

cation. As always, the American student is the one who suffers in the long run. Knowing little, he is allowed to know less and to “identify” with what he knows already, namely the tendencies, ideas, and artistic movements of the era in which he lives. Even the terms “studying,” “learning,” and “knowing” are avoided, replaced in university catalogs and course descriptions by “experiencing,” “appreciating,” and the careful “exposure,” often defined as “modes of knowing.”

As a corrective to this new type of academic extremism I wish to propose revision of the term “relevance”—if we have to work with so presumptuous a concept any longer—so that it includes “the usable past” as well (Henri Peyre’s term—and it is equally biased, but will have to do for the time being). It would be a surprise for many to find that much of the past turns out to be “relevant” or “usable.” Let us not fool ourselves: the aversion of many students toward studying past periods and origins stems very often from previous failure of their professors to meet the challenge of lively and knowledgeable presentation; in other words, it is a pedagogical rather than a curricular problem.

Therefore, by all means, let us teach students how to read literature, as Brooks points out so well, but by combining information (all kinds, as much as possible, certainly origins) with esthetic experience, fathom the *signifié* (in its widest sense) along with the *signifiant* and its various linguistic forms. Only then will we succeed in preventing the dangerous intellectual impoverishment which is already spreading in our academic field.

EDELGARD DUBRUCK  
*Marygrove College*

*Mr. Brooks replies:*

Dubruck’s letter demonstrates so total a misunderstanding of my argument that I despair of explaining myself to him. His defense of Curtius is unnecessary, for Curtius was never under attack. I made clear my admiration for Curtius. And I am of course aware of what Curtius means by “modern literature” in the context of *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. I was myself speaking within the context of a debate (at the 1970 MLA Annual Convention) on the adequacy and usefulness of Romania as a conceptual framework for study and teaching today. Why my critique should be read as either an abhorrence of painstaking philology or a depreciation of German scholarship, I do not know. And I am not in the habit of quoting from books I have not read.

Dubruck wishes to see me as a victim of the search for “relevance”—his term, not mine—and suggests

that I represent all sorts of deplorable tendencies in the contemporary academy. I in reply can only suggest that he attend to what I in fact said, rather than to his own obsessions. If the past is to remain knowable, the knowers will have to respond to its challenges with more than a ritual defense of past practices.

Peter Brooks  
*Yale University*

### The Man of Law’s Tale

To the Editor:

A colleague and I had been working for some time on many of the problems associated with Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale, and had reached certain conclusions about this puzzling work, when you published Morton W. Bloomfield’s provocative article “The Man of Law’s Tale: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy” (*PMLA*, 87, May 1972, 384–90). In the space available here we will not be able to stress the virtues of Bloomfield’s essay, but we feel that we must indicate the way in which it perpetuates certain problems of interpretation regarding the MLT rather than solves them.

Notwithstanding the complex argument indicated in the title, the first difficulty with the article is that it leaves Chaucer as a less than competent artist. There are no single statements to this effect, yet a brief look at a number of key passages in the paper will suggest what we mean. Bloomfield writes: “Many explanations have been offered for our lack of enthusiasm for the tale. The most obvious is its indifference to realistic characterization, motivation, and circumstance” (p. 384). He continues: “What are we to feel about an incredible heroine, Constance, who is subject to an impossibly ridiculous and coincidental series of events which one cannot take seriously, while the teller apostrophises and laments in exaggerated fashion over the happenings, attempting, directly it seems, to play on our feelings?” Developing his argument, he says: “We cannot identify with the protagonist as we long to, because the author or persona perpetually keeps us at a distance” (p. 385). We find that the Man of Law “frequently interrupts his narrative. He is a garrulous man who must comment on the action.” Moreover, “The interruptions all serve in different fashion to alienate us from the story and to stylize the action” (p. 385). These observations, all descriptively correct, suggest a lapse in Chaucer’s artistry, but this, surely, is a conclusion that we should be reluctant to arrive at.

