Chaucer And The House Of Fame Essay, Research Paper

QUESTION 7.

DISCUSS THE CULTURAL NATURE OF FAME AND ITS TEXTUAL

EXPRESSION WITH REFERENCE TO ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING:

ORAL HEROIC POETRY, CHAUCER’S DEPICTION IN THE HOUSE OF FAME

AND THE MODERN CONSTRUCTION OF THE CANON OF ENGLISH

LITERATURE.

YOU SHOULD FOCUS YOUR ANALYSIS ON THE INTERPLAY OF ORAL

AND LITERARY TRADITIONS IN THESE CONTEXTS.

Many critics have noted the complexities within Chaucer’s The House of Fame, in

particular, the complexities between the oral and the literary. The differences between

these methods are constantly appearing; Chaucer is well aware of rapidly changing

communicative practises and contrasts the preservation of utterance with the longevity

of literary texts. He achieves this by discussing the nature of “Fame” and the

difficulties that arise from it. “Fame” can both destroy and create. It can result in the

eternal preservation of great works and their creators. However, Chaucer is quick to

note the precarious nature of “fame” noting the unreliable process of attaining it and its

potentially momentary existence. Every creator with their respective work/s naturally

crave and desire “fame”; they want their subjects to remain fresh in the minds of their

audience. Chaucer, while neither totally praising the written nor the oral, reveals how

essentially the written word is far more likely to become eternal as opposed to the oral.

The relative “fame” of any work is dependent on many factors. Many traditional and

classical ideas result in the formation of the English canon, yet as Chaucer indicates,

the “fame” of these works can easily become annihilated. The arrival of new readers

with different ideals and thereby changing tradition, can reject classical or “canonical”

work and their “fame” will melt into nothingness.

Most stories, histories and legends that emerge from oral heroic poetry are to

herald the achievement of the powerful and wealthy so that their histories will not fade

from the memories of the population. The stories of Beowolf are a clear example of

this, as within these stories, (whether embellished or no), Beowolf’s fame and legend

reaches the modern reader hundreds of years later. Clearly, Beowolf is still very much

dependant on the conventions of oral traditions and written to leave a permanent

reminder of Beowolf, to enforce Beowolf’s fame. The use of “Hwaet” to mark the

start of an oration, emphasises the continuation of oral tradition. Most oral cultures

(usually illiterate), pass on stories and legends learnt from the previous generation,

basically using the authority of recalled memory, not as an actual witness; rather ‘I

have heard it said` than ‘I know this to be true`.

The importance of the terms ‘auctor` and ‘auctoritas’ is noted by A.J. Minnis.

Minnis states the importance of the ‘auctoritas’, quoting Aristotle who defines this as

the “judgement of the wise man in his chosen discipline.” The great reverence and

respect shown towards writers of antiquity is clearly evident in Chaucer’s The House

of Fame, yet there remains a definite inconsistency within Chaucer’s work. While

Chaucer is clearly familiar with many classical writers and their works, such as; Virgil’s

Aeneid, several works of Ovid , Boccacio and Dante, Chaucer’s work raises several

questions about the classical writers, the nature of written texts and the complexities

of ” fame”. The term “fame” had a myriad of meanings in Middle English, it could

mean “reputation”, “renown”, or “rumour”. Chaucer plays on all these meanings and

its implications, yet his ideas are clouded and obscured so it is difficult to define

whether his arguments are mocking, condemning or celebrating. J. Stephen agrees

with Shelia Delany’s argument in her book, The House of Fame: The Poetics of

Skeptical Fidelism and believes that The House of Fame is indeed “a sceptical poem”.

However, Russell is rather extreme in his view, believing that Chaucer is “writing to

deconstruct the tyranny of the written word”. It is difficult to agree with this view, and

although there are elements to suggest this may be the case, one would tend to agree

with Delany’s argument, that Chaucer “preferred to transcend the choice between

traditions rather than to commit himself whole heartedly to a single intellectual

position or a consistent point of view”.

