The House of Fame

Geoffrey Chaucer
late-fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by
Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold, in the style of Hannah Scot, from: Walter W Skeat (Ed), 1912. Chaucer: Complete Works, edited from numerous manuscripts. Oxford University Press.

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God turne us every dreme to gode! · For hit is wonder, by the rode · to my wit, what causeth swevenes ·

Either on morwes or on evenes – God, will you turn every dream we have into something we can cherish and profit from! For their causes are a wonder, to my way of thinking. Why do they come to some people and not to others? Why do they sometimes haunt and at other times prophesy? I know not. And whoever has guessed the truth is a better man than I; for I can make nothing of them, nor ever think to toil my wits much over them.

May great value go to the writers who treat of this subject, for I can proffer no opinion, but only pray that the holy cross direct all our dreams to such good! For never since I was born, and has no man before me, I swear, dreamed so wonderful a dream as I did on the tenth day of December which, as I can recall it now, I shall tell you every bit.

Invocation

But first – trust me – I will make an invocation to the god of sleep who lies in a cave by the river Lethe with his thousand sleepy sons, and pray that he will help me to give a faithful account of my dream, if every dream lies within his realm. And he, who is the mover of all things, who is and was and ever shall be, give joy and health to those who take this dream well and do not repudiate it or wilfully misrepresent it; and to anybody who should, for whatever reason, maliciously misinterpret it, I pray to Jesus that every harm that any man has had since the beginning of the world shall fall upon him, and say that he deserves it fully. This prayer shall he have from me; I offer no charity! Now listen, as I have said, to what I dreamed, or rather, to what I awoke to.

The Dream

On the tenth day of December, I lay down one night in my usual bed, exhausted, and fell asleep wonderfully quickly. And as I slept, I dreamed that I was in a temple made of glass, in which there were more golden images and more rich shrines, more jewelled columns and more curious pictures and statues of ancient
design than I had ever seen. Certainly I had no idea where I was, although I knew it must be a temple of Venus, for I saw in one picture her naked figure floating in a sea, and on her head was a garland of white and red roses and a comb to tidy her hair. Her doves were there, and Cupid, her blind son, and Vulcan, her husband.

And as I explored a little further, I found written in shining brass on a wall, these words: ‘Now I will sing of a man whose destiny brought him to Italy, with much adversity, to the shores of Latium.’ And so the story began. I saw the destruction of Troy, the voyage of Aeneas; I saw a tempest arise that every heart might tremble to see painted on a wall. There engraved I saw Venus; how you, my cherished lady, weeping bitterly, prayed to Jupiter on high to save and protect the Trojan fleet, since Aeneas was your son. I saw the tempest quelled and Venus telling Aeneas to go to Carthage and there he would find all the ships he had feared were lost. And to cut a long story short, she caused Dido, the queen of that country, to fall in love with him and become his lover. Why should I elaborate or take greater pains to speak of love? No, that is not my way. And besides, to describe how they got to know each other would take too long.

Oh, the mistake a woman makes to love a stranger! But let us speak of Aeneas and how he betrayed Dido, alas! and cruelly left her. When she saw how utterly untrue he was and would go to Italy, she began to wring her hands. ‘Alas,’ she cried, ‘woe is me! Is every man so faithful that a new year will find him seeking a new woman, if he can last that long, or maybe three?’

In these words Dido began to pour out her grief, as I truly dreamed, I plead no other source. ‘Alas!’ she cried, ‘my sweetheart, have pity on my sorrow. Let me live! Don’t go!’ But she cried in vain.

And when she knew for certain that Aeneas was heading for his ships she went to her chamber and called for her sister Anne, and poured out her agony when she arrived, insisting that it was her own fault for falling in love and not his, and there she stabbed herself to the heart, falling dead from the wound. For the full account read Virgil’s Aeneid or the works of Ovid; were it not too long to tell, by God, I would write it here!

But alas! the unhappiness and lamentation caused by such deceitfulness, as men may read in other books as well, and, sadly too, see every day in real life. Though to excuse Aeneas fully for his wrongdoing it must be made clear that he was commanded by Mercury to go to Italy and leave Africa’s shore.

