THE EAGLE'S SPEECH IN CHAUCER'S

HOUSE OF FAME

William S. Wilson

O reverend Chaucer, rose of rethouris all,
As in our younge ane flour imperiall.

—DUNBAR

BOOK II of Chaucer's House of Fame tells how the poet is carried aloft in the grip of an eagle, wondering whether he will be metamorphosed into a star. The Eagle explains to the fanciful poet that Jove has sent him to reward Geffrey with a trip to the House of Fame, where the loveless lover-poet will hear tidings of love. The problem of how Fame can hear everything on earth is introduced by Geffrey, and is solved in a long speech by the Eagle which turns out to be the central episode of Book II.

Since the explanatory speech on the transmission of sound does not advance the narrative of a journey for love-tidings, it has been treated as a digression, just as the synopsis of the Aeneid in Book I has seemed unnecessary to the plot, and the scene in the court of Fame in Book III is a further delay to the narrative. When the three main episodes are considered digressions from the ostensible purpose of the poem—the journey to hear love tidings—the poem has no unity. As D. W. Robertson has written recently, "In The House of Fame the various parts all concern the same speaker, and they appear in narrative sequence, but otherwise they have little outward connection with one another." The solution is to shift emphasis from the journey, treating it as a narrative framework rather than the center of the poem, and to examine the three episodes for thematic unity.

The three episodes can be related to the trivium, the linguistic arts of the Middle Ages. The synopsis of the Aeneid in Book I illustrates the techniques of medieval exegetical grammar on the ideal illustration of grammar, the Aeneid; the scene in the court of Fame in Book III illustrates the techniques of medieval dialectic on a medieval dialectician, the goddess Fame. Book II, the subject of this essay, illustrates the techniques of Ciceronian persuasive rhetoric on a relevant science, the physics of sound. In other words, if we ask how Chaucer thinks about the Aeneid, the answer is, grammatically; how he thinks about Fame, dialectically; how he thinks about sound, rhetorically. The journey for tidings is a spiritual journey, the adventures of a poet confronted with successive rivals to poetry—grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic—and discovering that poetry is something different.

Each time scholars have argued that Chaucer's poems were influenced by manuals of rhetoric, other scholars have answered that the example of poets was more influential than any precepts...
of rhetoric. Apparently, the only case in which some kind of rhetorical analysis must be allowed is in the instance of poems that mention rhetoric or rhetorical terms. Book II of the *House of Fame* qualifies for rhetorical analysis since the Eagle uses such terms as conclusion, persuasion, demonstration, and colors of rhetoric.

Aside from the vocabulary of rhetoric, Chaucer's familiarity with rhetoric is certain from his poetry, and probable from his life and times. In London schools, according to William Fitzstephen (d. 1190), "Sometime Certaine Oratours, with Rhetorical Orations, speake handsomly to perswade, being carefull to observe the precepts of Art, who omit no matter contingent." Even if Chaucer had not studied rhetoric in school, he might have studied it as a student at the Inner Temple. D. S. Bland has argued that law students did not study rhetoric from Sir Thomas Eliot's assertion that Law-French caused a lack of style and delivery in the speech of lawyers. But Bland is thinking of rhetoric as verbal ornament or entertainment, not as persuasion by means of deductive proofs such as those of geometry.

The techniques of rhetorical proof, those which would be appreciated by a lawyer on one hand and by a geometrician on the other, are suggested by the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: "Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic." Aristotle and other Greek and Roman rhetoricians emphasized logic and proof to an extent usually overlooked in studies of rhetoric as an influence on poetry, perhaps because the invention and arrangement of arguments seem foreign to poetry. To understand Chaucer's use of rhetoric, we must remember Aristotle's partial definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in the particular case what are the available means of persuasion" (i.1.2). The usual means of persuasion are the example, called rhetorical induction, and the enthymeme, called rhetoric syllogism. Such proofs are the only things that really come within the province of the art of rhetoric; style, delivery, memory, even the prologue and epilogue, are concessions to the audience, "... mere outward show for pleasing the hearer; wherefore no one teaches geometry in this way" (iii.1.6).

According to Aristotle, a speech requires only two parts, the narration of the case and the proof (iii.15.4-5). Quintilian's *Institutio* lists four parts (iv.6), but the *Ad Herennium* and Cicero in the *De inventione* divides a speech into six parts: exordium, statement of facts, division of topics, proof, refutation, and epilogue. The consensus of classical rhetoricians is that a speech can have from two to six parts, depending on the circumstances, but that the usual speech has four parts: exordium, narration, proof, and epilogue.

According to Cicero in the *De inventione* the exordium or prologue or *proem* "... brings the mind of the auditor into a proper condition to receive the rest of the speech. This will be

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2 See for an example Daniel C. Boughner, "Elements of Epic Grandeur in the *Troilus*," *ELH, A Journal of English Literary History*, VI (September 1939), 200-210. Which is answered by Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's Use of the *Teseida*," *PMLA*, LXII (September 1947), 598-621.