Chaucer, in his description of Virgil’s Aeneid decides to alter the events within

Virgil’s narrative. There is always the problem of what can be considered “true”,the

problems of authenticity and originality remain. These great writers that Chaucer often

references, like Virgil, Ovid, Boccacio, Boethius and Dante are ‘auctors` who carry

great weight and authority, yet , as this is Geffrey’s dream he is able to manipulate the

events within The House of Fame. Thus Geffrey has the power of both the oral and

written ‘auctor`, he has heard the stories before, (in Ovid and Virgil) yet can ‘retell`

these events to the reader with perhaps even more ‘auctoritas’ as he can also state to

the reader that ‘I was there so I can tell you the truth`. However, Chaucer’s ‘auctoritas`

is diminished because even though he was an actual witness, it was still a dream, a

hazy and unpredictable area which can neither be totally rejected nor believed and

accepted. These implications show that Chaucer was perhaps rejecting the ‘auctoritas’

of these writers, revealing the possible discrepancies within any text, written or oral,

and how narrative events are able to change depending on the reliability of the ‘auctor`.

The mocking of Geffrey and his scholarly life and ambitions would also indicate

Chaucer’s dislike of the scholarly and academic world of the 14th century. Geffrey is

caricatured as a book-worm, unable to comprehend events outside the world of books.

The Eagle speaks to Geffrey of the futility and emptiness of a scholar ; “Thou goost

hom to thy hous anoon,/And, also domb as any stoon,/Thou sittest at another

book/Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;/And lyvest thus as an heremyte,/Although thyn

abstynence ys lyte.” (655-660) During the Eagle’s impressive monologue the

intelligent Geffrey can only answer in rather dull-witted monosyllables;

“Gladly”,”Noo? why?”, “Yis” and “Wel”. Geffrey is also portrayed as a rather weak

and stupid fellow, despite his scholarly habits. When one compares him to the classical

heroes of classical mythology, he realises that he is a mere mortal and afraid; ‘”Oh

God,” thoughte I, “that madest kynde,/Shal I noon other weyes dye?’. Unlike the

heroes of old, Geffrey is aware that he is no brave hero; “nether am Ennock, ne

Elye,/Ne Romulus, ne Ganymede.” (557-558) Despite these negative representations,

there still remains elements of respect and awe towards classical writings and the

strong belief entrusted in these works as contained in the line, “In certeyn, as the book

us tellis.” (426) The same respect is reflected in a speech made by the Eagle to

Geffrey; “Loo, this sentence ys knowen kouth/ Of every philosophres mouth,/ As

Aristotle and daun Platon,/ And other clerkys many oon;/ And to confirme my

resoun,/Thou wost wel this, that spech is soun,” (757-762) It seems as though

Chaucer is exploring both elements of what is the true ‘auctor` and questions the idea

of ‘auctoritas`.

It is important to scrutinise the depiction of “fame” within Chaucer’s work as it

remains a crucial point in the formation of the modern canon of English literature. As

noted earlier, fame has many meanings and can mean “reputation”, “renown” or

“rumour”. Chaucer describes the more negative effects of fame, how it is granted to

people with little or no merit and how transient the nature of “fame” can be. When

Dido feels despairing and states, “O wel-awey that I was born!” she is not churlish

with Aeneas or Virgil, but curses, “O wikke Fame!”. According to Russell, it is Virgil’s

Fame that has “immortalised” the infamous behaviour of Dido and she is made the

eternal villain, continually playing her wicked role whenever one opens and reads the

Aeneid. In this way Dido is riding a cyclical machine where she is destined to a life of

ever-renewed “fame”and Dido’s clearly despises this. The nature of “Fame”, is often

transient and momentary. Chaucer takes note of the huge blocks of ice with the

engraved names of the famous. However, some of these names are exposed to the sun

and are melting away, clearly these are the people who will lose their “Fame” and

disappear into obscurity. Other names are preserved as they are protected from the

heat of the sun. The way in which the personification of “Fame”, the figure of the

goddess of Fame, grants “Fame” is haphazard and illogical. People of little merit, are

granted “Fame” by achieving infamous deeds, while others of merit are bluntly refused

“Fame”. In this way “Fame” is shown as a complete mystery, a strange and

uncontrollable force, not granted on the status of value and logic, more to do with

chance than reason.

