.

[14] I have taken all these references, including the lines of the poem given between brackets, from Piero Boitani, "Old books brought to life in dreams: the *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament of Fowls*" in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion* edited by P. Boitani and J. Mann, CUP. (1986), 1988, p. 43.

[15] Lines 12 to 19 and 52-56. All the references to the Poem are taken from the Riverside edition.

I wol yow tellen everydel.»[16]

It is more than probable that our author's contemporaries may have thought this date less arbitrary than we do today. The fact that it is repeated in two different verses (lines 63 and 111) shows its importance. Nevertheless, I wonder if to them, as to us, this date (10th December) strikes one as not being the most favorable time of the year for a love-vision.

As Melh states:»**The extensive, half serious invocation of the God of Sleep, combining conventional material and inventive individuality, intensifies our expectations and creates the impression that the poem in hand is an ambitious and serious work of art**».[17]

The following invocation which lasts till line 110 reinforces his narrator's ignorance, praying nevertheless that he could tell his story properly (lines 66-9; and 77 to 79).

The story of Book I, goes from line 111 to line 508, the very end of this Book I. It tells the story of Aeneid, supposedly depicted on the walls of the Temple of Venus, the complaint of Dido being its centre-piece . Thus, we see in lines 311-2:

«*In suche wordes gan to pleyne*
Dydo of hir grete peyne»

For curiosity sake I would point out that she has just complained of men's fickleness, which basically she depicts as a frivolous and cynical attachment to women either for a short time or even to three women at once, one for reputation, one for friendship and one for sexual pleasure (lines 305-10).

Chaucer finds in her complaint three important motifs:

* men's deceit as we have just seen.

* woman's vulnerability:

«*Allas, that ever hadde routhe*
Any women on any men!
Now see I wel, aud telle Kan,
We wrechched wymmen konne noon art.»[18]

The art referred to here is love, although it can also be understood as poetry or literature as P. Boitani affirms: «**Love is really human life - all of it, albeit short; it is an art - the ars amandi- that is long and difficult to learn. And finally, as is implied by the reference to ars longa, vita brevis, love is the art of poetry itself, and often the object of literature...In others words, love is not only a feeling, but also a real culture, with its conventions and its laws.**»[19]

* the theme of 'Fame', reputation and rumour, and her own destructive power, appearing as a victim of Fame:

«*O, well-away that I was born!*
For though yow is my name lorn,
And alle myn actes red and songe
Over al thys lond, on every tonge;
O wikke Fame! for ther nys

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[16] *Ibidem.*, lines 62-5.

[17] Dieter MEHL, *Geoffrey Chaucer: An Introduction to his Narrative Poetry*, CUP. 1986, p.55.

[18] Lines 332-5.

[19] P. BOITANI, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

Nothing so swift, lo, as she is!»[20]

In these three motifs we already see how Chaucer is fighting against the excitement of 'possessing' over 'being'.

Love belongs to 'being'. One never possesses love, love is always given, never bought. Dydo could not retain Aeneyd's love for her, he was obliged to continue his pilgrimage towards Italy: that was his destiny.

As for the blind obedience to common opinion against one's own criteria, Fame is always a dangerous and destructive agent. Chaucer's ambiguous concept of fame might be represented in lines 482-90, where the dreamer leaving the temple of Venus, finds himself in a desert, not a garden, but in another 'locus classicus' of the human imagination: a waste land, a sterile desert where Nature is totally absent:

«*Then sawgh I but a large feld,*
As fer as that I myghte see,
Withouten toun, or hous, or tree
Or bush, or grass, or eryd lond;
For al the feld nas but of sond
As smal as man may se yet lye
In the desert of Lybye.
Ne no maner creature
That ys yformed be Nature»

The image of the endless desert symbolizes a twofold dilemma: first, for the bewildered dreamer. He has not comprehended what has been revealed to him and his own experience is very trivial, he is struggling between literary tradition and his own pathetic reality. The second book of the Poem will provide something like the beginning of an answer for him.

As for the second dilemma, we think that it is the reader who is involved here. Mehl expresses this thought splendly: «**The reader, composing her (Dydo's) fundamentally human dilemma with what tradition and the poets have made of it, can only join her in lamenting over the arbitrariness of 'wikke Fame'. This basic problem, presumably, was Chaucer's real motive for trivializing the heroic story. Like any other glaringly one-sided interpretation, his version of the Dido narrative must challenge the reader and make him reconsider his own attitude towards this story**».[21] So Chaucer is looking for the individual's criteria, questioning the common, general, traditional beliefs.

The first book ends with the presence of the eagle. It is generally acknowledged that this eagle is derived in part from the eagle which carried Dante aloft in Purgatorio IX.

Book II, while transitional, is of great interest for the philosophical interpretation of the Poem.

