

## SOURCES OF THE INVOCATIONS IN THE "HOUSE OF FAME"

In this essay I propose to indicate the sources of the invocations at the beginning of each of the three books of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, and to discuss Sypherd's thesis that they were not suggested by Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

Sypherd's entire book aims at proving that the *House of Fame* is completely within the French tradition of the love-vision poem, against the German scholars who established a close relationship between Chaucer's work and the *Divina Commedia*. He refuses therefore to see "any relation between the two poems in respect to the literary form, the subject matter in general, and the significance" <sup>1</sup>, but immediately he adds:

we may yet look for influence from the *Divine Comedy* under two headings: 1. details of poetic material and expression; 2. the artistic feeling which determined the excellence of the poem. <sup>2</sup>

The theories of Ten Brink and Rambeau, perhaps suggested by Sandras's *Etude sur Chaucer*, are now superseded, and Sypherd's point is generally accepted. Robinson, in his notes to the *House of Fame*, repeats Sypherd's conclusions without comments. As it sums up the whole matter I shall be discussing here, I shall quote the note:

There has been considerable discussion as to the source of the three invocations. . . and it has been held that the whole idea of invocations was suggested by the *Divine Comedy*. But their use was common in poetry of various kinds and not unexampled in love-visions. In fact the particular address to Morpheus in the present passage seems to have been suggested by Froissart's *Trésor Amoureux* (11.615 ff.) <sup>3</sup>.

As the second and third invocations are no problem as far as sources are concerned, I shall treat them in the first place. Chaucer says:

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1 SYPHERD, W. O., *Studies in Chaucer's House of Fame*, p. 71.

2 *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

3 *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. by F. N. Robinson, p. 888, n. to 11.

Non faire blisfull, O Cipris,  
So be my favour at this tyme!  
And ye, me to endite and ryme  
Helpeth, that on Parnaso duelle,  
Be Elicon, the clere welle.  
Or thought, that wrot al that I mette,  
And in the tresorye hyt shette  
Of my brayn, now shal men se  
If any vertu in the be,  
To tellen al my drem aryght.  
Now kythe thyn engyn and myght! <sup>4</sup>

Compare to this the opening lines of Boccaccio's *Teseida*:

O sorelle Castalie, che nel monte  
Elicona contente dimorate,  
dintorno al sacro gorgoneo fonte,  
sott'esso l'ombra delle fronde amate  
da Febo, delle quali ancor la fronte  
spero d'ornarmi, sol che'l concediate:  
le sante orecchie a' miei prieghi porgete  
e quelli udite come voi dovete.

.....

Siate presenti, o Marte rubicondo,  
nelle tue armi rigido e feroce,  
e tu, madre d'Amor, col tuo giocondo  
e lieto aspetto... <sup>5</sup>

In the reference to Venus there are no verbal parallels, but there is one in the invocation to the muses, with its mention of mount and well. Yet the same passage, as Lowes justly remarks in his article *Chaucer and Dante* <sup>6</sup>, is much more faithfully echoed in *Troilus and Criseyde*, III, 1807-10:

Thow lady bryght, the doughter to Dyone,  
Thy blynde and wynged sone ek, daun Cupide,  
Yee sustren nyne ek, that by Elicone  
In hil Pernaso listen for t'abide...

where 'doughter to Dyone' answers to 'madre d'Amor', and 'listen for t'abide' exactly corresponds to "contente dimorate". Notice that Chaucer places the Muses on Parnassus and calls the well Helicon,

<sup>4</sup> HF, 11. 518-28.

<sup>5</sup> *Teseida*, I, 1 ff.

<sup>6</sup> LOWES, J. L., *MP*, XIV (1916-17), 705-735.

while Boccaccio's "sorelle Castalie" dwell on the Helicon by a well the name of which is not mentioned.

Lines 523-28 are suggested by *Inferno*, II, 7-9:

O Muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;  
O mente, che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,  
Qui si parrà la tua nobilitate.

'O Thought, that wrot al that I mette' is a literal rendering of 'O mente, che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi', except for the word 'mette'; the rest is an adaptation and enlargement, punctuated by a verbal borrowing, 'engyn' ('alto ingegno').