I saw engraved Aeneas’s arrival in Latium and all the battles he fought to secure his rights; how he killed Turnus and won the hand of Lavinia in marriage, and all the marvellous signs from the celestial gods; how in spite of Juno, for all her cunning and power, Aeneas achieved his destiny, for Jupiter took care of him through the prayers of Venus, to whom I pray always, to lighten our sorrows!

When I had seen all this, engraved in the temple: ‘Lord,’ I thought, ‘that created us, I have never seen such magnificence, such worthy images as are in this church; but I do not know who did this work, nor where I am, nor in which country, so I will go outside and see if I can find anybody who can tell me where I am.’

When I emerged from the door I looked around and saw that I stood before a wasteland that stretched for as far as the eye could see, without town or house, tree or bush, grass or ploughed land; for there was nothing but sand, the transparent grains as small as one finds in the deserts of Libya, and I saw
no creature at all to speak with. ‘Oh Christ!’ I thought, ‘in heaven, save me from phantoms and illusions!’ and I cast my eyes devotedly to the sky.

And I became aware that, close to the sun, as high as I could stretch to see, I thought I could discern an eagle soaring, but larger than any eagle I had ever seen. And as true as death, I swear it was made of gold, and it shone so brightly that no man has ever seen such a sight; it was as though the earth had won another sun, so brightly did this eagle’s feathers shine as it slowly descended towards me.

Book 2

Invocation

Now listen, everyone who can understand English and wishes to be instructed by my dream! Guide me, Cipris! And you, Apollo, who dwells by a clear spring on Parnassus, help me to compose and to rhyme.

Oh thought, that recorded all that I dreamt and stored it up in the treasury of my brain, now shall men see if any virtue lies in you to tell my dream properly; now show your capacity and power!

The Dream

This eagle I spoke of soon revealed more clearly to me his magnificence and beauty for, seeing me alone in the desert, he descended as though with a burning desire, swooped and snatched me up in his long, grim talons as I ran, and carried me upwards as though I was as light as a lark. How high I cannot tell you for I was so mystified and astonished, not to say petrified, that I passed out.

I was a long time thus, until at last he spoke to me in a man’s voice, saying, ‘Awake, and don’t be so frightened, for shame!’ And he addressed me by name, and so that I could awake more easily – I dreamed – ‘Awake!’ he said, in the same voice and language as one I could name; and with that voice, truly, my mind came to me again, for it spoke in a kindly way that I am unaccustomed to hearing.

And I began to wriggle as he carried me in his feet, and he said, ‘You are unnecessarily troublesome to carry for be assured you shall come to no harm. This adventure that has befallen you is for your instruction and profit. Let us see! Are you ready to look now? Take good heart and don’t quake so much with fear.’

‘Gladly,’ I said.

‘Well now,’ said he, ‘I shall first tell you, as you hang with terror in my feet, that I dwell with the god of thunder whom men call Jupiter and who often sends me long distances to do his bidding. And he has sent me here to you, now listen, by your faith! He has pity on you that you have for so long served with such diligence his blind nephew Cupid, and fair Venus also, without any reward, but nevertheless have set your wit – although your head is very light in this regard – to make books, songs and ditties in rhyme and rhythm as best you can, in reverence to love and his servants old and new; and Jove esteems it a great virtue that you often make your head ache at night for the effort you give to your writing. Wherefore, as I said, Jupiter considered this and also, good sir, that you have no knowledge of love directly; for when your work is done and your accounts are complete, instead of rest and entertainment you go home to your house and sit quietly at another book until you look completely confused; and
you live thus, like a hermit, although you are no celibate.

‘And therefore Jove, through his grace, desires that I carry you to a place that is called the House of Fame, to amuse and entertain you, in recompense for the labour and devotion that you have given, lo! causeless, to Cupid the heedless! And thus this god, through his goodness, will reward you with such things as will put you in good cheer. For trust well, when we arrive, you shall hear such truth, such lies, such joys and passions, such raunchy goings-on, such agonies, such jealousies, discords and deceptions as there are grains of corn in a granary; can you believe this?’ he said.

