Notes to The House of Fame

1. Rood: the cross on which Christ was crucified; Anglo-Saxon, "Rode."

2. Well worth of this thing greate clerks: Great scholars set much worth upon this thing -- that is, devote much labour, attach much importance, to the subject of dreams.

3. The poet briefly refers to the description of the House of Somnus, in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," 1. xi. 592, et seqq.; where the cave of Somnus is said to be "prope Cimmerios," ("near the Cimmerians") and "Saxo tamen exit ab imo Rivus aquae Lethes." ("A stream of Lethe's water issues from the base of the rock")

4. See the account of the vision of Croesus in The Monk's Tale.

5. The meaning of the allusion is not clear; but the story of the pilgrims and the peas is perhaps suggested by the line following -- "to make lithe [soft] what erst was hard." St Leonard was the patron of captives.

5. Corsaint: The "corpus sanctum" -- the holy body, or relics, preserved in the shrine.

7. So, in the Temple of Venus described in The Knight's Tale, the Goddess is represented as "naked floating in the large sea".

8. Vulcano: Vulcan, the husband of Venus.

9. Ered: ploughed; Latin, "arare," Anglo-Saxon, "erean," plough.

10. Sours: Soaring ascent; a hawk was said to be "on the soar" when he mounted, "on the sours" or "souse" when he descended on the prey, and took it in flight.

11. This is only one among many instances in which Chaucer disclaims the pursuits of love; and the description of his manner of life which follows is sufficient to show that the disclaimer was no mere mock-humble affectation of a gallant.

12. This reference, approximately fixing the date at which the poem was composed, points clearly to Chaucer's daily work as Comptroller of the

Customs -- a post which he held from 1374 to 1386.

13. This is a frank enough admission that the poet was fond of good cheer; and the effect of his "little abstinence" on his corporeal appearance is humorously described in the Prologue to the Tale of Sir Thopas, where the Host compliments Chaucer on being as well shapen in the waist as himself.

14. "To make the beard" means to befool or deceive. See note 15 to the Reeve's Tale. Precisely the same idea is conveyed in the modern slang word "shave" -- meaning a trick or fraud.

15. Love-days: see note 21 to the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

16. If this reference is to any book of Chaucer's in which the House of Fame was mentioned, the book has not come down to us. It has been reasonably supposed, however, that Chaucer means by "his own book" Ovid's "Metamorphoses," of which he was evidently very fond; and in the twelfth book of that poem the Temple of Fame is described.

17. Saint Julian was the patron of hospitality; so the Franklin, in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales is said to be "Saint Julian in his country," for his open house and liberal cheer. The eagle, at sight of the House of Fame, cries out "bon hostel!" -- "a fair lodging, a glorious house, by St Julian!"

18. The laurel-tree is sacred to Apollo. See note 11 to The Assembly of Fowls.

19. French, "roche," a rock.

20. St. Thomas of Kent: Thomas a Beckett, whose shrine was at Canterbury.

21. The half or side of the rock which was towards the poet, was inscribed with, etc.

22. Cop: summit; German, "kopf"; the head.

23. Gestiours: tellers of stories; reciters of brave feats or "gests."

24. Arion: the celebrated Greek bard and citharist, who, in the seventh century before Christ, lived at the court of Periander, tyrant of Corinth. The story of his preservation by the dolphin, when the covetous sailors forced

him to leap into the sea, is well known.

25. Chiron the Centaur was renowned for skill in music and the arts, which he owed to the teaching of Apollo and Artemis. He became in turn the instructor of Peleus, Achilles, and other descendants of Aeacus; hence he is called "Aeacides" -- because tutor to the Aeacides, and thus, so to speak, of that "family."

26. Glasgerion is the subject of a ballad given in "Percy's Reliques," where we are told that "Glasgerion was a king's own son, And a harper he was good; He harped in the king's chamber, Where cup and candle stood."

27. Cornemuse: bagpipe; French, "cornemuse." Shawmies: shalms or psalteries; an instrument resembling a harp.

28. Dulcet: a kind of pipe, probably corresponding with the "dulcimer;" the idea of sweet -- French, "doux;" Latin, "dulcis" -- is at the root of both words.

29. In the early printed editions of Chaucer, the two names are "Citherus" and "Proserus;" in the manuscript which Mr Bell followed (No. 16 in the Fairfax collection) they are "Atileris" and "Pseustis." But neither alternative gives more than the slightest clue to identification. "Citherus" has been retained in the text; it may have been employed as an appellative of Apollo, derived from "cithara," the instrument on which he played; and it is not easy to suggest a better substitute for it than "Clonas" - - an early Greek poet and musician who flourished six hundred years before Christ. For "Proserus," however, has been substituted "Pronomus," the name of a celebrated Grecian player on the pipe, who taught Alcibiades the flute, and who therefore, although Theban by birth, might naturally be said by the poet to be "of Athens."

