

tion to situations and subject matter is one he drew from a very rich tradition of lyric and narrative poetry. In order to appreciate Chaucer's manipulations of voice, as well as Boccaccio's and a host of other medieval poets', we must, it seems to me, acquaint ourselves deeply with the kind of rhetorical training that most medieval writers shared, a training that has largely disappeared from the modern academic curriculum.

Modern (antiromantic) literature, however, is not devoid of writers who participate brilliantly in the medieval tradition of rhetorical play with voices and narrative personae. May I remind Moriarty that T. S. Eliot's original title for parts 1 and 2 of *The Waste Land* was "He Do the Police in Different Voices." That great poem of many voices juxtaposed one with another—"fragments shored up against our ruin"—has important elements in common with *The Canterbury Tales*. Neither Chaucer nor Eliot need be characterized as an "inept literary amateur" because he writes poems that acknowledge fragmentation and incompleteness and uncertain authority as calculated structural foundations for an authentic poetry.

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The Center of *Ghosts*

To the Editor:

In "Of This Time, of *This Place*: Mrs. Alving's *Ghosts* and the Shape of the Tragedy" (101 [1986]: 57–68), Joan Templeton quotes Helene Alving's famous lines: "Your father never found any outlet for the overmastering joy of life that was in him. And I brought no holiday into his home, either. Everything seemed to turn upon duty and I am afraid I made your poor father's home unbearable to him, Oswald" (57). Templeton argues that the lines are not the center of the play, because they reduce *Ghosts* to "a play about a woman who failed as a wife" (57). On the contrary: the insight Mrs. Alving achieves makes her the critical center and heroine of the play. Previously she had seen only herself as a victim of a passionless, duty-bound society that poisoned sex, love, and marriage and made her a wife-prostitute. These lines reveal that now she has grown to see how the same society victimized her husband too, by itself and through her as a duty-ridden, joyless, bought wife. This recognition gives her heroic moral and intellectual stature: she is the only character in the play who has true moral self-knowledge and who understands her society's corrupt values and power. The speech also underscores the contrast between Oswald's joy in work and life on the one hand, and the pastor's killing duty, on the other, and anticipates the final moral dilemma. Faced with Oswald's syphilitic madness, Mrs. Alving again must choose between traditional duty (to keep her hopeless son alive) and joy of life (to provide him with

the euthanasia he urgently requested in the name of joy of life). Although her final moral decision is not certain, the basic thematic contrast between joy of life and duty dominates. The importance of Mrs. Alving's central speech is not that "[t]he wife's lack of responsiveness causes the husband's philandering" (57). What is crucial in these lines is not her previous sexual coldness but her present ability to understand the past and her part in it, her ability to see and grow.

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Reply:

I am pleased to respond to Bonnie Lyons's letter, for it merely strengthens the point I made in "Of This Time, of *This Place*": the gender-ridden ghosts of the past die hard in our critical reading of *Ghosts*. Lyons's position is a restatement of the ubiquitous interpretation that my essay argues against, that "the summation of the play," in Trilling's phrase, occurs when the wife, Helene Alving, says falteringly to her son that she did not bring any joy into his father's life and, with that recognition, gains self-knowledge, moral stature, and the other rewards literary "owning up" traditionally produces.

Bonnie Lyons writes that I argue that Helene Alving's words are not the center of the play, "because they reduce *Ghosts* to 'a play about a woman who failed as a wife.'" This is not so; I argue that seizing Fru Alving's two lines as the center of the play is both a grotesque simplification of Ibsen's brilliant play making, reducing the cornerstone of modern tragedy to a preachy fable of the evils of sexual puritanism, and an affront to Ibsen's spirit and purposes. If this interpretation is viable, then where are the exposition and development to fit it? Why does not Ibsen prepare us for what the Ibsen scholars take as a crucial revelation of frigidity by showing us a woman who failed to throw off her society's ideal of proper feminine prudishness? If *Ghosts* is a Sophoclean quest tragedy whose recognition scene is Fru Alving's two lines, then the earlier parts of the drama must prepare us for it, in the same way that Oedipus's recognition, an admission the audience has long awaited, satisfies the moral demands inherent in the author's schema. But, as I show in my essay, there is nothing in Ibsen's exposition and development that would suggest that the tragedy comes about because Helene Alving failed to be sexually warm to her husband. On the contrary, in the examination of the past that forms the major part of Ibsen's dialogue, Helene berates herself over and over for, against the desires of her heart, having agreed to the marriage at all; for having lacked the courage to stay away from Alving for good when, after a year of marriage, she had left him; for covering up the truth of his debility for twenty-nine years, even to the extent of building the absurd Captain