‘No,’ I replied, ‘because it is impossible; even if Fame had all the magpies in a realm, and all the spies, she could not hear all this, nor they see it.’

‘Oh yes, yes!’ he said to me. ‘I can prove it by reason so worthy that it will fascinate you. First you will learn where she lives, and your own books tell you this; her palace stands midway between heaven, the earth and the sea and whatever is said in any of these three places, even privately or discretely, from whichever direction, in whatever language, be it whispered, spoken or sung, will find its way to her palace.

‘Now listen carefully, for I will prove this must be so by a thought experiment. Geoffrey, you well know that everything in the natural world has its own special home where it may best be kept, and that, when displaced it will try to move towards this place again; thus a stone, if raised in the hand to any height and let go of, will fall.

‘So it is with fire and sound, or smoke and other light things, they always seek to rise; if they are free, light things will rise, heavy things will fall. Lo! this knowledge can be confirmed from every philosopher’s mouth, and well you know that speech is sound, or else it could not be heard; now listen to what I teach you.

‘Sound is nothing but broken air and every word that is spoken, loudly or softly, wisely or obscenely, is by nature just air. When men pluck harp strings, whether heavily or gently, with this stroke the air breaks as it does when men speak; so now you know what speech is. Now if you throw a stone into water, you know how one circle causes another, propagating outwards by the others’ movement, multiplying until the disturbance reaches the surrounding banks. In the same way, every word, spoken loudly or softly, first moves the air nearby, which in turn moves air that is further away. So in the air, my dear brother, every parcel stirs up the next and bares speech upwards, magnifying and amplifying until it reaches the House of Fame – take it in all seriousness or in fun.

‘Each thing has its own natural place, and this place for sound must lie in the air. And since everything that is away from its natural location will try to return, it follows that every sound will move upwards to the House of Fame, set between Earth, the sea and heaven. And it is to here that every spoken word ascends and is preserved. Have I not proved this simply?’ And I answered, ‘Yes.’

‘Aha!’ he cried. ‘So I can speak simply to a simpleton and show him the obvious! By God,’ he said, ‘I will vouch that before nightfall you will know the truth of this by experience.’ And with this he soared upwards crying, ‘By Saint James! Now we will have some fun!’

‘Look carefully down there,’ he said, ‘and see if you can recognise anything.’ And I began to look down and saw fields and plains, hills and now mountains, valleys, forests and cities, now ships sailing on the
sea. But soon he was flying so high that the entire world seemed no more than a point. And he spoke to me eagerly, asking: ‘Do you see any town, or anything that you recognise down there?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘I am not surprised,’ he replied, ‘for Daedalus was never so high as this, nor his child foolish Icarus, who flew so high that the sun melted his wings and he fell into the sea and drowned. Now look around, see the expanse of air we are in, but try not to be afraid for in this region dwell many of those beasts that Plato spoke of, the beasts of the air.’ And I saw these creatures, drifting and flying.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘look upwards and see the milky way that was scorched when the sun’s golden son desired to oust his father and govern. The horses saw well enough that he was incapable and began to lurch and rear until both the air and the Earth began to burn. Lo! is it not a great misfortune when a child is in charge of something that he cannot control?’

Then I began to look beneath me again and saw the ‘beasts of the air’, clouds, mists and tempests, snows, hails, rains and winds, swirling and forming, and I could see the way through which I had been carried. ‘Oh God,’ I said, ‘that made Adam, how mighty is your magnificence.’

‘Do you want to learn about the stars?’

‘Certainly not,’ I replied. ‘I am too old, now, for all that.’

‘A pity,’ he said, ‘because I would have taught you all the names of the stars and the location of each of the constellations.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said.

‘Yes, by God, it does,’ he said, ‘and do you know why? Because when you read about them in your books of poetry, you have no idea where these constellations are, although you often have these works in your hand.’

‘It doesn’t matter!’ I said. ‘I believe as well those who are conversant in this as though I knew the positions myself. And also, they shine so brightly here that it would destroy my eyesight if I had to look at them.’