This blending of different sources suggests the following associations as possible: as Chaucer's poem has tidings of love for subject, and in the second book the action really begins, the invocation to Venus comes logically to the mind; now the *Teseida* begins by such an invocation, containing besides an address to the muses; on the other hand, Dante has an invocation to the muses, followed by a reference to his mind, that registered all he saw. The two Italian passages, having the invocation to the muses in common, may in some such way have contributed to the poem of Book II. We may well ask ourselves, as Lowes in the article cited: "Did Chaucer perhaps keep a commonplace book, and was there a crowded page *sub voce* 'Musae'?" But perhaps writers at that time trusted their memory more than we do, and consequently it was more faithful to them than ours is to us.

Let us now consider the invocation which opens Book III:

- O God of science and of lyght,  
Appollo, thurgh thy grete myght,  
This lytel laste bok thou gye!  
Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,
- 1095 Here art poetical be shewed;  
But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,  
Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,  
Though som vers fayle in a sillable;  
And that I do no diligence
- 1100 To shewe craft, but o sentence.  
And yif, devyne vertu, thow  
Wilt helpe me to shewe now  
That in myn hed ymarked ys —  
Loo, that is for to menen this,
- 1105 The Hous of Fame for to descryve —  
Thou shalt se me go as blyve  
Unto the nexte laure y see,

And kysse yt, for hyt is hy tree.  
Now entre in my brest anoon! <sup>7</sup>

In the first canto of the *Paradiso*, Dante says:

- 13 O buono Apollo, all'ultimo lavoro  
Fiammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso  
Come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro.
- 16 Infino a qui l'un giogo di Parnaso  
Assai mi fu, ma or con ambedue  
M'è uopo entrar nell'aringo rimaso.
- 19 Entra nel petto mio, e spira tue  
Sì, come quando Marsia traesti  
Della vagina delle membre sue.
- 22 O divina virtù, se mi ti presti  
Tanto che l'ombra del beato regno  
Segnata nel mio capo io manifesti,
- 25 Venir vedra'mi al tuo diletto legno  
E coronarmi allor di quelle foglie  
Che la materia e tu mi farai degno. <sup>8</sup>

This time Apollo is invoked, and almost in identical terms: *House of Fame* 1093 corresponds to *Paradiso* I, 13; *HF* 1101-1103, 1106-1108, to *Par. I*, 22-25; *HF* 1109 to *Par. I*, 19. In this translation, Chaucer has left out all complications and everything that was not pertinent to his subject; he has added some explanations which he probably considered necessary either to make his meaning clear or—and this is more likely—to lighten the solemnity of the Dantean stanzas, scarcely suited to the character of his work.

These two examples show us how strongly Chaucer was impressed by certain very striking and noble passages in the *Divine Comedy*. The same fact is proved by his translation of the Ugolino passage, by his adaptation of the inscription over the gate of Hell in the *Parliament of Fowls*: "Per me si va nella città dolente..." Undoubtedly, Chaucer felt the majestic beauty of the Italian poet, and acknowledged his admiration in true medieval fashion, that is to say, by making some of the beautiful verses his own. But in the process the Dantean lines lose of their loftiness and grandeur, of their high epic seriousness which makes them already classical, and are, in a sense, brought back to the medieval.

The first invocation, unlike the other two, has no parallel in the *Divine Comedy*. Sypherd, and Robinson after him, suggests the following:

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<sup>7</sup> *HF*, 11. 1091-1109.

<sup>8</sup> *Par. I*, vv. 13-27.

- 615 Lors me dist Amours humblement:  
"Regarde cy premierement  
"Le dieu des songes, Morpheüs;  
"En apres vecy Orpheüs,  
"D'armonie et de melodie  
620 "Le souverain. Met t'estudie  
"A Morpheüs tant aouer  
"Qu'en bien te veuille coulourer  
"Ton songe et en fin advertir  
"A toute honneur et convertir. <sup>9</sup>

But this is not an invocation. The poet is taken before the god of Love, who gives him advice as to how to go about in the composition of his works. Froissart must ask Morpheus to send him colourful dreams and guide him, through those dreams, along the honourable path; he must also pray for the help of Orpheus, Rhetoric and so on. This, in allegorical language, means that he must make good use of his imagination und must employ all the devices necessary to make his poetry musical and effective. Still, he does not ask for *inspiration* for writing his poems. Prayers of this kind are all the so called "invocations" found in the French works. In the *Paradys d'amours*, the hero asks Morpheus to put him to sleep:

