7-1-1981

# Contemporary Literary Theory and Chaucer

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Published version. *The Chaucer Newsletter,* Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 1981): 1-2. Permalink. 

# THE CHAUCER NEWSLETTER

A Publication of The New Chaucer Society

Volume 3, Number 1 Summer, 1981


## THIRD CONGRESS SET

The third International Congress of the New Chaucer Society will be held April 15-18, 1982, at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel in San Francisco, California.

According to the Program Chairpersons, Penn Szittya (Georgetown University) and Donald K. Fry (State University of New York, Stony Brook), the program of events will have three differing presentations. The Annual Chaucer Lecture will be given by Jill Mann (Girton College, Cambridge University), and the Presidential Address will be given by John H. Fisher (University of Tennessee). Each of these addresses will be given on a designated day at a mid-day luncheon. Also on the program will be three plenary sessions, each focusing on a major theme. Chaucer's Audience and Language will be chaired by Paul Strohm (Indiana University); Chaucer and Wycliff will be chaired by David Jeffrey (University of Ottawa); and Chaucer's Manuscripts and Mind will be chaired by Jerome Taylor (University of Wisconsin).

The third part of the program will feature presentation of papers on a variety of topics. The papers will be delivered at the following sessions:

Exegetical Approaches — Chairperson: Joe Wittig (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Chaucer and the Continent — Chairperson: Ann Middleton (University of California, Berkeley)

Visual Chaucer—Chairperson: John Fleming (Princeton University)

The Canterbury Tales—Chairperson: Robert apRoberts (California State University, Northridge)

Troilus and Criseyde—Chairperson: John McCall (University of Cincinnati)

Prose and Shorter Poems — Chairperson: Michael Cherniss (University of Kansas)

Papers on these topics are still being accepted. However, interested contributors must send finished papers to Program Chairperson Donald Fry on or before 15 October 1981. Notification of acceptance will be given by late November.

Arrangements Chairperson Janette Richardson (University of California, Berkeley) will send reservation cards for the Sir Francis Drake Hotel to all members of the Society in the next issue of the Chaucer Newsletter. Members interested in staying at the hotel should return their reservation cards to the hotel no later than 15 March 1982. Registration fees and room rates will be given in the next issue of the Newsletter.

## Contemporary Literary Theory and Chaucer

*Judson Boyce Allen*

If one wishes, in our own time, to understand medieval lyric, one inevitably must read Paul Zumthor, who would certainly qualify as a person involved in, and representing, contemporary literary theory. When I did so, I found, among many other helpful statements, the following: The *grand chant courtois*, Zumthor says, "est un mode de dire entièrement référé à un *je* qui, tout en fixant le plan et les modalités du discours, n'a d'autre existence pour nous que grammaticale."[1]

This statement raised for me an extremely fruitful question. If the "I" of the lyric has no existence except grammatical, then what is the nature of grammatical existence? I went to the medieval grammarians, and in their writings I found that pronouns have "substance without quality." Further, I found that first and second person pronouns — those, of course, normal to lyric — are demonstrative rather than only relative, and so signify something present or as if present. In this discussion there is a strong sense of the metaphysical. Something substantial is at stake. The medieval lyric "I" or lyric ego exists grammatically by being a substance which, as uttered, has a presence inviting qualification — inviting occupation. The medieval love lyric enacts the state of being in love, and so defines that state for any given lover. Modern lovers who play or hear "their song" submit their emotions to a normative definition which we would doubtless call subpoetic. Medieval aristocratic courtly lovers had both a better love poetry and a higher respect for the normative. Their respect was, in part, provided for them and grounded for them by their grammar.[2]

This experience I take as a critical parable for our discussion. I am a person who knows rather more about literary theory contemporary with Chaucer than I do about the literary theory of my own day. But when I do read modern literary theory — the structuralists and the deconstructors, the phenomenologists and the hermeneuticists and the linguists — the array which Professor Bloomfield has defined for us— I very often find myself sent back to the Middle Ages with a new and fruitful question. But when I study the medieval evidence I usually make a discovery about medieval literature which contradicts the modern critic who pointed me toward it. In this case of the *grand chant courtois*, I was stimulated by a remark about textuality to find, in medieval lyric, a mode of utterance which was at once referential and normative.

The same thing, of course, happens with Chaucer. I began impressed with Foucault's analysis of Borges' Chinese encyclopedia — that bizarre system for the classification of animals.[3] Having read Foucault, I was able to suppose that I might expect a similar "alterity" as the ground of the *Canterbury Tales*. When I looked at medieval classification systems, I found no category corresponding to our modern "literature." But when I gave that up, in considerable surprise, I did find medieval ways of classifying tale collections, and the tales collected in them. By medieval norms Chaucer turns out to be a brilliant normative social theorist.[4]

Contemporary literary theory is, in essence, as Professor Bloomfield has told us, a discussion of language. It is concerned with signs, with the structures

(continued on page 2)

## Contemporary Literary Theory (continued from page 1)

which signs generate, with their interpretation, and, I fear, with the solipsism which provides for much of this enterprise both its field of reality and its Archimedean fulcrum point. At one end, this expanse of theory includes the anthropology of Levi-Strauss, which subsumes vast patterns of real human behavior under linguistic metaphors. At the other, the Marxists and the Freudians claim for words a material determinism. But it is all a web of words. Living in this modern web of words forces the medievalist, as he reads the past, to expand his attention. Literature is more than *belles-lettres*—in fact, as I said, in medieval terms it is no longer literature at all. Modern preoccupations with language, and with heuristic metaphors of language, help the medievalist see that medieval poetry is also grounded in a world whose Being is linguistic—verbal. But once the medievalist looks at his subject under this linguistic axiom, he finds texts that refuse deconstruction. He must see, if he is willing to read medieval texts in a medieval way, that even the most nominalist ones preserve a foreclosure with Being. They exist as a desire to find some way of believing in the Being of universals. In preserving this foreclosure with Being, medieval texts utterly contradict Derrida's desire to cauterize out of language all possibility of platonic utterance.

