



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Padua Research Archive - Institutional Repository

Nick Havely, ed., Geoffrey Chaucer: The House of Fame

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available at: 11577/3172041 since: 2016-01-10T18:50:01Z

Publisher:

Indiana University

Published version:

DOI:

Terms of use:

Open Access

This article is made available under terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Guidelines, as described at <http://www.unipd.it/download/file/fid/55401> (Italian only)

(Article begins on next page)

The Medieval Review, 2015 Reviews

The Medieval Review 15.10.13

Havelly, Nick, ed. *Geoffrey Chaucer: The House of Fame*. Durham Medieval and Renaissance Texts, 3. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013. pp. xiv, 272. \$22.69 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-88844-563-6 (paperback).

Reviewed by:

Alessandra Petrina

Università degli Studi di Padova

alessandra.petrina@unipd.it

In his review of the first edition of this book, which appeared in 1994, John M. Fyler rightly noted that such an edition, complete and detailed yet eminently approachable, would be an ideal tool for students dealing with this one poem and not with the larger Chaucerian corpus, and thus not needing the bulky and expensive Riverside Chaucer. The reviewer, however, also wondered which student would ever deal with *The House of Fame* alone, given the low popularity of this poem in classrooms, even at university level. More than twenty years after the appearance of that first edition, the poem has certainly seen an increase in critical attention, with excellent studies by, among others, Robert Meyer-Lee, Dean Swinford, Sarah Powrie, Helen Cooper, and Simon Meecham-Jones (most of whom are carefully taken into consideration in Havelly's updating of his work); but it remains difficult to fit *The House of Fame* into the university curriculum in which, traditionally, *The Canterbury Tales* or *Troilus and Criseyde* take precedence.

Yet it may be argued that this comparatively short poem would be an ideal choice to introduce students to late medieval English literature, given the wealth of topics and motifs it offers, as well as the links with contemporary and previous poems. Starting from this premise, the present edition would be an invaluable tool, since one of its great merits is to provide starting points for discussions that might explore different areas of late medieval thought and culture, from the structure of dream visions to the relation between English and other European cultures. More than twenty years after the first appearance of this book, a second edition has become necessary, given the number of recent critical studies on the poem, and given the fact that no other edition has appeared in the meantime; the textual evidence, on the other hand, remains the same, though the availability of databases such as EEBO (Early English Books Online) makes the comparison between the extant early printed copies easier--something of which the present editor is very much aware. Havelly has seamlessly incorporated his new material in the already existing work, maintaining a high level of scholarship. Aimed at both students and scholars, the book maintains throughout Havelly's typically informal and friendly tone, while offering a rigorous survey of the (sometimes complex) textual and linguistic problems associated with the poem.

Though, in the words of the introduction, this does not claim to be a critical edition, editorial standards are high. All five witnesses to the poem are taken into consideration, and the variants presented in the textual notes are far more than the ones present, for instance, in the Riverside Chaucer, while the thorny question of the different endings is dealt with separately, in an appendix to the textual notes (the reader will have to look for it, however, as it is not explicitly indicated in the table of contents). Wisely, textual notes, together with the long commentary, are confined to the end of the book, while the text of the poem is accompanied only by some light glossing that makes reading easier without becoming

intrusive. In this way the book reaches out to a wide range of readers, offering also wry little observations such as the fact that the Eagle's interest in poetics and its use of specialised and sometimes arcane language shows that the character "has (like George Eliot's Casaubon) a good deal in common with its author" (13). The rigorous division of the introduction into subsections may also guide readers towards the areas of their interest, though a reader less acquainted with Chaucer might have wished for a general introduction that would help dealing with the overall structure of the poem. Each of these sections is accompanied by plentiful (although not always fully updated) footnotes, offering a rich bibliography to readers who might want to pursue specific topics.

As is to be expected of a scholar who has devoted much of his work to Anglo-Italian literary relations, Havely is especially at ease with a poem he himself defines as "omnivorous" (17). His exploration of the possible influences that might have been at work in the composition of *The House of Fame* does not deviate from what was offered in the first edition, but there are interesting new observations in the section devoted to Dante (it should be noted that Havely has also recently published a major study on *Dante and the British Public*), while his investigation into contemporary scientific texts pursues his previous original work on Nicholas Oresme. The real strength of the edition, however, is in the commentary, presented as longer endnotes. Havely shies away from presenting an overall interpretation of the poem, which would in any case be out of place here, and prefers to concentrate on detail, giving the reader all the elements with which to pursue a critical investigation, and offering analogies and comparisons with an impressively wide range of classical and contemporary European texts. His work on Virgil in particular is extremely detailed and useful, while the other Chaucerian works are constantly kept in the reader's mind. A bibliography, a select (but generous) glossary, and an index of proper names complete the book.

The new edition emends some of the few omissions or infelicities present in the first, and Havely has taken into due consideration the observations and occasional criticisms of past reviewers, while keeping his own counsel on some disputed interpretations. All these elements confirm the high standard and solidity of this edition, and its value for students and scholars alike.