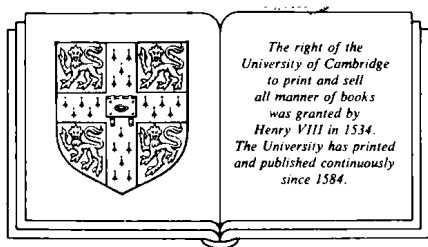


Judith Ferster

CHAUCE
on
Interpretation

Chaucer on Interpretation

JUDITH FERSTER



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To Paul Ferster
and Dorothy Coben Ferster
. . .sources and analogues

PREFACE



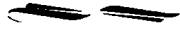
This book has roots in the first Chaucer course I took, in 1969 with Mary Carruthers at Smith College, and in my dissertation, directed by Elizabeth Kirk at Brown University. Since it has been “in the works” for such a long time, the list of those who have influenced it along the way is also long. It includes academics and nonacademics, Chaucerians and non-Chaucerians, and some institutions. The National Endowment for the Humanities supported me three times while I was working on this project: in 1975–6 for a wonderful postdoctoral year at the University of Chicago, in the summer of 1978 at the School for Criticism and Theory at the University of California at Irvine, and in 1980–1 at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina, where the community of fellows and the congenial and helpful staff provided an ideal context for writing. Brandeis University provided money for some of the typing and copying and access to a computer for word processing.

Of the individuals who have given help of many kinds, even the list of those who have read the entire manuscript is substantial: David Aers, Mary Carruthers, Robert Hanning, Richard Lanham, H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., Ira Levine, Jonathan Loesberg, Charles Owen, Richard Allen Shoaf, Jay Schleusener, John Smith, and Winthrop Wetherbee saved me from error, pushed me toward clarity, made me account for more of the evidence, and encouraged me to keep going. The friendly skepticism and editorial wisdom of my two latest readers, Ira Levine and John Smith, made the argument tighter and the style smoother. John Smith’s help made the editing and production of the final copy easier and more fun than I thought such a large task could be. For a Shakespearean, he knows a great deal about Middle English and computers.

Preface

A finely tuned account of how each of these readers (and many others) contributed and of where I could and could not accept advice would make another chapter. I must substitute an assertion of the gratitude and pleasure with which I have reviewed the catalogue of helpers. I have experienced part of my subject—how discourse produces new meaning—firsthand.

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INTRODUCTION



THE NARRATOR of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* has stood pondering the inscriptions on the garden gate in his dream. Since the inscriptions are contradictory, one describing the garden as a paradise, the other describing it as a hellish desert, the narrator is unable to decide whether to risk entering. His guide, Africanus, explains that since the narrator has exempted himself from love, the inscriptions do not apply to him; they are addressed only to lovers.

With that myn hand in his he tok anon,
 Of which I confort caughte, and wente in faste.
 But, Lord, so I was glad and wel begoon!
 For overal where that I myne eyen caste
 Were treës clad with leves that ay shal laste,
 Ech in his kynde, of colour fresh and greene
 As emeraude, that joye was to seene.'

(ll. 169-75)

Why is the narrator glad? Whether the garden turns out to be a paradise or a hellish desert should be merely a matter of scientific interest to the narrator. Perhaps his response is one of aesthetic pleasure. Perhaps there is a touch of relief in his gladness: If he does not completely believe that he is exempt from the gate's prediction, his pleasure at seeing the garden's beauty is not disinterested. Perhaps he is led to call the leaves evergreen by his desire that they conform to the inscription predicting a paradise where "grene and lusty May shal evere endure" (l. 130). He cannot know for sure that the leaves are evergreen; most of the trees listed in the next stanza (oak, ash, elm, etc., ll. 176-82) are decidu-

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ous. He hopes that the prediction of an evergreen paradise is correct, but he has just arrived and cannot know for himself. Evergreen is more a wish than a fact.