‘That may well be,’ he said. And he carried me onwards and upwards for a while. Then he raised his voice louder than I have ever heard.

‘Can you hear what I hear?’

‘What’s that?’ said I. ‘That great sound,’ he said, ‘that rumbles up and down Fame’s corridors, full of language both complementary and scolding, of truth and falsehood mixed. Listen well. It is not whispered! Can you not hear the great murmur?’

‘It is like the beating of the sea,’ I said, ‘against hollow rocks after a storm; let a man stand a mile from the shore and listen. Or like the dying rumble of a thunderclap.’

And with this word, we approached the House of Fame and in a street, I know not how, he set me safely on my feet.’

‘Now,’ I said, ‘while we can speak, before I leave you, what can I learn if, as you have said, nobody lives in this vast house.’

‘Oh no, you should understand,’ he said, ‘that when any spoken thing comes into the House of Fame
it takes on the appearance of the person who uttered it; it is so like the originator of the sound that you will guess it to be, man or woman, the very person. Is this not a wonderful thing?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Farewell, then,’ he said. ‘I will wait for you here. And may God of heaven send you the grace to reap some good from what you are about to experience.’ And I took my leave of him and began to explore.

**Book 3**

*Invocation*

Oh god of knowledge and of light, Apollo, through your great strength, guide this last little book. Not that I shall fail to use all the poetical arts; but despite shortcomings in the rhyme and errors in the metre, make it agreeable; and see that I pay more attention to the meaning I wish to convey than to the style.

And if, divine virtue, you will help me to set down the things that are in my head – by this I mean, to describe the House of Fame – you will see me go swiftly to the next laurel I see and kiss it, for it is your tree; now enter into my heart!

*The Dream*

When I had taken leave of this eagle, I began to climb towards the palace, finding the ascent difficult because the incline was steep and the ground was like glass; clearer than glass. My curiosity was aroused and I went down on my hands and knees to try to determine the type of stone from which it was made. It was ice. ‘By Saint Thomas of Kent!’ I thought, ‘this is a poor foundation on which to build such a high structure; it should bring little glory to its architect, so save me God!’

Then I saw that half the rock was engraved with the names of people whose lives had been prosperous and their fame widely spread. But the names were difficult to read and one or two letters of each had melted away completely. I began to conjecture whether they might have been melted by heat rather than by the wind. For on the other side of the hill, which faced northwards, were written the names of many famous people from ancient times, yet they were as fresh as the day they had been written, and looked as though they had been engraved in that very hour. But I knew well what the cause was; they were protected by the shade of the palace that stood high above me and were engraved on so cold a place that heat might not deface them.

I set off up the hill and found at the top a building that was so beautiful that no living man could possibly have the ability to describe it adequately. The great ingenuity, intricacy, beauty and workmanship I cannot convey to you, my wits are not equal to the task. It was all of beryl; there were shrines, towers, halls as full of windows as there are snowflakes in a blizzard, chambers, pinnacles, gargoyles, all made from one solid piece of beryl. And in each of the towers were various rooms filled with ballad-singers and storytellers; I heard Orpheus playing sweetly and precisely on a harp, and lesser harpers sitting at his feet. There were all sorts of musicians, many thousands, playing flutes, horns and bagpipes, teaching love serenades, merry dances and bloodcurdling calls to war.

There were more people than there are stars in heaven. I saw minstrels, magicians, old witches, oracular
priestesses, sorceresses, and religious men who knew all this sorcery. I saw queen Medea, Circe and Simon Magus; I saw, and knew by name, all those who had achieved fame through the magic arts, but to speak of all these people would take until doomsday!

I mused again upon the walls of beryl that shone more brightly than glass and began to explore further, finding the main entrance to my right; it was decorated with elaborate carvings such as I had never seen before, although fashioned by chance as often as by careful purpose. Passing these gold circles and florid ornaments quickly I dreamed that I came across many people shouting: ‘Gifts, gifts, keep them coming! God save the lady of this domain, our own gentle Lady Fame!’ and they all poured out of the hall, jingling coins and money. And some were kings in fine clothes and there were heralds calling the praises of rich folk and every man of them, I can tell you, was wearing a garment called a surcoat, richly embroidered, and none was like any of the others. But I am not about to describe all the devices that they wore on their coats, for I would find it impossible; men might make of them a book twenty feet thick I would estimate! Anyone able to do so could have picked out all the heraldic emblems worn since the birth of chivalry.

