THE DATE OF CHAUCER'S *HOUSE OF FAME*

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There has been so much controversy concerning the date of composition of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and there have been so many false premises established and destroyed that it is difficult at times to see the true issue, obscured behind shifting clouds of opinion. In the poem itself there is to be found but little evidence of the date. We are told that it was

Of Decembre the tenthe day,
When hit was nyght, to slepe I lay . . . ¹

Therefore, the poem could have been started on that day or shortly thereafter. We have one other bit of evidence. The eagle, as he carries the frightened poet through the air, says to him, among other things:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
And has mad alle thy rekenynges . . . ²

This passage would seem to be an obvious reference to Chaucer's duties as Comptroller of the Custom, which office he held from 1374 to 1386, and accordingly the poem would seem to have been written during this period. Back in 1870, Professor Ten Brink suggested that since Chaucer emphasizes the fact that he owes his visit to the House of Fame to the great god Jupiter, and several times alludes to the god,³ in honor of whom Thursday (Thor's Day) was named, the poem therefore was started on Thursday, December 10; since December 10 in 1383 fell on a Thursday, Professor Ten Brink believed that the poem was begun Thursday, December 10, 1383 and finished sometime the following year.

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¹ *House of Fame*, ll. 111–112.
³ *Ibid.*, ll. 609, 642, 661, etc.
Professor Koch, some twenty years later, followed the theory through and added to it a corollary; in the *Troilus* there occurs what might very well be a reference to the House of Fame:

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye.\(^4\)
So sende myght to make in som comedye.

Thus, said Professor Koch, the *Troilus* was finished before the *House of Fame*, ergo, before 1383. Prof. Frank Heath in his introduction to the Globe Chaucer further complicated the issue when he suggested that although the first two books of the *House of Fame* seem to be typical of the short couplets of Chaucer’s early verse, the last book seems more mature and was probably written near the close of Chaucer’s “French period.” His contention was that the poem was started before the *Troilus* was laid aside, and then finished sometime afterward. And so, a rather elaborate chronological structure has been built upon the Ten Brink-Koch theory.

In 1905, Professor Lowes, in his epoch-making article on Chaucer chronology,\(^5\) puts us back almost where we started. Brushing aside Ten Brink’s astronomy (and with good reason, as Professor Tatlock points out later, for December 10 falls on a Thursday every six years, and therefore December 10, 1377 would do just as well as Ten Brink’s date \(^6\)), Professor Lowes observes that the whole argument for a later date rests upon the validity of the claim that the reference in the *Troilus* to “som comedye” yet to be written points to the *House of Fame*. In support of the earlier date he cites an error in the *House of Fame*, an error which Chaucer made in using a Virgilian phrase, and which was corrected in the *Troilus*.\(^7\)

\(^4\) *Troilus and Criseyde*, Bk. V, ll. 1786–1788.
\(^5\) “The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women Considered in its Chronological Relations,” *PMLA* XX (1905) 748 ff.
\(^7\) This error was first pointed out by Kittredge and is to be found in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, I, 180:

> “pedibus celerem et pernicibus alis”

Chaucer confused “pernicibus” with “perdicibus” and in the *House of Fame* (11.1391–1392) said

> “And on hir feet waxen saugh I
> Partriches winges redely.”

In the *Troilus* (Bk. IV, l. 661) Virgil’s phrase is used correctly:

> “Was thorough-out Troye y-fled prest winges.”

Chaucer probably took the phrase from *Filostrato IV*, st. 78:

> “Era volata con prestissim’ ale.”
Lowes believes that the desire for "som comedye" simply means that the poet wishes for a complete change of theme, and that more than likely the poem referred to is the *Legend of Good Women*. He notes a change in the humorous quality of the *House of Fame* from that of the *Troilus*, which he believes shows a maturing of Chaucer's artistic powers. The humor in the *House of Fame* grows out of a specific situation, whereas in the *Troilus*, and particularly in the characterization of Pandare, the humor grows out of a fundamental attitude toward life; it has the "all-pervasive and chameleon-like" quality which shows this greater depth of power and vision in the poet.\(^8\)

Professor Lowes also finds the last important use of Chaucer's first narrative meter in the *House of Fame* and dates the poem as having been written sometime in the late 1370's probably in 1379, after the second Italian trip, from which, incidentally, Chaucer had probably brought back a copy of Dante with him.