- Tant y pensai qu'il me souvint  
Qu'il y avoit ja des nuis vint  
Que par usage à mon coucier  
Morpheüs aloie pryer,  
1700 De dormir le dieu agreable  
Et des songes le raisonnable,  
Que, par amours et par pité  
Et par sa debonnaireté  
Je qui dors ne dormoie point  
1705 Endormir me fesist... <sup>10</sup>

in *Li Orloge Amoureux* he prays Love to make him choose the right words to please his lady:

Or pri Amours, qui ses servans avance,  
Qu'il me purvoie en sens et en langage  
Telement que la belle et bonne et sage  
Voelle en bon gré ce dittie recevoir. <sup>11</sup>

In *La Fonteinne Amoureuse*, Machaut begs the god of Sleep send

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9 FROISSART, *Le Trésor amoureux*, vv. 615-624.

10 FROISSART.

11 *Ibid.*

Morpheus to assume his body, half-dead on account of love sufferings, and to appear before his lady and persuade her to return his love:

Pour ce prier vueil au dieu de sommeil  
Que Morpheüs face son appareil  
    Tel qu'a briés mos  
Le gentil corps qui n'a point de pareil  
Sache mon cuer, ma tristece, mon dueil,  
Et qu'il le tient par son dous riant vueil  
    Pris et enclos.

.....  
Hé! Morpheüs! voy comment il se duet!  
    A toy m'en plain.

As we see, the *Paradys d'Amours* or *La Fonteinne Amoureuse* are as good source of the invocation to the god of Sleep —where Morpheus is prayed to help the poet tell his dream 'aryght' —as the passage in the *Trésor Amoureux* quoted by Sypherd.

The source of *HF* 70 - 76 is *Metamorphoses*, XI, 592 ff.:

Est prope Cimmerios longo spelunca recessu,  
Mons cavus, ignavi domus et penetralia Somni,  
Quo nunquam radiis oriens medusve cadensve  
595 Phoebus adire potest; nebulae caligine mixtae  
Exhalantur humo dubiaque crepuscula lucis.  
Non vigil ales ibi cristati cantibus oris  
Evocat Auroram, nec voce silentia rumpunt  
Sollicitive canes canibusve sagacior anser;  
600 Non fera, non pecudes, non moti flamine rami  
Humanaeve sonum reddunt convicia linguae;  
Muta quies habitat; saxo tamen exit ab imo  
Rivus aquae Lethes, per quem cum murmure labens  
Invitat somnos crepitantibus unda lapillis.

.....  
At medio torus est ebena sublimis in antro,  
Plumeus, unicolor, pullo velamine tectus,  
Quo cubat ipse deus membris languere solutis.

This passage was the source of 11. 62 ff. in the *Book of the Duchess*, together with Machaut's *La Fonteinne Amoureuse* and Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*. In the *House of Fame* Chaucer summarizes Ovid's description of Sleep and his dwelling; the same as his source, he does not mention Morpheus by name. The few strokes with which he depicts Sleep, his cave and his 'slepy Thousand sones' seem more a reminiscence than a direct inspiration, although they suggest a better and more secure knowledge of the classical material.

Then comes the invocation proper:

And to this god, that I of rede,  
Prey I that he wol me spede  
My sweven for to telle aryght,  
80 If every drem stonde in his myght.

Up to now, I have not been able to find anything in the French love-vision poems which could be considered as a source for this, not because similar addresses to Morpheus do not exist, but because their spirit is different and in my opinion they cannot be rightly called invocations.

To lines 81 ff.,

And he that mover ys of al  
That is and was and ever shal,  
So yive hem joye that hyt here  
Of alle that they dreme to-yere,  
85 And for to stonden alle in grace  
Of her loves, or in what place  
That hem were levest for to stonde,  
And shelde hem fro poverte and shonde,  
And from unhap and ech disese,  
90 And sende hem al that may hem plese,  
That take hit welland skorne hyt noght,  
Ne hyt mysdemen in her thoght  
Thorght malicious entencion.

I should like to compare the following from Machaut's *Le Confort d'Ami*.