One can then ponder what Chaucer considered the greater evil, the “tyranny of the

written word” or the “tyranny of orality”. One obvious example that refutes the earlier

claims of Russell is the negative portrayal of Chaucer’s House of Rumour. Within this

place is great confusion and disorder, “And therout com so gret a noyse” (1927). The

idea of noise and confusion is again repeated in; “No maner tydynges in to pace./ Ne

never rest is in that place/ That hit nys fild ful of tydynges,/ Other loude or of

whisprynges;/ And over alle the houses angles/ Ys ful of rounynges and of jangles.”

(1956-1960). These various rumours obviously contain embellishments to the truth, if

not a complete fabrication. It seems that the negative rabble contained within the

House of Rumour is more severe than the relative mocking of the written word and

its scholarly institutions. It seems that the written word, despite its many faults, is still

more commendable and “true” than that of the spoken word which is far less reliable

than the ‘auctoritas` of classical writers.

When one looks at the flaws within The House of Fame it brings to question the

construction of the modern English canon and how it is formed. Obviously, Minnis’

claim that the oldest texts were generally considered the best is an idea that is

prevalent even today. Certainly the academic institutions were still a main factor

regarding the formation of the English canon. Like Geffrey and Chaucer who studied

classical writers like Virgil, Ovid and Dante, students studied this at school as it was

considered the most “valuable” of the texts, again reflecting the “older is better” idea

of ‘auctoritas`. According to Kaplan and Rose, Dr. Samuel Johnson’s Lives of the

Poets was the beginning of the formation of the English canon. Dr. Johnson chooses

the books that he personally felt was admirable and worthy of his praise. Already there

is the presence of an “elitist” society. Originally, as only the wealthy and privileged

were able to read and write, the process of the English canon was decided by the key

academic and scholarly figures, who decided to choose what the “right” type of work

would go into the English canon and repeatedly studied at institutions, therefore

making it cyclical, ever-renewing and therefore a permanent text that was entrenched

within The House of Fame. Just as the early oral heroic poetry was created to make

characters like Beowolf famous and therefore a permanent reminder to the population,

the written texts also serve as the anchor of “fame”. However, there is also the

ephemeral nature of “fame”, just as names melt into oblivion in The House of Fame,

the modern reader’s disinterest in a text can also disintegrate the “fame” of a text.

Suddenly the various canonised texts may not be considered relevant; an obvious

example of this would be the arrival of feminist theories, eventually emerging in

academic institutions and “melting” the “fame” and status of many canonical authors

and texts, who no longer are considered appropriate or informative. It would seem

that Chaucer’s depiction of The House of Rumour could also be correct. The power of

the written word has survived far better than that of the spoken. There are few if any

“rumours” that remain fresh and clear several hundred years later. The spoken word is

carried away in the wind, the constant mutterings often forgotten whereas the written

word has endured for many hundreds of years.

Clearly Chaucer has mixed feelings toward the power of literacy and orality. Both

can be enduring, but in an increasingly more literate society, the use of orality to

immortalise narrative events is rarely used. As Chaucer indicates, the written word

does remain in The House of Fame whereas the spoken word is more likely contained

within the constantly changing murmurings in The House of Rumour. However,

although Chaucer is himself a scholarly and academic man like Geffrey, he is still

rather mocking of the academic society and the scholars who seem to be permaently

fixed within the world of literature and relying entirely on book-learning, rather than

experiences from the events in the outside world of reality. Chaucer within his

description of The House of Fame also questions the relevance of literary works,

proving that the “fame” of authors and their works is a tenative one. Chaucer is clearly

reveals the beginnings of the English canon and the works contained within it. He

stresses the fluctuations of “fame” and how works can become a part an elite

grouping. The modern reader knows, that the books within the English canon may

gradually disappear or can reemerge, depending on the attitudes of people like

Geffrey, the readers and scholars, and of institutions that continually study the

“classical” texts. According to Chaucer, “fame” is not considered a noble

accomplishment and the result of chance rather than any literatary merit or virtue.