SCHOLASTIC LOGIC IN
CHAUCER'S HOUSE OF FAME

by William S. Wilson

The House of Fame is divided into three books, and three main episodes, which do not further the ostensible purpose of the poem, the Poet's journey to hear tidings of love as a reward for his unselfish service to love. The three episodes have been treated as digressions from the journey, but this approach leaves the poem without unity or meaning. The emphasis must be shifted from the journey for tidings of love, which can be treated as a framework, to the three disparate episodes, which can be shown to be significantly arranged. The three episodes demonstrate the three linguistic arts of the Middle Ages, the Trivium. Book I illustrates the techniques of medieval grammatica on the ideal illustration of grammar, the Aeneid,1 book II illustrates the techniques of Ciceronian persuasive rhetoric on a relevant science, the physics of sound,2 and book III, I will argue in this paper, illustrates the techniques of medieval logic on a medieval dialectician, the goddess of Fame. The journey for tidings is a spiritual journey, with the adventures of a poet confronted with successive rivals to poetry—grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic—and the discovery that poetry is something entirely separate.

When critics discuss poetry in relation to logic or dialectic (the two words mean the same thing for this period), they usually mean something like the continuity of argument in a mode which is neither inductive nor deductive, an intellectual process in which an idea generates its opposite which modifies it and which it modifies. Medieval logic resembles this intellectual method in its use of opposition as a principle in thinking, but it is more static than organic. As a thirteenth-century manual explains "dyaletyque" in Caxton's translation, "This science proueth the pro. and the contra. That is to saye the verite or trouthe and otherwise. And it preueth wherby shal be knouen the trewe fro the fals and the good fro the euyll." This dialectic is a critical pro-

ceedure seeking the highest and clearest knowledge, reasoning from probable premises, and depending on a choice between two contradictions. Book III of the *House of Fame* illustrates the use of such logic to analyze the popular idea of fame, refining it into a philosophic idea.

The process of definition begins with the entrance of a cross-section of humanity, "... of sondry regiouns/ Of alksesmyes condicious/ That dwelle in erthe under the mone, Pore and rych." This inclusiveness insures the universality of the conclusions. These representative people fall down on their knees to petition the Goddess. She has three alternatives, awarding them good fame, ill fame, or no fame at all. Similarly, a participant in a Platonic dialectic, according to Cicero, has three choices when asked a question: "... he must either refuse to answer, or concede your point or deny it."  

And somme of hem she graunted sone,
And somme she werned wel and faire,
And some she graunted the contraire
Of her axyng utterly.

(1538-41)

The first three groups of petitioners desire and deserve good fame, but they are treated diversely. Group one gets only a warning, or no reputation at all. Group two, identical with the first, is given ill fame. The Goddess tells Eolus to "... trumpe alle the contrayre, Of that they han don wel or payre" (1629-30). Ill fame then suggests or evokes its opposite, so that group three, indistinguishable from the first two, is granted the good fame it desires.

The fourth and fifth groups deserve good fame but desire obscurity. Group four is granted obscurity, but the antithesis or contradiction then arises, and group five has greatness thrust upon it. By now it is apparent that Fame moves between contraries, *sic et non, sic et non*, very like the contradictory motion in Peter Abelard's arrangement of quotations, *Sic et non*.

Group six consists of men who want the bad reputation of lovers, and who get it. Group seven, which is exactly like group six, asks for the same renown: "Lady, graunte us sone/ The same thing, the same bone..." (1773-74). But an indignant Goddess denies their plea.


The eighth group, villains who want good fame, do not receive it. An introspective Goddess, exhausted but unrepentant, rests from her caprice: "Al be ther in me no justice,/ Me lyste not to doo byt now" (1820-21).

The ninth group asks for the ill fame it deserves, and the Goddess gleefully grants it.

The Goddess of Fame has been called nonsensical, whimsical, and unpredictable; in view of her systematic self-contradictions, she can most precisely be called *illogical*. The literary notion of Fame which Chaucer derives from the *Aeneid*, Book IV, has been developed into self-contradiction and self-refutation. Fame's logic is an illogic, or a mock-logic, for she violates the law of contradiction by giving one group the opposite of what she gives an identical group; she flaunts the law of identity by being sometimes short, sometimes tall, sometimes fame, sometimes ill fame; and she ignores the law of the excluded middle, *tertium non datur*, when she offers a *tertium quid*, no reputation at all.

Scholastic logic has found the clearest and highest knowledge of Fame, but it has discovered no novel truth, and the Poet in the poem is in quest of novelty. He is disappointed since he already knew that people desired and received fame differently. What he had not known was the "condition" of Fame, and the "... ordre of her dom" (1905). The order of Fame's doom is a progression through contraries toward self-contradiction, a negative and purgative dialectic.

If the poem illustrates intellectual methods, thereby allegorizing the education of a poet, there must be a reason why Fame, and not Fortune or Love, represents dialectic. The reason can be found, I think, in the characteristic movement of the goddesses. Fortune moves in a circle or a cycle in the traditional emblem, and circular demonstrations are futile, according to Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* I.3. Nor has circular movement any contrary, according to Wyclif: "mutus circularis non habet motum sibi contrarium" (*De Logica*, III.3.14-15); but Fame, which moves up and down, has contraries: "ascensus autem et descendens contrarii sunt."

Love, which appears in the poem as Venus, has no symbolic motion as a goddess; but philosophically love is a motion toward the beloved, and a motion that ends when the goal is reached or the beloved is possessed (*De Logica*, II.3.3.59). But dialectic, unlike love, does not come to rest; peripatetics still walk up and down the corridors of academe.

The movement of Fame is neither cyclic like Fortune nor terminable like Love; it is a quantitative change of growth and diminution, a mo-
tion between contraries of ascending and descending, and this physical movement, while it represents the ebb and flow of man’s fame, is also an apt image for the movement of thought between contrary propositions.

After the Poet has witnessed this demonstration of medieval dialectic, he journeys to the House of Tidings and to a scene that comments on the uses of logic for poetic thought. In a brief emblematic event derived from Ovid (Metamorphoses, XII), a “lesynge and a sad soth sawe” are compounded into one tiding. The point of the fable is that truth and falsity are compacted and cannot be separated; but the very function of logic was such a separation, “a vero falsum cernere,” and the self-evident truth of the fable is that there is no way “… whereby shall be knownen the trewe fro the fals.” The House of Fame has used logic to discover the truth about Fame, but now the poem discourages the use of logic on the ground that it is a method of proving what common sense or intuition already knows. Chaucer is exploring the means of rendering truth in poetry, and the sceptical, although not melancholy, conclusion is that truth can be systematized but not discovered by means of logic. The Poet must continue his journey; the trivial arts are not what he has been looking for.

Queens College