Again, modern Hermeneutik makes us conscious of the power and responsibility of reading, of critical attitude, of—most generally—points of view. This consciousness not only sharpens our attention to Chaucer's ironic narrators and ultimately to the authorial voice which the text generates.[5] More important, if we are honest, it leads us to the abundant surviving documentation of medieval reading, to which Professor Minnis has called our attention, and which we are only beginning to bring to the attention of modern scholarship.[6] From this documentation—from medieval commentaries on texts being taken as literary—we can reconstruct the medieval point of view and its way of reading. And then we can know how to read Chaucer's ironic authority in a way not at all like that practiced by modern deconstructors.

Again, modern notions of textuality, which give maximum scope to the critic to read in an infinitely various field, following the infinite codes with which a text is saturated, make us expect multiple and shifting meanings in medieval texts. And the texts respond. Of Chaucer's strategies, Josipovici makes, in these terms, a brilliant modernist reading.[7] This reading he contrasts with Dante's more dependable truth. Even in Dante, of course, there are unstable ironies, and images that fail.[8] But if Dante's words enact provisionally their unstable ironies, or even a nihilism, it is only to make evidence of precisely that fallen condition which the enacting words seek, by expressing, to redeem. Medieval texts are polysemous, but only within structures which permit one to raise problems like those of modern deconstruction safely. Even when medieval texts force these problems on our attention, and they do, it is only to show that they are being raised by words which have the power to solve them.

I must admit that Chaucer had his own problems with what he would have considered an inheritance from Platonism. Like Dante,[9] who quoted his own *dolce stil nuovo* in his *Commedia* in order to repent of it and transcend it, Chaucer had to recover from idealizing love poetry in order to discover a valid voice. This recovery, as it is documented in the *Book of the Duchess,* Professor Shoaf has analyzed in great and convincing detail.[10] That the problem was persistent, Professor Vance has shown us in his discussion of the *Troilus*.[11] Chaucer, in working for this recovery, was not moving into a language which was useful because, in the modern idiom, he could keep it unforeclosed. Just the reverse. Chaucer was moving from a language — the language of idealizing love — which was paralyzing precisely because he could not make it vitally referential. He was moving toward that great achievement of the *Canterbury Tales* — exemplarity — that collection of material particulars of human life and action in which and from which universal truths can be conceived. He was trying to move, in short, from the unforeclosable to the happily foreclosed. However, though Chaucer's goal is the opposite of the modern one, he does begin, in the *Book of the Duchess,* in the predicament which modern theory has for the first time described with sufficient violence and terror. Our achievement of this description, of course, makes us particularly qualified to profit from what Chaucer did with it.

One final observation. If there has been any one discovery which characterizes our times, it is, as Josipovici puts it, that the "world is not 'given' but depends on the kind of assumptions we bring to it." (p. xiv) We have made this discovery simultaneously in science, philosophy, and art, and we have been led by this discovery to fundamental alterations of the worlds we once thought so objective and so safe. In art—from painting to sculpture to the novel — we have become anti-representational. We have called into question the validity of the whole realistic tradition, from its roots in Renaissance mimesis to its apogee in nineteenth-century realistic fiction. Having made this discovery, we have by definition removed from between ourselves and the Middle Ages a definitive barrier — that of the whole mimetic, Cartesian, subject-object, scientific, realistic world. Medieval people had not yet thought of it. We now no longer have to think from within it. We are beginning again to use the heuristic metaphor of language in a way which formally at least resembles the medieval. This is happening even in such barbaric fields as sociology — most eminently in the work of Erving Goffman, whom I should certainly want to add to our array of contemporary literary theorists.[12]

We are, in short, being qualified by contemporary literary theory to begin to ask medieval questions of medieval texts, and to ask those questions as if they were simply our own, directly, without having to break through the barrier of an intervening mimetic world. As we do, we have the great good fortune to be able to expect from Chaucer, and of course from Dante and Langland and Chrétien and Malory and all the rest as well, a medieval answer.

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### NOTES

This article is a redaction of a position statement given at the Chaucer Society's Second Congress.

1. *Langue, texts, énigme* (Paris, 1975), p. 171.

2. I deal with these matters in detail in "Grammar, Poetic Form, and the Lyric Ego," in *Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages,* ed. Lois Ebin, forthcoming.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1973), p. xv.

4. For a full account of this position, see my book, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981), written in collaboration with Theresa Anne Moritz.

5. H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," *PMLA,* 95 (1980), 213-224. This article had a particular presence because it appeared shortly before the Congress met.

6. I am happy to thank A. J. Minnis for having let me read the manuscript of his book, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages.* Its central evidence is drawn from materials in exegesis. I deal with the evidence of literary commentaries in *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction,* now forthcoming with the University of Toronto Press.