30. Marsyas: The Phrygian, who, having found the flute of Athena, which played of itself most exquisite music, challenged Apollo to a contest, the victor in which was to do with the vanquished as he pleased. Marsyas was beaten, and Apollo flayed him alive.

31. The German (Deutsche) language, in Chaucer's time, had not undergone that marked literary division into German and Dutch which was largely accomplished through the influence of the works of Luther and the other Reformers. Even now, the flute is the favourite musical instrument of the Fatherland; and the devotion of the Germans to poetry and music has been celebrated since the days of Tacitus.

32. Reyes: a kind of dance, or song to be accompanied with dancing.

33. Beam: horn, trumpet; Anglo-Saxon, "bema."

34. Messenus: Misenus, son of Aeolus, the companion and trumpeter of Aeneas, was drowned near the Campanian headland called Misenum after his name. (Aeneid, vi. 162 et seqq.)

35. Joab's fame as a trumpeter is founded on two verses in 2 Samuel (ii. 28, xx. 22), where we are told that he "blew a trumpet," which all the people of Israel obeyed, in the one case desisting from a pursuit, in the other raising a siege.

36. Theodamas or Thiodamas, king of the Dryopes, plays a prominent part in the tenth book of Statius' "Thebaid." Both he and Joab are also mentioned as great trumpeters in The Merchant's Tale.

37. Jongelours: jugglers; French, "jongleur."

38. Tregetours: tricksters, jugglers. For explanation of this word, see note 14 to the Franklin's tale.

39. Pythonesses: women who, like the Pythia in Apollo's temple at Delphi, were possessed with a spirit of divination or prophecy. The barbarous Latin form of the word was "Pythonissa" or "Phitonissa." See note 9 to the Friar's Tale.

40. Subfumigations: a ceremony employed to drive away evil spirits by burning incense; the practice of smoking cattle, corn, &c., has not died out in some country districts.

41. In certain ascendents: under certain planetary influences. The next lines recall the alleged malpractices of witches, who tortured little images of wax, in the design of causing the same torments to the person represented -- or, vice versa, treated these images for the cure of hurts or sickness.

42. Medea: celebrated for her magical power, through which she restored to youth Aeson, the father of Jason; and caused the death of Jason's wife, Creusa, by sending her a poisoned garment which consumed her to ashes.

43. Circes: the sorceress Circe, who changed the companions of Ulysses into swine.

44. Calypsa: Calypso, on whose island of Ogygia Ulysses was wrecked. The goddess promised the hero immortality if he remained with her; but he refused, and, after a detention of seven years, she had to let him go.

45. Hermes Ballenus: this is supposed to mean Hermes Trismegistus (of whom see note 19 to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale); but the explanation of the word "Ballenus" is not quite obvious. The god Hermes of the Greeks (Mercurius of the Romans) had the surname "Cyllenius," from the mountain where he was born -- Mount Cyllene, in Arcadia; and the alteration into "Ballenus" would be quite within the range of a copyist's capabilities, while we find in the mythological character of Hermes enough to warrant his being classed with jugglers and magicians.

46. Limote and Colle Tregetour seem to have been famous sorcerers or jugglers, but nothing is now known of either.

47. Simon Magus: of whom we read in Acts viii. 9, et seqq.

48. "And made well more than it was To seemen ev'rything, y-wis, As kindly thing of Fame it is;" i.e. It is in the nature of fame to exaggerate everything.

49. Corbets: the corbels, or capitals of pillars in a Gothic building; they were often carved with fantastic figures and devices.

50. A largess!: the cry with which heralds and pursuivants at a tournament acknowledged the gifts or largesses of the knights whose achievements they celebrated.

51. Nobles: gold coins of exceptional fineness. Sterlings: sterling coins; not "luxemburgs", but stamped and authorised money. See note 9 to the Miller's Tale and note 6 to the Prologue to the Monk's tale.

52. Coat-armure: the sleeveless coat or "tabard," on which the arms of the wearer or his lord were emblazoned.

53. "But for to prove in alle wise As fine as ducat of Venise" i.e. In whatever way it might be proved or tested, it would be found as fine as a Venetian ducat.

54. Lapidaire: a treatise on precious stones.

55. See imperial: a seat placed on the dais, or elevated portion of the hall at

the upper end, where the lord and the honoured guests sat.