The narrator's response to the garden generates this contrast between objectivity and subjectivity. On the one hand, the narrator may see and describe the garden as it really is; on the other, he may impose himself upon it, seeing it according to his desires. Both of these alternatives are dualistic: Subject and object are separate, and subject struggles, successfully or unsuccessfully, to understand object.

But the passage raises another, more dialectical possibility. The narrator's experience of gardens, even if it is subjective, is not completely self-enclosed because the narrator is not only a dreamer, but a reader, too. He is not locked inside his mind because his mind has been influenced by the world. His response to the garden has been shaped by books: Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*, Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose*, and Boccaccio's *Teseida*. When he dreams and perceives, he shapes the garden.

It is precisely the words about emotions that the narrator takes from his sources. His "comfort" at having Africanus take his hand is very like Dante's comfort (he uses the cognate of Dante's word) as Virgil takes his hand and leads him through the inscribed gate of Canto 3 of the *Inferno*:

E poi che la sua mano alla mia pose
con lieto volto, ond'io mi confortai,
mi mise dentro alle segrete cose.

And when he had laid his hand on mine with cheerful looks
that gave me comfort, he led me in to the things that are
hidden there.²

(3.19-21, pp. 46-7)

The narrator of the Middle English translation of the *Roman de la Rose* is "glad" when he enters the garden, and glad specifically because he believes it to be paradise:

And whan I was inne, iwys,
Myn herte was ful glad of this,

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For wel wende I ful sikerly
Have ben in paradys erthly.
So fair it was that, trusteth wel,
It semede a place espirituel.

(ll. 645-50)

The narrator of the *Parliament* may be glad that the garden is more like the garden of Love in the *Roman de la Rose* than it is like Dante's hell. His fear and joy are mediated by his reading.

Chaucer explores these models of the relationship between self and other (by "other" I mean anything outside the mind that the mind defines itself against, including the natural world, other people, and literary texts): the dualistic models in which self and other are separate and the dialectical model in which self and other are part of a larger system in which they mutually shape each other. In both dualistic models, interpretation, whether it produces subjective or objective readings, bridges the gap between self and other. In the dialectical model, the separation is de-emphasized in favor of a mutual relationship in which subject and object influence each other. The various models allow Chaucer to address the isolation and loneliness of the self, the difficulty of seeing and saying the truth, and the links, despite this isolation, between self and other.¹

This paradox of independence and dependence has implications for Chaucer's view of personal identity, political power, and literary meaning. Its implications for the self have already begun to appear in my discussion of the passage from the *Parliament*. It has implications for political power because sometimes power is relatively unconstrained and acts freely in the world and sometimes power is more dependent on context. Sometimes rulers can do what they like, and sometimes they need the acquiescence of those they rule; their subjects' tacit or explicit interpretation of them as rulers is crucial to the rulers' actions and the maintenance of their positions.

The paradox of the dependence and independence of mind and world also has implications for literary meaning. According to the dualistic view, the meaning of a literary work is in the work or in the mind of the author, and it is the job of the reader to find it. He can either know it objectively or, hopelessly cut off from it, project his own intentions upon it and use it as a mirror in which he

sees only himself. In both cases, subject and object are irrevocably separate. In the dialectical view, there are elements of both subjectivity and objectivity in interpretation. The interpreter interprets according to his own identity because no interpreter can step out of his own situation in order to interpret the text on its own terms; his very definition of "its own terms" will be informed by his identity and his position in a particular culture in a particular time. The interpreter's identity and location therefore contribute to the meaning of the text. However, the process is not self-enclosed or solipsistic because the world and the text also shape the interpreter. Subject and object are not two separate entities but part of a hermeneutical process that is circular but not vicious because it frequently brings to consciousness those prejudgments that shape interpretation.