The dream continues since line 529-30:

«*This agle, of which I have your told,*
Than shon with fethses as of gold,»

but is preceded by nineteen lines which constitute a Proem to the second Book, which replaces the traditional topic of Venus and Dido with Chaucerian autobiography, popular

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[20] Lines 345-50.

[21] MEHL, D. *op. cit.*, p. 57.

science, and pure comedy, although the ambiguous relationship between literary craftsmanship, convention and real-life experience is still present.

The Proem combines the direct style of the popular entertainer with rhetorical ostentation, as our author compares his vision and flight with those of Isaiah (*Isaye*), Scipio (*Scipion*), Nebuchadnezzar (*Nabugodonoson*), Pharaoh (*Pharoo*), Enoch (*Elcanor*). Throughout Book II, Chaucer quotes Plato, Boethius, St. Paul, Martiannus Capella and Alan of Lille, this gives us an idea of his seriousness even if the whole story is wrapped up in ridiculous pedantry or bookish exaggeration.

Davenport states with reference to this second Book: «**Chaucer, the ignorant dreamer, is taken on the wings of thought and philosophy through the realms of universal knowledge to the allegorical source-houses of human memory and information, where reputation and news are created; so all is revealed, the arbitrariness of earthly fame, the role of poets and historians, the multiplicity of men's activities and so on.....The poem is full of pleasing local effects.....Chaucer makes the journey of the dreamer in the company of a guide into a brilliant parody of the instruction of the inexperienced hero; the ludicrous physical image of poet dangling from instructor's claws translates the metaphor of the creative mind seized by thought into vivid action;....the knowledge of the universe generously made available exposes the idiotic aspects of all dream-poems, in which we can all sign our names in the heavenly visitor's book alongside Isaiah, Scipio, Nebuchadnezzar and the rest.**»[22]

It seems that as with Dante, divine Justice must always remain a mystery beyond the reach of human knowledge.

St. Paul had already mentioned this kind of tenet in the religious framework of christianity. Also, and with reference to our case, Paul G. Ruggiers comments: «**Chaucer's eagle, the agent of high comedy, not of serious moral drama, and the messenger of Jove, enables him to approach an understanding of the activities of Fame, her casual bestowal or withholding of favor; her caprice, or in short, her injustice is apparently her only standard. The implication for Chaucer, as it was an open rebuke for Dante, is the same: Who is Chaucer that he should attempt to judge this mystery and to fathom its operations?**»[23]

Book II is an extraordinary example of the literature of the journey with its scientific apparatus, the eagle being an excellent learned tourist guide and pedagogue. It is a transition from earth to heaven in search of an answer, which is promised in lines 670-5:

«*Wol with som maner thing the quyte,*
So that thon wolt be of good chere.
For truste wel that thon shalt here,
When we be come there I seye,
Mo wonder thynges, dar I leye,
And of Loves folk moo tydynges,»

The conflict of the whole Poem comes from the inability to adjust what is promised (the reward of love tidings for the weary poet) to what Chaucer actually sees in Book III, once he is in the House of Fame.

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[22] DAVENPORT, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-1.

[23] Paul G. Ruggiers, "The Unity of Chaucer's *House of Fame*" in *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, edited by Wagenknecht, OUP. 1959, p. 299.

Book III is presented in terms of a very personal experience and in this sense it corresponds to the climax of Chaucer's vision. The third book with its 1067 lines is the longest part of the work.

Charles Muscatine reports the following: «**The third book shares the antique, bookish flavor of the first, and its unsteadiness. The description is extremely profuse, as if the poet were pouring out all his lore. There is an artistic economy in it creating the sense of overwhelming richness of right and sound that we should expect in Fame's house**».[24]

Knowledge of love was promised in Book II, but it never arrives in Book III. There is only the confusion of Fame's arbitrariness and the chaos and turbulence of Rumour. As Mehl puts it: «**The 'tydynges' the poet has been in search of turn out to be nothing but an inextricable tangle of truth and lies, of no more use to him than all the preceding revelations**».[25]

I would like to finish this article by mentioning lines 1876 to 1882 which correspond to the poet's answer to the passerby who asks him if he has come to the palace of Fame in search of fame for himself:

«*Sufficeth me, as I were ded,*
That no wight have my name in his honde.
I wot myself best how y stonde;
For what I drye, or what I thynke,
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
Certeyn, for the more part,
As fer forth as I kan myn art».

It seems to me that with these words Chaucer is showing, once more, with a strong Boethian and Senequist inspiration, that inner peace cannot be bought on the world's terms. He rather refuses to be overwhelmed by the accidents of fortune or fame.

Actually our poet prefers his own criteria to those socially imposed by tradition, as well as being much more in favor of 'being' than of 'possessing'. Probably that's one of the reasons why this long, beautiful, and difficult Poem breaks off unfinished.

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[24] Ch. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, University of California Press (1957) 1973, p. 113.

[25] Mehl, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.