6 Trans. Lane Cooper (New York, 1932), I.i.

accomplished if he becomes well-disposed, attentive, and receptive” (i.15, 20). When the auditor is slow-witted, or the material is difficult to grasp, the speaker obtains good will by referring to his own acts and services without arrogance (i.15.20-22). This precept is illustrated by the Eagle’s tact, in Book II of the *House of Fame*, when he introduces himself to Geffrey:

“First, I, that in my fet have the, Of which thou hast a fere and wonder, Am dwellynge with the god of thonder, Which that men calle Jupiter, That dooth me flee ful ofte fer To do al hys commaundement.”* (606-611)

Good will is also obtained if the speaker gives an account of acts which his listeners have performed with “courage, wisdom, and mercy; but so as not to show excessive flattery: and if it is shown in what honourable esteem they are held” (i.16.22). The Eagle sympathizes with Geffrey, and tells him how Jupiter feels sorry for him because he has served Cupid so long without reward. Not to show excessive flattery, the Eagle says that Geffrey does not have much wit—“Although that in thy hed ful lyte is”—but then he continues to praise Geffrey’s generosity in praising love and his servants when he never takes part in love himself. Ostensibly the Eagle is explaining the purpose of the journey, the flight to hear tidings as a reward for unselfish service, but this elaborate introduction serves the additional purpose of making Geffrey well-disposed toward the Eagle, and therefore receptive to a speech. The Eagle is prompted to deliver a speech by Geffrey’s inability to understand how Fame can hear everything that is said on earth:

“... that kan I preve
Be reson worthy for to leve,
So that thou yeve thyne advertence
To understonde my sentence.” (707-710)

The Eagle’s concern lest he be misunderstood follows Aristotle’s advice to tell the audience to pay attention, not just at the beginning, but throughout the speech whenever attention might lag (iii.14.9). Each time the Eagle comes to a transition in his speech, he warns Geffrey to listen closely and to do his best to understand. The frequency of these admonitions indicates little respect for Geffrey’s intelligence.

The prologue which warms up the audience is followed by the narration or statement of the facts, in which the audience is informed of the allegations which are to be proved (*De inventione* i.19.27). Thus the Eagle explains what he is going to prove:

“First shalt thou here where she duelleth, And so thyn oune bok hyt tellith; Hir paleys stant, as I shal seye, Ryght even in mydles of the weye Betwixen hevene, erthe, and see; That what so ever in al these three Is spoken, either privy or apert, The way thereto ys so overt, And stant eke in so juste a place That every son mot to hyt pace, Or what so cometh from any tonge, Be hyt rouned, red, or songe, Or spoke in suerte or in drede, Certeyn, hyt moste thider nede.” (711-724)

This statement of the case is followed by a transition to the proof or demonstration:

“Now herkene wel, for-why I wille Tellen the a propre skille
And a worthy demonstracon
In myn ymagynacion.” (725-728)

The demonstration, according to Cicero, usually has five parts when it is deductive: the major premise; the proof of the major premise; the minor

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premise; the proof of the minor premise; and the conclusion of the proof (i.37-67). The Eagle first states the major premise, "... which sets forth briefly the principle from which springs the whole force and meaning of the syllogism":

"That every kyndely thynge that is Hath a kyndely stede ther he May best in hyt conserved be; Unto which place every thynge, Though his kyndely enclynynge, Moveth for to come to, Whan that hyt is away therfro;" (730-736)

This major premise is followed by the proof of the major premise, "... by which the brief statement of the major premise is supported by reason and made plainer and more plausible":

"As thus: loo, thou maist alday se That any thing that hevy be, As stoon, or led, or thyng of wighte, And bere hyt never so hye on highte, Lat goo thyh hand, hit falleth doun. Ryght so seye I be fryr or soun, Or smoke, or other thynges lyghte; Alwey they seke upward on highte. While ech of hem is at his large, Lyght thing upward, and downward charge." (737-746)

At the end of the proof of the major premise, that premise is repeated:

"Thus every thing, by thyss reson, Hath his propre mansyon, To which hit seketh to repaire, Ther-as hit shulde not apaire." (755-756)

This proof of the major premise is supported by reference to authorities, a rhetorical device sanctioned by Quintilian (v.11.36) and Cicero (De inventione i.53.101):

"Loo, this sentence ys knownen kouth Of every philosophes mouth, As Aristotle and daun Platon, And other clerkys many oon;" (757-760)

There is another transition as the Eagle turns from the major to the minor premise:

"And to confirme my resoun, Thou wost wel this, that spech is soun, Or elles no man myghte hyt here; Now herke what y wol the lere." (761-764)

There follows the minor premise, "... in which is premised the point which on the basis of the major premise is pertinent to proving the case":

"Soun ys noght but eyr ybroken, And every speche that ys spoken, Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair, In his subsstance ys but air;" (765-768)

The proof of the minor premise follows, by which "... what has been premised is established by reasons." This long proof consists of analogies which show that sound is "broken" air which travels in enlarging concentric circles. The proof can be summarized by quoting Vitruvius: "Voice is a flowing breath of air, perceptible to the hearing by contact. It moves in an endless number of circular rounds, like the innumerably increasing circular waves which appear when a stone is thrown into smooth water." Through the multiplication of these circles sound reaches the House of Fame.