This discussion has generated two basic models of the interaction between mind and world—the dualistic and the dialectical—and three areas in which Chaucer explores them—personal identity, political power, and literary meaning. My view of the dialectical model has been influenced, as my vocabulary indicates, by modern phenomenological hermeneutics. This is not the place for an exhaustive study of what Chaucer's intellectual context shares with modern hermeneutics. Such a study would wander from literary texts into rhetorics, commentaries, scholastic writings, and many other genres. For the present I shall sketch briefly some of the medieval ideas that provide a context for my interpretations of Chaucer's poems. Then, after sketching the modern theory, I shall outline the chapters that follow, using the hermeneutical vocabulary to suggest how Chaucer explores the dualistic and dialectical models of the relationship between mind and world. I shall end the chapter with two short examples of the critical approach I discuss here, comments on the *House of Fame* and on the *Tale of Melibee*.

PERSONAL IDENTITY

In fourteenth-century England, the status of the individual was changing. Conventional wisdom has it that members of traditional peasant societies see themselves more as part of a social whole than as individuals, taking their identities from their place in that whole rather than from any sense of their own unique qualities or experiences. They think of their place in society more

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in terms of obligations to the group than in terms of individual rights. If this generalization ever applied to England in the Middle Ages, it did not apply in any simple way to the fourteenth century. The important concepts of the body politic—the community to which the individual was subordinate—and the divinely ordered hierarchy tended to emphasize stasis and obedience: The individual was not expected to criticize or change the given order. Yet the history of the late Middle Ages is the history of the rise of individualism because of a number of interrelated economic, political, and cultural developments: the detachment of agricultural workers from ties to land and lord, the conversion of obligations of labor to obligations of money, the increase in wage labor, the growth of cities, the increasing importance of a merchant class, and, as a result of these changes, the increase in social and demographic mobility. All of these developments allowed individuals to change their financial, social, or geographic positions by their own efforts. They did not have to live and die in the positions in which they were born. Scholars have pointed to evidence that social and religious forms and consciousness evolved to express the change.⁴ Of course, the new forms did not immediately replace the old forms or the old theories that explained them. Early medieval ideas and incipient modern ones lived side by side.

Chaucer's works present both dualistic and dialectical models of the relationship between self and other. The tellers on the Canterbury pilgrimage take many of their concerns from their occupations: The kind of work they do determines the subject matter of their tales and their relationships with other pilgrims. Yet many of Chaucer's characters do not fit neatly into their niches, and the critical impulse to call them realistic individuals registers their refusal to be contained by stereotypes. Some of them even voice the idea that individual experience is singular and inexpressible. The Wife of Bath articulates the ideology of experience as teacher. Her fourth husband and the Merchant's Justinus exclaim over their inability to communicate their marital pain (III[D].492-4; IV[E].1553). The individual mind is isolated from others. Yet the more dialectical view is also possible. Alison's fourth husband and Justinus share the lament over their inability to share pain. They use similar images and vocabulary because they both borrow from St. Jerome; in fact, their images are proverbial. The isolation is communally expressed.

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Jill Mann's study of the portraits in the *General Prologue* has shown that the pilgrims' individual traits have sources in estates satires; what appear to be unique traits are in fact conventions. But Mann also analyzes the paradoxical fact that despite the pilgrims' conventionality, we respond to many of them as if they were individuals. She believes that our response is caused by the characters' complexity, their vulnerability to time, and our knowledge of their points of view. Her comments on the Parson provide a good example of the dialectic between stereotype and individual because the Parson himself seems to be aware of the estates satires' criticisms of parsons. His "individuality" consists of his conscious relationship to stereotypes about parsons.⁵ The contradiction between unique self and stereotyped role is resolved by a more dialectical view in which the individual is aware of his or her relationship to a tradition. As we shall see later, such awareness is a frequent result of participation in the hermeneutical circle.