Lo! how could I describe all this? And what need is there to tell you that every wall and every floor was of gold half a foot thick, and gold as pure as the Venetian ducats of which my pocket is all too light.

But there was no crowding in this vigorous and pleasant place; and high up upon a dais, in an imperial seat of solid ruby, I saw a creature forever seated whom nature had created only once. At first I truly thought that she was so small as to be less than a yard in height, but after a while she grew so wonderfully that she touched the Earth with her feet and with her head she touched heaven. And there I saw a greater wonder still, looking into her eyes; but I did not count them all, for she had as many as there are feathers on a bird, or on the four beasts that honour God’s throne, as John wrote in the Apocalypse. Her hair, wavy and curly, shone like burnished gold and she had as many ears and tongues as there are hairs on a beast. And on her feet I saw partridges’ wings and Lord! the jewels and riches I saw on this goddess! And Lord! the harmonious melody of heavenly songs I heard sung around her throne, such that the palace walls rung. So sung the mighty Muse Calliope and her eight sisters, meek and humble; and evermore, eternally, they sung: ‘Praised be you and your name, goddess of renown and fame.’ And on her shoulders were the heraldic emblems of all those who had achieved fame; even of Alexander and Hercules.

From this dais stretched a line of pillars all the way to the door. First of all I saw, standing high upon a pillar of pristine lead and iron, Josephus of the Saturnian religion who told romances of the Hebrews, and he bore upon his shoulders the fame of the Jewish people. And beside him stood seven others, wise and worthy, to help him support such a heavy burden. And because they had written of battles and other ancient marvels, therefore was the pillar made of lead and iron, for iron is the metal of Mars, the god of battle, and lead, without fail, is the metal of Saturn, who has such a large wheel to turn. And standing in each row were many I could name and describe, although to do so would take too long.

I saw standing upon an iron pillar a Thessalian who bore the fame of Thebes on his shoulders, and the name also of cruel Achilles. And nearby, in faith! and high on a pillar, stood the great Homer, and others also, holding up Troy; so heavy was its fame that it was no easy task to support it. And I saw standing on a pillar of tinned iron the Latin poet Virgil who, for so many years, has borne up the fame of Trojan Aeneas.

Next to him, on a pillar of copper, was Ovid who wrote of Venus and has sown widely the name of the great god of Love. And for some reason this hall, which I describe, had grown in height, length and
breadth a thousandfold since I had first entered.

Then I saw on a pillar of hammered iron the great poet Lucan, who bore on his shoulders, as high as I could see, the fame of Julius Caesar and of Pompey. And by him stood all the learned men who had written of Rome's mighty works, whom it would take too long to name.

And next to these, on a pillar of sulphur, as though he was mad, stood one who bore up all the fame of hell; of Pluto and of Proserpina, queen of this dark place.

What more can I tell? The hall was as full of those who have written stories of ancient times as there are rooks' nests in trees. But suddenly I heard a noise, like bees in a swarm, and looking around, I saw coming into the hall a mass of people from every region of the Earth, and they fell down on their knees before this noble queen and said: 'Grant us, bright lady, a request!' And some of them she granted and some she refused outright, and for some she granted the opposite of what they had asked; and as for her reasons, I have no idea, for these people, I well know, had each deserved good fame, but were variously treated, just as they are by Dame Fortune, her sister. Some said: 'Give us fame and renown for our good work.'

'I refuse,' she said.

'Alas!' they cried. 'Tell us why! Tell us the reason.'

'For it pleases me,' she said, and called her messenger to fetch Aeolus, the god of winds. Aeolus was subduing the winds to their distress, holding them down so tightly that they roared like bears, but he came at once and when he arrived at Fame's feet, he waited for her command.