With the completion of the premises and their proofs, the Eagle can give the conclusion "in which there is stated briefly what is proved by the whole deduction":

"Now have I told, yf thou have mynde, How speche or soun, of pure kynde, Enlyned ys upward to meve; This, mayst thou fele, wel I preve." (823-826)

In twenty more lines the Eagle repeats his argument, thus concluding the proof, but not concluding the speech, which has a separate brief conclusion as tidy as a geometric QED:

"Than ys this the conclusyon, That every speche of every man,

As ye the telle first began
Moveth up on high to pace
Kyndely to Fames place." (848-852)

The Eagle has now completed the four-part oration, and he fishes for compliments in words which show the self-consciousness of the rhetorical invention and arrangement, thus making rhetoric part of the meaning of the poem:

"Telle me this now feythfully,
Have ye not proved thus symply,
Without any subtilite
Of speche, or gret prolixite
Of termes of philosophie,
Of figures of poetrice,
Or colours of rethorike?" (853-859)

The Eagle plumes himself on the clarity he brings to a complex scientific demonstration:

"Pardee, hit oughte the to lykel
For hard langage and hard matere
Ys encombrous for to here
Atones; wost thou not wel thi?"
And ye answered and seyde, "Yis." (860-864)

And he is proud that he has adapted his style to his audience, just as the Host asks the Clerk to do, "That we may understande what ye seye" (IV.E. 20):

"A hal" quod he, "lo, so I can
Lewedly to a lewde man
Speke, and shewe hym swyche skiles
That he may shake hem be the biles,
So palpable they shulden be." (865-869)

Having established the excellence of his style, the Eagle asks for praise of his content:

"But telle me this, now pray se ye the,
How thinketh the my conclusyon?" (870-871)

Geffrey, not to be outdone, replies with equally technical rhetorical language:

"A good persuasion,"
Quod I, "hyt is; and lyk to be
Rygth so as thou hast preved me." (872-874)

11 Compare A Midsummer-Night's Dream, where "A good persuasion" (II.i.156) is the reply to another argumentative and deductive speech.

The Eagle, as he is well aware, has perfectly illustrated the five-part rhetorical syllogism or epicheireme. Now he illustrates the other means of persuasion, rhetorical induction, or the example. When rhetoric is associated with law, it concerns governing both oneself and others; the Eagle tells an appropriate anecdote of Phaeton, who was unable to govern himself or the horses, and he points the moral:

"Loo, ys it not a gret myschaunce
To lete a fool han governance
Of thing that he can not demayne?" (987-999)

This example which proves a moral is in the tradition of the preacher's exempla and the illustrator's emblems, a rhetorical tradition. The rhetorical qualities of the Eagle's speech on Phaeton are unobtrusive because Phaeton is part of the local color in the sky, so that mention of him arises naturally out of the scene.

We need not be surprised to find Ciceronian rhetoric in the fourteenth century. In his essay, "Rhetoric in the Middle Ages," Richard McKeon defines four historical periods of rhetoric; the fourth one is "the fourteenth century and the Renaissance in which Aristotle and the Greek rhetoricians, Cicero, Quintilian, and Boethius all had increasing influence." 12 In this period the dominant rhetorical tradition subordinates rhetoric to logic since rhetoric begins with hypotheses such as the Eagle's premises, while logic or dialectic begins with theses, universal questions such as the nature of fame. The Eagle emerges as a quasi-Ciceronian rhetorician, and can be said to represent Ciceronian rhetoric in virtue of resemblances between an aquiline and a rhetorical flight. The name of a late

Roman rhetorician—Aquila Romanus—explains the Eagle as a symbol of rhetoric. The comparison of an orator to an eagle (Bossuet was called the Eagle of Meaux) is turned around to make the Eagle an orator who carries Geoffrey away on a rhetorical flight of fancy.

The Eagle's speech may be interpreted as a test of Ciceronian rhetoric in a poem written when that rhetoric emerged as a claimant of poetry as part of its province. Apparently Chaucer was aware of the forceful persuasive rhetoric, whether of law, geometry, or Aristotelian deductive science, and as a young poet tested it in his poem as part of the characterization of the Eagle. The effect of this test is to separate poetry and persuasive rhetoric as intellectual methods.