56. The starres seven: Septentrion; the Great Bear or Northern Wain, which in this country appears to be at the top of heaven.

57. The Apocalypse: The last book of the New Testament, also called Revelations. The four beasts are in chapter iv. 6.

58. "Oundy" is the French "ondoye," from "ondoyer," to undulate or wave.

59. Partridges' wings: denoting swiftness.

60. Hercules lost his life with the poisoned shirt of Nessus, sent to him by the jealous Dejanira.

61. Of the secte Saturnine: Of the Saturnine school; so called because his history of the Jewish wars narrated many horrors, cruelties, and sufferings, over which Saturn was the presiding deity. See note 71 to the Knight's tale.

62. Compare the account of the "bodies seven" given by the Canon's Yeoman: "Sol gold is, and Luna silver we threpe; Mars iron, Mercury quicksilver we clepe; Saturnus lead, and Jupiter is tin, And Venus copper, by my father's kin."

63. Statius is called a "Tholosan," because by some, among them Dante, he was believed to have been a native of Tolosa, now Toulouse. He wrote the "Thebais," in twelve books, and the "Achilleis," of which only two were finished.

64. Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis were the names attached to histories of the Trojan War pretended to have been written immediately after the fall of Troy.

65. Lollius: The unrecognisable author whom Chaucer professes to follow in his "Troilus and Cressida," and who has been thought to mean Boccaccio.

66. Guido de Colonna, or de Colempnis, was a native of Messina, who lived about the end of the thirteenth century, and wrote in Latin prose a history including the war of Troy.

67. English Gaufrid: Geoffrey of Monmouth, who drew from Troy the original of the British race. See Spenser's "Faerie Queen," book ii. canto x.

68. Lucan, in his "Pharsalia," a poem in ten books, recounted the incidents of the war between Caesar and Pompey.

69. Claudian of Alexandria, "the most modern of the ancient poets," lived some three centuries after Christ, and among other works wrote three books on "The Rape of Proserpine."

70. Triton was a son of Poseidon or Neptune, and represented usually as blowing a trumpet made of a conch or shell; he is therefore introduced by Chaucer as the squire of Aeolus.

71. Sky: cloud; Anglo-Saxon, "scua;" Greek, "skia."

72. Los: reputation. See note 5 to Chaucer's Tale of Meliboeus.

73. Swart: black; German, "schwarz."

74. Tewell: the pipe, chimney, of the furnace; French "tuyau." In the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, the Monk's head is described as steaming like a lead furnace.

75. Tetches: blemishes, spots; French, "tache."

76. For the story of Belle Isaude see note 21 to the Assembly of Fowls.

77. Quern: mill. See note 6 to the Monk's Tale.

78. To put an ape into one's hood, upon his head, is to befool him; see the prologue to the Prioresses's Tale, l.6.

79. Obviously Chaucer should have said the temple of Diana, or Artemis (to whom, as Goddess of the Moon, the Egyptian Isis corresponded), at Ephesus. The building, famous for its splendour, was set on fire, in B.C. 356, by Erostatus, merely that he might perpetuate his name.

80. "Now do our los be blowen swithe, As wisly be thou ever blithe." i.e. Cause our renown to be blown abroad quickly, as surely as you wish to be glad.

81. The Labyrinth at Cnossus in Crete, constructed by Dedalus for the safe keeping of the Minotaur, the fruit of Pasiphae's unnatural love.

82. The river Oise, an affluent of the Seine, in France.

83. The engine: The machines for casting stones, which in Chaucer time served the purpose of great artillery; they were called "mangonells," "springolds," &c.; and resembled in construction the "ballistae" and "catapultae" of the ancients.

84. Or it a furlong way was old: before it was older than the space of time during which one might walk a furlong; a measure of time often employed by Chaucer.

85. Shipmen and pilgrimes: sailors and pilgrims, who seem to have in Chaucer's time amply warranted the proverbial imputation against "travellers' tales."

86. Pardoners: of whom Chaucer, in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, has given us no flattering typical portrait

87. Lath: barn; still used in Lincolnshire and some parts of the north. The meaning is, that the poet need not tell what tidings he wanted to hear, since everything of the kind must some day come out -- as sooner or later every sheaf in the barn must be brought forth (to be threshed).

88. A somewhat similar heaping-up of people is de scribed in Spenser's account of the procession of Lucifera ("The Faerie Queen," book i. canto iv.), where, as the royal dame passes to her coach, "The heaps of people, thronging in the hall, Do ride each other, upon her to gaze."