

(1973). One final note: Theodor is consistently misspelled throughout the essay.

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*Mr. Duncan replies:*

I had hoped to be able to discuss *The Mysterious Stranger* without getting involved in the tangles of the textual problem. But as Grover has made clear, I should have addressed the problem in a note, if not in the essay itself.

The Gibson edition of *The Mysterious Stranger* is definitive, to be sure, but it leaves us with the integrity of Twain's fragments. The Paine-Duneka version is indeed fraudulent, but it is the only one that leaves us with a single coherent story, or at least a single story approaching coherence. For that reason I agree with James Cox that it is closer to Twain's intention than anything else we have, because I presume that Twain's intention was a single coherent story. The two editions are not satisfactory for different reasons, and we have to choose between editions according to criteria that are inconclusive. The textual problem is insoluble. Therefore I silently took the same liberties with Gibson's edition that Paine-Duneka took (also silently) with Twain's manuscripts, but I do not propose that I thereby solved the textual problem. I was just trying to deal with my problem—the empirical and the ideal—as simply as possible.

As for "44," I regard him (again, with Cox) as Satan by another name. As for "Theodore," I wish I had spelled him "Theodor."

Finally, in dealing with the problem of *The Mysterious Stranger* as I did—that is, by not dealing with it explicitly—I committed the very error that I constantly warn my students against. I took short cuts so short that I left the reader behind, guessing where I was. I take that sort of indiscretion very seriously and wish to apologize for it, and to thank Grover for making me aware that I need to.

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### "Voice" in the *Canterbury Tales*

To the Editor:

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr.'s "The Art of Impersonation: A General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*" (*PMLA*, 95 [1980], 213–24) presents a provocative, in many ways attractive, but devilishly slippery argument. His initial target is Howard's

formulation, "unimpersonated artistry," and I believe many Chaucerians would agree with Leicester that a principle that allows the critic to separate passages of impersonation from those of an authoritative Chaucer invites interpretative quibbling and textual dismemberment, and, at the least, is logically inelegant. (My apparent deviation, cited on pp. 214–15, results from an attempt, perhaps misguided, at a thematic assessment of the Knight's Tale independent of the *Canterbury* format.) Leicester wishes to free the "voice" of the *Canterbury Tales* from any hint of an authorial "presence," specifically, a Chaucer the poet lurking behind a Donaldsonian Chaucer the pilgrim. Yet Leicester ultimately finds it necessary to add that Chaucer's "voice" is also "an impersonator in the conventional sense"; the tales are "double-voiced"; and, whether "he gives them his life" or "he takes his life from them," this speaker mediates between the "fictional others" and us, his audience (p. 221). But we have been told previously that such impersonation of the pilgrim narrators "*precedes dramatization of the Canterbury sort*" (p. 218) and the "prologal voice," after giving their portraits, "sets them free to speak" (p. 221). Do we not, then, still have two Chaucers here? The one is tied to the fiction of the pilgrimage and its narration and equally to the double voicing of the individual tales. The latter is only possible in Leicester's sense by virtue of the fiction of unmediated reportage (see the General Prologue, ll. 725 ff.); otherwise the specter of "unimpersonated artistry" within the tales would be logically inescapable. The second Chaucer would comprehend all the "voices," the "incomplete" one of the Prologue as well as the fulfilling ones of the various tales. But temporally independent of the fiction, ontologically distinct from any of its speakers, though only known through all of them, he is the voicer of all the voices, the total impersonation that Leicester himself refers to as "the personality of the poet" (p. 222). Even as we are told that the speaker's "art of impersonation" in the *Canterbury Tales* has as its telos self-impersonation, "to create himself as fully as he can in his work" (p. 222), do not Leicester's very words "create" and "work" reinstate a "presence," in distinction from which the text gains an autonomous status, a personality made or "worked up" by a creator?