Then came another huge company of good folk, who cried: 'Lady, grant us fame and renown!'

'No!' she replied. 'Your good works do not persuade me in the slightest to grant you fame. Instead, I shall give you infamy and a name to spit upon, although you have deserved much better. Now go on your way, for you have been served.' Aeolus took his trumpet and blew slander and undeserved shame, as swiftly as a stone cannon ball flies from a gun when fire has been set to the powder, and the smoke from it stank like the pit of hell.

A third company came and threw themselves on their knees and said: 'We have truly, each one of us, deserved fame, and implore you to let it be known!'

'I grant it,' she said. 'For it pleases me that your good work shall be known; and yet, you shall have better renown even than you deserve. Aeolus, put away your black trumpet and take the other one called 'Laud' and blow it so that their fame spreads throughout the world.' And so Aeolus blew.

And a fourth company came, though certainly they were few in number. 'Lady, we have tried to do good things but have acquired no fame. Please hide our works, for we did it out of kindness and for no other reason.'

'I grant all that you ask,' she said. 'With that I scratched my head and saw a fifth host fall to their knees, saying that they cared nothing for fame and had created the things they had for the love of God and for contemplation. 'What!' she cried, 'are you mad? No, your names shall endure, every one of you!'

A sixth company came. 'Mercy, dear lady; to be honest, we have done nothing to speak of and because
of our idleness and lethargy no ladies have ever held any other wish than that we might die; but nevertheless, let it seem to the world that women loved us madly.

‘I grant it, by my truth!’ she said. And with this a seventh rabble fell upon their knees: ‘Lady, quickly grant us the same as you granted to that other lot!’

‘Death on you!’ she cried, ‘every one of you, you indolent swine. You idle wretches. Do you hanker after such deceit? Men should hang you!’ Aeolus leapt up with his black trumpet and let out a sound that travelled the world and was so full of cruel jokes that everybody began to laugh and shout at these rogues’ expense. Then another company came; traitors, who had wickedly done the greatest harm that any heart can conceive, and they prayed that she might give them a good name.

‘No,’ she said, ‘it would be an error. Although there is no justice in me, it pleases me that it shall not be so, and I refuse.’

Then there came leaping into the hall an unruly crowd, with everybody chopping everybody else on the top of the head and shouting: ‘Lady dear, you must listen to us. In all truth, we are shrews, every one of us, and we take delight in wickedness; and for this reason we ask that our true nature be remembered and that our infamy endures.’

‘I grant it, certainly,’ she said. ‘But who are you who speaks this to me, wearing striped hose and with a bell on your hood?’

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘I am that rogue who burned the temple of...’ but at this point I imagined that I turned around because someone who was standing behind me, I thought, had spoken to me, saying: ‘Friend, what is your name? Are you here to receive fame?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘certainly not. It is enough that after my death nobody shall have heard of me.’

‘Then why are you here?’ he asked.

‘I will tell you,’ I said. ‘To learn something new, I know not what, tidings of this or that, of love or maybe of some other happiness. For certainly, he who brought me here said that I would see and hear some wonderful things in this place. But these things I’ve heard so far cannot be what he meant.’

‘No?’ he said. And I answered, ‘No, by God! For I have known since I was a little child that people desire praise and a lasting name, although I had no idea how or indeed where fame was achieved until now.’

‘I know well the things you want to hear,’ he said. Come with me and have no fear, for I shall lead you to where you will hear many things.’ Then I went with him out of the palace. And standing in a nearby valley I saw a building so strange that the house of Daedalus, that was called the Labyrinth, could not have been so wonderful to look at nor so curiously constructed. For constantly, as swiftly as thought, this outlandish house turned about and was never still. And there came from it a noise that was for all the world like the roaring of a stone when it is propelled through the air from a siege engine.

