

that “Chaucer tends to shift authority onto others” themselves imply that, for Chaucer, authority is a tool of effective verbal action and that the relation between its source and its adherent is characterized less by dominion, jurisdiction, and influence than by coordination, equivocality, and confluence. In one way or another, as Smith observes, we all live and communicate in ages of *auctours*; Chaucer shows us the self’s capacity to share in, if not to shape, the dialectical process of authorization.

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The Wife of Bath

To the Editor:

The March 1979 issue of *PMLA* illustrates beautifully both the major problem besetting the discipline of literary studies today and the role *PMLA* could assume in rising to a solution. Apt illustration of the problem is provided by Mary Carruthers’ article “The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions” (pp. 209–22), and equally apt illustration of the solution is provided by Stephen Ross’s article on *As I Lay Dying* (pp. 300–10). Moreover, the problem is formulated discursively by Michel Grimaud’s letter in the Forum. As Grimaud states, following Jonathan Culler, what we need, and what *PMLA*’s editorial policy could encourage, is fewer interpretive readings of individual works and more articles of general theoretical interest. Sufficient generalization is best sought not in a proliferation of subjects and literatures that would supposedly appeal to a wide range of *PMLA* readers but in a thoughtful exploration of the fundamental principles that underlie all literary studies. The troubled state of our discipline today and the defensive posture of the humanities in general reflect a profound uncertainty about the nature of our scholarly work and about the value of work so uncertainly understood. At such a time the cultivation of poetics is especially necessary as a means of clarifying first principles.

To the fundamental question about the nature of artistic illusion the articles by Carruthers and Ross pose responses so radically different that one can doubt that the authors share any basic assumptions at all about the discipline they profess. The difference is a matter of poetics, which Ross understands and Carruthers apparently does not.

Most of Carruthers’ article addresses a text that does not exist. Carruthers purports to tell us what Chaucer did not: “This paper first describes Alisoun’s practical economic experience as a wealthy west-country clothier endowed with the property of

her deceased spouses and then indicates how she uses this experience . . .” (p. 209). In undertaking to reveal the true life of the Wife behind the presumably imperfect indicators provided by the author, Carruthers is assuming that the text is an incomplete version of a truth that the skillful, informed, sensitive critic can help the author express. While Carruthers’ information about the cloth-making industry in England in the fourteenth century offers an interesting insight into economic and social history, its contribution to a reading of Chaucer’s writing is surely limited. In contrast, Ross’s article on “voice” in *As I Lay Dying* offers information of more than footnote utility; it illuminates a general truth not obvious to all, namely, that a character in fiction “has no existence without voice, before or after voice, beyond or behind voice” (p. 300). Such an insight—and this is a matter of poetics—enables us to see not only that Chaucer’s language, the voice he has named Alisoun of Bath, speaks in many registers and of many things but also that it is prior to any fictional character and exclusive of any real person other than Chaucer. To paraphrase Ross’s quotation from John Barth: this is not the voice of Alisoun; this voice *is* Alisoun, all there is of her. What Ross says further about speech in written form is a lesson Carruthers might do well to study: “Our expectations about speech . . . tend to dissimulate the artifice that puts it in written narrative” (p. 301). Chaucer, for those who will read him, is one of the supreme artificers in the history of written narrative, a rhetorician highly aware of the reality, and the magic, of his medium.

Faced with the reality of a virtuoso Chaucerian text, we need to keep our wits about us, and thoughtful study of poetics can help us do so. We might consider, for example, Saul Steinberg’s reflection on his own art, that what he draws is drawing, that his line wants to remind constantly that it’s made of ink. Such an observation is not irrelevant to the Chaucerian situation: what Chaucer wrote is writing; his verse wants to remind us constantly that it is made of words and that Chaucer made it as it is. The implications of such an observation, when applied to the demanding activity of reading an author such as Chaucer, must claim priority over considerations of the author’s (and his characters’ undepicted) economic and social milieu. How useful to a reading of any of the “Cash” sections in *As I Lay Dying* would we find a disquisition on carpentry in rural Mississippi in the twentieth century?