Or commencerai ma matere  
En supplant Dieu nostre pere  
55 Qu'il soit a mon commencement,  
Au moien et au finement.  
Cils qui tout scet et qui tout voit,  
Qui tout gouverne et tout pourvoit,  
Qui ciel et air et terre et mer  
60 Et quanqu'on scet dedens nommer,  
Tout ce qui est fu et sera,  
Fist tout, et tout ce deffera  
A un terme quil y a mis,  
N'oublie onques ses bons amis,  
65 Eins les conseille et les conforte  
et joie en misere leur porte  
Par mainte diverse manière,  
Et s'aimme d'amour si entiere  
Qu'onques a confort ne failli  
Qui donna tout son cuer a li.

This seems to be really an invocation, although not quite the epic kind; it is rather more similar to the following passage from Boccaccio's *Laberinto d'Amore*:

E perciò, acciocchè questo ne segua, divotamente priego colui, dal quale è quello, di che io debbo dire, e ogni altro bene procedette, e procede, e di tutto, come per effetto si vede, è larghissimo donatore, che alla presente opera della sua luce si fattamente illumini il mio intelletto, e la mano scrivente regga che per me quello si scriva, che onore e gloria sia del suo santissimo nome, e utilità e consolazione dell'anime di coloro, li quali per avventura ciò leggeranno, e altro no. <sup>12</sup>

There are strong external arguments in favour of Chaucer's knowing *Le Confort d'Ami*. In his Introduction to Guillaume de Machaut's *Oeuvres*, Ernest Hoepffner says about this work: "Trop souvent, malheureusement, ces qualités sont noyées dans un flot d'idées impersonnelles, de lieux communs et de banalités qui ne rendent pas toujours des plus attrayentes la lecture de ce long ouvrage. Tel ne paraît cependant pas avoir été l'avis des contemporains de Machaut. A l'exception du *Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne* aucun de ses poèmes n'a été reproduit aussi souvent que le *Confort d'Ami*. Il figure non seulement dans tous les grands manuscrits qui contiennent les oeuvres complètes de Machaut, mais encore dans ceux qui n'en donnent qu'un choix... En outre, il a même eu l'honneur de copies particulières, jusqu'au XVe. siècle" <sup>13</sup>. Then speaking about the traces it left in the French literature of the period, the editor adds: "Ce sont les preuves les plus manifestes du succès qu'obtint le poème de Machaut. Il ne le cède, sous ce rapport, à aucune de ses autres oeuvres." <sup>14</sup>

In the passage quoted, lines 57-63 carry the same meaning as lines 81 ff. in the *House of Fame*. 'Tout ce qui est fu et sera' seems to be directly translated in the line 'That is and was and ever shal', while 'And he that mover ys of al' is a concentrated, Dantean expression of the thought embodied in the French lines <sup>15</sup>. *Confort d'Ami* 11. 64 ff. and *HF* 83 ff. bear a resemblance in matter, if not in words or general intention, which may well prove that one is the source of the other.

To conclude: I believe that the *idea* of invocations cannot have been taken by Chaucer from the French love-vision poems, for it is not a "common feature" in them, as Sypherd says. The invocation is a classical convention, and it may very well have been suggested to Chaucer, not only by Dante, but by Virgil and Boccaccio. Writing about Rambeau and his comparison of the *Divine Comedy* with the

12 *Op. Cit.*, p. 259.

13 Introduction, pp. XVIII-XIX.

14 *Ibid.*, p. XX.

15 Cf. DANTE, *Paradiso*, I, 1.: "La Gloria di Colui che tutto move...".



*House of Fame*, Skeat says: "I am quite aware that many of the alleged parallel passages are too trivial to be relied upon, and that the author's case would have been strengthened, rather than weakened, by several judicious omissions; but we may fairly accept the conclusion that Chaucer is more indebted to Dante in this poem than in any other."<sup>16</sup> Skeat is rather on the side of Rambeau, while I incline to agree, on the whole, with Sypherd's theory, but I think his case would not have been weaker if he had refrained from relating every part of the *House of Fame* to the French love-vision poems. Aage Brusendorff says that in it the medieval conventions are strongly coloured by the new humanistic ideas<sup>17</sup>. No doubt, the invocation is one of the outposts of classicism in Chaucer's medieval art.

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<sup>16</sup> SKEAT, W., *Op Cit.*

<sup>17</sup> BRUSENDORFF, Aage - *Chaucer Tradition*.