The second problem with the article is the assumption that all the descriptively correct observations above should be viewed as negative elements from which we must rescue the tale. If the text reveals, as it

does, a colorless heroine involved in improbable action, and a narrator who constantly interrupts his tale, if by a variety of techniques we are kept at a distance from the tale, it would seem reasonable to argue that we start by assuming that this was what Chaucer had in mind when he constructed the story. Approaching the text with this assumption in mind, those elements which Bloomfield finds, in a word, negative may be seen as positive components of a coherent, consistent, superbly constructed work of art. Such a conclusion is at a far remove from the one offered by Bloomfield.

Briefly, the way out of the implicit charge of careless art, the way to avoid the assumption that the colorless heroine and the improbable action are aspects of this bad art, and the way of seeing that the distancing of the audience from the tale by the narrator and the actions of the heroine are essential parts of good (i.e., coherent, consistent) art is by perceiving that the important action of this tale does not take place in the story but in the changing attitudes of a narrator who is in a dialectical relationship with the heroine and the tale. He is the true center of the tale. Yet to see this clearly we must point to a further difficulty with Bloomfield's paper.

A major problem with Bloomfield's article is the omission of distinct references to the MOL as he appears in the General Prologue and the headpiece. An explanation for this may be found in the all too close identification he makes between the author and the persona when he writes "the author or persona perpetually keeps us at a distance" (p. 385). Certainly the author keeps us at a healthy distance, but he is, after all, the creator of the persona, and the persona is the means whereby we are kept away from identification with the heroine. The reason why we must not identify the author and persona can perhaps be found in the General Prologue. There we meet a MOL who is in receipt of great fees and who is keen on the purchasing of land. There is more than a hint in all this that the MOL is a crude materialist in the common sense of that term. Such a view is further developed when we reach the headpiece, where we find the MOL expressing a decidedly unchristian philosophy in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Since, according to the MOL, all this is rigidly determined, as well as being right, we have a narrator who is not only a materialist in the common sense, but one who is a full-blown materialist in the more sophisticated sense too. And this is the MOL that we meet at the beginning of the tale: we have been well prepared for the tale by all the material prefatory to it.

Ben Jonson said: "*Oratio imago animi*: Language most shows a man: speak that I may see thee," and it was no new idea with him. Speak is precisely what the

Man of Law does. If we look to the nature of his interruptions and observe the shift in his frame of references, we shall also discern a decided shift as he is transformed by the Christian values which are the particular possession of the heroine of the tale he tells. The difference in attitude can be seen even among the early apostrophes. The first two are dominated by beliefs in astrological determinism, and clearly these show a continuity between the MOL as he appeared in the prefatory material and his condition up to this point of the Tale. There are no Christian references at all in these passages—instead we meet Mars. The apostrophe to the Sowdanesse, however, does introduce Christian elements, though in a determinist form. The narrator says: "Thou madest Eve bring us in servage" (l. 369). But of course Satan did not *make* Eve bring us into "servage" at all, for she had to have free will—unless Satan is to be made into God and God into Satan. In the case of Custance, clearly God does intervene and in a sense controls her life, but even here we suppose that she had free will to reject her Father's command to travel to a marriage in savage lands. However, she does not, since she is paying homage to the high virtue of obedience.

In Part II of the Tale we have the fifth apostrophe, "O sodeyn wo," which is certainly medieval, but which in context may be regarded as ideologically neutral. It is with the next major interruption of the MOL that we see a change in reference and attitude:

Men myghten asken why she was not slayn  
Eek at the feeste? who myghte her body save?  
And I answer to that demand agayn,  
Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave  
There every wight save he, maister and knave,  
Was with the leon frete er he asterte?  
No wight but God, that he bar in herte.

God liste to shewe his woderful myracle  
In hire, for we sholde seen his myghty werkis;

This is a considerable remove from the materialist with which we began. While the MLT may never be noted for the depth of its realism, this passage surely points to a kind of psychological realism in that the MOL has become involved in and been changed by the values of the Christian heroine of the Tale he has been telling.

We have not the space here to discuss the contrapuntal apostrophes of Custance, nor can we examine the rapid haste with which the Tale seems to end, although we would suggest that the latter is a result of the realization on the part of the MOL of the extent to which he has been drawn into the value system of the heroine of his tale. The distancing of the tale, the garbularity of the narrator, the frequency of the latter's interruptions, all have a function we would argue, and

once these functions are recognized and fully developed we shall have a coherent and consistent vision of MLT that serves to illustrate once again Chaucer's superb artistry.