The voices that Chaucer names Alisoun are many, and Chaucer disposes them in fascinating ways, often “disrupting the expected correlations between voice and person,” as Ross observes of Faulkner. The most surprising of these disruptions

occurs at the beginning of the tale. Following the variously strident and pathetic, self-serving and self-defeating voices of the Wife's prologue, Chaucer brings forward in the tale a voice from another universe of discourse altogether, a voice delicately arch and reflective, associated with the literary culture of legendary history and chivalric romance. Thus Chaucer further reduces the possibility of relating the text to the kind of unified sensibility, however complex, that the critic might wish to identify as a person. Carruthers' reading is unsatisfactory because she hears no voice at all but only a tale of idealized sentiment. Caught in the hermeneutic circle, the critic interprets the tale as authentication of a person who existed before the text, who held certain ethical (here feminist) views that the critic wishes to expound. What a critic like Carruthers offers us, then, is not the author's text but her own. This mode of criticism is not intrinsically undesirable, though its value depends on the critic and on his awareness of the nature of his craft.

Carruthers ends her article without emerging from Chaucer's illusion, with praise of the Wife for her shrewdness, perspicacity, and confident self-knowledge. Perhaps there are fictional characters (and fictional narrators) about whom critics can appropriately draw such large inferences, but even Henry James and D. H. Lawrence are illusionists, by their very calling. A proper study of poetics, covering all the important thinkers in this field from Plato and Aristotle to the present, including Kuhn and Gombrich as well as Barthes and Derrida, would help readers like Carruthers distinguish between life and illusion and differentiate the forms and conventions of each.

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To the Editor:

"Who painted the lion?" One answer to Alice of Bath's question, indirectly to the point, is that in her day practically everyone who painted Jerome also painted a lion, his devoted companion. The lion is a familiar element in the depictions honoring Jerome as "doctor" and "father" of the church, a great penitent, a great ascetic, a devotee of Mary. A dove, symbol of divine inspiration, sometimes sits on his shoulder as he writes. Jerome is one of the most popular subjects of medieval and Renaissance art, and he is invariably an edifying figure.

In its allusion to Aesop, the Wife's question about the lion asks that texts be understood in their contexts. Scholars like Mary Carruthers should keep the question in mind when judging painted lions. In

the light of Jerome's medieval reputation it seems unlikely that Chaucer, as Carruthers suggests, is criticizing Jerome through Alice. Though we today may see his treatise *Against Jovinian* as extreme, and those who lived in his early century may likewise have done so, the pertinent question for pinning down its ironic function in the Wife's Prologue is, How was *Against Jovinian* seen when Chaucer wrote? Neither Carruthers nor her supporting references (Donaldson and Kernan) have confronted this problem. I have looked, but I have found no evidence of disapproval of Jerome in the fourteenth century. Despite its vituperation, his treatise offers much that a moderate man of that age could admire. It sincerely aims to praise and support the life of chastity. Being antimatrimonial rather than antifeminist, it presents an extensive list of good women, a list that Dorigen puts to good use in the Franklin's Tale.

I have a more general problem with Carruthers' article. I am concerned that, while she recognizes the need to consult medieval materials in evaluating Alice, the materials she uses most are not the most relevant ones. Her historicism is laudable, her methods less so. She takes the Wife out of her proper literary context, seeking answers to questions that are beside the point.

While Carruthers is mainly concerned with the historical situation of Alice, with "real-life" economic facts, the portrait of the Wife and her story of marriage are highly literary, mostly based on marital satire and designed to confront timeless problems. That Chaucer gives her a local habitation does not make the situation of cloth makers of Bath especially germane to understanding her. Nor are the Paston letters and the courtesy books that Carruthers cites particularly relevant to the central questions. Much more to the point are the kinds of materials that provide Chaucer's substance: estates satire, Jerome, Walter Map, Jean de Meun, Eustache Deschamps, and the fabliau *La Veuve*. Alice is primarily a product of literary satire; she and her husbands, who emerge from the same milieu, are equally venal. But Chaucer gives special point to his satire. He makes Alice stand over her Prologue and Tale as an emblem, not primarily of the bad wife or of the masterful wife, but of human carnality. Her interpretation of Scripture and her treatment of religious problems go not from letter to spirit, but from letter to letter; they are "hopelessly carnal." For her, marriage is not a sacrament (a manifestation of the spiritual) but a practical arrangement. For her (as for Carruthers) pilgrimages, vigils, processions, and the services of Lent are not religious events but "public occasions" on