The attempt to dispel the dramatic illusion in the *Canterbury* fiction hangs on Leicester's insistence on the fiction's "textuality," which he claims "the French have taught us always implies *absence*" (p. 216). There have been many French discussions of textuality in recent years, but Leicester's notes are only obliquely helpful here. He cites in other contexts two Frenchmen, neither of whom is, strictly

speaking, concerned with this sort of “textuality”: Benveniste deals with language in general, while Derrida’s “écriture” is broader in its implications, is even antecedent to language. Still, “absence” is a key term in Derrida’s philosophy, though it remains difficult to understand why it deserves undocumented, axiomatic status in Leicester’s argument. An explanation may be inferred from the criticism of Donaldson, whose hierarchical “realms” of Chaucer the pilgrim, the man, and the poet “take on a distinctly metaphysical cast” (p. 219). Derrida, of course, rejects strenuously any such “theology of presence” (and much more), but attractive as his antimetaphysical posture is to many modern critics, is it therefore more appropriate to a medieval text? His is not a metaphysically *neutral* position; nor is a theory of textuality derived from it. Any critical proposition that touches on the referentiality of language—in contrast to, say, a discussion of deixis—is likely to entail metaphysical assumptions, hence, it seems to me, is especially vulnerable to anachronism.

The textuality of a medieval literary work, in particular one “written to be read, but read *as if* it were spoken,” “a literary imitation of oral performance” (p. 221), merits the attention Leicester brings to it; but he underestimates the significance of his own concession for an age not entirely out of touch with oral culture. Our typographical imaginations can scarcely grasp the relationship between text and oral performance for a time in which the latter was still the norm and the former precariously indeterminate. Much of the “textuality” we perceive in the *Canterbury Tales* is an illusion of modern editions, though some of it, for example, the rubrication, is the work of medieval scribes. The stylistic and metrical features Leicester cites as evidence for textuality would obtain equally for the printed copy of a Shakespearean play. Though the theatrical analogy is not an exact fit, the sense of performance permeates the “textuality” of the *Tales*. To say that the only Chaucer we know is the one impersonated in the “voices” of his text is all that we can usefully say about Shakespeare and perhaps even Milton and Wordsworth. In fact, that assertion looks suspiciously like the New Critical dictum that “ultimately all we have is the text.”

Thus I find it possible to accept many of Leicester’s strictures against the bad habits of Chaucerians without having to embrace his theory of absence. We need assume no more of a presence than is commonly implied by the rhetorical definition of irony, namely, a locus for “what is meant” that is different from “what is said.” And perhaps the Chaucerian persona might be thought of as a reflex of extended irony, much as allegory is conven-

tionally defined as extended metaphor. No doubt we will not always agree about the exact bounds of irony and we need to beware of reifying either the “pilgrim” or the “poet,” but we cannot entirely dispense with a presence unless we remove the “im” from “impersonation.”

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*Mr. Leicester replies:*

Robert Burlin seems to find the specter of free play and the dance of the signifiers lurking behind the project he assigns to me of freeing the voice of the *Canterbury Tales* from “any hint of authorial presence.” While it might be interesting to deal theoretically with such issues in this text, I was more interested in how “Chaucer”—by which I mean the text itself—deals with the issue of authorial presence as content. As far as I can see, the “two Chaucers” I am accused of reintroducing inadvertently in my argument are simply the single speaker I attempted to describe, that is, Chaucer the poem, or the voice of the text. Burlin *does* reintroduce a distinction by making me say that impersonation of “the pilgrim narrators” precedes dramatization of the *Canterbury* sort, a premise that assumes that these narrators are still somehow outside of, prior to, the texts of the tales. What I said was that we have to read any tale in the way I described, attending to its voicing, and that such a reading is *analytically* prior to, and takes priority over, considerations introduced by the frame narrative. An assessment, thematic or otherwise, of the Knight’s Tale “independent of the *Canterbury* format” does not absolve us from the responsibility of attending to the tale’s speaker. The tale is a text that, as I said, “actively engages the phenomenon of voice” (p. 217) and makes that phenomenon its content. It is a text that is about its speaker, whomever we call him—and whomever Chaucer called him.

Nothing about the *Tales* as a whole hinders us from attempting to analyze the telos, or intentionality, of its single speaker and his goals and projects, as inferred from the text in which “he” is embodied. My perhaps incautiously phrased remarks on Chaucer’s aims were a general and preliminary (or prologal) characterization of this kind: my view of what Chaucer the poem is trying to do. As E. T. Donaldson used to say, “When I say Chaucer, I mean the narrator.”

I might point out in addition that nothing prevents the speaker from raising the issue of his relationship to the fictional others he mimes and that