Professor Tatlock, in his study of the problem of Chaucerian chronology,\(^9\) takes issue with Professor Lowes on a good many points, yet eventually manages to reach much the same conclusion. He agrees that the allusion to "som comedye" can mean almost anything, and characterizes those attempts to read subtle or general allegory into the poem as futile for the purposes of chronological research, for such allegory "was wholly alien to Chaucer's realistic, unspeculative genius."\(^10\)

Tatlock insists that the *House of Fame* was written after the *Troilus*, which he dates 1377. The *Troilus*, however, has since been rather firmly established as having been finished in or after 1385. The whole Tatlock-Lowes controversy, fascinating though it be, cannot be dwelt upon here, but the famous Root and Russell calculations would seem to have definitely settled the matter.\(^11\) Tatlock, moreover, attacks Lowes' idea that the *House of Fame* was Chaucer's last use of the narrative octosyllabic couplet, and thus dates before the *Troilus*; and accuses him, quite justly, in my opinion, of trying to make meter correspond to epoch rather than to subject matter. The point is,

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\(^8\) I must point out that this seems to be a very weak argument to me. The same type of humor would not be fitting for both of the poems. What is right for one would be all wrong for the other. I cannot believe that this argument is a strong enough basis on which to date one poem before the other.


\(^10\) *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

\(^11\) *PMLA*, XXXIX, 48 ff.
says Professor Tatlock, that the same meter would be incongruous for both the *Troilus* and the *House of Fame*. Since Chaucer was a master of both, it would be perilous to say that, as his genius developed, he abandoned one meter for the other.

Three other arguments are marshalled by Professor Tatlock (who gets two of them from Ten Brink); I shall deal somewhat summarily with them for he, it must be remembered, bases most of his argument on an early date for the *Troilus*. The first is the question of the shadowy figure of Lollius, who twice appears among the list of historians of Troy recounted in the *Troilus*, then is casually mentioned in the *House of Fame* without any other identification. Therefore, says Professor Tatlock, the allusion would be understood only by one who had read the *Troilus*. The second is that in the *House of Fame* there is a passage strongly reminiscent in atmosphere of a passage in the *Troilus*; the dream passage in the *House of Fame* looks for all the world like an expansion of the discourse upon dreams of Pandare. The third argument is that while he admits a certain falling off in quality of the *House of Fame* from the *Troilus*, he feels that the former still possesses one mark of maturity, freedom. Professor Tatlock says that Chaucer in the *House of Fame* has left French and Italian influence far behind and has become emancipated.

Having just argued that the *House of Fame* comes after the *Troilus*, Professor Tatlock then proceeds to draw almost the same conclusion as Professor Lowes concerning the date of the former.

He points out parallels between the *House of Fame* and Gower’s *Mirour de l’Omm* and says that the last six lines of the *Mirour* suggest that Gower borrowed from Chaucer. He dates the *Mirour* at about 1379 and concludes that the *House of Fame* was finished in or perhaps just before that year, after having been in the process of composition for a year or so. His conclusion is strengthened by Ten Brink’s astronomy, which, as already pointed out, could refer to either 1383 or 1377. Thus Lowes and Tatlock agree on 1379, in spite of their controversy concerning which came first, the *Troilus* or the *House of Fame*.

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12 ll. 1–65.
Professor Kittredge's book 16 should be mentioned, if only because in it he attacks Tatlock's chronology of the Troilus and rather conclusively shows that the House of Fame came before and not after it; as I have already emphasized, it is of little help in establishing a date for the House of Fame, if the Troilus is dated 1385 or later. Professor Kittredge's conclusion is of interest chiefly for its insistence that the House of Fame precedes the Troilus and must fall within the period following Chaucer's return from Italy and the composition of the "first great poem in the Italian manner—whether it be the Palamon or the Troilus." 17

Then, in 1912, Professor Imelmann proposed a new date for the poem. He thinks that the House of Fame was begun on December 10, 1381 and abandoned on the eighteenth day of the same month and year. 18 In proof of this thesis he mentions the hints of surprising love tidings in the poem and then takes lines 2133–40 as clinching his argument:

Me for to pleyen and for to lere,  
And eke a tiding for to here  
That I had herd of somme contre  
That shall not now be tolde for me  
For hit no nede is, redely;  
Folke kan synge hit bet than I,  
For all mote oute, other late or rathe  
All the sheves in the lathe.

He says that they obviously point to some love affair out of England, but of interest to Englishmen; the most important event of this nature was Richard II's wooing of the Princess Anne of Bohemia. Therefore, says Professor Imelmann, the poem was begun on December 10, 1381, when word first came of Anne's approaching arrival in England; and when the report came of her landing on December 18, Chaucer abandoned the project simply because he didn't have time to finish it.

Even to the inexperienced scholar this theory seems to leave a great many gaps to be filled in. Why abandon the poem just because the royal bride has arrived, especially when the poem is so patently near

16 The Date of Chaucer's Troilus and Other Chaucer Matters, Chaucer Society, London, 1909.
17 Ibid., p. 61.
18 Englische Studien XLV (1912) 397–431.
completion? Then too, as Professor Manly points out, Anne was to have arrived in the summer of 1381, but was held up by various delays. When the journey was finally begun, it was made in slow stages. And, again, the order which Richard issued for her reception was dated December 1. Why, it may be asked, should Chaucer wait until the tenth to begin the poem, when he must have known that the princess had a ten-day start on him?