K. J. HUGHES  
*University of Manitoba*

*Mr. Bloomfield replies:*

Mr. Hughes's main objection to my article (*PMLA* 87, 1972, 384–90) is that it ignores the teller who alone provides the key to the Man of Law's Tale (MLT). Furthermore it assumes that Chaucer is a bad artist inasmuch as I report the widely accepted view that MLT is duller than most of the other tales. On the contrary, those elements "which Bloomfield finds . . . negative may be seen as positive components of a coherent, consistent, superbly constructed work of art."

Inasmuch as I was reporting at the beginning of my article what readers usually think (which Hughes admits) and not my opinions at all, I find the statement that I find these elements negative and Chaucer guilty of "careless art" surprising to say the least. The whole point of my article was to show that although readers tend to find MLT dull, it is not dull but makes an important medieval point in a medieval as well as a universal way. It is therefore astonishing to find after having written such an article to be told that I have made Chaucer guilty of "careless art." It is reassuring to know that Mr. Hughes and his nameless colleague have saved Chaucer from my slur on his honor.

As for Mr. Hughes's own interpretation, I find it too psychological. I believe that Chaucer's *Tales* can stand by themselves. The addition of the teller and his psychology is a further complexity which may increase the richness of perspective in a Canterbury tale but it cannot by itself explain a tale. If a tale cannot be self-sustaining on its primary level, then it suffers from a serious deficiency. In other words, I do not believe that the sole purpose of the *Tales*, as Kittredge argued, is to recall and explain the character of the tellers. Hughes's attempt to save Chaucer's artistry from what he regards as my denigration of it does not seem to me to be satisfactory on general grounds. In general, modern criticism is moving away from purely psychological interpretations, and I think that this movement is a step forward, especially when it allows us to study narrative structure.

In particular, even ignoring the general weakness of purely psychological interpretations, I find Hughes's interpretation unconvincing in its own terms. I find the Man of Law's assumed conversion in the very telling of his tale especially hard to believe. It rests upon an assumption of insincerity in the Christianity of the first part of the tale and the sincerity of the Christian refer-

ences in the second part. The evidence Hughes and his colleague offer for this transformation reveals a basic ignorance of medieval Christianity and a forced reading of texts. As an example of the former I may take the astounding assumption that Chaucer takes a modern liberal Protestant point of view about poverty (i.e., that it is an unmitigated evil) and of the latter the interpretation of l. 389 that "thou [Satan] madest Eva bring us in servage" necessarily denies freedom of the will to humans. Astrology was widely believed in by good Christians in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance and such a belief did not imply complete determinism. No Christian can believe in an all knowing and good God and believe in absolute and unconditional free will. In one sense Satan did make [it possible] for Eve to "brynge us in servage." The presentation of the opportunity to sin is not a denial of human freedom to choose. He who tempts us successfully makes us in some sense to sin.

A final point. When a writer does not wish to get into extraneous issues he may use "or" in the nonexcluding sense of "vel" not "aut"—and/or. I did not wish to get into a discussion of the relations between author and persona in my paper, an important point but nonetheless irrelevant to my particular argument. I therefore wrote "author or persona" (take your choice or both).

MORTON W. BLOOMFIELD  
*Harvard University*

### Robert Burton's Tricks of Memory

To the Editor:

In his study, "Robert Burton's Tricks of Memory" (*PMLA*, 87, May 1972, 391–96), David Renaker is puzzled by Burton's method of using sources. He finds significant changes in the numbers quoted, "fusions of names," "fusions of concepts and events," additions and interpolations ("imaginative embroidery"). These phenomena can be ascribed, in his opinion, to slips of memory or sketchy notes. Yet this is hardly true, since the author has retained all these "deficiencies" in the six editions which appeared while he was alive. Renaker suggests another solution: "We must conclude that he was both aware of his quirks of memory and indifferent to them; unless, perhaps, he actually valued them for the peculiar charm they lent to his work" (p. 391). However, he does not show why we "must" reach this conclusion, and the "perhaps" certainly does not satisfy the curiosity of the reader. I would like, therefore, to offer a different solution.

Renaker is looking at the problem from the standpoint of modern standards of accuracy in using material borrowed from others. This problem is very old,