

## *The Hous of Fame Revisited\**

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It is a pleasure to rejoin scholarly discussion of Chaucer's celebrated incomplete poem, one upon which I stumbled while in graduate school at Princeton with John M. Steadman many years ago and on which he has recently cast his erudite and perspicacious eye. There are two points on which I should like to comment: the first on the performance of the poem, and the second on the sense of play that the poem manifests so richly.

Unlike my own earlier contribution in 1953, which speculated on a possible occasion for a 'reading' of the poem—for "one of the ritualistic functions of the Inner Temple," quite possibly the Christmas Revels, "which by the end of the fifteenth century were the most elaborate of the revels at the Inns"<sup>1</sup>—I wish here to concentrate on Steadman's emphasis upon the 'performance' of the poem. He observes very shrewdly that the "conscious mystifications in the earlier books . . . are partly designed to arouse and maintain suspense, puzzling the audience and increasing their eagerness to hear the continuation of the story at the next recitation," very likely for "three successive days" (7). We lack definitive verification of the occasion, although the sixteenth-century testimony, which declared the *Hous of Fame*<sup>2</sup> was written for an Inn of Court revel is surely persuasive, even if by the nature of the evidence it cannot be absolutely certain.

What can be established with conviction is the consequence of such a performance over three successive evenings, "occasional poetry of a very high order indeed" (7). For those elements which have been

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\*Reference: John M. Steadman, "The House of Fame: Tripartite Structure and Occasion," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 1-12.

deplored as artistic flaws—"the apparent lack of coherence in Chaucer's plot, its tripartite structure, and the seeming lack of continuity between one episode and the next" (7)—may well have been deliberate, a conscious response to the conditions of the 'performance.' It is time to remove the quotation marks around the term performance and to eliminate any note of the apologetic, and time to recognize that this poem has the special qualities of a piece written for a special occasion, whether or not it is one that can be definitely established six centuries later. This done, the principles for reading and interpreting a performance poem ought to be established and, one hopes, agreed upon.

At least provisionally I would put forward the theory of Emilio Betti, who called for three types of interpretation according to types of texts being studied:

re-cognitive	historical and literary texts
presentational	dramatic and musical texts
normative	legal and sacred texts

Ignoring the first and the third (which occupy considerable space in Betti's hermeneutical system) I address the presentational.<sup>3</sup> If we follow Betti's formulation (even without regard to the massive theoretical structure on which it is based), we perceive that a performance text—whether accompanied by music, or dance, or visual arts—is directed at an audience, and a modern 'reading' of the performance poem requires surrender on the part of the interpreter to this completed act, one that fulfills the intended meaning of the composition. A corollary of this view is that a presentational text is not complete *until* it has been performed (or presented). Therefore, a linguistic or philological interpretation cannot be complete without the fuller historical understanding of the occasion and the audience for which the script was written. To echo Betti (in the formulation of Josef Bleicher<sup>4</sup>),

In the translation of a text, the dramatization of a play and the performance of a piece of music, the "interpreter" is engaged in the activity of transposing one context of meaning into another and in this sense re-creates the work in question. The principal guideline in this process, which can so easily fall prey to subjectivism and arbitrariness, is the demand to try and fulfill the intention of the author, and all energy has to be put into the task of making it apparent.

The first step, I urge, is to recognize the presentational quality of *The Hous of Fame*. What follows is that our theory and kind of interpretation must be faithful to the intention of the author. I would then agree completely with Steadman's emphasis on the deliberate nature of the apparent lack of coherence in the plot, and the seeming lack of continuity between one episode and the next: these qualities are indeed deliberate and a conscious response to the conditions of the performance.

Farther, we miss a great deal in our reading of Chaucer if we fail to celebrate his sense of play. Writing in an as yet unpublished contribution, "Chaucer and Huizinga: The Spirit of *Homo Ludens*," I put it that "with Chaucer we are given a poetics of play, and Huizinga can provide a rich sense of playing as a civilizing function for our reading of Chaucer."<sup>5</sup> Further, in Chaucer's range of genres we find three kinds (at least) of play in his world of church and court and country: the games about hunting and warfare, the games about love (courtly love especially), and the sense of life itself as a game. Yet another kind of play is that of interaction between *auctor* and readers or listening audience. One has only to consider the rigidifying structures of *lectura* in the university, monastic, and legal worlds during Chaucer's time, and to consider how tempting the rules of *lectura* would be to one with a sense of irony.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that the *Hous of Fame* is some kind of play, a game for which we have lost the rules (and are not even certain of the occasion for the play). We stand helplessly outside the game: helplessly (as the range of critical opinions about the poem illustrates), like listening to jokes being exchanged in a language we do not fully comprehend. What is evident, I would be prepared to argue (in the traditions of civility that *Connotations* is rapidly establishing), is that the poem itself takes the game for granted, and the structure of the poem (that is to say, its deliberately truncated ending) is a kind of playfulness, and one that the original audience would immediately understand.<sup>7</sup>

There are differences between the systems of relationships of *Troilus and Criseyde* (on which I have touched in the essay cited) and the *Hous of Fame*. It is self-evident that the Trojan poem is presented to a court audience, that is, to an audience largely filled with aristocratic women (as in the celebrated miniature in Ms. Corpus Christi College, Cambridge,

Ms. 61). We cannot yet be certain of the audience for the *Hous of Fame*, but we can express our conviction that it is different from that of the *Troilus*; and we may also declare that it is an audience uniquely at home in the preparation or performance that takes place—most likely, as it seems to me, in the Inner Temple, with its already highly developed sense of ritual and (in the nature of the revels) a willingness not to take itself too seriously, at least for the time being.