Another way to consider individuals to be part of a larger system is to notice the ways they shape each other through interaction. A group forms a system in which each becomes different from what he or she would be alone. Such a dialectic also describes the relationship between writers and readers. As Evan Carton says in his apt article on the *Troilus*, "In recognizing the complex interdependency of authoring and reading, Chaucer denies autonomous control to the one and insular passivity to the other and suggests that complicity is the essence of linguistic exchange and of worldly experience."⁶

POLITICAL POWER

The paradox of political power is visible in the fourteenth century. On the one hand, the hierarchical model of society means that some people have power over others who are below them. Their exercise of that power does not depend on the active consent of those they rule. On the other hand, in both theory and practice, the late Middle Ages produced more dialectical models. There were more and more ways for the populace to participate in legal and political processes. According to Walter Ullmann, "However much the theocratic-descending theory of government was loudly, officially and unofficially, proclaimed as the only form of government com-

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patible with Christian beliefs, the lower regions of society . . . acted very much on the ascending principles of government . . .”⁷ Several theorists wrote that the populace is not only the object but the source of the prince’s power. According to John of Paris, the king rules with the consent of the governed, who can withhold it and deprive him of his power and legitimacy.⁸ Marsiglio of Padua wrote that the government is the means of accomplishing the people’s will, which can bestow and withdraw government office. Since common profit limits tyranny,⁹ rulers can be said to rule because they are allowed to: They present themselves as legitimately powerful and are accepted as such. They win power because their interpretations win acceptance.¹⁰ A power struggle is a clash of interpretations, and, conversely, a clash of interpretations is a power struggle. There is an interpretive aspect to politics and a political aspect to interpretation.

Chaucer seems to have been aware of both views of power. On the one hand, he portrays leaders who have the power to impose their wills: Virginius kills Virginia, Almachius kills St. Cecilia, and the Trojans trade Criseyde to the Greeks, all because of real hierarchies of power. On the other hand, Chaucer portrays leaders who need or accept advice from their subjects: Theseus, Walter, and Melibeus all change their decisions because their subjects petition them or negotiate with them.¹¹ This dynamic is especially apparent where there are ad hoc leaders like Harry Bailly, Nicholas, and the Pardoner, who attempt to control situations over which they have no authority. The relationships between these ad hoc leaders and their subjects are dialectical.

LITERARY MEANING

Medieval discussions of literature often include its effects; literary works and their authors can be praised or blamed according to how they are perceived to influence the behavior of their audiences.¹² Either fiction leads audiences into falsehood and evil, and writers are liars, or fiction urges its audiences toward salvation, and writers are aligned with philosophers and saints. Macrobius, for instance, discards fables that have no effect other than pleasure and accepts those that “encourage the reader to good works.”¹³ Hugh of St. Victor rejects the “songs of the poets” in favor of Scripture, which “teaches what it delights us to know

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and what it behooves us to imitate." Citing Gregory, he encourages readers to respond to all books not merely aesthetically, but with "a desire to imitate the virtues set forth."¹⁴ In the *Genealogia Deorum*, Boccaccio must defend fiction because its critics

cry out that poets are seducers of the mind, prompters of crime, and, to make their foul charge, fouler, if possible, they say they are philosophers' apes, that it is a heinous crime to read or possess the books of poets; and then, without making any distinction, they prop themselves up, as they say, with Plato's authority to the effect that poets ought to be turned out-of-doors—nay, out of town, and that the Muses, their mumming mistresses, as Boethius says, being sweet with deadly sweetness, are detestable, and should be driven out with them and utterly rejected.¹⁵

These passages are interesting for their relative positions in medieval intellectual history. The late Middle Ages produced views on the usefulness of poetry other than Hugh's strict ban. During the humanistic renaissance of the twelfth century, the Chartrians valued pagan authors as sources of wisdom.¹⁶ There may even have been some support for the idea that fiction is good precisely because it is not a source of wisdom, but rather an occasion for refreshing play.¹⁷ Yet despite these arguments against the traditional mistrust of fiction, in the fourteenth century Boccaccio must still engage it or at least pay it lip service.¹⁸

The passages from Hugh and Boccaccio are also interesting for the way they include the reader. Boccaccio cites allegations that reading may be criminal. Hugh says that readers have to learn how to use books properly. Emphasis on the *use* of literature leads naturally to a corollary emphasis on the users. If writers are responsible for not leading audiences astray, readers are responsible for not being led.