Professor Brusendorff, undaunted by Manly’s objections, worked on the Imelmann theory, but dated the poem a year earlier. He says that the marriage negotiations were begun in 1380, that early in the year the Bohemian ambassadors had visited England. On December 12, 1380, the English embassy was appointed; a later document dated December 26 specified that the negotiations were to take place in Flanders. When one remembers that the decision to appoint the English ambassadors must have been made a day or two in advance, before the commissions were signed and sealed, then, says Professor Brusendorff, it becomes evident that we have hit on the very day of the beginning of the poem, December 10, 1380.

The validity of this whole theory depends on the belief that the poem was complete (Brusendorff believes early in 1381) and that the last few lines have been lost, not unwritten, and this is the conclusion Professor Brusendorff reaches; through his study of the manuscript versions of the poem he has become convinced that sixty lines would complete the poem, and these sixty lines have been somewhere, somehow, and sometime, lost.

Dr. Pollard, in the 1931 revised edition of his Chaucer primer, follows Brusendorff and apologizes to Chaucer “for having suggested in earlier editions of this book and elsewhere, that having been borne up to the House of Fame by the golden eagle, he did not know how to get him down again.”

Professor Robinson, in his admirable Cambridge edition of the poems, although he doesn’t mention Brusendorff’s theory specifically, follows it to the extent of accepting the period around 1379–80 on the basis of the general style of composition.

And so, for almost a decade it seemed that the issue was settled,

that the poem was chronologically established as having been started on December 10, 1380, and finished early in 1381. Ten Brink's astrology was minimized to almost the vanishing point.

But then, in 1934 came Professor Bronson's article, which would scrap Imelmann, Brusendorff, Pollard, and all. Bronson says that the Brusendorff conclusion appears plausible only as long as one refrains from looking at the poem itself. "To accept the proposal is to accept the corollary that Chaucer was both an unintelligent courtier and a bad artist. For is it not to assume that Chaucer thought that a poem filled with the most profound irony and skepticism, a poem, which, moreover, goes out of its way to emphasize and reemphasize the faithlessness of men to women, which turns the whole Aeneid into a tale of true love betrayed by perfidious man, would be an agreeable engagement present to Richard and Anne? What, we must exclaim, has become of Chaucer's tact? . . . Surely it is the strangest prothalamion conceived by the imagination of a courtly poet." 22

In a long and detailed analysis of this view, Mr. Bronson shows that the poem cannot possibly refer to Richard and Anne, but he makes no effort to fill the gap, leaving that to "persons more learned than the writer." In a footnote at the conclusion of the article, he takes note of an article by F. C. Riedel, in JEGP XXVII: 441-469, which would attempt to prove that the poem was a "covert attack on John of Gaunt, who in the summer of 1378 was felt to have outraged decency by appearing in public with his mistress, Catherine Swynford," 23 and while Bronson does not feel that Riedel has proved his point, he does emphasize that there is evidence of a satirical attack on someone, but does not make any suggestions.

Such is the present status of the controversy, as far as I have been able to determine. From out the pros and cons of the three-generation dispute I shall attempt to draw a few conclusions, admitting beforehand, however, their inconclusive nature. First, the poem comes before the Troilus; that much seems definite. Secondly, internal evidence, fairly unimpeachable, would indicate that the poem was written between 1374 and 1385. Thirdly, I think that we are justified in ignoring Professor Ten Brink's astronomical theory in the face of more overwhelming evidence. Fourthly, as far as the verse form

23 Ibid., p. 192.
and the character of the poem go, and as far as the influence of the Temple d'Onneur and the imitation of the House of Fame by Gower in his Mirour de l'Omme can be realized, the approximate date of the poem can be set around 1379–80, even if we choose to ignore more elaborate theories.

My own opinion is that Brusendorff is correct in believing the poem to have been written on the occasion of the marriage of Richard and Anne, and to have been started on December 10, 1381; I reconcile this with Bronson's objection by a pure conjecture. Possibly Chaucer intended the poem to be a typical love-vision poem in honor of the royal betrothal, but during the course of it he became so engrossed in the possibilities of satirical and moralistic writing, that near the end, he was brought up short with the realization that the poem wouldn't possibly do for his purpose; therefore, he abandoned it and wrote something else for the occasion, possibly the Parlement of Foules. Then, later, rather pleased with the artistic merits of the House of Fame, he allowed as much of it as he safely could to be circulated, and in that mutilated state it has come down to us.

I emphasize, however, that this is a highly conjectural theory, one which I should not be prepared to defend to the last drop of ink. Like Professor Bronson, I leave the matter to "persons more learned than the writer."

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