

Ph.D. FIELD EXAMINATION
in
Middle English
Fall 1999

To The Candidate

There are three parts to this examination. In each of the three parts you have a choice among three questions.

Part A consists of questions on Chaucer.

Part B relates Chaucer to other writers and works of the period.

Part C deals with non-Chaucerian texts.

Each of the three questions are weighted equally in the marking scheme.

Avoid use of any text extensively more than once in preparing your answers.

PART A. Chaucer.

Write on one of the following three topics:

1. Critics have argued that The House of Fame, among other things, is:
 1. A study of the relationship of people to the mutable world through the agency of fame (P. Ruggiers)
 2. A exposition of "the vanity of worldly fame" (B. Koonce)
 2. "A sort of Dantesque journey through the realm of allegory" (M. Praz; or as others suggest, a parody of the Divine Comedy).
 4. "... A critical and skeptical ... [work], rooted in the awareness of coexistent contradictory truths and resulting in the suspension of final rational judgment" (Delany)
 5. A work whose "... subject ... is the art of poetry itself" (Shook)

Consider The House of Fame and the variety of meanings to which it has given rise. Is the apparent disagreement among readers a function of the text itself? Does Chaucer's text itself compel the variety of interpretations it has elicited?

2. In The Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer employs the first person narration, writing, for example, that "... whan I on hym [Love] thynke,/ Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke./ For al be that I knowe nat Love in dede,/ ... Yit happeth me fol ofte in bokes reede/ Of his myrakles. ..." (ll. 6-11); The Book of the Duchess he begins: "I have gret wonder, be this lyght,/ How that I lyve. ..." (ll. 1-2). In The Complaint of Mars he uses the first person in lines such as "Seynt Valentyne, a foul thus herde I synge /Upon thy day ..."(ll. 13-14). Compare Chaucer's use of first person narratives in any three of his works (including the above three if you wish), considering the function of this choice of narrative stance.
3. Chaucer's endings are among the most intriguing aspects of his work--those which are "unfinished" as well as those which have "resolutions." Many have argued that the incomplete poems have a completeness in themselves and that, if we are left puzzled, we are not left dissatisfied by them. The "completed works," on the other hand, often puzzle the reader with their conclusions--the abruptness with which The Book of the Duchess ends, for example, or the open-ended quality of The Parliament of Fowls which concludes with the hope "to mete sumthyng for to fare / The bet, and thus to rede I nel not spare." Certainly, the "ending" of The Canterbury Tales has been the subject of debate. Discuss the effects and functions of the ending of three of Chaucer's poems. You may use any or all of those mentioned in the question.

PART B. Chaucer and Middle English Literature.

Write on one of the following topics:

1. In his Oxford lectures, C.S. Lewis made the following observation on originality in Middle English writers:

I doubt if they [medieval writers] would have understood our demand for originality or valued those works in their own age which were original any the more on that account. . . . The originality which we regard as a sign of wealth might have seemed to them a confession of poverty And the paradox is that it is just this abdication of originality which brings out the originality they really possess. The more devout and concentrated Chaucer's gaze on the *Filostrato* becomes, or Malory's on the "French Book," the more real the scenes and people become to them. That reality forces them presently to see and hear, hence to set down, at first a little more, and then a good deal more, than their book has actually told them. They are thus never more indebted to their auctor than when they are adding to him.

Consider the paradox of tradition and originality in Chaucer's use of sources in Troilus and Cressida, in Malory's long prose romance, in the Alliterative Morte Arthure and in one play from the cycle you have chosen. Is the problem of medieval dramatists, dealing as they are with a "sacred text," different in kind as well as degree from that faced by Chaucer and Malory?

2. Consider the statement that Troilus and Criseyda is at once "funny" and "grave," "learned" and "light hearted." Compare the blend of comedy and seriousness in Troilus, Piers Ploughman and two of the morality plays from the reading list.
3. Chaucer begins his House of Fame with the narrator's long disquisition on dreams:

God turne us every drem to goode!
For hyt is wonder, be the roode,
To my wyt, what causeth swevenes
Eyther on morwes or on evenes,
And why the'effect folweth of somme,
And of somme hit shal never come;
Why that is an avision
And why this a revelacion,
Why this a drem, why that a sweven,
And noght to very man lyche even;
Why this a fantome, why these oracles,
I not;

Consider the use of dreams in two Chaucerian and two non-Chaucerian texts on the reading list. Consider what function dreams play in the works you single out for discussion.

PART C. Non-Chaucerian texts.
Write on one of the following topics:

1. Discuss the use of intertextuality in three Middle English allegories and romances from the reading list.
2. J.F. Goodridge, in his introduction to the Penguin translation of Piers Ploughman, writes:

Religious discourse was not a solemn and mannered performance, remote from the common vernacular, and Langland's medley of tongues is the characteristic voice of fourteenth-century England. His art consists largely in deploying all its arresting combinations and contrasts. One of his favourite devices is to allow the hieratic and the demotic, the learned riddle and the popular joke, to fall out in quick succession or change places.

Consider the validity of the observation that "Langland's medley of tongues" is "the characteristic voice of fourteenth-century England" by examining at least two late medieval texts from the reading list in addition to Piers Ploughman.

3. David Bevington remarks that there are two sets of readers of cycle plays: one set "see the cycle as an organic whole shaped by patterns of foreshadowing and fulfillment" while others "stress the pragmatic effects of historical experiment and accretion." Considering the full cycle prepared for this examination, construct an argument for either of the two positions you consider most tenable. Consider historical as well as textual evidence for your case.