The Middle Ages is full of stories about people telling stories as examples to imitate.¹⁹ Sometimes the results are beneficial, as when St. Augustine's conversion is mediated by the story of St. Antony. St. Antony is converted when he hears a portion of the Bible read in church and takes it "as a counsel addressed to himself."²⁰ Augustine's awareness of Antony's conversion and of another man who was converted when he learned about St. An-

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tony leads him to interpret the voice in the garden as a command and to choose a passage of Scripture on the basis of which he transforms his life. Thus, the story is doubly mediated by the imitation of stories: Augustine has the example of Antony and the example of how to use Antony by imitating him.

Sometimes the mediation by stories is destructive. Dante's Paolo and Francesca lose their souls by imitating the adulterous passion of Lancelot and Guenevere. Francesca blames the book and its author for her damnation:

Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse . . .

A Galeotto [pander] was the book and he that wrote it . . .
(*Inferno*, 5.137, pp. 78-9)

Her accusation against the author is consonant with the orthodox demands on authors. But whatever the author's intentions, the couple short-circuits them by acting before they read the book's tragic end, which might have made them think twice before playing Lancelot and Guenevere: "That day we read in it no farther." Paolo and Francesca have made a mistake about how to read and how to use their reading; Francesca's accusation of the author is an attempt at self-justification.²¹

Francesca's blame of the author points to a conflict in the later Middle Ages between the orthodox demands on authors to produce good results in their audiences and the growing independence of those audiences. According to Janet Coleman, the conflict was heightened in the late fourteenth century because, on the one hand, there was more interest in the "morally responsible and individual author" and, on the other, there were more and more opportunities for solitary reading.²² Oral performance was still common, and although hearers at a reading or recitation can miss the point through inattention or misunderstanding, the performer can control certain aspects of the audience's experience. To the extent that the performer determines the selections, order, pace, tone, and accompanying gestures, he or she can also influence interpretation. When people take the book home and read for themselves, they are much more independent. As paper became cheaper and literacy spread, ownership of books increased, and more and more people could experience that freedom with literary works. The nominalist

emphasis on God's freedom produced a congruent emphasis on the individual's moral responsibility.²³ This train of thought might be relevant to Wyclif's idea that people (or at least some of them) should be able to read the Bible for themselves even if they do not know Latin. Church pronouncements accused Lollards of making books and discussing them. To have books in one's hands is to exercise some control over them. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Barthes describes a reader's action on the text: "[W]hat I enjoy in a narrative is not directly its content or even its structure, but rather the abrasions I impose upon the fine surface: I read on, I skip, I look up, I dip in again."²⁴ This formulation sounds quite modern, but Christine de Pizan's description of her own reading at the beginning of *The Book of the City of Ladies* agrees with Barthes quite well. She says she picked up a book, "and after browsing here and there and reading the end, I put it down . . ."²⁵ Furthermore, since the typical medieval mode of composition was the rewriting of old works, the power of readers to reshape a work while retelling it would have been clear to educated audiences that knew one or more of a work's ancestors. Writers themselves demonstrated the reader's power to transform a poem and thus showed that reading can be a kind of rewriting.

In the *Retraction* of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer makes it clear that he understands the possible effects of stories on readers by worrying that some of the tales "sownen into synne" (X[I].1086). In the context of the pious and confessional tone of the *Retraction*, he acknowledges the potentially harmful effect of stories. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, he describes the results of literature when he notes Criseyde's reaction to the song her niece Antigone sings in the garden. After she hears the song, she is more willing to become the kind of lover the song describes:

But every word which that she of hire herde,
She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,
And ay gan love hire lasse for t'agaste
Than it dide erst, and synken in hire herte,
That she wex somewhat able to converte.
(Book II, ll. 899-903; emphasis mine)

Criseyde responds to the song by imitating it, even becoming an edition of it by printing it in her heart.