There are many today who would nod in agreement with Goethe's dictum that "grau . . . ist alle Theorie," especially when it diminishes the fundamental character of any text. One may suppose, to conclude, that Chaucer himself would be—or is (if we accept him like the figure of Troilus in *Troilus and Criseyde* high in the Empyrean)—amused no doubt at the seriousness with which modern scholars have approached his poem, and perhaps amused still more at their failure to comprehend its special nature.<sup>8</sup> Might he not think that a "gotcha" (that American slang signal for a successful trick played on a listener to a joke) was appropriate, and might he also reflect that the very distance of scholars from his poem's performance was itself ironic?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. J. Schoeck, "A Legal Reading of Chaucer's *Hous of Fame*," *UTQ* 23 (1954): 185-92. "What I am suggesting, then, is that Chaucer wrote his *Hous of Fame* for one of the ritualistic functions of the Inner Temple; the date of December 10 in the poem's first lines might suggest the Christmas Revels, which by the end of the fifteenth century were the most elaborate of the revels at the Inns" (189-90). I further suggested on p. 190 that the "man of gret auctorite" might be the Constable-Marshal of the Christmas revels, and I called attention to other references or allusions in the poem which would support a performance in the Great Hall of the Inner Temple. The kind of reading that I suggested in 1954 for the poem was necessarily provisional—and "necessity here mothers the invented dictum that perhaps all readings of poems are ultimately provisional" (192)—but it reinforces, and is reinforced by, the atmosphere of ritual and the air of parody of ritual.

<sup>2</sup>See Gerard Legh, *Accedence of Armorie*, first published in 1562 and reprinted a half-dozen times: see *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland & Ireland*, ed. A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, 2nd ed. revised by W. A. Jackson

and completed by Katherine F. Pantzer (London: Bibliographical Society, 1976) nos. 15388-15393. The *Accedence* was also reprinted in the *Workes of Armorie* (1572), collected by John Bossewell and printed by Richard Tottel. The reference to Chaucer and the *Hous of Fame* is to be found on folio 118, where Legh pictures Pegasus (part of the coat-of-arms of the Inner Temple); and he writes: "And therefore S. Geffreye Chaucer buylte unto him (after of his owne nature & condition, a house called Fame . . . ."

<sup>3</sup>See Emilio Betti, *Allgemeine Auslegungslehre als Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967)—the 2 vols. of the original *Teoria Generale della Interpretazione* (1955) have been abridged to one volume.

<sup>4</sup>Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) 46.

<sup>5</sup>Forthcoming in *Tales Within Tales: Apuleius Through Time*, ed. Constance S. Wright and Julia Bolton Holloway (New York: AMS Press, 1994) 97-106. In this essay, I have also observed that "Huizinga gave us an anthropology of play in his seminal work on *Homo Ludens* (1944), which is a study of the play element in culture. With Erasmus we are given a rhetoric of play in such works as the *Colloquies*, the *Adagia* and the *Praise of Folly*, that supreme turning and twisting of the mock encomium, itself a playing with the strategies and forms of rhetoric" (96).

<sup>6</sup>In "Chaucerian Irony Revisited: A Rhetorical Perspective," in *Florilegium*, ed. Douglas J. Wurtele (Ottawa: Carleton University, 1992) 124-40, I have offered a view of the rhetorical resources for irony that were available to Chaucer, as well as a rhetorical reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*. On *lectura*, see M. D. Chenu's admirably compact and lucid introduction in *Towards Understanding St. Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and Dominic Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964) 80-85. It must be added that in the English Inns of Court there were several kinds of *lectio*, with the semi-annual 'Readings' commanding considerable attention and doubtless an excess of seriousness—which would provide a ready (and readily identifiable) target for the play of a poem such as *The Hous of Fame*.

<sup>7</sup>The accessibility of the poem in three manuscripts and the editions of Caxton and Thynne would suggest that there was some continuity of reading: perhaps at least among members of the Inns of Court who, like Legh, knew the key.

<sup>8</sup>Jokes played on listener or audience have been familiar enough in world literature, as the studies of Jung and Kerenyi have revealed, see William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, eds., *Mythical Trickster Figures* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1994); and the trickster continues to play his devices in Shakespeare, as Richard Hillman has recently made clear in *Shakespearean Subversions: The Trickster of the Play-text* (London: Routledge, 1992). Jokes played on listener or audience are familiar enough in frontier or emerging cultures. Thus in American literature we find Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man* (1857); Mark Twain's pessimistic late story, *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1900), or his posthumous story *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916); and in the trickeries of the saga of the Snopes told by William Faulkner in several of the novels of his fictitious Yoknapatawpha County. The twentieth-century musical *The Music Man* operates along these lines to the continuing delight of audiences in several countries. Tricks upon readers are now conventional everywhere in post-modern literature.