

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

which one observes and is observed. Even a husband's funeral provides a matrimonial market day for Alice. Again and again, she secularizes occasions and materials whose significance for her should have been spiritual.

Today's readers often share Alice's deafness to medieval spiritual meanings and have difficulty in understanding the irony implicit in her ignoring these meanings. Lacking comprehension of the background, they are left to admire her fortitude and her cleverness in dispensing with all ghostly nonsense. Alice becomes a hero. Perhaps for most her performance profits in effectiveness from a modern reading. But such readings spoil much of Chaucer. *Griselda and the Clerk's Tale*, for instance, become absolute losers. What was designed as the apex of the "marriage group" appears to the modern audience simply as folly. And of course the Clerk's Tale without its spiritual significance is foolish.

To read medieval literature properly, historical scholarship is necessary, but not all historical materials are equally pertinent. Chaucer's own materials often tell us where to look. Alice presents a problem not of economics but of spiritual failure. It is only in seeing how she changes wine into water that we understand her real significance. In their relationships the Wife and her husbands lack the essential quality of the Christian marriage, charity, a divine gift. Jerome and his lion, mutually and unselfishly solicitous, creatures more of Chaucer's time than of Jerome's, show genuine love.

JAMES I. WIMSATT

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Ms. Carruthers replies:

I was tempted not to reply to either Robert Jordan's letter or James Wimsatt's, preferring to let them write Q.E.D. to Alisoun's observations concerning clerks who spend too much time in libraries. But, since one accuses me of having the morals of a feminist and the other of holding opinions hopelessly carnal, I have felt moved to make a response.

I would have thought it self-evident that Chaucer was creating a fictional character in Alisoun, and not depicting a real-life person; what concerned me was the conditions of that fiction, that is, the text. Jordan is so elated by his discovery that fiction is an illusion that he conflates the word with "illusory," a term that emphatically does not apply to Chaucer's text. He accuses me of telling "what Chaucer does not," namely, that the Wife is a west-country clothier endowed with the property of her five dead husbands. But it was not I who described her as being a woman "of biside Bathe," a cloth

maker who "passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt," and a widow who has outlasted five husbands. Nor was it I who called that narrative succeeding the Wife of Bath's Prologue the Wife of Bath's Tale. Jordan does not comprehend the manner (including the use of varying "voice") in which Chaucer creates the illusion of personality in the *Canterbury Tales*; his version of that poem disregards the existence of the frame narrative by which Chaucer insists upon the linkage of a teller with a tale. It is precisely the lack of a frame narrative in *As I Lay Dying* that makes Ross's analysis of "voice" in that work possible, as he says—and this is only one of many significant ways in which the *Canterbury Tales* is different from *As I Lay Dying*. Both Jordan and Wimsatt suggest that detailing the "local habitation" of texts is a task fit only for footnotes; Jordan believes we should engage ourselves with "poetics" instead. But texts have a local habitation and a name; any poetic that disregards this essential fact is doomed to produce "airy nothing."

Wimsatt says that the historical context I provide for Alisoun is "beside the point." Indeed it is if one assumes, as he does, that she "stand[s] over her prologue and tale as an emblem . . . of human carnality." I do not assume that, nor does Wimsatt provide me with any reason why I should. Wimsatt's understanding of evidence is curious, to say the least. He seems to think that because he can find no (non-Chaucerian) fourteenth-century reference disapproving of Jerome he is justified in concluding that the *Adversus Jovinianum* was regarded then (though never before or since) as marital counsel intended for the laity. But no evidence means merely no evidence—and it justifies no conclusion. We do have firm evidence that it was precisely what Jerome seemed to say about Christian marriage that disturbed the church, raised the question of heresy, and provoked Pammachius' "prudent and friendly" action. It is up to Wimsatt to provide evidence demonstrating that the reputation of Jerome's treatise in the later Middle Ages underwent the sea change he suggests. Until he does, I will continue to believe the known evidence.

There is no need to force a choice between the literary context of the Wife's prologue and tale, with which Chaucerians have long been familiar, and the historical conditions described in my article because the text nowhere requires that such a choice be made. That Chaucer creates both a literary and a social habitation for Alisoun suggests that he was interested in the continually various play between them, such as that, for example, embodied in the words *experience* and *auctoritee*. I hope that further work on the Wife and her fellow pilgrims will explore the connection between these