And this house was made of withies and wicker, like the material men make into cages, panniers and baskets; and in addition to the rushing noise of a stone, and the wickerwork, this house was full of things hurrying, with loud creakings and many other movements, and it had as many entrances as there are leaves on the trees during the summer and on the roof could be seen many thousands of holes to let out the sound. And throughout the day and night these doors were left wide open; there was no
porter to admit or bar the passage of conversation and there was no rest in that place nor any time at all when it was not brimful of news – news of wars, of peace, of marriages, of journeys, of delays, of death, of life, of love, of hate; and lo! this house of which I write, let me make it absolutely clear, was not small, for it was sixty miles in length and although the timber was of no strength it was built to last! – to last for as long as Fortune, who is as much the mother of events as the sea is of wells and springs, is pleased to see it last. And it was shaped like a cage.

‘In all my years,’ I said, ‘I have never seen such a house as this.’ And as I pondered over this, I became aware that my eagle was perched high upon a stone nearby, and I went over to him and said: ‘Let me stay a little longer, I pray you, and for God’s love, let me see what wonderful things lie in this house, for yet, perhaps, I might learn something from it, or something that I will like, before I go.’

‘By Saint Peter! that is my intention,’ he said, ‘and the reason why I am loitering here! But one thing I must tell you; that, but for me taking you inside, you could never contrive any device to enable you to perform this feat for yourself, because the place whirls about so quickly. But since Jove, through his grace, wishes to bring you final comfort with such sights and sounds as might gladden your heart and alleviate your despondency, he has told me to help and advance you with all my power, and show you where the greatest instruction is to be had, as you shall soon see.’

With this he snatched me up between his toes and took me through one of the windows I had seen in the building – and immediately all seemed still and nothing appeared to turn or to move at all; and he set me down on the floor. But such a throng of people as I saw roaming about was never seen before, and never shall be, for certainly there cannot be this number on the whole Earth, not of all the creatures that Nature has ever formed. I hardly had a foot’s breadth of space to stand up in, and every person that I saw was whispering secretly into his neighbour’s ear, or else spoke openly like this: ‘Don’t you know what has happened?’

‘No,’ said the other. ‘Tell me!’ And he told him and swore that it was true – ‘He said this,’ – ‘he did that,’ – ‘this will happen,’ – ‘that’s what I heard,’ – and all the folk who are alive would not find the cunning to describe all the things I heard there. But the most wonderful thing was this: that when someone had heard something, he would pass this news to another with some embellishment, and in less time than it takes to ride a furlong this news would have quickly been passed on and on and recounted faithfully, both the truth and the falsehood, whilst being embellished even further and growing all the time, like a careless spark that grows at last to engulf a whole city in conflagration. And when it had run its course and grown out of all proportion, it would rise towards a window and pass through even the tiniest crevice to facilitate its escape.

As I watched, I saw an outright lie and a certain truth meet one another by chance at a window as they both prepared to fly from the building; and when they met they prevented each other from leaving and pushed one another aside crying: ‘let me go first!’

‘No, let me! And I will make sure of it because I shall never leave you but be your own sworn brother! We will each meddle with one another such that no man, however angry, shall have only one of us but both at once to companion his belief.’ In this way I saw truth and falsehood merge together and fly out as a single tiding; and in this way every piece of news was carried through the holes straight to the House of Fame, the lady Fame; and she gave each a duration, some to grow and then quickly diminish to nothing, others to behave otherwise, and all to be blown about by Aeolus. I saw twenty thousand in a single flight.
And lord! this house was at all times brimful of sailors and pilgrims with their bags full of lies; and thousands of courtiers, messengers and pardoners and other Christian men with their boxes crammed full of untruth. And as I went about as quickly as I could, doing my best to try to discover what I wanted to learn, something that I had heard about but which I will not now divulge – for there is no need, other people can sing it better than I, and all the straw in a barn will be uncovered sooner or later – I heard a great noise in the corner of the hall where men were reciting poetry. I went to look and everyone was running as fast as they could, all shouting, 'What's going on?' and when they were all in a heap, the ones behind began climbing over the ones in front in order to get a better view, scrambling up through the noise and treading on each others' feet and stamping as men do for eels. And at last I saw a man whom I had no business seeing, but he seemed to be commanding great respect...

...because that man was myself.

The menskful wight tho tales kepe · ful dernly and ful yerne
Shal wite the lay of Briton clerkys · and ancien sothe shal leren